Abstract:

The Third Man is a film that exemplifies the technical, commercial, and cultural factors necessary to earn a strip of celluloid a spot in history. The following essay examines the film’s cultural ties to film movements such as film noir, Italian neorealism, and French poetic realism. The technical advancements of the British film industry are studied through lighting, location, and non-diegetic music choices. Finally, the commercial significance of a movie produced during the postwar boom in British filmmaking is highlighted in relation to American coproduction. Overall, the essay seeks to answer how the risks taken throughout the production process led to the film’s lasting success.
Frame by Frame — this is the way Studio Canal went about the painstaking process of restoring the 1949 film *The Third Man*. After scanning one of the 1948 prints of the film and using software to complete automated corrections, it still comes down to a team of restoration specialists to manually do the dirty work (The Third, 15:30). In 2015, the restored film premiered at the Cannes film festival in 4k, 66 years after the original took home the Palme D’or. Now the restored film is available on Blu-ray for new audiences to experience for years to come. But what makes a film worthy of such extreme measures of preservation? Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* experiments with dramatic lighting, location shooting, and an unconventional score to create a genre bending narrative with a unique cinematic style. Such an undertaking posed technical and commercial difficulties but by sticking to his vision, Reed was able to create an innovative film relevant to a society still recovering from world war II.

Underneath the surface plot of *The Third Man* is an exploration of the issues that the world was coping with following World War II. Set in Vienna, a city divided into four occupation zones, the tension between the different world powers is palpable. Whether it’s when Anna’s papers are confiscated or an Austrian landlady yells at the international police, it’s the little interactions between characters that hint at a more systemic problem. The characters are living in an unstable city. A city torn apart by bombs. A city ravaged by the new black market. But most of all, a city lacking trust. It’s this version of Vienna that the unsuspecting American novelette writer, Holly Martins, stumbles into. When Holly uncovers the conspiracy of his friend, Harry Lime’s death, the story becomes a study in morality. Lime who faked his own death, has been selling adulterated penicillin for a profit. Much like the titular character of the French film *Pepe le Moko*, who writer Graham Greene admired, Lime is a charismatic anti-hero in hiding. But the
disturbing innerworkings of Lime’s mind are exposed to the audience in a way that sets him apart from le Moko. In his famous monologue at the top of the Vienna ferris wheel, Lime comments on the insignificance of the people below: “Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you 20,000 pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really old man tell me to keep my money or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare?” The sociopathic logic of Lime expresses an evil that the world became acquainted with during the war. In the postwar years, the public mind was marred by a pessimism and fear which people like Lime perpetuated. In the end of the film, Holly avoids the corrupting power of Lime and ultimately kills his old friend. This triumph over evil is a bittersweet victory but in no way a happy ending. The problems of the postwar society persist and the disillusioned, Holly Martins, is left alone to think about his actions. This is an ending fitting for any French poetic realism film (Thompson, 258). But the plot is not the only culturally significant aspect of the work.

The Oscar-winning cinematography of The Third Man is technically innovative and largely inspired by the stylistic conventions of film noir. Indicative of this genre is a type of lighting called low key lighting or “illumination that creates strong contrast between light and dark areas of the shot, with deep shadows and little fill light” (Thompson, 726). This technique can be observed in many shots from The Third Man and is used to establish the “gloomy”
mood that film historians Bordwell and Thompson characterize as a key component of the noir. Furthermore, shadow often has an intimate relationship with particular characters in film noir. Bordwell and Thompson point to one specific shot of *The Maltese Falcon* when “Brigid is taken away in an elevator by the police, marked as the archetypal film noir heroine by the shadow on her face” (Thompson, 208). Carol uses shadow in this symbolic capacity as well. The lighting of the Harry Lime character is of particular significance.

The film opens with Harry Lime’s funeral, but in one pivotal scene about halfway through the film, Lime is revealed to be alive. The scene strategically uses shadow to obscure his face before the ultimate reveal. It begins when Holly, notices a person hidden under an archway and verbally confronts his pursuer. Initially only the figure’s legs are visible, as a cat affectionally rubs up against him. However, as Holly shouts, this prompts someone in a nearby building to turn on their light, illuminating the figure’s face from above. Holly then recognizes the figure to be Harry Lime. So, it is a sudden change in lighting that is responsible for one of the most memorable moments of *The Third Man*. This demonstrates Carol’s ability to use light and shadow to motivate the action of a scene and advance the plot. When Lime runs away, the audience only sees his large

![The Third Man: The shadows of an awning hide Harry Lime](image1.jpg)

![The Third Man: Harry Lime is dramatically revealed by a window light](image2.jpg)
shadow move across the buildings as Holly pursues him. This is another way in which the cinematography experiments with the properties of light. By placing a double in front of a large spotlight to jog in place, Carol is able to project this large image of Harry across the Viennese architecture (Baker). The shadow is a fitting symbolic representation of both the power and mystery of Lime and it’s a motif that continues to be explored by the film in other scenes. While the film employs lighting techniques common to noir films, it also expands on these techniques to create unique stylistic and thematic choices.

But these bold lighting choices didn’t come without difficulty. Since most of the film is shot on location at night, effective lighting was difficult to achieve. First of all, the big lighting rigs necessary to illuminate large portions of the town were in small supply. The only place manufacturing these high-end lights was the U.S. and all of England only owned about four of them in total (Baker). So the four lights had to be shipped from England to be used in Vienna and once there, the lights had to be hauled around and powered by generators. Vienna was still a city recovering from war, so Carol says the team couldn’t rely on Vienna’s “depleted electricity mains” (Baker, 29:54). One technique that proved helpful in overcoming lighting difficulties, was taking advantage of the reflective quality of the wet cobblestone of the Vienna streets. Deliberately spraying down the roads with water, Carol was able to achieve a glittering effect that added an extra layer of texture to the darkness (Baker, 36:00). The drying water technique can be seen in almost all of the night shots of the film.
The decision to shoot the movie on location in Vienna gives the film the emotional heft of seeing the real aftermath of World War II. The bombed-out buildings constantly in the background of the *The Third Man* turn even its most basic shots into somewhat of a spectacle. As the film begins, the audience is introduced to the city by Carol Reed himself. In a documentary style montage, Reed plays the role of narrator telling the audience about Vienna after the war. The influence of Reed’s time in the British Army’s film unit is evident in this segment which efficiently and effectively lays the groundwork for the story to come (The Editors). While the opening provides the historical context in which the story takes place, this is the only time the hardship of the postwar years is candidly described. The rest of the film avoids preachy, heavy handed dialogue used to carry out a political agenda. Instead, the audience gets a feel for the postwar climate of Vienna merely from watching the town. This method of portraying hardship falls very much in line with the Italian Neorealist movement.

The Italian film *The Bicycle Thieves*, which was released a year before *The Third Man*, was also shot on location and dealt with postwar issues. Like *The Third Man*, the film had mixed performances from both actors and non-actors. These aspects of neorealism serve to increase the authenticity of these films (Thompson, 325). By including people who actually lived in the real locations being depicted, the films become more faithful reproductions of a period in time. In *The Third Man*, most of the extras are

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*The Third Man: An assortment of Vienna natives are the extras for this scene*
taken directly off the streets of Vienna (Baker, 21:00). As a result, the audience gets to see the unique faces of those that have experienced hardship rather than an artificial Hollywood imitation. Also, almost all of the actors portraying Austrians were natives to the country. These actors who didn’t speak English had to learn their lines phonetically or even improvise lines that would never be translated. The similarities between *The Third Man* and *The Bicycle Thieves* depart however when it comes to their plots. *The Third Man* is a much more elaborately plotted story as opposed to the everyday realism of *The Bicycle Thieves*.

Additionally, in *The Third Man*, some shots are designed to draw attention to the wreckage of Vienna. The film is littered with ultra-wide angles that depict the extent of the damage and the emptiness of Vienna at night. In the film’s chase scenes, as the characters run through the city, the audience is given an opportunity to take in the atmosphere of a variety of locations. In one scene for example, Holly and Anna run down a broken stone staircase which dominates the composition. Filming the shot in close proximity with a wide-angle lens exaggerates the proportion of the staircase, reminding the audience of the fractured state of the town. In yet another chase scene, Holly stumbles down a pile of rubble to hide in the shell of a car. These types of shots speak to the dual philosophy with which Carol Reed made the movie: with an eye for aesthetic but the demand of necessity. In the editing room, Reed was strict about removing shots that didn’t serve a function within the plot (Baker). But Reed is still able to give a detailed
portrayal of the city by designing his shots to tell the story of the city as well as the characters within it. Sometimes the plot of the film even seems like a vehicle to explore Vienna, taking the audience from the top of Vienna’s ferris wheel to the depths of Vienna’s sewers.

_The Third Man_ was the first feature length British film to be almost entirely shot on location (Baker, 21:00). This presented several difficulties for the crew. Since the snowy winter was rapidly approaching, Carol split the team into a day unit, a night unit, and a sewer unit in order to complete filming faster. Carol, however, directed all of the units and frequently went without sleep (Drazin). Ultimately, the rigorous seven week shoot in Vienna payed off (Baker, 37:00). By filming the narrative in the actual wreckage of World War II, the film feels much more real and communicates volumes about this time in history. The film itself has become an artifact from the postwar years.

Finally, Aton Karas’ technically innovative and culturally relevant score is one of the most important contributors to _The Third Man_’s unique style. The unconventional soundtrack is entirely composed on one instrument: the zither. Carol Reed discovered this exotic stringed instrument and its player by chance at a welcoming party when he arrived in Vienna (White). Immediately fascinated by the instrument’s sound, Reed dropped plans for an orchestral score and instead hired Karas to write the music for his film. The first shot of the film, in fact, is a close up of the zither being played as the opening credits roll. This is appropriate because throughout the film, the zither plays the role of a character itself. Initially it seems to be an intrinsically happy sounding instrument. The central melody of the film, the “Third Man Theme,” is an instant earworm. But the film’s postwar atmosphere is anything but happy and the carefree zither exists as an ironic point of contrast to what’s happening on the screen (White).
“The Third Man Theme” seems as if the zither is pursuing its own fantasy separate from the other characters of the film, telling its own story.

As the film progresses, we hear the instrument’s versatility. When the zither slows down, it can express the sad sort of beauty of Alida Valli’s character Anna Schmidt, a sound that seems to be more tonally consistent with the feeling of postwar Vienna. It can accentuate the frantic moments of the film such as the discovery of Harry’s escape into the sewers. At times, the zither even seems to be playing the role of the third man, Harry Lime, while he’s not on screen. The score casts Lime’s shadow over the other characters’ interactions and subconsciously hints his presence to the audience. It’s in the final sewer chase and ultimate shooting of Lime, that the zither goes silent. The zither shares Lime’s unburdened charisma amid the ruin. It’s this endearing quality of the zither that attracted audiences to the score. It would go on to sell half a million copies in the first three months that it was released on record (White). What’s more it would become the unique voice of the film’s cinematic style, the voice of the third man.

*The Third Man* is a case study of the commercial difficulties of funding a British film in the postwar era and the implications this has on the director’s control over the production. In order to make the movie, a deal was struck between American producer David O. Selznick and Alexander Korda the European film producer (Drazin). In exchange for partially funding the movie and supplying American actors, Selznick would receive the rights to release the movie in the U.S. Throughout the process, however, Selznick would prove to be more than the British team had bargained for. After several meetings to discuss the project, Carol Reed and Graham Greene were soon peppered with Selznick’s notorious memos. First, Selznick took issue with the casting of Orson Welles as the Harry Lime character, believing his name would hurt box office
turnout. Selznick went on to question key plot points. One such problem with the script, in Selznick’s opinion, was that the protagonist, Holly Martins, needed to be more heroic. Selznick didn’t like scenes that showed his fallibility like when Martins gets drunk. Selznick also took issue with the common clothing his star Alida Valli was dressed in, wanting something more attractive (Baker). Selznick’s overbearing involvement was a stark contrast to the relatively laid-back presence of Alexander Korda perhaps an indicator of the differing philosophies between the nations when it comes to directorial control. It was only when the movie proved wildly successful that Korda took extreme involvement in attempting to redefine the terms of the funding agreement causing a massive argument with Selznick (Baker). While Reed and Greene later expressed frustration at the experience of working with Selznick, most of the conflict between them can be attributed to differences in style. Selznick’s desire to make a Hollywood blockbuster hit conflicted with Reed’s background in documentary filmmaking and his somewhat neorealist impulses. Plus, Selznick’s suggestions weren’t universally bad, as it turns out, he was an adamant supporter of both the zither score and the famous ending shot of the film. Some of the changes Selznick wanted were realized in his edit of the movie released to U.S. theaters. But it is Reed’s edit of the film that has been immortalized in film lover’s circles.

*The Third Man* is the result of inventive stylistic choices aided by a well-versed understanding of several influential periods in film history. The lighting, setting, and score of the movie all make it notable in addition to its postwar plot. Given the film’s lasting impact on audiences, it’s no surprise that the film was voted the greatest British film of all time in a poll conducted by the BFI.
Works Cited


