What’s it about?
Often voted the greatest British film ever made, The Third Man is Oscar-winning director Carol Reed’s undisputed masterpiece. The action starts when American novelist Holly Martins arrives in Vienna just after World War II to stay with his old pal Harry Lime – but ends up at his funeral. On a quest to discover how Harry died, Martins slowly discovers that his recently deceased friend was not the lovely chap he remembers at all – and the circumstances of his death get less and less clear the closer that he looks at them. This stunning thriller, written by Graham Greene, makes unforgettable use of the shadows and shabby glamour of post-war Vienna.

Who made it?
English filmmaker Carol Reed started out as an actor, but quickly moved on to producing and directing. In 1968 he won the Best Director Oscar for his classic musical Oliver! and became the first ever director to receive a knighthood.

One of England’s most acclaimed novelists, Graham Greene also wrote some classic movie scripts. As well as The Third Man, he wrote two of Reed’s other best-loved films, The Fallen Idol and Our Man in Havana.

Orson Welles made his name with his legendary directorial debut Citizen Kane. Often hailed as the greatest film of all time, Welles also starred in it, aged just 26. He only appears in a few scenes in The Third Man, but arguably steals the show.

Backstory
Set in the crumbling, bombsite-filled streets of occupied Vienna, the film captured a global sense of fear and moral uncertainty in the aftermath of World War II. For British cinema, however, a golden age was beginning. Between 1945 and ‘50, British classics including Brief Encounter, Brighton Rock, The Red Shoes and A Matter of Life and Death were filmed. The team behind The Third Man – Carol Reed, Graham Greene and producer Alexander Korda – led the boom.

The Production
Orson Welles, a famously difficult character, refused to film underground during the scenes set in Vienna’s sewers, so had to be replaced by a body double. When he did appear on set, however, he did come up with the film’s killer line: “In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”
The reviews

“An iconic work [...] great in so many ways, from Graham Greene’s script to Anton Karas’ score, from Welles’s first appearance in the doorway to the final long take at the Viennese cemetery.”

The Observer

“This stunning noir set amid the ruins of post-War Vienna features perhaps the most memorable chase sequence in cinema.”

Channel 4 Film

“As always, unmissable.”

The Guardian

Look out for

The iconic Ferris wheel scene, just over an hour in. Here Martins finally catches up with the man who’s been eluding him for most of the film. With the wheel slowly turning and the streets of Vienna looming below, it’s the perfect picture of Martins’ spinning moral compass and the mixed-up, murky world conjured up by Welles’ riveting dialogue.

Listen out for the film’s distinctive score too – played on the zither (the stringed instrument shown in the opening credits). After hearing musician Anton Karas playing it at a restaurant in Vienna, Reed was determined to have him compose the film’s music. Flowing seamlessly from jaunty humour to breathtaking suspense and haunting romance, it’s hard to imagine The Third Man without it.

Talking points

What is the film’s most surprising moment?

“He’ll have you in a dither with his zither!” was one of the film’s taglines when it was released – but what did you think of the music?

Crumbling architecture, murky sewers, deserted Ferris wheels… What’s the film’s eeriest location? Why?

Review starter

Full of unbelievable twists and turns, this is guaranteed to have you on the edge of your seat...

I don’t normally watch thrillers...

What we think

Led by Orson Welles’ unforgettable turn as the charismatic but villainous title character, this spellbinding thriller showcases the combined talents of a cinematic dream team.

What happened next?

The film was a popular and critical hit, winning the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival, the Best Film BAFTA and an Oscar for its cinematography. Reed worked with Greene again to adapt his novel Our Man in Havana for the screen 10 years later, but The Third Man is widely considered their best collaboration and the peak of Reed’s career.