



Universidad
Zaragoza

Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Representation of Los Angeles in *Chinatown*

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2015

Index

| | Page |
|---|------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Los Angeles Grows in Booms | 3 |
| Chinatown..... | 5 |
| The Water Wars | 7 |
| <i>Chinatown</i> : The Transition from Noir to Neo-Noir and Nostalgia | 9 |
| | |
| Analysis | 13 |
| The Duality between Noah Cross and Jake J. Gittes | 13 |
| Water Control | 18 |
| Chinatown..... | 21 |
| | |
| Conclusion | 25 |
| References | 27 |

Introduction

In this essay I analyse *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1973) focusing on its narrative and visual elements. I will examine the historical meanings of the movie in the context of the period the action is set, the 1930s, and also in the 1970s when it was released. The introduction, divided in four sections, provides information about the city of Los Angeles and its development, the issues related to the water supply and the history of the Chinese community in the city. Next I contextualize the movie within its cinematic history, specifically film noir, as one of the first movies of neo-noir. The analysis will try to explain how these topics are shown in the film by means of mise-en-scène, framing and the performance of the actors.

Los Angeles Grows in Booms

Los Angeles, a city born in the desert, had a population of 300.000 inhabitants in 1914 which had escalated to 3,862,839 people a hundred years after. This growth in population and its compulsory expansion of city limits has mainly come from investment in real-estate and has made Los Angeles a “stand-in for capitalism in general” (Davis, 18).



Street of Los Angeles in 1910.

The transition has not been in one single push but in several booms. One of them came from the railroad investment to extend the transcontinental lines to Southern California, which made clear that there was a high interest in the development of Los Angeles and its surroundings. This move not only promoted a great migration of people but also induced real-estate agents to cause the first boom of 1886-1889. Eventually, the railroad frenzy broke, ruining many fortunes in the process.

Some of those who were affected by the collapse of the railroad investment cast their eyes on Los Angeles and arrived there to form part of its elite, like General Harrison Gray Otis. Years later they started a plan, “The New Beginning”, for the development of the city in an unprecedented measure (Davies 112). By 1907 it was considered that if the rhythm was maintained, Los Angeles could dispute San Francisco’s industrial domination in the near future. Otis, along with Harry Chandler, who took charge of the Times-Mirror Company after his father-in-law’s passing, were one of the elites of Los Angeles while on the other side were Isaias Hellman and Henry Huntington who stood as two powerful economic figures.

These conglomerates of powers were the ones who most profited from the boom that was about to come. Making use of manipulative and speculative actions to hold control over water and city management, Otis, Chandler, Hellman and Huntington as well as other capitalist figures, secured the San Fernando Valley and part of the north-east of Los Angeles for their advantage. They joined in “syndicates” and managed to purchase the land at low prices (Davis 114). They later sold the land, making huge amounts of money as the price of the land picked up after the disclosure of urbanization projects planned for when the aqueduct from the Owens Valley brought the water to the city. It was because of these capitalist elites that the acquisition of water was possible. They were the source of much of the money that went into it and they succeeded even though the

residents of the Owens Valley fought bitterly. The manoeuvres of these elites were not precisely within the strict boundaries of the law.

‘The money made by the joint operation went into the Downtown construction boom, more precisely into real estate, which underpinned property market price. They managed to expand the city and make progress in certain services, for instance the building of Union Station which brought about the relocation of Los Angeles’ Chinatown (117).

Chinatown

Chinatown in Los Angeles was a small quarter in 1870s located next to the Plaza, the once political, commercial and social centre of the city that declined gaining a reputation for vice and violence. The Chinese community developed into a neighbourhood of around 2500 inhabitants by 1910 and the relation of the city of Los Angeles in general with the Chinese was not affable. As the population of Los Angeles increased, the inhabitants of Chinatown found themselves being separated from the city (Seong-Leong). This isolation was accompanied by a number of anti-Chinese regulations that made clear the existent racial discrimination against this ethnic group.

An instance of that discrimination was the 1875 Page Law that aimed to decrease immigration rates by restricting the entrance of Chinese women in U.S. territories. Other examples of the ongoing discriminatory policies are the regulation during the 1910s of fruit and vegetable vending by the city public health department that especially targeted Chinese business, claiming that as part of the Chinatown houses were next to the railroad lines and the Chinese owned stables it was a hazard to the sanitary conditions of the food they sold. The antagonism towards the Oriental community reached one of its highest levels in 1871 when a group of 500 people went to Calle de Los Negros and killed 19

Chinese people. The slaughter came after an incident between two Chinese rival groups that turned into a gunfire resulting in the death of a white man (Cho 19).

Segregation did not only come in the form of racial hate but also by the industry of the area (Seong-Leong). The area next to the Plaza was the spot chosen to locate many of the businesses that profited on prostitution and gambling, attracting customers both from Chinatown and from the rest of the city despite the banning of prostitution in 1909. This fact points out the corruption existing in the city government that allowed such business to concentrate in that location. The result of the convergence of these practices was a sense of insecurity among the common citizens that tried to avoid the area as much as possible. This contributed to the isolation of the Chinese community both physically and socially.

The situation continued until the 1930s when plans to build Union Station where Chinatown was located emerged. Communities like Chinatown that were displaced from the core of the city, the racial hostility they had to face and the fact that they were not allowed to purchase land made them an easy target for the developers. The Chinese community did not have the means to fight for their homes (Seong-Leong). As a matter of fact, it was not the first time that the community had to relocate. After Chinatown was struck with several intentional fires in 1886 and the massacre of 19 Chinese people in the next year the Chinese community claimed some kind of compensation. The people responsible for those actions were never brought to justice and the only answer from the city was a plan to move Chinatown to an even more barren place which served to highlight the inferiority in which the community stood.

Finally, in 1933, Chinatown was demolished, removing the Chinese community from where they had put down roots for the construction of the Union Station railroad terminal. The project intended to solve problems with railway traffic coming from the

maze of railroad lines where the Plaza is. A new Chinatown officially opened in 1938 northwest of the Plaza where it has remained until now.



Old Chinatown in 1937. In the background, the construction of Union Station.

The Water Wars

By 1920 Los Angeles was among the ten most populated cities in the U.S. and although there were means to bring water, city officials and leading business men already knew that the city would be in need of more resources due to its rapid expansion. William Mulholland was for many years chief engineer and general manager of the city-owned Bureau of Water Works and Supply and also the chief architect of the Owens Valley Aqueduct. He knew that the best option was the Owens Valley as it had already been surveyed in 1903 and seemed to fulfil the water needs for the projected population growth. The proposal was to build an aqueduct and reservoirs that would transfer water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles. Mulholland certified the viability of the project and agreed

to design it but refused to make it a joint enterprise with Fred Eaton, the head of the Los Angeles City Water Company. The cause was that Mulholland knew there was a project



From left to right, J.B. Lippincott, Fred Eaton and William Mulholland in a photograph taken for the "Los Angeles Times"

by the Reclamation Service of the United States that aimed to reevaluate the valley for its reclamation. The Reclamation Service's project included an irrigation plan that prevented them from acquiring the water. Nonetheless, they managed to

obtain land and water rights in 1905 with a scheme involving Fred Eaton and his counterpart in the Bureau of Reclamation Joseph Lippincott. It was "this clandestine agreement" that ignited the fuse of what was about to come (Shiva, 55).

The major part of the people in the Owens Valley lived off agriculture and ranching and the prospect of the project of the Reclamation Service made them think they could prosper greatly. Instead, they found that they were going to receive nothing as the result of the scheme that only served the needs of Los Angeles. However, the water was not even going to the city itself but to the San Fernando Valley, which had been purchased by the elite of Los Angeles, some of them close acquaintances of Eaton and Mulholland, who knew the price of that land "would skyrocket" ("William Mulholland").

The residents of Owens Valley were not idle: they fought the construction of the aqueduct using dynamite to break it and prevent the water being channelled. The other side answered in turn by sending armed security to protect the ongoing construction with clearance to shoot to kill (Shiva, 55). The resistance continued for several years but despite the sabotages the enterprise advanced and was finished in 1913. A tragic incident happened when the Saint Francis Dam broke down causing around 400 casualties.

Mulholland, the supervisor of the construction, was blamed for the catastrophe and was forced to resign. At the end, Los Angeles prevailed over the claims coming from the Owens Valley residents. The city stood then as an uncontested figure and although it suffered economic setbacks due to the sabotages they were not as gruesome as those of the other side (Mulholland, 266).

Chinatown: The Transition from Noir to Neo-Noir and Nostalgia

Film noir usually has a private detective as protagonist but far from being a white knight he is an antihero conducting his investigation “midway between lawful society and the criminal underworld” (Barsam and Monahan 87). Female roles have more prominence in this kind of films. They are no more damsels in distress, they are femmes fatales. Independent and “deceptive predators” (87), they overpower the figure of the detective with their intelligence and lead him to his downfall. Films noirs are usually shot on location and generally use big urban areas as the setting of the movie, often the city of Los Angeles. But if there is an element that defines film noir is its visual style (87). Filmed in black and white, lighting is used to create degrees of shadows to play with the information that the different scenes convey (88).

Many of the common elements of film noir are present in *Chinatown*. The protagonist matches the conception of the hard-boiled cynical private investigator that had previous experience as a policeman but left the force “in either disgrace or disgust” (87). There is also the villain whose evil is out of question although we do not grasp its full magnitude until the end of the film. Still, as the film develops we have the sensation that he is indeed the bad guy. In terms of the femme fatale the character in *Chinatown* is rather different from the usual conception. Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) is the obvious character to fit the role: she is a widow for much of the film, which, coupled with

the fact that at some point Gittes (Jack Nicholson) believes that she has been the one who killed Mr. Mulwray (Darrel Zwerling), makes her the perfect “black widow”. However, as said before, she is not the classic femme fatale because she is the victim of the film and not the agent of the hero’s downfall.

To sum up, the typical noir characteristics are easily identifiable but there are other elements that differ substantially from the usual noir film. In terms of the plot, it was usual for these films to tie all the narrative knots at the end so that the audience had a sense of closure. This is not the case with *Chinatown*. Noah Cross (John Huston) is left to continue with his scheme untouched by the authorities and leaves with his daughter/granddaughter while Gittes is set free and carried away by his two associates from the dead Mrs. Mulwray.

Although film noir usually used the city as the location of the films, in *Chinatown* we see a different view of Los Angeles. The city appears to lack an urban core and everything is scattered. As we can see, in the film Gittes uses his car very often to go from one place to another; it is like a “centrifugal space” (Schuler, Murray 170). Another change from the usual noir is the use of colour as black and white are replaced by “sepia and sand” (168). Most of the scenes of the film are illuminated if not by outdoors sun light by interior lighting and there are only a few scenes in which darkness, but more importantly shadows, play an important role. Take for example the scene in which Gittes meets with the fake Mrs. Mulwray (Diane Ladd) at his office. The blinds are down and the room is full of shadows implying that there is something fishy going on with the job proposition. In opposition, the next scene at Gittes’s office in which he is looking at some pictures of Mr. Mulwray and Noah Cross arguing with each other is shot without any play of shadows, suggesting that those photographs will play an important part in the plot.

In conclusion, although *Chinatown* has elements typically associated with film noir, there are changes in how those elements are used. This is what makes *Chinatown* a neo noir film. It was, in fact, one of the first to revisit the genre. One of the reasons to label the film as neo noir is the use of violence and eroticism. The scenes in which Gittes repeatedly slaps Evelyn, the one in which we see both of them after they have had sex, or the very first scene after the initial credits showing various photographs of a man and a woman engaging in sexual intercourse manifest that *Chinatown* departs from noir films by bringing in a more graphic approach towards violence and sex (Scott 3).

Chinatown was made in the 1970s, coinciding with a nostalgic wave that aimed for the reevaluation of the genres' "mythology" (Casper 50). In this case, Polanski made a movie presenting a city of Los Angeles chronologically set back in the 1930s. However, the movie is far from being only a trip to a previous state of the city, it also feels like a warning of the present situation. In addition, there is a sense of preoccupation about what could become of Los Angeles if speculative and dishonest practices as those depicted in the movie went out of control. Besides the aspect of political criticism that arises from the land scheme of the movie, there is also a notion of escapism. In the documentary *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, written, produced, directed and edited by Thom Andersen (2003), the voice-over explains the nostalgic element in *Chinatown*: "In any time in its history Los Angeles was always a better place a long time ago than in the present." Andersen also mentions the wave of nostalgia of the 1970s and the criticism embedded in *Chinatown* towards the questionable methods used by city rulers. In addition, Andersen comments on the criticism embedded in *Chinatown* towards the questionable methods used by the authorities: "How did we go wrong? When did we go wrong?" and the wave of nostalgia of the 1970s: "What was new in the seventies was a nostalgia for what might have been,

a sense that everything might have been different except for one defining event. We began to look for an originary sin.”

Analysis

In this section I provide a close analysis of *Chinatown*, focusing on narrative aspects, particularly character construction, and visual elements, specifically mise en scène and editing, in order to explore its representation of the city of Los Angeles. I explore the version of the events depicted in the movie and their connection to the history of the city in order to see how the corruption of the city and the scheme of the purchasing of the water and land rights from the Owens Valley are presented. In addition, I analyse the motif of water and how it is equated to power. Finally, I look at the final scenes of the movie in Chinatown relating them to the final message of pervasive corruption in the city of Los Angeles depicted in the film.

The Duality between Noah Cross and Jake J. Gittes

The construction of the characters of Noah Cross and J.J. Gittes produces important meanings in connection with their urban background. On one hand, Noah Cross is a respectable figure mainly because he has lived in L.A. for a long time. The wealthy entrepreneur who builds cities and empires is a well-established icon in U.S. culture and Hollywood films—the public figure that everybody respects and often fears. In the first scene Cross shares with Gittes they have a conversation that shows this trait of acquired respectability just because he is a well-known figure in the city:

(Cross) “Exactly what do you know about me?”

(Gittes) “Mainly that you are rich and too respectable to want your name on the newspapers.”

(Cross) “Of course I’m respectable, I’m old! Politicians, ugly buildings and whores all get respectable if they last long enough”.

Noah Cross is meant to condensate the different members that formed the elite society of Los Angeles and that were involved in the scheme to purchase water and land rights from the Owens Valley (Scott 9). As was seen in the introduction, several of those figures were General Harrison Gray Otis, president of the Times-Mirror, his son-in-law Harry Chandler and Isaias Hellman, who along with Henry Huntington formed the Pacific Electric Railway in 1901. The plot engineered by Huston's character runs parallel to the real scheme regarding the acquisition of the water rights, but the main difference lies on the timeline. For example, in the scene in which Gittes attends a conference about the proposal of a new dam there is a discrepancy in terms of the dates: the movie is set in the 1930s but the project to build the aqueduct to bring water to Los Angeles started in 1908 shortly after they acquired the rights of the valley.

On the other hand we have J. J. Gittes. He is a former police officer, now a private detective specialising in marital cases, until the issue of Mrs. Mulwray takes a personal turn for him. A symbol of the lower-middle class of the 1930s, he is safe until he sticks his nose into business related with people from the high class. This results in a violent encounter with a gangster that warns him against going further with his investigation. In this scene we can see Roman Polanski himself playing the hoodlum who scars the protagonist's nose with an almost surgical cut. With his performance, Polanski transmits a tranquil demeanour while cutting Gittes's nose, showing that he is in full control of the situation. Besides, the way the gangster is dressed, a pale coloured suit and a colourful bow tie, tells us he is not making any effort to hide the fact that he is part of the corrupt system that rules the city and therefore has no need for concealment.

Along with the character played by Polanski there is another man, Claude Mulvihill (Roy Henson), whom we had previously met when Gittes was exiting the Water and Power Department. There we learned that he was in the department's payroll to

protect the reservoirs as they received some threats. Here we have another instance of fiction paralleling what really happened, as the real aqueduct that was going to bring water to Los Angeles also received threats, actual sabotage actions took place, and guards were hired to ensure no one interfered with the construction. *Chinatown* connects the Water Department with the scheme to acquire the rights over the Owens Valley through the character of Mulvihill. We see him again with Noah Cross in one of the final scenes as his henchman, reinforcing the idea that Cross had been the mastermind behind the plot the whole time.

Cross and Gittes stand for two archetypes of the Los Angeles of the 30s. The first is the high class politician, the all-powerful capitalist representing the confidence on the old institutions whose perversion is unfathomable; “a figure whose rotten hand turns love into incest, abundance into deprivation, and friendship into murder” (Kavanagh). His longing to make money has rendered him unable to see anything else aside from what he wants. This can be seen in the conversation between him and Gittes:

(Gittes) “How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?”

(Cross) “The future Mr. Gittes! The future!”

We can perceive that he thinks he is above the common people. In the scene in which Gittes meets with him to explain that he knows about his plot we can observe how Cross looks at Gittes from a higher position. This stance is emphasised not only by John Huston’s height and physical appearance, physically overpowering Nicholson’s character, but also by the position of his head as he leans backwards or when leaning forward on his cane. The effect is further enhanced by the fact that we can see his whole face in the scene, unlike Gittes of whom we can only see the side of his face.



Gittes presents Cross the evidence he has of the latter's involvement in Mr. Mulwray's murder.

Moreover, it can be seen that Cross believes that he is in a higher moral position as he has reached the conclusion that it is in human nature to take as much as possible by all means possible. It is this belief that makes him so dangerous. "I don't blame myself. You see, Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place, they're capable of anything."

Gittes is the common citizen who aspires to reach a higher status. However, he is not an image of a white knight for he has to engage in underground activities in his job as a detective. In addition, in the scene in which he goes to Noah Cross's villa, when Cross asks if his former colleague is an honest man, he says: "Far as it goes. He has to swim in the same water as we all do." With this he is conveying that the city is corrupt from the top down and that he is no stranger to such corruption. Until he gets involved in the Mulwray case we can see how he conforms to the common social trends, and tries to keep a distance with cases that may bring him trouble as in the scene with the fake Mrs Mulwray. "Let sleeping dogs lie," he tells her.

Being a character representing a segment of the society of Los Angeles, he lives his life by the principle of "live and let live" or, as he puts it, "I'm just trying to make a

living.” After he resigned from the police due to a tragic incident involving a woman he could not save, he started his business as a private detective, which allowed him to control the nature of his investigations. His cautious approach comes from the knowledge he acquired as a policeman that the government of the city, and those who were really pulling the strings, interferes with the police work, advising the officers to do “as little as possible” at least in certain areas of the city. As a matter of fact, Lou Escobar (Perry Lopez), Gittes’s partner in the Los Angeles Police Department, was promoted because he followed that advice and now he is a lieutenant. That is why Gittes knows that if he takes the case he will end up playing with fire and prefers to avoid the heat. Once it catches his attention he steps out of the system, starts asking questions that he should not be asking and gets his warning from the gangster scarring his nose. The cut accompanies him for the rest of the movie as a constant reminder of the price he will have to pay if he carries on with the inquiries that will lead him to discover the scheme to expand the city and those who will make fortunes with it: “to be good in the world of *Chinatown* is to be powerless” (Henley). The cost of his actions serves as a punishment for his lack of conformity with the system which no one can defy even if it is in the name of justice.

This may be seen as an exaggeration of the limits the ruling forces were capable to reach but it is a good example of the kind of power they exerted over the city. The movie conveys the idea that they could surpass any standard procedure without any legal consequence. In the historical events, the scheme was discovered and a special investigator was appointed to investigate the matter. The official absolved Lippincott, the supervisor engineer of the Reclamation Service, and blamed the city of Los Angeles for manoeuvring to avoid a fair competition for the rights of the Valley. In any case, the completion of the aqueduct was not affected (“A Hundred or a Thousand Fold More

Important"). So, in that sense, the real power of the ruling class and its representation encapsulated in Noah Cross are more or less the same.

To sum up, Noah Cross and Jake Gittes stand for two, if not opposite, very different notions. On one hand, Cross is an important capitalist figure, respectable in his façade but so crooked in his inner self that he will do anything to attain his goals. He is a symbol for the corruption that rules Los Angeles. On the other hand, Gittes represents the lower-middle class. At the beginning of the movie his ambition is to do his job avoiding as much trouble as possible but as the film moves forward his determination to bring the guilty ones to justice grows. Although he is not the perfect image of a detective, Gittes is meant to embody the fight against great evils. However, the forces against him prove to be too big for him and his quest ends in failure.

Water Control

Water is one of the main motifs in *Chinatown* and plays an important role because water also symbolises power (Holland). Water is the foundation of Cross's plan and if he succeeds in bringing it to the San Fernando Valley his dominance over the city will be immeasurable. We see Los Angeles in the middle of a drought and planning to channel water from the Owens Valley into the city, which raises deep concerns among its inhabitants. The movie depicts this situation of conflict in the scene in which Gittes drives to the Valley to see some orange groves and is welcomed with shots and a beating.

The movie shows its concern with water early on with two scenes that emphasise the lack of water of the city and how this issue is going to be addressed. However, there is also a subtle sense of warning of what could happen as a result of the measures to bring water to the city. The first scene to introduce the issue of the water supply is the conference in which the proposition for a new dam is presented. Just after Hollis Mulwray

refuses to build it due to the instability of the foundations of the soil, people start jeering at him and a couple of shepherds enter the room. They come with their cattle to protest because the dam was the alternative to the construction of the aqueduct. The completion of this last project would suppose the reduction of the water available in the Owens Valley; the place they live in and where they produce their sustenance. Shortly after one of the men accuses Mr. Mulwray of stealing their water we have a match cut to the dry bed of a river. The image at the beginning of the scene is devastating as we see nothing but brown colours under the bright sunlight and, on the left of the frame, a bridge that stands as the only proof that a river ever existed. Then the camera pans to the right until Gittes appears so we can see the full extension of the arid landscape with only some patches of vegetation in the low mountains. He, like us, is looking at the dry river and after a few seconds moves backwards as if repelled by the unnatural image of a river without a single drop of water. The transition between the protestors and the dry river feels like a premonition of what will become of the Owens Valley if the water is redirected to the city.



Gittes looks in bewilderment the dry bed of the river.

Another instance of this match cut is used after we see Gittes in the morgue while the examiner explains that a homeless man was found drowned in the bed of the dry river.

Then the image changes to the place where the body of the dead man was discovered, presenting us the same arid image as before. This editing device emphasises the need for water of Los Angeles and the draught that the city is experiencing in the movie. Moreover, as the draught is caused by Noah Cross it also stresses the moral corruption of the capitalist elites symbolically represented by Cross. In fact, his name, Noah, is reminiscent of the Genesis Deluge (Eggert), where water was an element of destruction of life, which coincides with one of its roles in *Chinatown*. In the movie, water is the cause of death of the homeless man and also of Mullholland's, transforming it into a token of death. The reference to the biblical flood is ironic in a film about the importance of water in a city built in the desert, but accurate if we think about the money Cross will make with his scheme and the devastation in terms of the draught his plot will bring. It is water, or more accurately the lack of it, that Cross uses to dominate the future of the city.

The exchange of power between Gittes and Cross is visible in the previously mentioned scene at Evelyn's mansion. We can see how confident Gittes is as he explains he knows everything that happened, taking the leading role of the conversation. In front of him, Cross enters the scene with an innocent demeanour and he reacts in a nervous way by tilting his head down when Gittes hands him the obituaries as if his plot had been liquidated. In addition, the place where they stand is close to the house, an environment much friendlier to Gittes. The turning point comes when Cross recomposes his higher stance mentioning the pond in which he drowned Hollis Mulwray and asserting his limitless ambition as he takes the preeminent position of the discussion and describes his plans. Furthermore, now that he is in charge, he moves their position towards the garden very near the pond where he is more comfortable as if his power emanated from the water. We see Gittes following him not only physically but also asking the questions that Cross wants to answer as if he was enchanted by Cross's explanation of the whole picture.

Gittes's conception of the city, corrupt but with the hope that there is some room for justice, departs from Noah's vision of expansion based on immoral foundations (Scott 9).

All these elements form a clear picture of the rotten nature of Noah Cross and the system that he represents in the real Los Angeles: a man who is not afraid to dirty his hands if he can profit from it and, moreover, has no fear of the consequences. Water is used in *Chinatown* to symbolise money and power, but at the same time it is something that goes beyond them. As Cross says, water, together with the money and power he already has, is the key to secure the future of Los Angeles for the ruling forces of the city, along with a considerable fortune for himself.

Chinatown

The duality between Noah Cross and Jake J. Gittes has its climax in Chinatown. As an actual place, it only appears at the end of the movie. Chinatown is a place that cops want to avoid as much as possible as the language and the customs of the Chinese inhabitants of the neighbourhood make it difficult to make any kind of police work. As the movie is set in the 1930s the Chinatown that is shown in the film is the product of the last of the several relocations that the Chinese community had to undergo. Before coming to the last location Chinese Angelenos lived in an area rife with gambling and prostitution, making it a critical spot for the police. Although the movie does not show the activities of those businesses, it insinuates the idea that the police were not encouraged to do a firm job. In a conversation with Evelyn Mulwray, Gittes explains that the District Attorney advised the members of the police "to do as little as possible," which is consistent with the persistence of the illegal business in Chinatown before its change of situation.

One of the scenes that conveys the idea that there is something fishy inside the police department and in its connection with the local authorities is when Gittes goes to see the Oak Pass Reservoir. There he meets with two members of the police, one of them Lou Escobar, his former partner of the days he was a policeman in Chinatown. Now his friend has climbed up the ladder and is lieutenant. His merits are never mentioned but it is hinted that his promotion is due to his obedience and refraining from asking questions about the orders he is given.



Loach, Escobar and Gittes walk towards the murder scene.

The mise-en-scene gives the audience many details about the two policemen. Loach (Richard Bakalyan), Escobar's partner, is wearing a suit with a tie and a hat, all of them dark-coloured. Similarly, Escobar's suit and hat are also in the same colours although his tie and shirt are livelier and therefore attract more attention, symbolising his rank. The dark colours convey the idea that all policemen are cut from the same pattern when it comes to abide to the directives. In stark contrast, Gittes wears a pale grey suit, visually breaking apart from the two policemen and their system. In addition, the contrast between Gittes and them is enhanced by the fact that he is the one asking almost all the questions, something inherent to police work but that comes from the character who is

outside the police force. It seems like Gittes is the only one that wants to put hard work into the case to come up with an explanation.

As they walk, Escobar is placed in the centre of the frame with Loach and Gittes at his sides, slightly behind him. Escobar's demeanour while moving is firm but he swaggers a little as if he were boasting about being superior. Besides, his hands in his pockets in a crime scene suggest that he is there just to put on a performance, as if he has nothing to investigate about what has happened there, enhancing even more the contrast between them and Gittes. On Escobar's right, Loach struts more than walks, emphasising the idea that their presence there is of little importance and makes him look more like a henchman than a member of the police. The fact that Loach is on his right, a position usually associated with trust, suggests that the lieutenant places his confidence in him, a character that appears to be everything but trustworthy, hinting at the atmosphere of corruption inside the police.

Chinatown is the only place in the movie in which neon signs, one of the most typical features of Los Angeles movies, are visible. This suggests that the final events of *Chinatown* in the actual Chinatown of the movie are the essence of the Los Angeles of those times. Noah Cross, with all his evil doings, succeeds both in escaping from the man who intended to bring him to justice and in taking his daughter/granddaughter, the reason why he hired Gittes' services. Chinatown, the core of Los Angeles, is the landmark that seems to sanction Noah Cross's power in Los Angeles and crushes Gittes, as his set of beliefs are not in tune with the system that rules the city.

We see the true identity of Los Angeles in the last scene because the film does not bring us to Chinatown to visit the place as tourists. As Kavanagh says, "it is rather to witness a scene of final destruction." To add more emphasis to this fact, the scene ends with the main characters surrounded by a silent crowd of oriental faces that are just

watching what has happened. The Chinese people do nothing while the upper classes decide the course of action of the system that rules them all. In this sense, the last scene gives us a taste of the true Los Angeles, the one that hides under its shining surface: the common people stand watching while those like Gittes choose between following the precepts of a rotten system and fighting. In the meantime, those at the top rule.

That the movie ends in Chinatown is significant in terms of the final message of the corruption of the city. The actual Chinatown was a community isolated from the core of Los Angeles not only physically but also socially. In the scene in which we meet Escobar for the first time we hear how Gittes asks him, “Tell me, you still putting Chinamen in jail for spitting in the laundry?,” reflecting a generalized attitude towards Chinese immigrants.

Finally, the movie ends with a crane shot that moves from eye-level to a higher position above the level of the buildings, showing the street with only a few inhabitants of Chinatown and several neon signs and lights in the background. This shot reinforces the notion that the actions at the end of the movie are only an instance of the occasions in which a person with good intentions fails to change the system. Furthermore, as the camera rises, we feel as if it was offering Cross’s gaze, looking at the city from his higher position above everything and everyone else.



Crane shot showing Chinatown with neon lights in the background.

Conclusion

Chinatown starts with a credit sequence with blacks and whites and deep saxophone music that creates a 1930s nostalgic atmosphere. Moreover, the first scene of the film starts with some photographs again in black and white, a visual element essential in film noir (Gilmore 121). However, this noir style is disrupted by the revisiting of several elements as the role of the femme fatale or the apparition of colour in the rest of the movie, indicating that *Chinatown* departs from noir to introduce neo-noir. Aside from the nostalgic touch, it also has a critical message, a warning for future times. *Chinatown* is like a prophecy of what would become of Los Angeles if the corrupt practices depicted in the film dominated its future (Scott 4).

Although the movie does not follow the real timeline of the events and makes some changes from the historic accounts--it is "more syncretic than fictional" (Davis 114), as it mixes the events that happened in different years. One of the main examples of how the movie condensates reality into its plot is the figure of Noah Cross. He is the convergence of several people that formed part of the high society of Los Angeles and that were behind the real scheme to secure the Valley for their profit. Therefore many of the character's actions are meant to symbolise their corruption and pervasive influence in the city. Cross's capitalist enterprise is raping the land and the city and this disruption of nature is paralleled in him raping his daughter years before the events in *Chinatown*. "Nature proves to be no match for the aggressive force of capitalism and its patriarchs" (Schuler, Murray 169), for he is able to redirect the course of a river, murder Mulwray himself and rape his daughter.

The only one that stands in Cross's way and who could bring his plot to pieces is Jake J. Gittes. He symbolises the powers of good as he is determined to bring Cross to

justice. In the scene in which they meet at Evelyn's mansion we can observe how convinced he is that Cross's fate is sealed as he presents Cross the evidence he needs to finish him. He thinks Cross is going to accept his defeat and give up (Sperber) but that is nowhere near what Cross has in mind. The exchange of the dominant role in the conversation is visible in the change of scenario, now closer to the water, where Cross is indeed in his element. Cross's control over water is as valuable as money and it is precisely water that he uses to determine the future of Los Angeles (Kavanaugh).

Chinatown appears after Cross forces Gittes to hand him the final piece of evidence while his henchman points at Gittes's head with a gun. The isolated apparition of the Chinese community at the end of the movie matches the reality of its separation and alienation from the core of the city but also adds a sense of importance as it is the place where the film will climax. It is there that we see how Cross's influence trespasses every limit imaginable and how Gittes's will to do good by the city is shattered to pieces. We see his face of frustration as one of the policemen handcuffs him while he is trying to explain that Cross is the one to blame, but everything is in vain. Cross is able to take his daughter/granddaughter with him, his "object" of desire during the whole movie, and sees how his power is reasserted by the reaction of the police. Chinatown is turned "into a symbol of human corruption, chaos and immorality" (Sperber) that is better not to play with.

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