

Carol Reed, The Third Man (1949)

Major Credits:

Cast: Joseph Cotten (Holly Martins), Orson Welles (Harry Lime), Trevor Howard (Major Calloway), Alida Valli (Anna Schmidt)
Producers: Alexander Korda, David G. Selznick
Screenplay: Graham Greene
Cinematographer: Robert Krasker
Music: Anton Karas

Background:

The idea for the film originated with conversations between Reed and Greene, who then wrote the story first as a short novel, then a screenplay, and published the novel after the movie appeared. Producer Alexander Korda wanted a story "about the Four-power occupation" of Vienna; his American co-producer, Selznick, demanded certain changes (including changing some of the unsavory characters from Americans to Europeans) "for patriotic reasons." Because he felt his story was too light, Greene wanted to end the film with Holly getting the girl. Reed scrapped the happy ending.

The Third Man was one of the first important British films to be shot on location, which surely accounts for its authentic atmosphere. In the original print, Carol Reed speaks the voice-over prologue; Joseph Cotten's voice was used in the American distribution.

Stylistic Qualities:

Reed is a relatively unobtrusive director, his style usually reflecting the company he keeps, which may be why this film has received surprisingly little analysis despite being consistently counted among the world's great films. What it does have is an excellent plot, sometimes considered a spurious asset by auteurist film critics, but certainly not by Aristotle. And it also has the considerable presence of Orson Welles.

1. tilted camera angles - suggest the unstable world of postwar Vienna
2. lighting effects - expressionistic element added to locations, the shadows and darkness reflecting the paranoid atmosphere of the Cold War.
3. music - the zither is electronically amplified; giving it a strange and special quality. Perhaps it suggests the irrepressible nature of the human spirit. Anton Karas was a street musician discovered by Reed and Greene during their stay in Vienna.

Topics for Discussion:

1. One of the main themes is surely the conflict between personal loyalty versus social responsibility--the question of informing--which was central to the period of the Cold War. Evaluate the relative moral positions of each of the four major characters:
2. The Third Man offers several permutations of the theme of personal identity (Calloway/Callahan, Holly/Harry, Anna's forged papers, the funeral for the wrong man). Ultimately, though, the characters seem dominated by the circumstances, the environment, of Vienna. Consider the impact of the historical moment on the development of each of the major characters.
3. Does the film offer a moral alternative to the self-absorbed cynicism of Harry Lime, best expressed in the famous "cuckoo clock" speech (written by Welles)?
4. Holly Martins' story is another version of the American innocent abroad. Discuss the stages of Holly's initiation.

"It casts a spell--the spell of heartbreak in an hour and a half that enshrines the end of Europe more indelibly than any film I know."

- Vernon Young