

CHINATOWN (1974)

"Is this a business or an obsession with you?"

Major Credits:

Director: Roman Polanski

Screenplay: Robert Towne

Producer: Robert Evans

Cast: Jack Nicholson (J.J. Gittes), Faye Dunaway (Mrs. Mulray), John Huston (Noah Cross)

Background:

Chinatown was part of a revival of the hardboiled detective genre that had lain dormant in Hollywood since the 1940s (e.g., John Huston's The Maltese Falcon [1941] and Howard Hawks' The Big Sleep [1946]). Polanski has written, "I saw Chinatown not as a 'retro' piece of conscious imitation of classic movies shot in black and white, but as a film about the thirties seen through the camera eye of the seventies." Thus, in a gesture similar to his adaptation of the conclusion of Macbeth, he changed the original happy ending of Robert Towne's script in which the detective prevails and the woman escapes to Mexico for a much darker conclusion reflecting the cynicism, alienation, and frustrated romanticism of 1974.

Set in the late 1930s, the film details a conspiracy based on an actual fraud case in 1905 in which businessmen and politicians staged a "drought" to ensure public approval of a new water project that would make them rich by expanding the boundaries of Los Angeles.

Chinatown was Polanski's first Hollywood film since the notorious Manson murders in which his wife, Sharon Tate, and their unborn child were slaughtered. Polanski himself appears as "the man with the knife" who slits open Jake's nose. Seventeen years after the original, Jack Nicholson directed and starred in a sequel, The Two Jakes.

Cinematic Qualities

Although he decided to shoot the film in color rather than black and white, Polanski otherwise eschews the "arty" direction that marks much of his earlier work. The film's "closed form" is particularly reflected in the claustrophobic close-ups that mark the dialogue scenes. The cutting deliberately follows the seamless editing style of classic Hollywood films. Note the frequent use of horizontal compositions, particularly in dialogue scenes employing a long take, in accordance with the film's wide-screen format.

Note, too, how the narrative is impelled by two of what Hitchcock called "McGuffins," missing pieces of the puzzle--like Welles' "Rosebud"--that the audience will latch on to as the key to the mystery. The first of these, "Applecore," proves relatively insignificant, but "Chinatown" defines a great deal.

Questions for Discussion:

1. "Chinatown" comes to signify more than a geographical place but a state of mind. What happened to Jake in the past in Chinatown, and how does it help to explain his present character and motivation?
2. How does the incest theme come to have broader implications?
3. What kind of "world view" is reflected in Chinatown? Is the depiction of individual character and American politics consistent with this view?
4. Why is the film's one graphic representation of violence, the slicing of Jake's nose, so effective and so resonant? How and why is the final act of violence depicted differently?

"In the right time and the right place, people are capable of anything."

"Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown..."