
‘Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water’

Politics, Perceptions and the Pursuit of History in Roman Polanski’s Chinatown

Ian S. Scott



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/1203>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.1203

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Ian S. Scott, “Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water”, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 2-2 | 2007, document 1, Online since 17 October 2007, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/1203> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.1203>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

'Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water'

Politics, Perceptions and the Pursuit of History in Roman Polanski's
Chinatown

Ian S. Scott

- 1 Probably the most famous phrase in *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski's 1974 homage to detective noir, is virtually the last line spoken in the movie. The ensemble of characters is standing by the car that Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) has attempted to escape in with her daughter, Katherine (Belinda Palmer). Detectives have fired shots from up the street in their attempt to prevent Evelyn from fleeing the scene and the result is that the long slow single horn sounding some yards away signals Evelyn's death. Her head rests on the steering wheel and blood pours from a bullet wound that has entered her skull and gone through the defected eye that private detective J.J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson) had noticed in a scene earlier in the movie. Lieutenant Escobar (Perry Lopez) urges Gittes to go home and his associates pull him away from the vehicle with Walsh (Joe Mantell) famously pleading: "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown."
- 2 Of course, "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown" is also one of the many lines in the film that pays due reverence to the screenplay's inspiration, the work of Raymond Chandler. Screenwriter Robert Towne had read an article in *New West* magazine on Chandler's L.A. and saw an opportunity to relocate a detective story back to 1930's California. "Reading Chandler filled me with such a loss," he said, "that it was probably the main reason why I did the script" (Wyatt 148). Stylistically in particular, the film's visual treatment of L.A. appears to deliver a sumptuous reconditioning of the depression era. And in the title of the film, notions of dislocation, social and community tension, as well as urban expansion and ghettoization play to the themes of the outsider and the 'other' embodied in Gittes' persona. Towne explained that the film's title came from a conversation with a Hungarian vice cop who had worked the beat in Chinatown. The cop told Towne that with so many different tongues and dialects, the police were never sure if they were intervening in a crime down there or helping to perpetrate one. This dialectical confusion is metaphorically implanted upon Gittes, his investigation, and

Towne's creation for him of a past – as an officer in Chinatown – which he thought he had escaped, until the character of Evelyn Mulwray enters his life.

- 3 So *Chinatown* is both an unwelcome psychological fixation for the character of Gittes in the story and a meditation on an alternative, updated version of the Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain west coast noir detective story. These two pathways, together with the Oedipal sub-plot that winds its way through the narrative, have formed the bulk of the investigation done by film scholars looking at the movie; and the way *Chinatown* transformed and reconfigured the classic noir legacy, in stylistic as well as linguistic terms, has remained the mainstay of many readings of the film (McGinnis 249-51; Belton 933-50; Shetley 1092-1109).
- 4 The picture clearly has a number of the key elements in the genre: a workaholic private investigator, a femme fatale, and a plot with double-dealing sexual intrigue. But while its story follows what at first appears an obvious path to solution and satisfactory closure – Gittes uncovers scandal and deception at the heart of elite power and exposes such shenanigans – slowly but surely bigger, wider and more imponderable issues (state politics, the relevance of water to L.A., even the weight of history itself upon the state) begin to make his investigation a fatalistic pursuit. Gittes' investigation travails the byways of the city's recent past and the representation of that history is one of two themes that this article explores further and wishes to contest and reconsider in the light of other studies.
- 5 The first connected theme, however, is a re-evaluation of the visualization and stylization of *Chinatown*. Contrary to past readings of the movie, it is the contention here that Polanski's presentation establishes a far more modern, preemptive setting for Los Angeles, a construction that, far from looking to the past, actually concerns the future, the future beyond the film's 1930's setting as well as its 1970's production. Through these notions this article asserts that *Chinatown* is not only a unique and far more contemporary presentation of L.A. than other readings have suggested, but it is now also a cinematic composition that has to labor under its historical pretensions and has itself passed over into the realms of the California mythology it purports to expose. Linking the visual and the historical together, therefore, this article argues that *Chinatown* is today a movie that, more than thirty years after its first theatrical release, is no longer *about* Los Angelean or Californian history; it has become a *part* of the city and the state's history.
- 6 First of all in seeking to assert how and why the film has taken on the mantle of purportedly real social and historical discourse, it is important to pass comment on *Chinatown*'s place in a brand of Hollywood film that arose in the 1970's, and the link such films hold to similar contemporary movies. *Chinatown* heralded the rise of what became known as *neo-noir* in the 1970's, and scholars have pointed to a collection of contemporary and period pieces which, it is claimed, either owe allegiance to, or share a kindred identity with, Polanski's film. Utilizing Marc Vernet's notion that in the 1950's noir as a genre entered into a conflict and transformation predicated upon the greater use of color in film, Leonardo Gandini argues that color provided the definitive break between classic and contemporary cinema and ends up being the formal motif upon which modern noir is constructed (Vernet; Gandini 302). And, as Nicholas Christopher has further identified, a series of films did indeed emerge during the decade of the seventies that built upon the foundations of classic noir, with *Chinatown* central to this evolution, pushing the genre on into new unexplored territory. For

example, in an era when sex and violence on film was starting to become more explicit, much is made of the fact that *Chinatown* begins with close-up photographs of illicit fornication (Naremore 207). Christopher points to two films with contemporary settings that drew on this new uncompromising *neo-noir* tradition: Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (Warner Bros; US, 1975) with Gene Hackman and Walter Hill's *The Driver* (20th Century Fox; US, 1978) starring Bruce Dern (Christopher 240-1).

- 7 Michael Eaton, on the other hand, in his BFI companion piece for *Chinatown*, while maintaining an allegiance towards *colored-noir* as a progressive tendency within this type of detective genre, nevertheless posits a slightly alternative kind of *noir-revisited* position for the movie, comparing it with two Chandler adaptations of the time, made either side of the Polanski film. Robert Altman's updating of a late novel, *The Long Goodbye* (United Artists; US, 1973) had Elliot Gould as a rather passive anachronistic Philip Marlowe, while Dick Richards' respectful translation of *Farewell My Lovely* (EK, Incorporated Television Company; US, 1975) included an "unreconstructed" Robert Mitchum as Marlowe (Eaton 21-2). Other films often cited as companion pieces in this era include Coppola's *The Conversation* (Paramount; US, 1974), John Schlesinger's adaptation of *The Day of the Locust* (Paramount; US, 1975) and Ulu Grossbard's *True Confessions* (United Artists; US, 1981).
- 8 *Chinatown* is a film allied in part to all of these texts, and yet thirty years on it also remains somehow detached from them and determinedly unique in its conception. In fact, *Chinatown* modernized *film noir* before modern or, might we even say, *post-noir* ever surfaced. In terms of atmosphere, plot devices and especially tonality of image, for example, Polanski's picture shares much more ground with 1990's noir thrillers such as *The Usual Suspects* (Spelling; US, 1995) and *Se7en* (New Line; US, 1995) than it does with the earlier films. Indeed, Christopher McQuarrie's script for the former film so successfully reconstituted the noir legacy that it became the first in the genre since *Chinatown* to win an Oscar. Additionally, in the overwhelmingly successful *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, Warner Bros; US, 1997) and less notable but nevertheless interesting *Mulholland Falls* (Lee Tamahori, MGM; US, 1996), Polanski's film has recent pictures that tip their hat far more to *Chinatown*'s sense of refinement, languor and cinematographic intent than do any earlier examples of the formula. This continual mapping of the film's stylistic and cultural milieu continued apace in the 2000's with David Lynch's nightmarish fable of Hollywood and L.A., *Mulholland Drive* (Le Studio Canal+; US, 2001) and the 2006 Academy Award winner for best picture, *Crash* (Lions Gate Films).
- 9 The reason why *Chinatown* has been impersonated, overlaps, and contrives to associate itself with, or be joined to, a myriad of other films yet has never quite been eclipsed, is because *Chinatown* is clearly a very modern movie. The film is modern because of two central elements: the first is its visual presentation of a Los Angeles that, while overlaid with some thirties nostalgia, is really a precursor to the transformation of L.A. in a number of more contemporary pictures; and the second point is that *Chinatown*'s history, while again perfectly recognizable in its relation to events of the approximate era, is in actual fact a prophetic vision of L.A. to come and a resemblance of the developments and personalities that have dominated recent times rather more than the depression era. It is that sense of the prophetic and timeless quality of the picture that explains how and why it has been left in the position of historical signifier for a series of developments that somehow delineate the identity and outlook of California in

general, and Los Angeles in particular. *Chinatown*, therefore, is not a postmodern film in the way that scholars like John Cawelti and Frederic Jameson have argued, particularly in its relationship to the construction of nostalgia (Cawelti 200). Rather, the movie is what one would like to describe as proto-modern, and this description can be offered in terms that link directly *Chinatown*'s filmic as well as social and economic concerns. In delving into this argument it is important to point out where and how this notion's antecedents have arisen and the manner in which they have, up until now, been articulated.

- 10 Film historian Neil Sinyard has pointed out that Polanski's film is modern, if not postmodern, because it was one of the first to echo Hollywood's own history by ironically placing a past master of traditional noir, John Huston, into the heart of the story as the movie's evil business magnate, Noah Cross. Huston had of course made his directorial debut with the third film version of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941. James Naremore's work on film noir supports this assertion when he comments that

Chinatown returns wholeheartedly to the past, recreating 1930's Los Angeles in meticulous detail and acknowledging its indebtedness to *The Maltese Falcon* by casting John Huston in an important role (Naremore 205).

- 11 This character device certainly reminds the audience of the film's lineage but, at the same time, as Sinyard states, shows us, "the distance we have traveled from that world" (Sinyard 128). *Chinatown* is therefore self-reverential by virtue of and in connection to its cinematic heritage even before one begins to dissect its storyline and further historical countenance. Cross, meanwhile, is not just a filmic signifier but is much more an elongated 20th Century archetype of Los Angelean history. And that historicity as well as *Chinatown*'s modernity has tended to be situated in the film's – and 1970's Hollywood in general – allusion to a failing liberal ethos. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner suggest that "*Chinatown* is a striking articulation of mid-seventies cultural pessimism," wrapped up, as it was, in the secrets and deception that were perceived to be allegorical to the simultaneously unfolding crisis of Watergate (Ryan and Kellner 83).

- 12 The views of Sinyard, Naremore and Ryan and Kellner are important and it is easy to share their impressions of the film as both a significant staging post in 1970's American cinema, and as a commentary on the social and political events of the era. But *Chinatown* stretches beyond these cultural and political boundaries to become a movie whose cinematic vision is not retrospective at all but more akin to presentations of Los Angeles much later in its, and Hollywood's, twentieth century development. It is also a film whose themes and concerns are not simply a reflection of the times, but are ones redolent of a cultural artifact now trapped by its pursuit of history, a history vehemently disputed and contested in areas other than the medium of cinema. But these other areas, histories of California and the city, biographies of the great and the good who inhabited the West, and political and social observations of the era the movie purports to represent, nevertheless choose to utilize *Chinatown* as a bulwark for and against those very debates in the film about water, power, and corruption in Los Angelean history. They do this because the film has been eclipsed as fictional yarn and replaced as documentary evidence for the way a city matured and grew up. But how might we explain and reconcile these two contrasting, even paradoxical features of

period visual recreation and contemporary historical relevance as a way to endorse *Chinatown*'s prophetic modernism and trap it within its own historical materialism?

- 13 Visually, to quote Sinyard, Roman Polanski pumped "poisonous color" into *Chinatown* mixing it with "savage violence" (Sinyard 128). The film was something of a cathartic experience for its director. Firmly ensconced in the comfort of Rome, it was producer Robert Evans and the prospect of working for a big Hollywood studio again that dragged Polanski back to Los Angeles, after the death of his actress wife, Sharon Tate, nearly five years earlier.¹ The arranged violence of the film, including Polanski's own cameo as a "midget" hoodlum, thus had a personal edge to it and, in Evans, there was a legendary producer who wanted Polanski to do for noir, what Francis Ford Coppola had just achieved for him with the gangster movie in *The Godfather* (1972). While the uncompromising sight of more graphic violence in both films pinpointed the way towards a less censored Hollywood product in the future, it is also easy to see how and why Evans might want *Chinatown* to be the next *Godfather* (even though *Godfather II* was already on its way in the same year). While the film would indeed become rich and evocative, Polanski constantly spoke of wanting to avoid simple "retro-chic," as he called it. This debate stretched to an argument on set and eventually led to the sacking of cinematographer Stanley Cortez just ten days into the shoot.² Cortez was replaced by John Alonzo who later wrote of how he had tried to avoid too many gimmicks, and too much expression with the camera, choosing instead to maintain classic focal lengths and let the design and costuming of Richard and Anthea Sylbert speak for itself (see Alonzo). Sylbert himself commented that he sought out all the revivalist white, Spanish style, hacienda buildings he could find in L.A. in order to give the film a very smooth, sleek look (Gianos 31). Michael Eaton's analysis in particular picks out Alonzo's assessment of an uncontrived presentation for the imagery of the movie as an argument against theorist Frederic Jameson's assertion that *Chinatown* was simply a "recuperation" of thirties Los Angeles (quoted in Eaton 51).
- 14 Eaton's analysis is instructive and well observed in this regard. Alonzo and Polanski do shoot a Los Angeles in the 1970's that is remarkably modern and ameliorating compared to some earlier interpretations, and the patina of thirties recreation is not as obvious with repeated viewings. It is in fact this disturbing, almost dystopian inflection of the city's drought-laden and disused riverbeds, together with and mapped on to the final scene's garish, neon juxtaposition of the eponymous neighborhood, that has led the likes of Mike Davis to link the film with radically futuristic visions of L.A., notably Ridley Scott's science-fiction classic, *Blade Runner* (Warner Bros/Ladd; US, 1982).³ But there are other modern cinematic influences to tap into as well. *Chinatown*'s sympathy for this incessant sense of image and recreation is reminiscent of the Los Angeles crafted by cinematographer Victorio Storaro for Warren Beatty's political movie, *Bulworth* (20th Century Fox; US, 1998). In this film, Storaro adopts his trademark lush colors but arranges them in a unitary lighting collage that sees the uplands of Beverly Hills painted in soft golden hues while the menacing sanctuary of South Central L.A. is cast in a dark blue sheen. Storaro, like Alonzo before him, captures the natural effervescent glow of the city to project an ethereal, otherworldly construction of action and events. Gandini points out in his analysis that most of the early part of *Chinatown* is situated in "an iconographic framework made up of natural scenery of great chromatic

intensity" delicately configuring blue seas, green lawns and orange suns into a richly woven canvas (Gandini 303). Director Brad Silberling engages in a similar approach for his film, recasting the signature description of Los Angeles into a literal title for the city's sense of the secular and the remote. For in *City of Angels* (Warner Bros; US, 1999), a loose re-working of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, heavenly creatures really do walk the streets of L.A., surrounding themselves amongst the building work and construction that notes the city's unending development, but which also points to the fragility of human existence in this metropolis.

- 15 *Chinatown* as the jumping-off spot for representations of mortality, as well as finality, are also re-confirmed in Sidney Lumet's brief excursion away from his beloved New York during the mid-1980's in the Jane Fonda thriller, *The Morning After* (Lorimar/American Filmworks; US, 1986). Transforming the L.A. underworld, William Friedkin, with considerable assistance from his cinematographer Robby Muller, creates an urban cityscape inhabited by disturbed and disturbing characters in *To Live and Die in L.A.* (United Artists; US, 1985). And the ultimate apotheosis of this vision and grand eloquent statement to the city, its dark underpinnings and constant re-invention in the 1990's and beyond, comes with Michael Mann's twin crime epics, *Heat* (Warner Bros; US, 1995) and *Collateral* (Dreamworks/Paramount; US, 2004). Both of these films, rather like *Chinatown*, neither simply guard the city's associative landmarks (in the way that so many New York films have to fill their scenes with the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings for openers) nor avert their gaze from the underside of the California dream. *Heat* and *Collateral* cannot, and indeed must not disassociate themselves from their own fatalistic pursuits, for just as Jake Gittes is caught in the cleft stick of unsolvable mystery and urban change unfolding before his very eyes, so the confrontation in the first film between Robert De Niro's professional bank thief, Neil Macqually, and Al Pacino's hard-bitten yet flawed cop, Vincent Hanna, must end in the death of one and the destruction of each other's ideals and reverential view of the city. The film's denouement is then appropriately played out at L.A.'s most visceral, constantly changing and expansive landmark, LAX airport. Likewise in *Collateral*, Tom Cruise's hit man, symbolically and repetitively also called Vincent, is a frenzy of action and solitude, a foundling navigating his way through the city's darkened, sodium-lit crevices. But as his eyes as well as his state-of-mind darken on his way to confronting his own mortality, so too the claustrophobic excess of Mann's photography reveals a Los Angeles equally closing in on the state of Vincent's existence. As Edward Porter comments in his review of the picture:

The lemon-yellow shade bestowed by street lighting is exactly caught, and the orange-red haze of LA's smoggy sky appears as something Turner might have come up with if he had ever been introduced to spray cans. The film's visual art is immersive: I'm not sure that any other Los Angeles movie has better evoked the city's humidity (Porter 15).

- 16 So each of Mann's films, as well as the others cited above, constructs their unfolding narratives in similarly effusive colors and hues; light and darkness matched and constrained by primary palettes imitative of *Chinatown*'s own variegated social history. It is these visual pretensions of a city at once constructing and deconstructing its image, much copied in recent Hollywood accounts of Los Angeles, that not only give clues to its contemporary cinematic relevance but which are also an important link to the history played out in *Chinatown* and in the city's later urban development. As Neil Campbell points out in his work on the "new west," Polanski and Towne, like Chandler

before them, recognized that cities were the lifeblood of the west and operated in binary aversion to the space around them. Campbell thus comments:

Relationships surrounding this interlocking of rural and urban, wealth and land, imaginary and real, are at the heart of life in the region and recur in many of its core texts (Campbell 133).

- 17 Towne drew on this lineage and suggested its future possibilities in his script for *Chinatown*. In particular, he was struck by one of the most influential texts of the mid-century period, Carey McWilliams' book, *Southern California Country*, first published in 1946. McWilliams brought an important philosophical enlightenment to writing on the state as he attempted to debunk the classic "boosterist" histories that had dominated the scene since Hubert Howe Bancroft and before. McWilliams indeed owed a great debt of thanks to his inspiration and patron, Louis Adamic, whose works such as *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (1931) did much to reveal the "centrality of class and violence to the construction of the city," as Mike Davis describes it (Davis 33-5).
- 18 Contemporary Californian historian Kevin Starr has commented that McWilliams had an ambivalent, divided image of the state. Like Jake Gittes and the fictional companions that follow him, he was "both mesmerized and appalled by the demotic vigor of the Southland, its confusing profusion of people and half-baked ideas" (Starr 19). Gittes is a disciple of such views and films like *Blade Runner*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, *Heat* and *Collateral*, as well as Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (Warner Bros; US, 1992), Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (20th Century Fox; US, 1990) and John Singleton's *Boyz 'n the Hood* (New Deal; US, 1991). All cinematically reinforce a post-structuralist vision of characters in each movie that resent the intrusion of this metropolitan force upon their lives but who are powerless to resist all the same. Starr sums up the dilemma for which *Chinatown* the movie has become shorthand identification. "Here, after all," he says, "was an overnight society in search of its history, which it would both discover and manufacture" (Starr 19).
- 19 It is in this description that *Chinatown* finds much of its resonance with L.A.'s expansion. But, unlike the other contemporary and period movies, at some point the film passed over from fictional and artistic presentation of the city to mythological cipher for a period fought over tooth and nail by the descendants and luminaries of California's past. The plot of the film seemed clearly to draw its contextual matter from the folklore that surrounded the Owens River Valley episode early in the century. This was a land deal which acquired thousands of acres in the San Fernando Valley, an area north of L.A., and water from the Owens River project, some 250 miles north of the city, would have to flow through it in order to get to the city. It was this speculative deal that made the fortunes of many of the city's leading patrons. In *Chinatown*, the architect charged with establishing and leading a similar project (only it is two decades on in the fictional tale) is the head of the city's water and power division, Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling). In real life, the charismatic figure that has come to embody water politics throughout much of the state's history is the similarly named William Mulholland. It was Mulholland, together with former L.A. mayor, Fred Eaton, Reclamation Service engineer, J.R. Lippincott, and *Los Angeles Times* proprietor Harrison Otis, who themselves mesmerized the communities of the southland in the early part of the century and dominated much of the political landscape, literally and figuratively. Mulwray in *Chinatown* begins the story by reminding the public inquiry that is proposing a new dam for the city that a recent disaster had claimed lives, a reference

clearly to the 1928 Saint Francis Dam break in the Santa Clara valley, a dam Mulholland built. Eaton, Lippincott and Otis are merged into the demonic, almost biblical figure of Noah Cross and, at the close of the film, it is Evelyn who reminds Gittes that her father's power extends as far as control of the police force, a significant reference for establishing the LAPD's stranglehold on the city's politics and society from at least the 1930's onwards until today. All of a sudden, it becomes easy to see how, as David Wyatt comments, Polanski and Towne were actually conducting "an inquiry into the power of cinematic truth" (Wyatt 146).

- 20 *Chinatown* was no longer movie folklore, or cultural narrative, but historical re-enactment. In the words of Michael Eaton, *Chinatown* was "not just a place in the past where no one knew what was going on [...] but, much more dynamically, a metaphorical site still mentally present," and one could be forgiven for thinking that this was not only Jake Gittes' destiny but the film's *raison d'être* as a whole (Eaton 55). *Five Fires*, Wyatt's "catastrophic history" of the natural forces that have swept through California during its growth and development is a fascinating and, at times, personal account of the state's evolution. And yet, a fair amount of his chapter on "the politics of water" is devoted to *Chinatown* which he describes as "one of the most sophisticated treatments" of the water story ever told (Wyatt 136). Nowhere else in the state's history does such a cultural artifact lie in the path of simple historical evaluation. In 1991, the *New York Times* published a piece on water systems in the US, and in describing L.A.'s experience cited *Chinatown* as the chronicler of how the city seized control of water resources. In the 1996 PBS television series *Cadillac Desert*, based on Marc Reisner's excellent history of water politics in the west, Robert Towne got to expand on the reasons and motivations for his construction of the fictional character Noah Cross, as though he were and had acted like some real historical figure from the Owens Valley episode. Even Reisner himself, in dealing with this period and with Mulholland in particular in the book, while never mentioning the film, does contrive to call the relevant chapter *Chinatown*. In much the same vein, Ray Pratt's evidence leads him to conclude that: "*Chinatown* remains a landmark of 1970's American film, incorporating a retro look at genres, locales and *actual* (my emphasis) history" (Pratt 118).

- 21 It is not just those who wish to use *Chinatown* as a cipher of historical conferment upon a period of Californian history that end up deferring to its mystical power either. First appearing in 2000, Catherine Mulholland's book, *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles* sought to once more debunk these persistent mythologists by constructing a painstakingly revisionist history of her grandfather, his contribution to the building of the southland, and some reminders about California's past. At the beginning of the book, she states unequivocally:

Because the water story remains the founding myth of modern Los Angeles, this work also calls into question many current versions of the so-called Owens Valley controversy. Was there really rape and betrayal by the city's leaders? Was the entire building of the Owens Valley Aqueduct truly the result of a conspiracy among Los Angeles capitalists to acquire water in order to develop for speculation their holdings in the San Fernando Valley? (Mulholland iv).

- 22 Mulholland and Los Angeles' dubious and murky past is therefore set to be given renewed assessment in her account; but no sooner do we get to page 4 before Mulholland mentions *Chinatown*! In fairness calling attention to the movie this early in the book is her way of setting it free from the shackles of the history it purports to represent, and the so-called inaccuracies at large in the picture. But in the very citing

of the inaccuracies of character and place, she is herself inadvertently alluding to a founding myth of the film, that Hollis Mulwray and/or Noah Cross is somehow linked to William Mulholland and therefore *Chinatown* must, in some form, be emblematic of the state's past. Unfortunately, she also doesn't help her cause much further by erroneously pointing out that *Chinatown* was made in 1979, five years on from its actual production and release (Mulholland 4).

- 23 Nevertheless, maybe the slip is prophetic, for it constitutes an attempt to let loose *Chinatown* from its responsibilities as harbinger of a history that, when the film was set and then later made, had not yet run its course. Mike Davis is one writer who sees how the picture has operated as "surrogate public history" but which now ought to be relocated, he thinks, back into the Chandler/*noir* legacy (Davis 44). It is from the hard-boiled traditions of that time, carried on through writers such as Mickey Spillane, James Ellroy and Bret Easton Ellis, and emphasized in filmic adaptations of their work, as well as stories from other writer/directors, that *Chinatown's* cultural legacy can be re-evaluated. But even Davis cannot escape the suggestion of a "syncretic" analysis of the picture that hints at its vision of a place in the process of becoming, and therefore concedes the film as a visionary tableau of the real and authentic. Over and above the noir tendencies of Polanski's film, therefore, it is the expansion of Simi Valley, the control of the LAPD, zoning, immigrant segregation and ghettoization that bind together the historical and the cinematic. Together with these social inequities, the "windfall profits" from the Owens Valley created today's ruling class, this argument suggests, and Davis's work at the very least implies. From Mulholland, Eaton and Otis, on through Harry Chandler, Earl Warren, William Parker, John McCone (future head of the CIA), Reese Taylor (future President of Union Oil), Senator William Knowland, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Tom Bradley, Richard Riordan and now Arnold Schwarzenegger: these are the people whose apparitions loom large, those that waited in the wings to copy the *modus operandi* of the elite incorporated into *Chinatown*; those that became its successors and future torchbearers.
- 24 Therefore, the enduring success and persistence of Polanski and Towne's movie is its ability to deliver a flavor of Los Angeles' excess and its paradoxical energy whether or not it offers contextual accuracy. *Chinatown* is tied up with the history it seemingly represents not simply because of the narrative connotations that appear too similar to ignore, though they are in fact no more than an amalgamation of events over a thirty year period, but because of the film's visual and cinematic heritage. Indeed, it is this emblematic construct within the film that better locates the movie's influences and importance. Leonardo Gandini suggests that the shift from darkness to light (color) is a significant concern for all modern noirs but is additionally a way to exploit the expressive and subversive potential of a film offering what he describes as the hyperrealism of Hollywood from the seventies onwards (Gandini 306). The film's themes are consequently in its framing, and the camera's take on thirties society actually belies the critical experience of Los Anglean development to come; a city, initially, with little industrial base, a metropolis with no heart or soul surreptitiously but relentlessly dividing a population by race, class and the controlling forces of wealth and power.
- 25 And nor do these controlling forces just get tied up in the evil personification of Noah Cross in *Chinatown*. They are about the forces of federal power, of political and economic association still about to be unleashed on the southland; a conglomerate only

just being built in the film's 1930's setting. In this respect, then, the movie is much more about the Los Angeles that has developed since the 1970's than it is about a city mythologized by some composite pre-war past. There is a visual stratification in the film that highlights the city's grandiosity as well as pointing to its coming fragmentation. The past is constantly superseded by the present and future. Jake's nostalgia for a city he once thought he knew and liked is constantly dissipated by the discovery of urban progress and change that he doesn't. The penultimate scene, for example, concludes with Gittes meeting up with Cross at the house where Hollis Mulwray was killed so he can present his evidence and knowledge of Cross's complicity in the murder. Cross's control of the valley's water supply, that will result in a bond issue to build a new reservoir and dam bringing the valley under the control of the city, seems to haunt Jake almost as much as the man's murderous actions. Here is more change, more progress, and more distance being built between Jake's vision of what he thought the city was like, and the unending expanse that it is now becoming. As if this binary conflation of opposites - stability versus change, the past versus the future, rich versus poor - needed laboring one more time in the picture, the scene prophetically includes the sound of an airplane (clearly apparent in the 'thirties, though by no means common) circling overhead, a sound that was deliberately left in the sound mix by Polanski. The noise occurs just as Gittes asks Cross how much money he needs to control things in the city. Cross shakes his head at the private eye's naivety and points out that it is not the money he has acquired which explains his desire for control. Like the aircraft filtering through the Los Angelean skies, "It is the future, Mr. Gittes, the future!" Therefore, in sympathy with Cross's pursuit of corporate immortality, it isn't nostalgia or post-noirist pastiche that suffuses the narrative strains of *Chinatown*; it is an understanding of the future direction of the city, its iconic and historical reinvention, that locates its cultural relevance and enduring cinematic vitality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alonzo, John A. "Shooting *Chinatown*." *American Cinematographer*. 56.5 (May 1975).
- Belton, John. "Language, Oedipus and *Chinatown*" *MLN* 106.5. *Comparative Literature* (December 1991): 933-50.
- Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. London: Bloomsbury, 1998.
- Campbell, Neil. *The Cultures of the New West*. Edinburgh: BAAS Paperbacks, EUP, 2000.
- Cawelti, John G. "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films." *Film Theory and Criticism*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Christopher, Nicholas. *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* New York: Owl Books, 1997.
- Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*. London: Vintage, 1990.
- Eaton, Michael. *Chinatown*. London: BFI Publishing, 1998.

- Gandini, Leonardo. "Noir in Color." *Fotogenia* 1 (1994): 302.
- Gianos, Phillip. *Politics and Politicians in American Film*. London: Praeger, 1998.
- McGinnis, Wayne D. "Chinatown: Roman Polanski's Contemporary Oedipus Story." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3.3 (1975): 249-51.
- Mulholland, Catherine. *William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Naremore, James. *More Than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*. London: University of California Press, 1998.
- Porter, Edward. "Damage Imitation." *The Sunday Times, Culture Section* (September 19, 2004): 15.
- Pratt, Ray. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001.
- Ryan, Michael and Kellner, Douglas. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Shetley, Vernon. "Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*." *MLN* 114.5 (1999): 1092-1109.
- Sinyard, Neil. *Classic Movies*. London: Outlet, 1988.
- Starr, Kevin. "Carey McWilliams's California: The Light and the Dark." *Reading California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900-2000*. Ed. Stephanie Barron, Sherri Bernstein and Ilene Susan Fort. London: University of California Press, 2000. 15-30.
- Vernet, Marc. "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom". *Shades of Noir*. Ed. J. Capjec. London: Verson, 1993. 1-32.
- Wyatt, David. *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe and the Shaping of California*. Harlow: Addison-Wesley, 1997.

NOTES

1. Peter Biskind notes that the first house that was found for Polanski, when he returned in the summer of 1973, was at the top of Benedict Canyon and required him to drive past his old place on Cielo Drive, the scene of the murders. Eventually he rented a place in Beverly Hills. See Biskind 151.
2. Polanski had seen the early rushes and thought there was too much "ochre and tomato ketchup" in the print which gave it an old-fashioned look. Apparently Evans had actually been passing on instructions to the labs developing the film to make it look like this, something Polanski, when he discovered the truth, did not take too kindly to. See Eaton 50.
3. Davis makes the connection by way of *Blade Runner's* original "Chandleresque" voice-over, which had Harrison Ford's character, Deckard, speaking in Marlowe-like tones. It was not the version director Scott wanted, however, and when the film got a re-release and new director's cut ten years later, the voice-over had disappeared. See Davis 44.

INDEX

Keywords: California, Chinatown, Film and History, Film noir, Jack Nicholson, Los Angeles, Robert Towne, Roman Polanski, Water, William Mulholland

AUTHOR

IAN S. SCOTT

University of Manchester