

### Chinatown (1974)

“Are you alone?” “Isn’t everybody?” Most noir protagonists are lonely, sad and detached character’s who unfortunately get involved into something that is way over their head. Raymond Chandler created those characteristics within the private eye and actor Humphrey Bogart perfected it in films like *Maltese Falcon*, *In a Lonely Place* and *The Big Sleep*. Jack Nicholson’s character Jack Gittes is a little more relaxed than Bogart, less cold and soft spoken, but still hiding romanticisms and sadness. Gittes occupies human tragedy, and has tortured secrets of his own, most of them left in Chinatown where he used to work for the District Attorney and where he unfortunately will have to end up again at the end of this story. Gittes doesn’t like to get dirty, but when the job comes down to it, he can get as dirty as the rest, even if it means getting his nose slashed open. After he stumbles across an affair, lies, and deception Gittes starts to see that he is caught in the crossfire of something that is larger at stake: An attempt for the water company to buy up the San Fernando Valley by diverting water so its farmers go broke. But like every great noir, behind each plot lies dark lies and repressed secrets of murder, corruption and incest.

The screenplay of Chinatown was based on the Owen River Valley scandal of 1908, in which Screenwriter Robert Towne mirrored the story of Chinatown. Cinephiles are used to many of their favorite films and its stories be based on distorted truths and situations, however rarely do you find instances where a film itself has distorted history and changed events after the fact. In the article *Film as Urban History: The Case of Chinatown* by John Walton, he explains on how life can imitate art and how Chinatown in some ways altered future history and created popular history. In the controversial efforts to acquire water for development by citizens of the Owen's Valley during the 1920's, many of the true events and facts that occurred to influence this development were later on distorted or false. And when the film *Chinatown* was released in 1974 many people took the screenplay written by Towne as the absolute truth, when it was anything but.

Of course *Chinatown's* story of conspiracy and greed for environmental degradation didn't start with just the film itself. Conspiracy's and critical accounts on what really happened with the original scandal started from the earliest days of the Owens Valley Los Angeles controversy and expanded throughout the decades. Legends grew over time and when *Chinatown* was released in 1974 and became universally acclaimed the conspiracy became public, which made some people have to speak up and set the record straight on what was fact and what was fiction. Many films in the history of the cinema brought upon the underlying themes of land development and the opposition between the country owners and city owners within the cities of America. Like for instance many of Frank Capra's film's told stories about the common man rising up against hypocrisy of business owners and their opposition to larger greedy companies expanding their lands in films such as *The Fountainhead*, *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Roman Polanski's new noir *Chinatown* addressed similar themes but under all the

politics, communities and city expansions brewed corruption, greed and dark family secrets. Chinatown was originally seen as a neo-noir, an update or homage to the classic noir genre that started with *The Maltese Falcon* in the early 40's and ended in the late 50's with Orson Welles *Touch of Evil*. Now decades have passed and history has blurred slightly, with many critics and fans believing Chinatown can easily rest among the classic noir period.

I believe it wasn't a coincidence that Polanski hired the legendary John Huston to play the menacing and devious millionaire and controller of the water department Noah Cross. John Huston had already established himself as one of the greatest American directors and one of the main contributors to the private eye film with such noir classics as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Key Largo* and *The Asphalt Jungle*. For any respected director or Hollywood figure, to play a revolting loathing character like Noah Cross would be a challenge, but Huston probably didn't give it a second thought. In life and on the screen Huston was a man of integrity and honesty, and he pulls off such memorable lines as "I'm respectable. I'm old. Politicians, ugly buildings and whores all get respectable if they last long enough," as naturally as Bogart is relighting one of Lauren Bacall's cigarettes. There is a point in the film in which Gittes asks Noah Cross what else can he possibly buy that he can't already afford. Noah answers with such disdainful glee, "The future, Mr. Gittes, the future!" (Similar to the noir *The Third Man* Cross seems to never pronounce Gittes' name correctly.)

Director Roman Polanski found out about the script of Chinatown through Nicholson who persuaded him into flying back to the States to direct it. Polanski's wife Sharon Tate and unborn child was murdered in August of 69 by followers of Charles Manson, and so Polanski decided to leave the United States to get away from the tragic events and the media. Producer Robert Evans and Jack Nicholson knew that Polanski would be perfect for a story like Chinatown and would

give it a European and bleak setting. With enough persuading, Polanski flew back to the states and agreed to direct the film with Nicholson in the lead role as Gittes. Unfortunately when the idea of the ending came across Polanski, he insisted on not making it a happy one. Originally Noah Cross was going to die and Evelyn Mulwray would survive the original shootout, but going through such horrific ordeals within his own life, Polanski knew that sometimes evil conquerors over good and he wanted the ending to be tragic. It's a good thing Polanski stuck to his guns because the bleak ending is considered one the quintessential gritty endings of the early 70's, and the idea that money, power and greed can cover up any lie no matter how grotesque or horrific, makes the film *Chinatown* even more timeless than it already is. "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."