

Martin Scorsese on 'The Third Man': The best revelation in all cinema

A reissue of 'The Third Man' is released on Friday. The Hollywood director Martin Scorsese reveals how Carol Reed's classic British noir from 1949 has influenced him and why it feels as fresh as ever.

The Independent, Tuesday, 23 June, 2015

Martin Scorsese

I saw *The Third Man* for the first time on television in New York, with commercial interruptions. I think I was about 15 years old, maybe 16. I saw *Citizen Kane* around the same period. I remember that I wanted to see the film on its first release, but was unable to do so, which created a mystique about the film. The theme was a radio hit, but my first viewing was on TV, around '56 or '57. But even with commercial breaks on a 16-inch screen, the power of the picture, the surprise, the entertainment, the film-making itself... a revelation. Expressive style, virtuosity – I became fixated, obsessed.

I couldn't wait to see the film again, but I had to wait until it was shown on television, maybe four or five months later. It wasn't the optimum viewing condition, I still lived in a small apartment with my family, so it was difficult to find the concentration and quiet I needed to figure out why the picture affected me so much. I was becoming aware of film-making itself around this time, about storytelling, about extraordinary cinematic experiences.

Simultaneously, a young priest who was a mentor to me and some friends gave us Graham Greene's books to read. *The Power and the Glory* had quite an effect on me. There was a stage version of it off-Broadway, and a live TV play with Laurence Olivier and George C Scott, also. Graham Greene's Catholicism had a strong impact on me, his themes of sin and redemption. I was very much aware of Graham Greene's contribution to *The Third Man* before seeing it. And I had seen his name on the credits of *The Fallen Idol*, in particular, the combination of Graham Greene and Carol Reed. I also admired *Odd Man Out*, as both of these films were shown on TV constantly.

I remember going to a place on 14th Street called Movie Star News where they had 8 by 10 glossies, production stills, and I bought a beautiful set of *The Third Man*, including some great artwork, and a great shot of Anton Karas under a table in the recording studio. They heard him playing his zither in a nightclub in Vienna, and when they went into the studio in London it didn't sound the same. They figured out that acoustically it would sound more like it had in the nightclub if they had him play under a table.

About four months ago, I screened a beautiful 35mm print of the picture for my daughter and her friends. "Why do we keep watching this?" I suppose it's [Joseph] Cotten and [Alida] Valli – that's the emotional core of the picture. For instance, the scene where Holly Martins (Cotten) finally goes to her apartment. He's a little drunk, and he tells her he loves her and he knows he doesn't have a chance. That's when she says, "The cat only liked Harry." So that leads right into the great revelation of Harry Lime in the doorway with the cat – which is iconic. But it's more than that – it's one of the great epiphanies in movies: the cat turning the corner and nestling itself on those wing-tip shoes, and then Harry Lime being revealed when the light is turned on in the doorway and it shines in his face.

Remember Walker Percy's great novel *The Moviegoer*? He refers to that moment in such a beautiful, special way. It became a moment internationally, a shared experience for a vast audience seeing that film. It's not just a dramatic revelation – there's something about Orson Welles' smile at that point that shifts everything to another level, and it sustains no matter how many times you see it. Welles comes into the picture about halfway through. That's the first time you actually see him, after you've spent so much time picturing him in your mind because everyone has been talking about him and thinking about him. So that might be the best revelation - or the best reveal, as they say - in all of cinema.

When Holly Martins finally meets Harry face to face on the Ferris wheel, you expect Harry Lime the criminal. Instead, he just jauntily walks up, says, "Hey, come on, let's take a ride." It's just a casual conversation... about all those dots moving around down there, and do you mean to tell me that if somebody came to you and said you could make a lot of money, but the only catch is that every once in a while, one of those dots might stop moving, you'd really say no? And then the great line—"Tax-free, old man, tax-free." And not to mention, Harry's response to, "You used to believe in God" – "Oh, I still do believe in God, old man. I believe in God and Mercy and all that. But the dead are happier dead. They don't miss much here, poor devils." Welles' contribution is enormous, of course. He inhabits the character. It's all a perfect fit.

You can't talk about *The Third Man* without recognizing the incredible contribution of [cinematographer] Robert Krasker. Those night scenes, the streets they wet down, the reflective surface it creates. *Mad* magazine did a memorable parody of *The Third Man*, picturing water trucks all over the city with massive hoses watering down every street. Then there's the city of Vienna itself, split up into four sections, with people living in beautiful baroque apartments, the camera pans and we see half of it in ruins. There's this extraordinary sense of a world that's come apart, accentuated by the off-centred cameras, the canted angles. It depicts the emergence from mass psychosis, 60 million people killed in the war, a civilization destroying itself: the camera style expresses that. The images never feel grounded. There's a story about when William Wyler, the great director, saw the picture and, as a joke, sent Carol Reed a level to keep his camera straight.

When the picture was released, the music became popular all around the world. That *Third Man* theme was a part of our lives. That sound was so strong, raw, yet jaunty. The sound of the zither itself feels ironic and provocative. I later found the actual soundtrack of the picture on an LP – it still sounds better than the CD. The zither music is a character in *The Third Man*, reflecting the madness and the desperation of that ruptured world, the feeling that anything can happen at any time. The upbeat irony of it...

Has it had an influence on my career? When I saw it, I was ripe for it – ready to understand what you can do with the camera. The themes of the picture made me feel comfortable about dealing with similar kinds of characters, characters you'd consider undesirable - the charm of evil. I did a paper on the film when I was 18 at NYU. The professor had different ideas. He wrote a note on the paper: "Remember, it's only a thriller." I disagreed. We know what happens in *Psycho* or *Vertigo* or *The Red Shoes*. So why do we keep watching? If some dismiss a work because it "fits" into a genre, then why does it sustain repeated viewings? It's more than the plot twists and surprises of the story. Certainly, it's the characters, the world they inhabit, the

love stories, the trust and betrayals – the human heart. Each presented with intelligence, wit, and a very real joy of film-making, while still feeling fresh.

I hope *The Third Man* reissue prompts re-evaluation of the work of Carol Reed, a wonderful film artist.

This is an exclusive transcript taken from a filmed interview with Martin Scorsese. Additional writing by Martin Scorsese.