

Drew Bassett

Peter William Evans: Carol Reed

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Peter William Evans: Carol Reed

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Peter William Evans wants us to believe that Carol Reed is an underrated director unfairly kept in the shadows of David Lean and Alfred Hitchcock, whose films

“deserve far greater recognition than has recently been their due.” (p.7) However, the book fails to convince me completely and many of his films have failed the test of time. Apart from *The Third Man* (1949), an acclaimed masterpiece, and *Oliver!* an Oscar winner in 1968, not many other films by Carol Reed come to mind compared to films by Lean or Hitchcock. If *Trapeze* (1956) or *Fallen Idol* (1948) is one of your personal favourites, do you associate them with Reed as director? And if you are a big Reed fan, are you able to say what makes those films Carol Reed films?

Reed was born in Putney in 1906. He and his four brothers were brought up by their devoted mother. He served his apprenticeship in the British film industry in the 1930s first as an actor, then dialogue coach, assistant director and finally as a director in his own right, making a series of low budget second features. His first films, like many at the time, were unremarkable bargain basement imitations of American imports. After the war, during which he made documentaries, he started making British films with a strong sense of realism which dealt with the British character, institutions and problems. Most acclaim was achieved from his three collaborations with Graham Greene, *Fallen Idol*, *The Third Man* and *Our Man in Havana* (1960), plus *Odd Man Out* (1946), and *Oliver!* (1968). He was lured to Hollywood in the 1950s and the quality of his work there and as well as in England generally declined.

In all fairness, there are various reasons which make it difficult to evaluate Reed. Firstly, unfamiliarity with the complete body of his work. He directed about 30 feature films, and a handful of documentaries during the war. The films range across an array of genres, e.g. thrillers, musicals, drama and propaganda. If any genre was his own, then it is probably the thriller. I personally have only seen five of his films and *Oliver!* was only seen under duress as a birthday treat which my mother forced onto me (unfortunately, I still have nightmares about Bill Sykes played by Reed's nephew Oliver Reed). Secondly, Reed himself was a modest man whose “often self-deprecating remarks [about his films' realization] have not helped his reputation” (p.169). Clearly, he wasn't a self-publicizing director in the mould of Alfred Hitchcock or Oliver Stone but a self-effacing man who was not impressed by the honours he had accrued throughout his career: Several British Film Academy Awards, an Oscar, the Grand Prize at Cannes, and a knighthood in 1952. In addition to his own humility, the fact that his best work in the 1940s, *Odd Man Out*, *Fallen Idol* and *The Third Man*, was eclipsed by the poor critical reception and the missing financial success of his later work (with the honorable exception of *Oliver!*) up to the time of his death in 1976. And finally, there is lack of clear authorial themes and subjects running through his work: a Ridley Scott of the 20th Century, perhaps?

Evans has managed to tease out some of the common threads running through Reed's work, although Reed himself was very generous to collaborators such as

Graham Greene, John Box (art direction), Robert Krasker (cinematography) and Bert Bates (editing). There are mediations on the relations between art and life. The marked patterns of his films “seem to indicate, consciously or unconsciously, either a search for or a willingness to accept commissions for films concerned with loss, destabilized or marginalized characters, and difference and otherness” (p.5). He tells us about lonely characters caught in a crisis not of their making. There is Reed’s fondness for unhappy endings, loose ends and man’s folly. *The Third Man* being the most famous example. Folly is often explored through two sets of opposed characters. Some characters are prepared to wreck people’s lives in order to achieve their goals, for example Jenny (Margaret Lockwood) in *The Stars Look Down* (1939). Others have an aura of innocence whose childish acts produce chaos unintentionally such as Wormold (Alec Guinness) in *Our Man in Havana*. These characters “highlight Reed’s perennial interest not only in parent/child relationships but also in questions of loss, innocence and experience” (p.5) which reflect on sociological as well as psychological determinants, but it is hardly surprising considering Reed’s own illegitimate status as a child. On an occasion Evans returns to Freud for ‘clarity’. Transgressive characters are often twinned with conformists, for instance Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) and Harry Lime (Orson Welles) in *The Third Man*.

Most of Evans’ arguments can be found in the introduction and conclusion. He gives detailed examples in the chapters between, but if you want an overview of Reed’s work you could almost skip the middle 80%, especially as Evans’ writing style, except for the rare flash of humour, is easy to read but not particularly interesting. The author writes about Reed’s brilliance of form, the use of realism, the expressionistic compositions of *The Third Man*, the talent for suspense, the non-diegetic use of music and the use of close-ups. He believes Reed’s “eye for detail and for creating atmosphere through photography or editing is unsurpassed in the British cinema” (p.169). It is clear that *The Third Man* is a masterpiece and other films from the 40s have many merits but if Reed stakes “a legitimate claim to be considered one of the truly outstanding figures of British cinema” (ibid.), then, what does that say about British cinema? British cinema is an oxymoron according to Satyajit Ray.

Evans undoubtedly has a great love of his subject and places the films in their “autobiographical, socio-political and cultural contexts” delving into “gender and performance theory”, and “the complexities of nationalism and identity” according to the back cover. I’m afraid the text only partly lives up to these expectations.

Drew Bassett (Köln)