

**BFI Future Film member Joe Steen recommends
The Third Man (1949, dir. Carol Reed)**



From the first creeping, whimsical note of Anton Karas' infamously seductive zither soundtrack, *The Third Man* announces itself as a quaint and curious masterpiece of British cinema. The quintessentially English narrator provides a brief vignette of post-war Vienna, delivered in a haughty and jarringly buoyant tone that will prove all the more strange as we embark on a cryptic journey through the slippery streets of Vienna. For our hero, Holly Martins, ancient ideas about good and evil seem about as distant and uncertain as the identity of this enigmatic 'Third Man'.

Though it is commonly categorised as film noir or British noir, *The Third Man* is not quite composed of the same pulpy ingredients as its Hollywood influences. Our femme fatale is no malevolent spider-woman, our detective hero constantly out of his depth, and the forces of law and order no less bewildered and ineffective. Where *The Third Man* remains fundamentally film noir, however, is in its evocative and striking visual character: Graham Greene's tense and enigmatic picture of post-war alienation is brought vividly to life by the skewed and suspicious eye of the camera, searching desperately down Vienna's dark alleyways and through the rubble of its bombed-out buildings. The film's conclusion, although unforgettable in terms of visual splendour, remains painfully uncompromising and powerful – aching with uncertainty and the betrayal of our expectations.

Though the film has moments of great tension and sporadic comedy, they are sparsely measured and subordinate to the moral intrigue that skirts the plot's shadowy surfaces, culminating in perhaps the most notorious (certainly the most incredible) examples of ad-libbing in cinema – the 'cuckoo clock speech'. Joseph Cotten's tipsy everyman Holly may be our nearest anchor within this ominous and mystifying reality; his simple yet wholesome pathos sets him apart from the

detective-hero role he seems fundamentally incapable of playing. He is, however, no match for the stark, seductive magnetism of Harry Lime – however many ‘dots’ he is willing to expend for profit. Orson Welles’ contribution to *The Third Man* is remarkably small, appearing well over halfway through the film, yet the film’s definitive cinematic moment – the fairground sequence (an apex of philosophical proportions) owes itself entirely to Welles’ majestic screen presence and absence – who else could talk about death with such charming callousness?

However, the fact that *The Third Man* remains so impressive to this day is more than merely a testament to the towering presence of Orson Welles or even the quaint Englishness of Graham Greene’s screenplay. In fact, Welles’ entrance – a moment of quiet spectacle – would be nothing without Anton Karas’ zither score. Its unremitting jaunt, threatening to overshadow the murkier depths of the narrative, is as present as any leading character, intensifying the atmosphere of bewilderment, though its catchiness is impossible to escape. It may well be that it is this precise conflict between the brooding undertones of murder, conspiracy, and alienation with the zither’s quaint and addictive exuberance that cements *The Third Man* as a mystifying, atmospheric and terribly English postwar masterpiece.

Joe Steen joined the BFI Future Film Steering Group in January 2016 and currently studies English at Queen Mary, University of London. Though growing up in the South West, any trip to London has for him been incomplete without visiting the BFI. He runs a film and music blog at www.mojosfilter.wordpress.com