

Chinatown

By James Verniere

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"Chinatown," one of the best films of one of the best decades in American movie history, is a grinning skull of a movie lewdly murmuring those incantatory, seesawing fragments, "My sister, my daughter, my sister, my daughter," into our ears. A 1974 film noir set in Depression-era Los Angeles, it's a fiendishly clever merging of Raymond Chandler, Franz Kafka, and Sophocles. It is both a definitive American film and distinctly un-American-like, especially by today's industry standards.

Its controversial ending in which Faye Dunaway's beautiful, fetishized face is transformed into a death's head by a fluke pistol shot would never pass muster among today's marketing experts, although Alfred Hitchcock, whose influence is also palpable, probably loved it. With its doom-laden fatalism, ably enhanced by composer Jerry Goldsmith's "lonely horn," its oddly ominous, gently bobbing camerawork by John A. Alonzo (who replaced the legendary Stanley Cortez), its sense of history as a recurring nightmare, and its Polish-Jewish film school graduate and Holocaust survivor Roman Polanski, "Chinatown" is an art-house movie in American mainstream drag. Seldom since Hitchcock's prime had a director displayed such a facility for making a commercial movie that is also a work of art.

An example of Hollywood's tradition of cultivating foreign filmmakers, Polanski's "Chinatown" was independently produced by Paramount production head Robert Evans ("Love Story," "The Godfather," etc.) and is even more accomplished than Polanski's first American triumph, his 1968 adaptation of Ira Levin's "Rosemary's Baby," which Evans had overseen at Paramount.

Based on a screenplay by Robert Towne, a screenplay over which Towne and Polanski battled fiercely (in Towne's version, the evil tycoon dies and the heroine lives), "Chinatown" is a fact-based tale about the role greed played in the evolution of modern-day Los Angeles and, of course, Hollywood.

Polanski's antagonist is another randy devil, in this case sinister Noah Cross, a tycoon who has had an incestuous



Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway attempt to unravel a mystery. Courtesy Library of Congress

relationship with his daughter and whose name sounds both biblical and like a negation of Christianity. The plot involves and scandal, two murders, a family secret, two femmes fatales and a conspiracy at the highest levels of L.A. society to enrich itself even more by transforming the arid valley into valuable real estate and incorporating it into the City of Los Angeles.

The film is a virtual catalogue of the Seven Deadly Sins, beginning with Lust in a comic scene in which the jaded private detective and former policeman J.J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson) sits languidly smoking while his client Curly (Burt Young) gasps in anguish at photographs of his wife screwing a male stranger (in this scene, Jake casually refers to his office's new venetian blinds, the signature prop and visual trademark of film noir).

The dirty joke will soon be on Jake and the viewers. Jake, the dandified, slightly disreputable private investigator of Towne's script, springs from the same gumshoe gene pool as Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Hammett's Sam Spade, but with crucial twists. Jake's insolence, his lack of respect for police and social superiors, is informed as much by Vietnam/Watergate-spawned irreverence and iconoclasm as pulp-noir conventions.

And unlike most fictional detectives, Jake is never seen with a gun in his hand. When Jake, the noir knight errant, finds that he has failed miserably to thwart the forces of darkness, it cues on the screen's most memorable lines: "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown." The word "Chinatown," with its echoes of the Far East, where the United States had been mired in an unpopular war, is L.A. cop code for

a mystery one can never solve or even fully grasp, an absurdist-existentialist synonym for Fate.

Although set in Los Angeles in the late 1930s, the film reeks of Old World pessimism and post-Vietnam disillusionment and despair: a pervasive sense of rot flourishing just beneath California's cloudless skies, hilltop mansions, manicured gardens, and jeweled sunsets. Not since Rene Clement's French-language hit "Purple Noon" (1960), a sun-splashed Italian Riviera-set film noir featuring color photography by the great Henry Decae, had evil enjoyed such, uh, clement weather.

Although producer Evans suggested a black-and-white retro look for the film, Polanski insisted on Panavision and color, arguing in his autobiography that he wanted "a film about the '30s seen through the camera eye of the '70s," and the color imagery, especially for a period and a genre we associate with black-and-white, is stunning: the sun-drenched yellows and browns and tanned Los Angeleno faces, Evelyn Mulwray's cream-colored Packard, her hazel eyes, auburn marcelled hair, blood-red lipstick and nail polish. In a foreshadowing similar to an earlier shot of a pocket watch with a shattered face, Jake breaks the ruby lens of Evelyn's taillight and then in his car trails the glowing, damaged white "eye" in the distance.

Polanski's own morbid sensibility percolates throughout. As a child, Polanski was smuggled out of the Krakow ghetto and found refuge, if not love or kindness, in various foster homes. He narrowly avoided death twice, once when a Nazi soldier took a potshot at him, and again much later when his pregnant wife and several of their friends were stabbed to death by members of Charles Manson's so-called family in their Benedict Canyon home in 1969 while Polanski was abroad. Polanski would emerge from seclusion after the Tate-La Bianca murders to transform Shakespeare's "Macbeth" into a cinematic bloodbath.

Although deeply traumatized by the murders, Polanski had already demonstrated a fondness for psychological and gothic horror, variations on themes of sex and death, in such previous films as "Knife in the Water" (Poland, 1962), "Repulsion" (Great Britain, 1965), "The Fearless Vampire Killers or: Pardon Me, But Your Teeth Are in My Neck" (Great Britain, 1967) and "Rosemary's Baby" (1968). In a typically kinky twist, Polanski cast himself in Chinatown as the pint-sized thug with an Eastern European accent who symbolically castrates Jake, whom he addresses as "kitty cat," by slitting his nose with a knife, an act anticipating the mutilation of Evelyn Mul-

wray's face.

In a rehearsal for her own grisly death, Evelyn Mulwray rests her head on her steering wheel in another scene, inadvertently sounding her horn. When Evelyn later helps Jake escape in her car from two thugs (including Polanski's "midget"), a pistol is fired at them, leaving a hole in Evelyn's windshield. In the very next moment, Evelyn gently touches her fingers to her left eye as if brushing away a particle of glass. It's the same eye in which Jake will detect a "flaw" and that will be destroyed by a final bullet.

In another scene, Jake waits outside the office of L.A.'s new Water and Power Chief Engineer (John Hillerman) and just under his breath sings and hums the 1936 Dorothy Fields-Jerome Kern standard "The Way You Look Tonight," a macabre touch. In light of all this fatal momentum, no other ending was possible.

Nicholson, the hugely charismatic veteran of the Roger Corman biker-horror-movie school of filmmaking, established a following with his killer smile and widely mimicked, ironic line delivery in such films as "Easy Rider" (1969), "Five Easy Pieces" (1970) and "Carnal Knowledge" (1971). He received his third Academy Award nomination for his role in the Towne-scripted "The Last Detail" (1968). Faye Dunaway, who had failed to find a worthy follow-up to star-making turns in "Bonnie and Clyde" (1967) and "The Thomas Crown Affair" (1968), tangled with Polanski on the set but was cast in spite of pressure to hire Jane Fonda. With her sculpted cheekbones, applied eyebrows, haughty demeanor, and wounded sexuality, Dunaway's Evelyn Mulwray is mysterious and erotic, a "flawed" art deco goddess who can barely muster the nerve to pronounce the word "father" out loud. Both Dunaway and Nicholson give career-defining, Academy Award-nominated performances (both lost).

Polanski and Evans cunningly cast veteran actor-director John Huston in the role of incestuous tycoon Noah Cross. Rawboned and with a deep, sepulchral voice, Huston's Cross relishes fish served with their heads attached, and with his back to Jake, he gives the camera an unforgettable, fish-eyed look when he realizes Jake knows he's not telling him the truth about his murdered sun-in-law and former partner Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling). "You make think you know what you're dealing with, but, believe me, you don't," he warns Jake. Huston's Cross is majestic and loathsome, Lord Death. Huston was, of course, also the son of great American screen actor Walter Huston and was the writer-director who made history

with his 1941 screen version of Dashiell Hammett's "The Maltese Falcon." Humphrey Bogart played Sam Spade in Huston's film and was a 1960s antiestablishment icon and obvious inspiration for Jake Gittes.

In what would have been a notably incestuous development, Polanski and Nicholson, in whose home Polanski would allegedly commit the crime he remains accused of (sex with a minor), reportedly toyed with the idea of casting Anjelica Huston, Nicholson's lover at the time, as Cross's daughter Evelyn.

"See, Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that in the right time and the right place they're capable of anything," is Cross's explanation for his relationship with his daughter Evelyn, and it sounds prophetic in light of Polanski's subsequent legal predicament. Although the Hustons wisely vetoed the casting idea, the scene in which Cross asks Jake if he is sleeping with his daughter remains creepily resonant.

"Chinatown" has roots in such film noir masterworks as "Murder My Sweet" (1944), "The Big Sleep" (1946) and "Touch of Evil" (1958) and yet also anticipates the scandal-mongering, celebrity-obsessed cynicism of Curtis Hanson's "L.A. Confidential" (1997), John Boorman's "Point Blank" (1967) and Robert Altman's "The Long Goodbye" (1973). The period was a fruitful one for film noir experiments and revisions.

But none was as perfect as "Chinatown" (production designer Richard Sylbert and costume designer Anthea Sylbert, who was married to Richard Sylbert's identical twin brother Paul, made monumental contributions to the film). Another grace note in the film is the way Asian faces haunt the edges of Polanski's frame (and Jake's world): the Mulwrays' husband-and-wife butler (James Hong) and maid (Beulah Quo), their vexed Japanese gardener (Jerry Fujikawa), who mutters the line, "Bad for glass," meaning "Bad for the grass," tipping Jake off to saltwater in the Mulwray's pond, and a lewd joke about "a Chinaman" Jake tells his coworkers. Most evocative of all are the numerous, nameless Asian faces drawn irresistibly to the carnage at the end. Like Homeric shades drawn to spilled blood, they are the audience's ghostly, rubbernecking stand-ins, and like them, all we can do is stare in silence at the horror.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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