

Drew Bassett

Rob White: The Third Man

2004

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2004.2.1856>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Rob White: The Third Man. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 21 (2004), Nr. 2, S. 250–251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2004.2.1856>.

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Rob White: The Third Man

London: BFI Publishing 2003 (BFI Film Classics), 88 S., ISBN 0-85170-963-X, £ 8.99

If I were to give George W. Bush the benefit of the doubt (which I don't particularly want to), I could compare him to Holly Martins, the charmless central protagonist in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) who blunders around post-war Vienna with an air of righteous indignity, oblivious to local sensibilities, unaware or uncaring of the consequences of his actions. Martins (Joseph Cotton), a writer of substandard westerns, is offered a job working for a charity by his old friend Harry Lime (Orson Welles), but when he arrives he finds out that Harry has been killed under mysterious circumstances. Major Calloway (Trevor Howard) of the military police is of the opinion that Lime was a racketeer and therefore deserved to die. Martins investigates, falls in love with Lime's deeply grieving girlfriend Anna (Alida Valli) and eventually uncovers the fact that the death was staged. After much vacillating Martins confronts Lime in the city's labyrinthine sewers

and like a dedicated sheriff in one of his cheap westerns shoots Lime dead. The girl he loves despises him for his lack of loyalty and resolutely refuses to help betray Lime even when it becomes clear that Lime has already betrayed her to the Russian police. No matter how well-intentioned Martins is, he lacks subtlety and does not understand complexity. "He is an hypocrite because he effortlessly confuses principled behaviour and self-interest. He is dangerous because he thinks he has the makings of a hero, with God or virtue on his side (p.60)." Does this not remind you of a certain president?

The Third Man is highly intelligent and superbly executed. It boasts a cast of very capable German-speaking actors in the character roles. Anton Karas's one-off zither score inextricably links the sound of that instrument to the film. The music "clings to the contours of the film, but in another sense it is an independent line of meaning, even a counter current" (p.34). The sound design in the climatic chase in the sewers, unfortunately, has been overshadowed by the expressionistic lighting. The film's mood changes from moment to moment, from despair to frivolity, and has an atypical but deeply satisfying unhappy ending: the girl wants nothing to do with the hero. "It is also a film which insists on a variety of perspectives. . . it does not cohere, it does not oversimplify its world and it does not demand to be understood in any single way" (p.79). Is Martins a loyal friend or a shallow hypocrite? Anna a self-destructive obsessive or principled friend? Lime a malevolent sociopath or charismatic martyr? Never has a film had such weak hero, no wonder that Orson Welles's Harry Lime dominates it.

The film was a commercial and critical success on both sides of the Atlantic and confirmed Reed as a director of note. Robert Krasker's stunning lighting of the night scenes – where characters running through the streets cast elongated shadows two storeys high onto the facades of adjacent buildings – won him an Academy Award. The Harry Lime created by Reed and his screen writer, the novelist Graham Greene, "has passed into the general culture, as indeed have the whole mood and look" (p.71), from Ultravox's video for *Vienna* (Russell Mulcahy, 1981) to the graffiti "Harry Lime lives" scrawled on a sewer wall in *Alligator* (Lewis Teague, 1980).

Rob White has written a likable, entertaining, but curiously lightweight account of *The Third Man*. He alternates a description of the film's storyline with anecdotes about the creative and production process behind it, and has the occasional stab at theoretical analysis. It seems producer Alexander Korda, Reed and Green were great friends but often at odds with David O. Selznick who released the film in the United States. He was very sensitive to certain issues such as the (lack of) American presence in the film – Vienna was divided into sectors and administered equally by the Russians, British, French and Americans, and any suggestion that Martins and Lime had been more than just school chums. Another interesting anecdote concerns the fact that if Welles had turned the role

down, Howard would have played Lime. One can only imagine how diminished the film would have been without Welles's amoral but magnetic Lime. Unfortunately, there is very little about Reed's concerns and influences, other than Reed being "one of the great directors of city experience and what he emphasised was disorientation and alarm. His heroes are purposeful but hunted" (p.46). "The criminal . . . trapped, injured, without any hope of escape" (p.78), that is the city as prison. The lack of local understanding, its foreignness is exaggerated by having subtitled German dialogue, contrived camerawork and a child that accuses Martins of murder. Innocence it seems, especially Martins's, is dangerous. Even the animals seem to menace him – at one point he is bitten by a cockatoo. White does mention that the famous camera tilts were influenced by *Un Carnet de Bal* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) which Reed had reviewed for *Night and Day*: Not everyone approved of Krasker's tilts. Apparently William Wellman mailed Reed a spirit level with instructions to place it on the camera. However, there is no mention of Reed's experience assisting Edgar Wallace on his melodramas, or the documentary work Reed did during the war. *The Third Man* is nothing if not a love triangle between Martins, Lime and Anna (although Lime is much more in love with himself than Anna) played out on location.

Having watched the film again recently, it is hard to imagine how Lime could have killed his associate Joseph Harbin and fooled the porter who witnessed the accident into believing it was Lime, himself. Frankly, it is quite implausible but there is a dreamlike, or rather nightmare quality to the film which permits the impossible regardless of the authentic setting, and as White says "it is not a coherent film – but this is one of its great strengths, rather than a shortcoming." (p.78)

Drew Bassett (Köln)