

The socially critical films of 1974: Part 1

Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*: Film noir in a time of malaise

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The suspenseful and disturbing *Chinatown* (1974) ranks not only among Polish-born director Roman Polanski's finest films, but also among the finest films of its era. It follows a private detective determined to unravel a conspiracy in 1930s Los Angeles. He soon realizes that his client is not telling him all she knows and that, generally speaking, nothing is as it appears.

With *Chinatown*, Polanski sought to recreate on screen the atmosphere found in the hardboiled detective novels of American-British author Raymond Chandler (1888–1959). As Chandler had done at his best, Polanski skillfully highlights the contrast between the gleaming, glamorous surface of Southern California and the seamy, even horrific, foundation on which it rests.

But *Chinatown* is not merely a genre exercise. Its story of a Depression-era conspiracy contains an indictment of the corruption, rapacity and violence of the contemporary social order in America and elsewhere. Today, this indictment carries even greater power.

In the film's opening sequence, a woman (Diane Ladd) introduces herself as Evelyn Mulwray and hires detective J. J. "Jake" Gittes (Jack Nicholson) to investigate her husband, who she believes is conducting a love affair. Gittes then attends a public meeting at which Hollis Mulwray, Evelyn's husband and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's chief engineer, loudly and publicly rejects building a new dam because it would be unsafe. Later, the detective photographs Mulwray in the company of a young woman who is presumably the lover in question.

The photos are soon splashed across the local newspapers, causing a scandal. Then the real Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) visits Gittes and threatens to sue him over the unwanted publicity, which is intended to discredit Mulwray. Shortly, the latter's dead body is found at a reservoir. Gittes goes to work for his widow.

Probing the proposed dam project, Gittes discovers that water is being dumped out of the reservoir at night. Since

Los Angeles is in the middle of a drought, Gittes suspects foul play. At the reservoir one night, two thugs warn him to stop snooping around. One of them (Polanski) slices open Gittes' nose with a knife.

The case leads Gittes to the sinister millionaire Noah Cross (John Huston). Over lunch at the club he owns, Cross offers to pay Gittes twice his normal fee to find Mulwray's supposed young lover. Gittes is openly dubious about Cross but accepts the assignment.

The further Gittes proceeds, the more he is attacked, beaten and shot at. Realizing that he has uncovered a conspiracy involving the city's wealthy and powerful, Gittes is determined to get to the bottom of it and expose the culprits. But his quest for justice puts him, and Evelyn as well, in danger. Gittes is moving inexorably toward a final showdown the implications of which he only dimly understands.

Chinatown benefits from strong performances. Nicholson ably brings out Gittes's multiple dimensions. The detective has sufficient professional veneer to operate among the affluent and influential, but his lower-middle-class origins often peek through. He delights in crude jokes and frequently reveals his prejudices (against Chinese, Jews and "Okies," for example). Yet his distrust of and even antipathy for the rich and powerful are sincere and deep-rooted. We see Gittes denounce a banker for throwing people out of their homes.

Dunaway, especially well cast, resembles a '30s movie star and conveys the cool elegance of Evelyn: a woman of wealth and leisure. Her dissimulation, though not always convincing, is a necessary defense mechanism of the privileged (and damaged). It is part of what makes the plot complex and increasingly ominous.

However, perhaps the most outstanding performance is Huston's. Brimming with transparently false geniality, Huston conveys almost nothing but overpowering, monomaniacal menace. It's no accident that he consistently

mispronounces Gittes's name and serves him a fish with its head intact. "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but, believe me, you don't," he warns darkly.

There is this renowned exchange:

GITTES: I want to know what you're worth—over 10 million?

CROSS: Oh, my, yes.

GITTES: Then why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?

Cross eventually tells him, "You see, Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and right place, they're capable of anything."

The plot of *Chinatown* is based loosely on the California water wars of the 1910s and '20s. During this period, Los Angeles officeholders diverted water from the Owens Valley into the metropolitan area. The water was used to irrigate the San Fernando Valley, large tracts of which had quietly been bought by a secret network. The urban investors profited handsomely at the expense of farmers in the Owens Valley. William Mulholland, superintendent of the city's Department of Water and Power, led this conspiracy. Mulholland was an inspiration for the character of Mulwray, although the latter is a figure of integrity in *Chinatown*.

For contemporary audiences, the film no doubt evoked—among other things—the Watergate scandal then seizing the nation's attention. During the 1972 presidential election, the reelection campaign of Republican President Richard Nixon organized a break-in of offices in the Watergate office building, which served as the Democratic National Committee headquarters. The burglars' arrest and the subsequent investigations (ongoing during the filming of *Chinatown*) uncovered enough evidence to justify the impeachment of Nixon for obstruction of justice, abuse of power and contempt of Congress. Rather than face impeachment, Nixon resigned in August 1974, less than two months after the release of Polanski's film.

The criminality and deception exposed during the Watergate investigations heightened the anti-establishment sentiments that already were prevalent, especially among radicalized youth and important sections of the working class, including striking teachers, longshoremen, autoworkers and others.

Chinatown appeared in an explosive political and social atmosphere, following the winter of 1973–74, which was dominated by the quadrupling of oil prices and the independent truckers' strike, combined with the unraveling of the widely hated Nixon administration.

The film spoke to these events and a more generally crisis-ridden society, but inevitably through the prism of the filmmakers' social positions, outlooks and sensibilities.

Chinatown is the work of artists who, though not grasping the full significance of these developments, are nevertheless responding sensitively to them.

The Red Scare and the purge of Hollywood that followed World War II cut subsequent generations of filmmakers off from socialist thought. The upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought about a radicalization among artists, but a radicalization with many contradictions.

Screenwriter Robert Towne set *Chinatown* in the 1930s presumably to make a connection with the Chandler era, the Depression years, and perhaps out of the belief that contemporary Hollywood had lost qualities that existed in an earlier period. The filmmakers may even have felt that a character like Gittes, a defender of the common man, was more plausibly located in the 1930s.

It is telling, however, that the militant working class of the era makes no appearance in *Chinatown*. Polanski treats the few workers who do appear with indifference or condescension. Although *Chinatown* presents an unanswerable indictment of the rich, it also implies that the game is fixed and the best course may be to cut one's losses. The final mood is one of fatalism and resignation.

Nonetheless, as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted some years ago in an assessment of Polanski, "The exile from 'communism,' Polanski, but an honest artist, with his eyes open, made a meticulously constructed, devastating and deeply felt indictment of American society. One wonders if the political establishment, especially in Los Angeles, ever truly forgave him."

Time has done nothing to blunt the film's power. *Chinatown* speaks viscerally to our sense of horror and injustice in the face of the crisis and bankruptcy of American capitalism, which is far more advanced today.



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