As the latest version of this classic British novel reaches Australian cinemas, BRIAN MCFARLANE considers the original text and its two screen adaptations, each of which has much to offer in the English and media classroom.
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as any other twentieth-century author so

tenaciously associated with the screen as

Graham Greene? Just think of the multiple

connections this distinguished British author

has with the most popular entertainment form of the period.

Greene is linked to cinema most prominently as an adapted

author – almost all of his novels have been reworked for the

screen, several more than once – but also as an author of

screenplays (from his own work on some notable occasions),

as a pungent film critic during the 1930s, and even once as an

actor. But if he has been much taken up by filmmakers, it is

also worth noting that he once wrote, ‘When I describe a scene

... I capture it with the moving eye of the cine-camera rather

than with the photographer’s eye – which leaves it frozen. In

this precise domain, I think the cinema has influenced me.’

His first novel was called The Man Within (1929) and its title

now almost seems a prophesy of what would be his preoccu-
pation in the many novels (and plays and short stories) that

appeared over the next forty-odd years. So, what do we

associate Greene the novelist with? Among other matters, a

strong Catholic element; a taste for the bleak and tormented,

especially in matters of love and sexuality; pity for sufferers

but absolutely no sentimentality; and a pervasive aura of

moral ambiguity and conflict. It’s unlikely that anyone reading

Greene would ever exclaim Laugh? I nearly died! – he is a very

serious, even sombre, novelist. This is even true of his

so-called ‘entertainments’, the term he used to differentiate

what he saw as his lighter works, including thrillers such as

The Ministry of Fear (1943).

Greene is much associated with the high period of British

filmmaking in the late 1940s. The Man Within was filmed in

1947 [directed by Bernard Knowles] and features a striking

performance by Richard Attenborough as a cowardly young

man who redeems himself morally. However, it was the next

three films (which Greene also wrote the screenplays for) that

made him so notable a figure in British cinema. My chief

concern here is the original version of Brighton Rock (John

Boulting, 1947), but the other two – The Fallen Idol (1948) and

The Third Man (1949), both directed by Carol Reed in the years

of his remarkable ascendancy – remain pinnacles in an

exceptionally rich period. The former, a study of a child’s

innocence put to the test by adult behaviour, was based on

Greene’s short story ‘The Basement Room’; the screenplay of

the latter film actually led to the story being written. Greene

himself wrote that The Third Man ‘was never written to be

read but only to be seen’ and recorded how it began over

dinner with producer Alexander Korda:

[the] germ of an idea [was] contained on an envelope flap: ‘I had

paid my last farewell to Harry a week ago, when his coffin was

lowered into the frozen February ground, so that it was with

incredulity that I saw him pass by, without a sign of recognition,

among a host of strangers in the Strand’.3

From this starting point derived one of the screen’s most

seductive entertainments: it regularly shows up in lists of
best films and remains a peak of British film noir. It charts the efforts of another ‘innocent’, the hapless American hack-writer Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten), as he struggles to keep his feet amid the corruptions of postwar Vienna. Also characteristically, Greene moves between exotic locations (Vienna, Cuba, Indochina) and the bleak England of, say, *Brighton Rock*, nailing their specificity in a few telling details.

As a much-adapted author, Greene has fared pretty well with filmmakers. If nothing quite rivalled the distinction of his collaborations with Carol Reed, there is certainly a good deal else to admire. Two 1942 adaptations are notable in their disparate ways. Noir specialist Andrew Spicer believes that *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942, based on Greene’s *A Gun for Sale*) offers the first detailed delineation of the modern urban hit man, a new antihero that expressed the feelings of doom, disillusionment and social unease in a society poised on the brink of war.

*Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942, based on Greene’s story ‘The Lieutenant Died Last’) is a compelling ‘what if’ study of German soldiers penetrating an English village through collusion with its traitorous squire. In a subtle analysis of the film, Charles Barr writes that ‘It continuously undermines the seductiveness of cosy English facades, easy-going English qualities,’ resisting simple deployment of sympathies, as indeed Greene notably does throughout his oeuvre. The most recent adaptations of his work include *The End of the Affair* (Neil Jordan, 1999) and *The Quiet American* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), both the second screen versions of their respective novels, as is *Brighton Rock* (Rowan Joffe, 2010) – a fact that reflects the screen’s ongoing fascination with Greene.

### The 1938 Novel

*Brighton Rock* was Greene’s first ‘Catholic’ novel, and is distinct from his ‘entertainments’. The former are more overtly concerned with what he saw as major matters – life and death, heaven and hell, salvation and perdition – whereas the entertainments focus on plot, background and action, and are less concerned with religious or moral issues. In its overall narrative trajectory, *Brighton Rock* obviously has much in common with the thriller pattern: it involves a murder, announced in its opening paragraph, followed by an investigation of sorts, and reaches a kind of justice by the end. But there is a good deal more to it than this paradigm suggests. Certainly its major ‘cardinal functions’ – that is, events that are connected consequentially as well as sequentially, and comprise the ‘hinge-points’ of the narrative – provide a strong basic structure. Fred Hale, in Brighton for the day in his role as journalist ‘Kolley Kibber’, meets Ida in a pub and they go off together. She leaves him alone for a few minutes, which leads to his death, and this in turn leads her to assume responsibility for tracking down his murderer. It also leads the killer, petty criminal Pinkie Brown, to marry waitress Rose in order to ensure that she won’t discredit his alibi, and to kill Spicer to remove another threat. Ida, a cheerful, blowzy woman in early middle age, has a strong sense of right and wrong. She has scarcely known Fred Hale but is motivated by a feeling for justice, and is subsequently determined to try to save Rose from Pinkie’s dangerous intentions. And so on.

However, this string of events doesn’t ultimately account for the novel’s power, and we have to look further to appreciate its moral and emotional complexity. The narrating voice of the novel directs our attention to the boy Pinkie, whose background – semi-poverty,
a revulsion against human sexuality – has led him to a life of shabby criminality. Kite, the one member of the gang for whom Pinkie had any affection and who perhaps acted as a father figure for him, has been killed, and this is what has made Pinkie the chilling, affectless gangster we meet. Pinkie’s (and Greene’s) Catholicism is a key element in the book’s texture; when Pinkie is trying to win Rose to his purposes, he makes the point that they are both ‘Romans’, telling her in his own way that this gives them an insight into the dark heart of things that ordinary people don’t understand. For example, Ida knows about right and wrong and has a simple sense of justice, but Catholics, Pinkie claims, have the darker knowledge of good and evil – though it’s evil that preoccupies him.

So, though Brighton Rock can be read as a thriller, it has considerably more to offer. It can also be read as a study in adolescent criminality (and the influences that have made Pinkie as he is), as a study of a particular social background (the cheerful, busy resort and its dark underside), or as a study of human corruption and of what goodness might be like. Has ‘goodness’ more in common with Ida’s easygoing affability, which gives way to a zeal for justice, than with Rose’s ‘innocence’? The average thriller will not normally take on so much – or stay so tenaciously with the reader – and such multi-layered complexity offers a distinct challenge to the filmmaker.

THE 1947 FILM

Context

Though the film was made in 1947, it was set several years earlier, before World War II.8 The film’s opening title, which appears over the background of Brighton’s pebbly beach, reads:

Brighton today is a large, jolly, friendly seaside town in Sussex exactly one hour’s journey from London, but in the years between the wars behind the Regency terraces and crowded beaches there was another Brighton of dark alleyways and festering slums. From here, the poison of crime and violence, gang warfare, began to spread until the challenge was taken up by the police. This is a story of that other Brighton – now happily no more.

The filmmakers – the filmmaking team of Roy and John Boulling – were required to insert such a disclaimer in order to film on location in Brighton. The film’s star, Richard Attenborough, recalled forty-two years later: ‘Oh, there was a lot of opposition because it was casting shame upon the comfortable seaside town of Brighton and so on.’9
Despite this disclaimer, the film fit snugly into postwar film noir stylistics. The noir iconography is a more potent signifier than any attempt to hint at its supposed 1930s setting. The pervasive bleakness, enhanced through the contrast with the busy, heedless life of the coastal resort; the lighting and editing procedures that highlight faces, particularly the chilling close-ups of Attenborough’s Pinkie set against, say, the other gang members or the innocent Rose (Carol Marsh); the city’s wet streets: these and other visual elements are captured by ‘Harry Waxman’s cinematography [which] brilliantly recreates Brighton as both a shadowy netherworld and a place of sunshine and fun’.

‘Postwar’ is an important intertextual element in relation to this version of Brighton Rock, not only for the way its noir proclivities work against the grain of the period setting but also because the film represents two key elements in the heyday of British filmmaking. First, it exemplifies the realist tradition valorised by wartime British cinema, in which a near-documentary concern for authenticity reinvigorated the films of the war years. Second, its status as a literary adaptation aligns it with key titles in what is probably the period of British film’s highest achievement – think of David Lean’s Dickens films, Laurence Olivier’s dealings with Shakespeare, and Anthony Asquith’s adaptation of Terence Rattigan texts, among many others.

Those last two names are especially significant to note here. The twin Boulting brothers, Roy and John, emerged from minor films in the 1930s and wartime documentaries (famously Desert Victory, 1943 and Burma Victory, 1945) to occupy a high place in the postwar upsurge, with each alternating as producer and director. However, they were not the first names associated with the film, which was originally to be directed by Asquith from a screenplay by Rattigan. On this matter, Roy Boulting made the following comment about the screenplay credit:

A notable critic of the period described the film’s ending as ‘one of the most unscrupulous tamperings with a book I have yet encountered’ and finally dismissed the Boultings’ film as ‘a child’s guide’ to the book.
Greene and Rattigan! Chalk and cheese would you say? But the joint screen credit was determined, not so much by a collaboration, as by a prior contract. Brighton Rock had been purchased jointly by Anatole de Grunwald (who would produce), Anthony Asquith (direct) and Terence Rattigan (to adapt and write a screenplay). It was hardly their cup of tea: the undertones of Graham’s highly idiosyncratic Catholicism eluded Terry, while the gentle, cultivated ‘Puffin’ Asquith found the brutal milieu, the savage action, extremely uncongenial. Finally, defeated, they gave up on the subject. Those harder roughnecks, the brothers Boulting, arriving on the scene, acquired the film rights from them. A condition of the sale was screen recognition for Rattigan’s aborted script … but adaptation and writing glory were, in truth, entirely Graham Greene’s.11

I’ve quoted this for two reasons. First, because the Asquith–Rattigan partnership had never done anything like Brighton Rock. They were well established as purveyors of civilised entertainments such as The Way to the Stars (1945), so their interest in Brighton Rock perhaps suggests that they were drawn to it on the strength of Greene’s name rather than the subject. Second, the importance of Greene’s name on the screenplay points to the film’s bleakness and metaphysical content, which derive directly from the novel. Also, though the ending was much criticised at the time as an etiolation of Greene’s sombre agenda, it is worth noting that it had his approval. He later wrote: ‘The script of Brighton Rock I am ready to defend’, even though he felt the Boultings were ‘too generous in giving an apprentice his rope, and the film-censor as usual was absurd’.12

Critical opinion often rushes into flaying a film for not doing
justice to a novel, and this was no different; a notable critic of the period, Richard Winnington, described the film’s ending as ‘one of the most unscrupulous tamperings with a book I have yet encountered’ and finally dismissed the Boultings’ film as ‘a child’s guide’ to the book.13 In view of such comments, it is salutary to have Greene’s own views on record. This is not to imply that his assessment is worth more than any other perse, but it is important to note that he was relatively satisfied with the cinematic fate of his novel and, especially, that he approved the ending. In the novel, Rose goes home after Pinkie’s death hugging the recording he has made in which she thinks he has said he loves her. In fact, he has said the opposite and Greene leaves her walking ‘towards the worst horror of all’. The film has her listening to the record, cracked as a result of Pinkie’s attempt to destroy it, and it now stops on, and repeats over and over, ‘I love you’. It doesn’t take much imagination to guess that she would skip over the scratch and go on to listen to the rest of the recording, so carpings about sentimentalisation of the film seem uncalled for.

The adaptation
The film’s overall narrative pattern follows that laid down in the novel: reduced to its barest bones it is a tale of murder, investigation and pursuit, and contains a denouement in which justice, of a sort, appears to have been done. The major narrative events referred to above are pretty closely followed. Kite is murdered, which has preceded the film and is noted in a newspaper piece; Fred (Alan Wheatley) comes to Brighton as part of a promotion organised by his newspaper and Pinkie kills him as revenge for his role in Kite’s murder; Ida (Hermione Baddeley) doesn’t accept the verdict regarding Fred’s death and, with some help, goes about tracking Pinkie down and rescuing his new wife, Rose, whom Pinkie married to stop her from incriminating him; Ida and others thwart the suicide pact Pinkie has tried to talk Rose into, and so on. The major change (is it really so ‘major’?) is in the ending, as noted above, but in general, the cause-and-effect movement between the novel’s chief events is retained. Structurally, the film uses cinema’s temporal and geographic mobility to render fluidly the movement among the novel’s various locations. The film, with its thirty-three sequences, effectively achieves this fluidity by alternating between scenes. This would be clumsy in a novel but works effortlessly on screen. A minor example of this occurs when the film cuts between Pinkie meeting with the superior protection crook Colleoni (Charles Goldner) at the posh Cosmopolitan Hotel and Ida walking purposefully along the beach in search of information about Fred. A more crucial alternation occurs as the film nears its climax: this segment starts in the pub when Pinkie and Rose say goodbye to gang member Dallow (William Hartnell) and go out into the rain, presumably to carry out their pact of ‘dying together’, leading Ida to ask Dallow where they’re headed. The remainder of this penultimate segment creates tension by alternating between Pinkie and Rose on the pier, talking of their ‘pact’, and Ida gathering up Dallow and a policeman and the three of them making their way to the pier to save Rose. The tension of this segment largely derives from the skilful editing of Peter Graham Scott; not to underestimate the screenplay’s intentions or the director’s imaginative interpretation of his material, but the editing here evidences a distinctly cinematic strategy.14
Aesthetically, the new film doesn’t have the powerful generic or stylistic associations that postwar noir thrillers had provided for the Boulting brothers’ film.
The film’s other strengths, which I haven’t space to deal with in detail, include a skilful distinguishing between the various gang members; a bold, broad and loud Ida; and a superb Pinkie from Attenborough, who had played the role in a stage dramatisation of the novel. Attenborough was Greene’s choice for the film, to which he brought a chilling sense of youthful menace. As well, the look of the film is persistently compelling, both in the way it catches the appropriate ambivalence about the bustling seaside resort and the astuteness of John Howell’s production design in, for instance, the contrasting interiors of Pinkie’s shabby house and the plush Cosmopolitan or the cheery pub. A critical reappraisal nearly fifty years later claimed that ‘The Boulting brothers attack the subject matter with considerable verve, producing some glorious set-pieces.’ Not much liked when first released, this is a film well worth re-viewing now.

THE 2011 FILM

Context

Whereas the Boulting brothers’ film was about as British – as English – as a film could be, Rowan Joffé’s new version is officially a French/UK co-production: the French company, Studio Canal Features, is as prominently listed in the credits as the UK Film Council and BBC Films. Of itself, this wouldn’t mean that the film lacks national specificity, but it does point to a different industrial context from that in which the old film was produced. This is very much a recurring phenomenon in ‘British’ filmmaking of the last decade or more, and there is often a corresponding sense of filmmakers consciously aiming their work at international audiences.

More significantly, perhaps, is that whereas the 1947 film was made during a period of high distinction in British cinema history, Joffé’s film is situated in a much less confident filmmaking era. There are very good British films being made – while directors such as Mike Leigh and Michael Winterbottom are at work there is always the promise of exceptional work – but there is not the continuity of product that was possible in the postwar period when the studios, whatever their shortcomings, provided a more secure production context. Aesthetically, the new film doesn’t have the powerful generic or stylistic associations that postwar noir thrillers had provided for the Boulting brothers’ film.

This sounds like a rather negative approach to the new film, but ‘industrial’ and intertextual references are relevant in considering any film. Accordingly, in looking at Joffé’s film I think it is apparent that it belongs in a thinner filmmaking texture than the earlier one.

The adaptation

First-time feature director Joffé has said in an interview that he had

A kind of addictive love of the novel. And if I’m totally honest, although I profoundly revere the 1947 film and I think Richard
Attenborough’s performance is extraordinary ... it wasn’t my vision of the book. I mean, apart from anything else the book is shot through with colour and is a vivid experience ... what Graham Greene does is take a noir genre, a true crime genre and he gives it a spin and brings it to life.17

In these and other statements he is repudiating the idea of remaking the earlier film, as he comes to different terms with the precursor novel.

From the outset, Joffe stakes a claim for re-imagining certain key elements of the novel while still maintaining the broad outline of its narrative. For instance, whereas Kite is well and truly dead before the beginning of both the novel and the 1947 film, Joffe has chosen to start with Kite’s murder on the night streets: he emerges from a phone booth, there is a flash of knives, men run from the scene and Kite is left dead on the ground. This is followed by an encounter in a public toilet between Pinkie [Sam Riley] and Fred Hale [Sean Harris], whom Pinkie recognised at the scene of Kite’s death. Pinkie pulls a knife but Hale gets the better of him. Next, there is a newspaper headline about youth taking over in Clacton and Margate, and we know we’re in the mid-1960s when the clashes between mods and rockers terrorised the south coast. In the last of these opening segments, Ida [Helen Mirren] and Phil Corkery [John Hurt] are drinking in the pub when Fred, clearly well known to Ida, comes in and tries to borrow money from her.

I draw attention to these early segments to make clear that Joffe has for better and/or worse set out to make something new, and some of these changes are more significant than others. For instance, he has updated the setting on grounds that he wanted contemporary audiences to view Pinkie’s actions not ‘through the lens of history’ but as part of that era of profound youthful rebellion. This later leads to a genuinely funny moment when Pinkie, having nicked a scooter, finds himself leading a whole procession of invading mods down Brighton’s main drag. Somehow, though, there isn’t the sense of menace, of shabbiness, of doom even, that the old film had. As to the opening moments, perhaps nothing could equal the chill of Greene’s own first sentence: ‘Hale knew, before he had
been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.’ Joffe stages Kite’s death efficiently enough, but it’s almost as if he didn’t trust the audience to pick up on Kite’s connection with Pinkie unless it was spelled out.

Making Ida the manager of the cafe Rose (Andrea Riseborough) works at tightens the narrative strands by giving Ida a stronger motive for protecting Rose from Pinkie, just as her knowing Fred increases her determination to track down his killer. At the same time, though, this renders her persistence more conventional. Greene’s Ida wants a bit of good-humoured fun out of life, but is also impelled by a firmly held urge to see justice done, and by a firm, crude grasp of right and wrong. Another narrative tightening involves Rose having her photo taken with the frightened Hale on the pier (a replacement for her more tenuous connection via Hale’s card being left under a tablecloth in the cafe). Like the Rose-Ida link in the cafe, this also works against the novel’s (and the earlier film’s) sense of arbitrariness – a set of disparate characters gradually being caught up together in the teeming crowd of holiday-makers.

However, there is plenty to admire in the new film. The shabby grandeur of the front at Brighton, the tawdry dignity of the Palace Pier, the squalid housing estate where Rose’s life is bartered between Pinkie and her father, the invasion of delinquents on their scooters, the whiff of youthful rebellion in the 1960s air: all these are vividly enough realised, even if it loses some of the earlier film’s evocation of a shoddy, criminal underworld at work. If Riley’s Pinkie is less truly alarming than Attenborough’s, there is compensation in Riseborough’s touching Rose, more class-exact than Marsh’s was, and Mirren brings her own sort of tenacity to Ida’s pursuit. Joffe’s ending replicates the 1947 film’s (with the unnerving addition of Rose being pregnant to Pinkie), and it seems to me no more evasive than when it was originally so harshly criticised.

CONCLUSION

If Greene’s Brighton Rock touches on greatness in its portrayal of one whose chief connection with religion is in relation to hell and damnation, it is arguable that neither film quite sets off such painful resonances in the generic context of the thriller. The new film, for all its superior gloss, can’t suggest the endemic shabbiness that pervades the Boultings’ version, but there is something so chilling at the heart of the story about two blighted young lives that it would take a far less efficient retelling than Joffe’s to dispel it altogether. Pinkie, on the page and on the screen, is a pitiable and desplicable product of his time and circumstances, and Rose as his loving victim is a figure of real pathos. Greene wasn’t always pleased with the way his novels were adapted, but he was gratified with the Boulting treatment. I also suspect that he’d have felt Joffe gives him reasonable grounds for satisfaction.

Endnotes

4 The best account of the film’s production history is Charles Drazin’s In Search of The Third Man, Methuen, London, 1999.
8 The film is available on DVD on several different labels, one named ‘The Graham Greene Collection’.
11 McFarlane, op. cit., p. 78.
14 Scott became a notable TV director after directing a few modest cinema features.
15 Attenborough reported that Rose was played on stage by the then-rising Dulcie Gray who, excellent actress as she was, was considered too old at twenty-seven for the camera’s remorseless eye. Personal interview with author, 1989.