Chinatown (1974) Polanski

P Michell, 2020

Like Body Heat earlier screened, this is another Neo-Noir. Whilst the dialogue is justly famous, keep an eye on non-verbal scenes. Often tiny are shown in reflection as in a mirror, a camera lens. Everything is told from Gittes point of view. Muse be remembered that John Huston. (He directed his first film - the famous Maltese Falcon (1941) with Humphrey Bogart – one of the Film Noir classics.) Story is set in 1937 Los Angeles and a lot of effort was made to keep the film 'in style of 1937'.

Jack Nicholson stars as J.J. Gittes, a shady, jaded private detective specializing in divorce cases, who is approached by a woman (Diane Ladd), claiming to be Evelyn Mulwray. She asks him to investigate her husband, Los Angeles Water Commissioner Hollis Mulwray, whom she suspects of philandering. When Mr. Mulwray later turns up dead, Gittes becomes involved in a grand-scale conspiracy involving the control of water in drought-afflicted Los Angeles. At the center of the dirty dealings is a powerful local businessman, Noah Cross (John Huston), who has much to gain from directing water to his orchards, as well as some ugly personal secrets to hide. When Gittes becomes romantically involved with Cross's beautiful daughter, the *real* Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway), he is drawn deeper into the corruption and violence that seems to originate with the malevolent Cross.

Paul's thoughts - using 'pedestrian' professionals (composer, cinematographer, actors) this film is an example of how a gifted director can turn a film property into far higher lever of artistic interpretation. For many this would be the high point of their film careers.

A new book has been released (see below for review) that suggests that Chinatown was the beginning of the 'end of Hollywood as we knew it'. The blockbusters such as Jaws, Star Wars franchises damaged film making post this time. I'd beg to differ as there was many terrific films that came out in the 1980s and early 1990s dispite this.

CREATIVE PERSONNEL

Director: Roman Polanski Producer: Robert Evans Screenplay: Robert Towne Cinematography: John A. Alonzo Production Design: Richard Sylbert Music: Jerry Goldsmith Cast: Jack Nicholson (J.J. Gittes), Faye Dunaway (Evelyn Mulwray), John Huston (Noah Cross), Perry Lopez (Escobar), John Hillerman (Yelburton), Darrell Zwerling (Hollis Mulwray), Diane Ladd (Ida Sessions). C-131m. Letterboxed.

<u>Roman Polanski</u> - Director (39 films), Writer, A person with some historical baggage ... family moved <u>back</u> to Poland from France, before WWII.

Polanski's Polish years has had major influence as a director. Was in Poland during the post war Polish Cinema flowering of the 1950s and 1960s focusing on Nazi horrors. Noted

Directors such as Munk, and Wajda established international reputations on film festival circuit. Polanski initially working as an actor appearing in a 1955 Wajda film, then studied at Lodz Film School, where he made some notable shorts (including one about men carrying a mirror). Debut film was Knife in Water (1962) which Wikipedia states was one of first Polish films not deal with the war. First Polish film to garner an Oscar nomination. Polanski moved to Britain where he made now famous Repulsion (1965). In 1968 went to Hollywood and made Rosemary's Baby (1968).

His wife Sharon Tate was murdered by the Manson Groupies in 1969.

Still ongoing issues re sexual involvement with a 13 y.o girl – Samantha Gaimer. He fled the US and still cannot return.

Since then Polanksi had made many notable films inc The Tenant (1976), Frantic (1988), The Pianist (2002)

Trademark techniques:

Likes to arrange shots from the protagonist's perspective and slowly pan around the room to points of interest as the character notices them.

By the end of his films, the protagonist often meets an uncertain, melancholic future (The Ninth Gate (1999), The Ghost Writer (2010), Rosemary's Baby (1968), Chinatown (1974) and The Tragedy of Macbeth (1971)).

<u>Robert Towne - Script</u> (37 films) (with Polanski)

Started working with Roger Corman in 1960s inc Tomb of Ligeria (1964) Good friends with Jack Nicholson.

Often brought in to to fix scripts. [script doctor] such as Godafather (1972).

Was originally offered \$125,000 to write a screenplay for <u>The Great Gatsby</u> (1974), but Towne felt he couldn't better the <u>F. Scott Fitzgerald</u> novel, and accepted \$25,000 to write his own story, "Chinatown", instead.

Known for: Tequila Sunrise (1988), Frantic (u.c. 1988), Parallax View (u.c. 1974), The Last Detail (1973),

Robert Evans - Producer

In the late 1960s and early '70s, he became the quintessential "new Hollywood" executive, with: slickly packaged productions like <u>Rosemary's Baby</u> (1968), <u>Love Story</u> (1970) and <u>The Godfather</u> (1972) revived Paramount. (The latter film and <u>Chinatown</u> (1974) are the artistic highlights of Evans' Paramount career, though the amount of credit he deserves for them has been debated for decades.) Eased out of Paramount, he saw <u>The Cotton Club</u> (1984) turn from a musical "Godfather" into a fiasco of front-page proportions. Evans righted his career with a new Paramount deal in the 1990s, with his last producing credit having been on the blockbuster romantic comedy <u>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</u> (2003).

<u>Roman Polanski</u> eliminated Jake Gittes' voice-over narration, which was written in the script, and filmed the movie so that the audience discovered the clues at the same time Gittes did.

<u>Faye Dunaway</u>'s distinctive look was inspired by <u>Roman Polanski</u>'s memories of his mother, who, in the pre-World War II-era, would fashionably wear pencilled-on eyebrows, and have her lipstick shaped in the form of a Cupid's bow.

According to <u>Roman Polanski</u>'s autobiography, he was outraged when he got the first batch of dailies back from the lab. Due to the success of <u>The Godfather</u> (1972), producer <u>Robert</u> <u>Evans</u> had ordered the lab to give this movie a reddish look. Polanski demanded that the film be corrected.

There is a rumor that this was the first part of a planned trilogy written by <u>Robert Towne</u> about J.J. "Jake" Gittes and Los Angeles. The second part, <u>The Two Jakes</u> (1990), was directed by <u>Jack Nicholson</u>. The supposed third part never existed, as later confirmed by the writer; however, certain elements and details of the story (a corrupt company called Cloverleaf tries to buy up all public transportation in order to replace it with freeways) would later end up in <u>Who Framed Roger Rabbit</u> (1988), which was a film-noir spoof/homage of Chinatown.

Sam O'Steen – Editor (34 films)

Like Robert Towne, another major gifted contributor to Chinatown. Often worked with Polanski. Impressive cv inc: Who's Afraid of Vrigina Woolf? (1966), Cool Hand Luke (1967), Rosmeary's Baby (of coruse), Catch –22 (1970), Carnal Knowledge (1971), Bilox Blue (1988)

Jerry Goldsmith – music (258 films)

Started out in TV writing music for Perry Mason and others in alte 1950s. Varied work including conducting studio orchestras for movies. Conductor on A Patch of Blue (uc 1965), compoer – Basic Instinct (1992)

Music written extremely quickly – in ten days. Nomianted for Oscar and still widely praised. . MGM's first trumpet, - Uan Rasey (who doe the solos) – said that Goldsmith told him to *play it sexy -but like its not good sex*.

Links:

Here's the link to the script: http://www.public.asu.edu/~srbeatty/394/Chinatown.pdf

FYI - Whole film commentary by Robert Towne & David Fincher https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3_q0dXOtu4

<u>Trivia</u>

The screenplay is now regarded as being one of the most perfect screenplays ever written and is now a main teaching point in screenwriting seminars and classes everywhere.

At the time of filming, <u>Jack Nicholson</u> had just embarked on his longstanding relationship with <u>Anjelica Huston</u>. This made his scenes with her father, <u>John Huston</u>, rather uncomfortable, especially as the only time Anjelica was on set was the day they were filming the scene where Noah Cross interrogates Nicholson's character with "Mr. Gittes...do you sleep with my daughter?"

Whole lot more at IMDB.com

<u>Analysis</u>

Roman Polanski's 'Chinatown' is one of the most impressive works of the period, an amazing experience from all angles

https://cinephiliabeyond.org/roman-polanskis-chinatown/

Book Review: *The Big Goodbye: "Chinatown" and the Last Years of Hollywood*, by Sam Wasson <u>Fabrice Ziolkowski</u> April 2020, Issue 94, Senses of Cinema

I've had a quasi-symbiotic relationship to Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* ever since I first laid eyes on it in May 1974. It was at a preview screening of the film in Santa Barbara and I may be the first person to have written a review of it for a local paper weeks before its release – meeting Polanski in the process. Moving to Los Angeles in 1978, my obsession with the city's history led me to making my own film, *L.A.X.*, a feature-length "essay" on memory and erasure. A few years later, on my last night in Los Angeles, I spent a surreal evening at Robert Evans' sprawling Woodland, walking away with the uncanny feeling that I had met the true Norma Desmond.

So it was with a certain enthusiasm that I found out a new book focusing on the *Chinatown* was about to be published. Sam Wasson's *The Big Goodbye: "Chinatown" and the Last Years of Hollywood* is the latest addition to the voluminous literature published about the film over four decades – its portmanteau title combines Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*. To paraphrase Sam Goldwyn, we've passed a lot of water since the release of *Chinatown*, but the film keeps on giving, continuously revealing hidden facets, an onion whose layers can be peeled infinitely.

While Wasson book goes over mostly well-known ground, he manages to uncover some new elements. One thing he does remarkably well is paint a picture of Los Angeles and the mood before its fall from grace, specifically before the Tate-LaBianca murders. A sort of golden moment during which everything seemed to be fine and the dream of hippie-dom was real. I felt the same wave of nostalgia recently watching *Echo of the Canyon* (Andrew Slater, 2019). Of course this was but an ephemeral moment. The "Summer of Love" of 1967 was soon followed by the turmoil of 1968 with the murders of Martin Luther King in Memphis and

Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles, the escalation of the Vietnam War. Soon on its heels, the wild turbulent events of 1969: the break-up of the Beatles, Woodstock, Manson, the Moon landing, Altamont. And down the road, Nixon and Watergate: *Chinatown* as a product of its time.

No doubt, the most important new element Wasson brings to an analysis of the making of *Chinatown* is screenwriter Robert Towne's unacknowledged and un-credited collaboration on several screenplays with Edward Taylor – a friend of Towne's who taught at USC. This revelation comes as one of those dirty little secrets that finally comes to light. Towne did not write alone, but has always had a collaborator on films such as *The Last Detail*, *Chinatown*, *Shampoo*. Why Towne has never bothered to actually credit Taylor remains unclear.

Full of juicy anecdotes, many of them already known, Wasson's book is short on actual scholarship and at times even on basic information. For a book dedicated to the concept of the end of Hollywood, it never mentions the actual budget of the film – a mere \$6 million, ridiculous by today's standards. Wasson also fails to cite the scholarly work of Elaine Lennon who wrote a fascinating PhD dissertation on Towne's work. This auteur approach to the screenwriter makes for great reading and was published as *China-Towne: The Screenplays of Robert Towne 1960-2000*.

The book's title and its last chapters suggest that *Chinatown* and its production signalled the end of Hollywood (*the last years of Hollywood*). But can this really be? Hollywood has died and been revived many times, phoenix-like from the ashes. Hollywood has had as many "last years" as there have been "Fifth Beatles": right before the talkies, when television appeared, when colour appeared, with the fall of the studio system in the mid-sixties and the emergence of the independents, with the advent of streaming platforms, etc. Hollywood has died at least a dozen deaths and crawled back from the grave. The process is likely to go on indefinitely.

No doubt, Wasson's vision of Hollywood's alleged demise is skewed by his insistence on the role played by Robert Evans, a true bigger-than-life character the writer seems to be drawn to like a moth to a flame. Evans, who died a few months ago, is a Hollywood legend. Every lie that has been told about Robert Evans is true, it is said: a consummate dealmaker, devoted to movies, a big mouth, a monumental ego, insufferable, shady and totally fascinating. No wonder Wasson is pulled in by Evans' personality. The mistake is to take Evans as embodying Hollywood as a whole. *Chinatown* signals the last years of Robert Evans, but not of Hollywood Coman Polanski directing *Chinatown* (1974).

Wasson's book presents another blind spot: the predominantly Jewish identity of the creative core players of *Chinatown*: Roman Polanski, Robert Evans, Robert Towne, Richard Sylbert and Jerry Goldsmith. It's surprising that Wasson never mentions Towne's Jewish background. The son of second-generation Jewish immigrants, Towne's birth name is Robert Bertram Schwarz. Which clarifies, among other things, the fact that the Jake in *Two Jakes* (the sequel to *Chinatown* originally titled *The Iron Jew*) is a ruthless Jewish real estate developer – like Towne's own father. And how could one not think of this when Wasson, following Polanski's own biography, recounts a first creative meeting about the project that takes place at Beverly Hill's premiere deli, Nate 'n Al's, between Evans, Polanski, Sylbert and Towne: four Jews getting together in a deli to discuss a project about a land grab scheme by Gentiles.

The very writing process involved in *Chinatown* as described by Wasson extends to a particularly Jewish activity known as *pilpul*. The Hebrew word refers to a method of Talmudic study via intense textual analysis in attempts to reconcile any apparent contradictions presented from various readings of different texts. Pilpul is largely conducted by pairs of yeshiva students or rabbis. It is, in essence, the search for the truth that comes from a close analysis of an existing text. This leads at times to vehement disputation.

Famously, Towne's unwieldy script of over 300 pages (later reduced to 180 pages), went through a head-to-head rewriting process with Polanski for several weeks – a process that Towne has often carped about but which *did*yield him an Oscar for best screenplay (without credit to Polanski).

The collaborative effort between Towne and his uncredited writing partner already feels very "Talmudic" and goes even deeper when Polanski steps in. Of course, this is not new in the collaborative writing process. This clearly argumentative back and forth process to reach a "truthful" draft is well known to screenwriters. The discussion centres around an interpretation of the material, an explanation of it, getting rid of what is superfluous and adding or becoming more precise about what is the bottom line of the story. Towne defending a story deeply anchored in Los Angeles, Polanski pulling the story towards a more universal and broader comment on capitalism and corruption. The process lasts for eight weeks at the end of which, the core of *Chinatown* has been found. *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski 1974)

The very thrust of *Chinatown* also reflects the view of those Jewish filmmakers who focused on social issues, big and small, exploring the reality behind the façade of the American Dream, some of them paying for it dearly during the McCarthy period: Herbert Biberman (*Salt of the Earth*), Dalton Trumbo (*Tender Comrade*), Ben Barzman & Joseph Losey (*The Boy with Green Hair*), and Billy Wilder (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Double Indemnity*). Yes, Los Angeles is a golden land, but it hides a dark past. Like all of America, it is built on skeletons and its foundation is not what it claims to be. This is not cynicism, this is ripping the mask off the American dream and showing that behind it are things that are not so pretty: mass slaughter, rape, murder, corruption.

Chinatown hides yet another layer, one that is not often talked about. According to Wasson, Towne began writing the script in 1971 following a reading of Carey McWilliams' famous "biography" of Los Angeles (*Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, 1946). It is here that the so-called Water Wars are discussed at length, including the rape of the Owens Valley – the "theft" as such of the water supply for the benefit of Southern California. And McWilliams' book tells other tales about Los Angeles, how it came to be, including one that could not fail to have caught Towne' attention: the race riot of Chinatown in 1871.

At the time, the very title of *Chinatown* is an enigma to most of those involved in the project. Evans doesn't have a clue what it means. None of it takes place in Chinatown (until the last scene which was added by Polanski), it's not about Chinatown by any means. Towne has always explained at the time that Chinatown is a metaphor for the unknowable, a state of mind of confusion in which nothing seems like it really is, a hall full of mirrors, a shell game. The metaphor was fraught back then as it is today with racist overtones: the inscrutable East, the mysterious Orient and its denizens. Shades here of Fu Manchu, of mysterious Tong Wars, etc.

But above and beyond the metaphor lies the reality of Los Angeles' true-life Chinatown, its population and history. It might be only coincidence, but Towne does begin writing the screenplay on the 100th anniversary of the worst race riot to have taken place in Los Angeles – some might even say a pogrom. In October 1871, a mob of 500 people descended on Chinatown, then located in the current site of Union Station, lynching 20 Chinese nationals. In 1938, Chinatown is demolished and Union Station takes its place. Ironically, the "new" Chinatown is rebuilt using sets from MGM's production of *The Good Earth* – basically, a Hollywood version of a Chinatown: a dragon biting its own tail. If anything, "Chinatown" is also shorthand for America's dark past in general and Los Angeles' own racist murderous history. And so *Chinatown* and Chinatown are like so many matryoshka dolls, each concealing yet another view.

But wait, where the hell am I? It seems I've gone astray and fallen down the *Chinatown* rabbit-hole, leaving poor Sam Wasson behind. That's the risk you take when you open the Pandora's box of this film – roads diverge, you lose your way in a hall of mirrors with more clues, false leads and new points of view than you can shake a stick at. Sam Wasson's *The Big Goodbye* could never be a definitive work on the subject (no book could ever be). But in spite of its failings it remains a good entry point for those courageous would-be explorers searching for the true heart of *Chinatown*.

Sam Wasson, The Big Goodbye: "Chinatown" and the Last Years of Hollywood (New York: Flatiron Books, 2020)

Review by Roger Ebert, 2000

"Are you alone?" the private eye is asked in <u>Roman Polanski</u>'s "Chinatown." "Isn't everybody?" he replies. That loneliness is central to a lot of noir heroes, who plunder other people's secrets while running from their own. The tone was set by Dashiel Hammett, and its greatest practitioner was <u>Raymond Chandler</u>. To observe <u>Humphrey Bogart</u> in Hammett's "<u>The Maltese Falcon</u>" and Chandler's "<u>The Big Sleep</u>" (1946) is to see a fundamental type of movie character being born -- a kind of man who occupies human tragedy for a living.

Yet the Bogart character is never merely cold. His detachment masks romanticism, which is why he's able to idealize bad women. His characters have more education and sensitivity than they need for their line of work. He wrote the rules; later actors were able to slip into the role of noir detective like pulling on a comfortable sweater. But great actors don't follow rules, they illustrate them. Jack Nicholson's character J.J. Gittes, who is in every scene of "Chinatown" (1974), takes the Bogart line and gentles it down. He plays a nice, sad man.

We remember the famous bandage plastered on Nicholson's nose (after the Polanski character slices him), and think of him as a hard-boiled tough guy. Not at all. In one scene he beats a man almost to death, but during his working day he projects a courtly passivity. "I'm in matrimonial work," he says, and adds, "it's my metier." His metier? What's he doing with a word like that? And why does he answer the telephone so politely, instead of barking "Gittes!" into it? He can be raw, he can tell dirty jokes, he can accuse people of base motives, but all the time there's a certain detached underlevel that makes his character sympathetic: Like all private eyes, he mud wrestles with pigs, but unlike most of them, he doesn't like it.

Nicholson can be sharp-edged, menacing, aggressive. He knows how to go over the top (see "<u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>" and his Joker in "<u>Batman</u>"). His performance is key in keeping "Chinatown" from becoming just a genre crime picture -- that, and a <u>Robert Towne</u> screenplay that evokes an older Los Angeles, a small city in a large desert. The crimes in "Chinatown" include incest and murder, but the biggest crime is against the city's own future, by men who see that to control the water is to control the wealth. At one point Gittes asks millionaire Noah Cross (John Huston) why he needs to be richer: "How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?" Cross replies: "The future, Mr. Gitts, the future." (He never does get Gittes' name right.)

Gittes' involvement begins with an adultery case. He's visited by a woman who claims to be the wife of a man named Mulwray. She says her husband is cheating on her. Gittes' investigation leads him to Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling), to city hearings, to dried river beds and eventually to Mulwray's drowned body and to the real Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway). Stumbling across murders, lies and adulteries, he senses some larger reality beneath everything, some conspiracy involving people and motives unknown.

This crime is eventually revealed as an attempt to buy up the San Fernando Valley cheaply by diverting water so that its orange growers go broke. Then that water and more water, obtained through bribery and corruption, will turn the valley green and create wealth. The valley has long been seen as a key to California fortunes: I remember Joel McCrea telling me that on his first day as a movie actor, Will Rogers offered two words of advice: "Buy land." McCrea bought in the valley and died a rich man, but he was in the second wave of speculation.

The original valley grab was the Owne River Valley scandal of 1908, mirrored in the 1930s by Towne. In the preface to his Oscar-winning screenplay, he recalls: "My wife, Julie, returned to the hotel one afternoon with two quilts and a public library copy of Carey McWilliams' Southern California Country, an Island on the Land --and with it the crime that formed the basis of Chinatown." McWilliams, for decades the editor of the Nation, presented Towne not only with information about the original land and water grab, but also evoked the old Los Angeles, a city born in a desert where no city logically should be found. The screenplay explains, "Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water." John A. Alonzo's cinematography, which got one of the movie's 11 Oscar nominations, evokes the L.A. you can glimpse in the backgrounds of old movies, where the sun beats down on streets that are too wide, and buildings seem more defiant than proud. (Notice the shot where the bright sun falls on the fedoras of Gittes and two cops, casting their eyes into shadows like black masks.)

Gittes becomes a man who just wants to get to the bottom of things. He's tired of people's lies. And where does he stand with Evelyn Mulwray, played by Dunaway as a cool, elegant woman who sometimes--especially when her father is mentioned -- seems fragile as china? First he's deceived by the fake Evelyn Mulwray, and then by the real one. Then he thinks he loves her. Then he thinks he's deceived again. Then he thinks she's hiding her husband's mistress. Then she says it's her sister. Then she says it's her daughter. He doesn't like being jerked around.

Her father the millionaire is played by Huston with treacly charm and mean little eyes. There is a luncheon where he serves Gittes a fish with the head still on, the eyes regarding the man about to eat it. "Just as long as you don't serve the chicken that way," Gittes says. In life and

on the screen, Huston (who directed "The Maltese Falcon") could turn on disarming charm by admitting to his failings: "Of course I'm respectable. I'm old. Politicians, ugly buildings and whores all get respectable if they last long enough."

Like most noir stories, "Chinatown" ends in a flurry of revelation. All is explained, relationships are redefined, and justice is done -- or not. Towne writes of "my eventual conflict with Roman and enduring disappointment over the literal and ghoulishly bleak climax" of the movie. Certainly the wrong people are alive (and dead) at the end of the film, but I am not sure Polanski was wrong. He made the movie just five years after his wife, <u>Sharon Tate</u>, was one of the victims of the Manson gang, and can be excused for tilting toward despair. If the film had been made 10 years later, the studio might have insisted on an upbeat ending, but it was produced during that brief window when <u>Robert Evans</u> oversaw a series of Paramount's best films, including "<u>The Godfather</u>."

For Polanski, born in 1933 in Paris, reared in Poland, "Chinatown" was intended as a fresh start in Hollywood. After several brilliant thrillers made in Europe in the early 1960s ("Knife in the Water," "Repulsion"), he came to California and had an enormous success ("Rosemary's Baby," 1968). Then came the Manson murders, and he fled to Europe, making the curious "Macbeth" (1971), with its parallels to the cult killings. After "Chinatown" came charges of sex with an under-age girl, and exile in Europe. "Chinatown" shows he might have developed into a major Hollywood player, instead of scurrying to finance bizarre projects such as "Pirates" (1986).

For Nicholson, the role had enormous importance. After a decade's slumming in exploitation films, he made an indelible impression in "Easy Rider" and followed it with strong performances in "Five Easy Pieces" (1970), "Carnal Knowledge" (1971) and "The Last Detail" (1973). But with Jake Gittes he stepped into Bogart's shoes as a man attractive to audiences because he suggests both comfort and danger. Men see him as a pal; wise women find weary experience more attractive than untrained lust. From Gittes forward, Nicholson created the persona of a man who had seen it all and was still capable of being wickedly amused. He could sit in the front row at a basketball game and grin at the TV camera as if he expected the players to commit lascivious deeds right there on the floor.

"Chinatown" was seen as a neo-noir when it was released -- an update on an old genre. Now years have passed and film history blurs a little, and it seems to settle easily beside the original noirs. That is a compliment.



Roger Ebert was the film critic of the Chicago Sun-Times from 1967 until his death in 2013. In 1975, he won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism.

