

IN THE SHADOW OF THE CUCKOO CLOCK.
THE SUBVERSIVE REALISM OF *THE THIRD MAN*

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Abstract: *With a view to exemplifying how film noir can effectively combine elements of expressionism and realism through a participatory viewing experience, this paper provides a discussion of The Third Man as a cinematic text that concomitantly reiterates traditional insular values in times of global conflict and strengthens the individuality of post-war British cinema against the pressures of the American film industry.*
Keywords: *British cinema, film noir, palpable absence, semantic gaps, visual realism*

1. Introduction

Once ranked by the British Film Institute as the best British film of all time (BBC News 1999), *The Third Man* is a cinematic piece that has continued to fascinate critics and viewers alike ever since its release in 1949. A star production from every angle, benefitting from the memorable performances of staple names of the film industry of the time (Joseph Cotten, Trevor Howard, Alida Valli, Orson Welles), backed up by the haunting expressionist cinematography of Robert Krasker and the masterful directing of Carol Reed, *The Third Man* embodies two of the most praised qualities of any timeless masterpiece – it entertains viewers while engaging them, at the same time, in self-scrutiny. Based on Graham Greene’s eponymous novella (commissioned specifically to provide the screenplay material), it follows a deceptively simple story, informed, in part, by the writer’s own experience with the MI6, in particular, his friend and supervisor Kim Philby, who is said to have served as the prototype for the film’s central (although for the most part absent) screen figure, Harry Lime, a racketeer dealing in the diluted penicillin business in post-war Vienna. At face value, the story has little to offer besides the stock ingredients of the detective and romance genres. American pulp novelist Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) travels to Vienna with the promise of being offered a job by his friend Harry (Orson Welles), only to find out upon arrival that the latter was killed in a car accident. Suspecting foul play, Holly embarks upon an investigative journey of his own, despite the efforts of Major Calloway, an officer of the British peace-keeping force, who tries to keep him away from the affair. Along the way, he encounters several dubious characters linked with Harry, as well as Harry’s former girlfriend, the actress Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli), with whom (predictably) he falls in love. Harry is revealed to be alive and is confronted by Holly in what constitutes, perhaps, the most memorable scene of the film, in which Harry delivers his famous “cuckoo-clock” speech on the insignificance of human life and ineffectiveness of democracy in face of anarchy and violence. Holly is eventually convinced by Calloway to act as a decoy and, at the end of a dramatic chase in the Vienna sewers, Harry, mortally wounded by the police, is shot by his friend. In the film’s equally iconic closing scene, we see Anna walking past Holly in the cemetery, effectively precluding a possible romance plot from being materialised. Underneath this veneer of classic (melo)drama, there lies, however, a solid cinematographic foundation that propels *The Third Man* well beyond the noir formula. The first minute of the film offers the viewers a series of scenes meant to anchor the ensuing action in a credible setting. Images of Vienna rooftops and stills of Baroque statues are cut together with faces of people involved in what appear to be black-market activities, among shots of military personnel and streets signs testifying to the presence of a multi-national occupying force. This opening sequence, echoing the mechanism of intellectual montage, announces the approach that

will underpin many of the key-moments of the film. Without the voice-over narration (performed in the UK release by Carol Reed himself), the opening segment turns into a powerful screen testimonial of life in a formerly glorious bastion of European culture and civilisation still lying in ruins and trying to make sense of its new, unfamiliar position, and an example of visual journalism done in the tradition of the British Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s and 1940s (with which Reed himself had been affiliated through a series of works he had produced during the war years). This matter-of-fact introduction, heavily reliant on location-shooting, already places the viewer in the uneasy position of an occupant of a semiotic space that compounds the logic and the aims of seemingly incompatible perspectives on the narrative material – one that is artistic-creative and another, realist-objective one.

It is this dual layering of *The Third Man* that the present paper sets out to investigate, albeit, without claim for exhausting all the possible implications of the subject. The aim is to discuss how a particular set of meaning-making elements and strategies are employed in the film in order to subvert the melodramatic mode typical of many noirs, actively engaging the viewer in the process of deciphering the deeper moral message of the film, as well as to emphasise how it managed to remain (at least in part) true to certain insular values, in a time when British cinema was becoming increasingly more dependent on American financing and marketing.

2. The “Great Anglo-American Film War” and Two Versions of The Same Film

The Third Man is a prime example of an international effort. It was shot on location in Vienna, with many scenes filmed in Britain at the Sheperton and Isleworth studios, showcasing a multinational cast of British, American and Austrian actors. The international political scene (the reconfiguration of the ideological map of Europe by the parties that emerged victorious from the war) serves as the anxiety-inducing background of the mundane story. No less importantly, Carol Reed’s film also captures the equally delicate condition of the British film industry, whose evolutionary course had been dictated since its infancy by the unstoppable movie-making juggernaut that America, in particular Hollywood, came to represent in the 1920s. As Street sums up (2005: 5-26), London’s position as a major commercial centre drew the attention of American film producers as early as the 1910s. With the increased role of film distribution in the second decade of the twentieth century, a trend was established whereby American film became a solid competitor on the British scene. The trend was solidified over the following decades as the demand for American films on the British market steadily increased. Despite the quota system imposed through the two Cinematograph Film Acts (1927 and 1938), which mandated a strict proportion of domestic productions for rental and exhibition in local cinemas, the lagging behind of the British film industry continued, a situation further complicated by the increased reliance of British cinemas on American production during the World War II. To protect the British film industry and slow down the remitting of large sums of money to the US, in 1947 the government imposed a 75% *ad valorem* duty on American films. Consequent on this, the Motion Picture Association of America instituted a boycott, refusing to supply films to Britain. The tensions led to what Michael Korda dubbed “The Great Anglo-American Film War” (Lennon 2016a) and subsided only after the duty had been removed, in 1948.

British film was still reeling from the effects of the “Film War” when *The Third Man* went into production. Producers Alexander Korda and Carol Reed had to show deference to American interests and sensitivities, as vented by David Selznick, the American co-financer and co-producer of the film. Among other things, Selznick objected to Americans having been under-represented in Greene’s text. Thus, in the film the two originally English characters of the novella, Rollo Martins and Harry Lime, are given American identities (with the former also being renamed to Holly, for the English name was deemed unconvincing for American audiences). According to Michael Korda, Greene possessed “a natural anti-Americanism of an upper-class Englishman”, being “suspicious of the motives of the United States in the Cold War and resentful of American

assumptions of morality” (Korda qtd. in White 2015). In this context, the Americanising of the two originally English characters could be seen, in fact, as a deepening of the Anti-American sentiment, given the negative traits embodied by the two protagonists (Holly – the alcoholic author of cheap westerns, Harry – the cynical misanthrope involved in illicit activities). The only concession that somewhat softened this situation was to change the American racketeer Cooler into the Romanian Popescu in the final script of the film (White 2015).

That Selznick saw greater potential of the more glamorous elements of the film and considered the more evident references to political issues as potentially offensive (or at least irrelevant) to American audiences can also be seen in how he thought the film should be introduced to the overseas viewers. Thus, the American theatrical release went to great lengths to make sure the film would be well-received by his compatriots, by employing a dialogue in which a sombre male voice is complemented by an overly suave, almost lewd, female one:

[man’s voice:] The third man — hated by a thousand men, [woman’s voice:] desired by one woman...

[man’s voice:] The third man — hanging is too good for him, [woman’s voice:] nothing is too good for the third man.

[man’s voice:] Her man was the third man...

[woman’s voice:] ... the man on every woman’s lips. (qtd. in Baker 2004)

Additionally, the introductory narration, apart from the required adaptation to the norms of the American vernacular (using the voice of Joseph Cotten as Holly Martins), also omits the passages in which the narrator alludes to historical and cultural realities: there is no “Constantinople suited me better” (deemed, perhaps, as too passeistic – a nostalgic British nod to the idea of empire), no mention of Vienna’s four zones being “each occupied by a power” (the victors were liberators, after all), nor any “sort of smattering of German” (the language of the nation responsible for initiating two world wars).

In light of these changes, it is possible to speak of two distinct versions of the same film. While the differences may not be sufficient to warrant radically dissimilar interpretations of the two, they equip *The Third Man* with the capacity to serve not only as a reflection of historical realities but also as a testimony to some of the underlying economic and cultural forces that have influenced the course of British film industry and as another example of the dual, multiply polarised character of the film. Yet, as shall be seen further on, despite the concession made to the American party, *The Third Man* managed to remain true to the tradition of British film-making.

3. The Devil’s In The Details – Film Noir Between Expressionism and Realism

As Leach explains, if there is one element that critical discourses about a British “national cinema” have repeatedly emphasised, it is the role of the British realist film tradition (2004: 37). According to numerous scholars, Leach further points out, the documentary movement of the 1930s-1940s is credited with making all the later developments possible (2004: 48). Though this essentialist perspective came to be contested in more recent times, for *The Third Man*, as suggested in the introduction to this paper, a succinct reference to certain aspects linked with film realism is necessary in order to understand the distinctive quality of this film within the general noir canon.

That film noir and realism may be compatible is not immediately apparent. A significant part of the scholarship on the distinctive traits of noir has focused on stylistic and formal elements that give noir its instantly recognizable character, such as low-key lighting (chiaroscuro), canted and wide angles, distorted representations of people and objects, non-linear narration, many of which retraceable to earlier cinematographic modes, most prominently, German expressionist cinema of the 1920s-1930s. In *The Third Man* such elements are introduced early on, in the scene depicting Holly’s arrival at Harry’s former place at 15 Stiftgasse. We cannot fail to notice the oblique, almost interminable staircase with its railing that intersects, on our visual plane, the embossed straight ornamental wooden lines of the doors or the alternating use of low and high

angles during the conversation between the German-speaking porter and Holly, suggestive of the latter's vulnerability and awkwardness. It's a world that contradicts both the character's and the spectator's expectations and logic, since we see the porter mistakenly pointing down as he says "already in heaven" and up when he adds "or in hell" while referring to the defunct Harry's possible whereabouts. Such details will be used extensively in several key-scenes of the film: the interiors in which objects and people seem to be unnaturally offset, the streets and buildings of Vienna where long or tall shadows make fantastic projections, the tilted windows of the box car in the scenes shot on the Riesenrad, to name but a few. In a characteristic noir and expressionist fashion, these instil in the viewers a sense of anxiety in face of an unspoken evil that has found a home in a city which has lost its centre through war and the ensuing partition into zones controlled by foreign powers. In fact, as Kennedy aptly points out, "perpendicularity" is a rare stylistic element in this film, which is why many of the memorable scenes are exactly those in which "people do stand up, or near-perpendicularly loll, in an outbreak of something resembling repose" (1999: 37). We may read these as clues that carry an implicit ethical or moral message: in this bent and crooked world some still manage to remain upright (Anna's dignified walk past Holly in the closing scene), while others are unable to do so, either by choice (Harry Lime standing tall in the dark doorway) or by force of circumstance (Holly leaning against the cart in the cemetery, at the end of his friend's funeral).

While this modernist-expressionist material gives the film a more poetic touch, it does not lead to the exclusion of certain realist elements. Here, we should remember that the foundational logic of film (as compared to other arts) is, inevitably, realist. As Marcus explains, following earlier observations made by Siegfried Kracauer, "[p]hotography and film ... both reveal the true lineaments of reality, and open out onto an unprecedented vision of the world" (2007: 183). In cinema, realism and expressionism are not entirely antinomical. Rather, as Leach has pointed out, they should be regarded as "tendencies" which may be present concomitantly in all films, albeit in different degrees, depending on how much "emphasis" the film-maker chooses to place on one or the other (2004: 66). André Bazin went as far as to support the existence of a different type of film realism, which does not rely exclusively on continuity editing but makes use, instead, of long takes and deep-focus shots, through which the spectator can enjoy "a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality", a form of realism that encourages "a more active mental attitude" (Bazin 1967: 35-36 qtd. in Leach 2004: 51-52). Others have suggested further possible connections between modernist cinematographic techniques and those characteristic of film realism. According to Aitken, John Grierson, the founder of the British Documentary Movement, proposed in his own turn a form of cinematic realism at the basis of which lay "the idea that the realistic film should portray totality through linking particular forms of representation with more general symbolic parameters" (2006: 148). This arose from the belief that art had to "transcend the fragmented condition of modernity and portray totality", in other words, the "continuing reality" and the "hidden harmonies" of the universe (2006: 146). As one who had worked with the movement, director Carol Reed was exposed to such ideas and, as we shall see, in *The Third Man* utilised a number of strategies to reveal "totality", aligning himself with what is called "intuitionist realism" (Aitken 2001; Aitken 2006 passim).

In addition to the above, there are also historical arguments in favour of an affinity of British noir for the realist mode. As Leach points out elsewhere, besides "a visual style emphasising low-key lighting, deep shadows and unusual camera angles", noirs usually rely on "a corrupt and threatening urban setting in which crime is endemic" (2014: 14). The extremely hard conditions experienced by Britain during WW2 as well as, in the post-war years, "a growing awareness that Britain was no longer a major world power" (Leach 2014: 15), made the noir a particularly promising medium for exploring social, ethical and moral themes, as had been done earlier through documentaries. At the same time, this uncomfortable position in which Britain had found itself after the war led British film-makers to reconsider their relationship with the past,

including the ossified practices of high art. Turnour (2013) argues that British noir represented “a menace to the canon”, as it frequently came to be the antithesis of what had been considered “quality” cinema. However, in reality, this did not imply a radical break with the past but, rather, a fusion of the old and the new, as noir successfully incorporated “the veiled symbols of social criticism” and “the most rapidly responsive pop cinema style” (Turnour 2013). In this context *The Third Man* also exemplifies what Baker (2014) has called the “post-war melancholy that mirrored how the country felt after the short-lived joy of what seemed an anti-climactic victory over the Nazis”. Indeed, despite Selznick’s attempt to spice up the film for easier American consumption, there is nothing even remotely melodramatic in what we see on the screen. On the contrary, in a number of exquisitely constructed scenes, Carol Reed determines us to engage in a meaning-making activity at the end of which we are made to understand better the pervading sense of worthlessness that surrounds the lives and deeds of the characters. Like Harry himself, who is absent from much of the action and yet remains the driving force of the entire plot, Reed provides us with what we may call a “palpable absence” of signifieds – we sense their presence but we must eventually discover and validate them through the clues laid out for us by the cinematographer. As such, we obtain a deeper sense of the real, or the “essence”, as the aforementioned Grierson once understood it.

4. “This Isn’t Santa Fe...” – Making Sense of the Fragments

The Third Man is, undoubtedly, a complex piece both in terms of cinematic techniques and at a thematic level. Regarding this latter aspect, Vineberg draws attention to the “crosshatching” of three main themes in the film: “(1) the social and moral disintegration of post-war Europe; (2) the discrepancy between the real world and the world as fiction orders it; and (3) the nature of personal and social responsibility” (1985: 33). Of these, for the purpose of this paper the second one bears more relevance.

From a certain angle, *The Third Man* is about manipulation and the impulse to order things, both of which are at home in a world like post-war Vienna, where none of the old ways would work anymore. Without exception, all of the characters are manipulators: Harry Lime tries to convince Holly to become his partner in crime, Harry’s acquaintances exert themselves to give Holly only half-truths in an effort to keep him uninvolved, Anna struggles to persuade Holly that Harry has remained a kind soul, Holly labours to make sense of the entire situation, while Calloway cleverly uses him to capture Harry. Calloway’s case is of particular interest, as it brings the narrative closer to the strategy that characterises many of the great works of realist fiction and, at the same time, is suggestive of a characteristically British quality. He is a prime example of “palpable absence”, indicative of how in the film the British element has been demoted to a secondary, almost off-stage position. As Gribble explains, in Greene’s novella Calloway is the narrator, acting in this position as “an intimate acquaintance of the reader”, who, right from the outset, “adopts a chatty familiarity with the reader” (1998: 235). By contrast, in the British version of the film the narration is done by an anonymous storyteller, who is present only for the duration of Carol Reed’s introductory voice-over. The consequences of this choice are multiple. On one hand, Calloway’s loss of narrative control serves as an example of how the story “interrogates the pathos, and the sense of history dissolving through English fingers” (Stephens 2013: 12). Once the rulers of the largest empire, on the reconfigured map of the post-war world they have to accept a less obvious role: they may still pull the strings and have even the Americans in their palm, the film seems to suggest, but from the orchestra pit, out of the limelight. Moreover, as such, his moral points are also made more convincing, since he is no longer conditioned by the subjectivity inherent in the narrative act. On the other hand, the invisibility/inaudibility of the narrator “allows the characters and the events to speak for themselves, without mediation” (Gribble 1998: 235). Having been denied the benefits of this “intimate acquaintance”, the viewer is also co-opted, in a more active way, in the meaning making process.

Calloway's special position in the film may also be read as a subtle ironic jab at American idealism, exemplified by both Holly and Harry. After a narrow escape from Popescu's henchmen, Holly manages to make his way to the police headquarters. There, Calloway reminds him (as Popescu himself has done earlier) how dangerous and foolish it is to mix fact and fiction: "I told you to go away, Martins. This isn't Santa Fe, I'm not a sheriff and you're not a cowboy." (Reed 1949) Calloway's words can be read in fact as a plea for realism. In this sense, Sinowitz points out that Calloway's reminder to Holly indicates "that unlike Martin's fictions, where the plots can be controlled by the artist, people die in the random, uncontrolled world that is postwar Vienna." (2007: 416). No less idealistic is Harry's personal plot to confuse his friend and the authorities, since he ends up illustrating his own cynical existential philosophy. On the greater cosmic wheel, Harry, "the ultimate utilitarian" (Killmeier 2010: 109) simply "stopped moving forever", like one of the dots he referred to in his Riesenrad speech. He dies, ironically, at the hands of his own friend, who, in a similarly ironic turn, plays out the plot of his western novelettes, becoming the sheriff he has refused to be. In fact, at the end of the film, Holly emerges as the "quintessential Greene figure of the innocent destroyer, the naïve believer in goodness who, because he cannot comprehend evil, unwittingly becomes its instrument." (Lesser 1984: 19). In consequence, it may be said that irony functions as the primary mode "which enables the film to confront the illusions and realities, the naïve innocence and the worldly cynicism that are dramatized by the story of Holly Martins and Harry Lime." (Palmer and Riley 1980: 20).

The third element that demonstrates the realist leanings of the film, complementing narration and irony, is *mise-en-scène*. Under Reed's direction, Robert Krasker's "unerring" camera (Schwab 2000: 4) takes over the role of narrator, turning the novella's subjective narration into an objective one. This makes it possible for the city itself to become "an entity of its own, a presence to be felt continually, beside the characters", endowed with a plethora of potential valences – "a desert, a trap, a labyrinth or even hell" (Schwab 2000: 4). Ewans notes another peculiarity of Vienna as presented in the film: "the city becomes a projection of a haunted, threatened identity" (1998: 38), while in a somewhat similar vein Vineberg describes Reed's Vienna as a "post-apocalyptic Babel" (1985: 34).

While as a background to the action Vienna is "oppressively self-evident", providing no clues to the characters (Sayler 2013: 294), for the viewer, Krasker's lens turns it into the ultimate symbol of the decay of civilisation, where the ghosts of the past still roam the streets aimlessly, as suggested by the old drunk balloon-vendor who comes to pester the pursuit party while they are on lookout for Harry. The scene is particularly eloquent in its complex collection of semantically loaded fragments offered up for the viewer, like pieces of a huge visual puzzle. Once again, we intuit the existence of an encoded message, but we are offered no instructions as to where the individual elements should fit. First, there is only a shadow projected on the wall of the Alte Apotheke, in the historic Michaelerplatz. It slowly makes its way towards the centre of the frame, like a menacing force that won't stop growing (the intensity of the moment being wonderfully sustained by Anton Karas's unforgettable zither notes). However, the figure is soon revealed for what it actually is – an aimless pedestrian. Calloway and his aide Sgt. Paine try to ignore him, knowing that his presence might endanger the mission, but this relic of bygone days is persistent, hobbling his way closer until the camera has no choice but to foreground him. He leaves only after Paine has agreed to buy one of the balloons, but not before his grinning face is well imprinted on our retina. The significance of the scene becomes fully clear during the sewer chase, when we are left to understand that Paine's kindness does not warrant a divine prize, for he is mortally wounded by Harry. The last piece of the visual puzzle, which may easily pass unnoticed at first sight is the statue of Neptune and the fallen giant, part of the "Macht zur See" ("Power at the Sea") fountain, which takes up the right third of the visual plane. With this detail in place, the scene acquires ironic connotations too, as it hearkens back to the idea of lost imperial glory (as well as vainglory, considering that the Habsburgs were far from being a major maritime power).

In other scenes, the semantic gap pertains to the scene itself, rather than being created through the association of earlier and later shots. This is the case in the scene that marks Holly's turning against his friend, once he receives first-hand proof of the disastrous effects of Harry's diluted penicillin racket. Calloway's role as a manipulator is reinforced, as he convinces Holly to make a detour, on their way to the airport, to a place where he admittedly has an "appointment". It's an invitation that Holly cannot turn down: "Why don't you come in too? You're a writer. It might interest you." (Reed 1949). They step into a hospital ward where the young victims of the diluted penicillin are being treated. Reed does not reveal to us the faces of the dying patients; we are only shown Holly's appalled look as he inspects the beds and listens to Calloway's explanation. At this point, we have become the impersonal "unerring" camera ourselves, following the character surreptitiously, from behind a hospital cart, or at eye level, noting every possible twitch on his face. The children are absent because they had been made irrelevant by Harry's actions. Their fates have been decided a while ago and science (or faith) can do nothing to change this. At the end of the scene, we see a nurse throwing away a teddy bear, rendered useless through the death of the child. Indeed, in Lime's system, we are all discardable.

5. Conclusions

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, *The Third Man* is characterised by a dual layering that successfully employs modernist and expressionist devices not so much as an artistic effort but by subsuming them to a realist goal in the tradition established in British cinema in the years predating World War II. Giving the camera narrative force, employing irony and making the viewer an active participant in the meaning-making process, Reed's film succeeds in revealing a totality that lies beyond the world of individual fragments. As such, it conveys a moral lesson about what it takes to remain human in the modern "waste land." Addressing the theme of "the charm of evil" (Suton 2019), it presents us with a "series of broken mirrors in the rubble" (Craig 2010: 204), through which it makes us evaluate our own possible choices in face of similar situations.

In the final analysis, *The Third Man* remains a film that unites, as much as it divides, audiences. For the film scholar and the more experienced audiences, it provides a generous offering of scenes that are a delight to both the eye and the intellect. The casual viewer, however, may turn away in disappointment. The film depicts a world whose principal characteristic is despair. As Saylor eloquently states, "[t]he rank desolation of the natural elements, the absurd revolutions of naked political bureaucracy, and the violent exposure of romantic nostalgias, all collude in a world where despair is the common *lingua franca*" (2013: 288-89). Further on, he adds that in this world hopelessness is not a psychological condition but "simply the air that Greene's character's breathe" (289). This seems to be supported by the closing shot of the film as well, which, Lennon suggests, epitomises the inescapable conclusion of the whole scenario:

The film's final shot, achieved with some practical difficulties on the day, peels away the pretence of friendship or goodness or decency. Anna's integrity is intact. Holly is bereft: a traitor and a killer, he has not managed to steal Harry's lover or change the world or do anything worth mentioning. He just killed his best friend—even if it were to be interpreted as a mercy killing and on military orders. He chased Harry's shadow and discovered his own. The desolation is wrenching. (Lennon 2016b)

Ironically, the ending that leaves no hope of reconciliation and even less room for romance was suggested by Selznick himself, for both Greene and Reed were inclined towards a more conventional resolution (Holly following Anna as she leaves the scene, alluding at the possibility of ending up together). But Anna's determination and Holly's passivity mark the eventual victory of realism over romance:

Anna cannot be contained; instead, she breaks away from Martins's passive desire that she stop and join him and instead walks on, breaking through the hold of Reed's camera—holding at a kind of realistic, eye-level angle—and the frame of the screen, triumphant in her free will. (Sinowitz 2007: 431)

As she walks out of the scene, Anna becomes herself an “absence” and we are left alone, one with the camera, staring indefinitely at the inscrutable blank that lies at the end of the cemetery alley, which has now become our axis mundi.

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