

*Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, USA 1974; *Director of Photography*: John A. Alonzo; *Production Designer*: Richard Sylbert; *Costume Designer*: Anthea Sylbert)

*Chinatown* is evidently a film about Los Angeles. Its plot is firmly centered in the urban milieu of the city, numerous of its scenes were filmed in real-life locations and it features an array of historical references. In this regard, *Chinatown* constitutes a classic entry in the canon of self-reflexive Hollywood films. It is history made myth or, alternatively, myth made and sold as a particular form of history. Yet, at the same time, it registers as an unusual film within this context as well, particularly with regard to its approach to the history of Los Angeles. Unlike the prototypical Hollywood meta-movie (examples range from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *A Star is Born* (1954) to *The Player* (1992) and *The Artist* (2011)), *Chinatown* is “concerned with neither the mythology of the movie business, nor with historic criminals from LAPD files.” In spite of its conceptual similarities to a common Hollywood formula, it thus ultimately constitutes a different entity.

The screenplay of *Chinatown*, the film’s foundation, was written by Robert Towne, a Los Angeles native. Although the text adopts the tone of hard-boiled detective fiction pioneered by such classic authors as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, it is not a literary adaptation but an original work, informed by the writer’s life experience and literary style. In this regard, it is inherently channeled through Towne’s sensibilities and it posits a history that is more personal in nature than comprehensive. The personal and creative take on history in *Chinatown* essentially manifests itself aesthetically. Rather than referencing one particular event or time period, the film’s script synthesizes –and syncretizes– several early twentieth century historical segments into one mythical construct: an inner-city corruption scandal, the St. Francis Dam disaster, and the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

As Vincent Brook aptly summarizes, “The film [*Chinatown*] clearly conjures, while not directly naming, the corruption scandal that forced the city’s mayor and police chief from office in 1937. It also maintains the basic time frame, while changing the name, of the St. Francis Dam disaster that killed more than 450 people in 1928. Where the scenario takes the most license is in substituting a fictional controversy and scandal over a

new dam's construction in the late 1930s with the city's early twentieth-century imbroglio over the Owens Valley Aqueduct, constructed between 1905 and 1913."

*Chinatown* constructs its plot around these historical events yet does not strive to portray them in any greater detail or depth. Rather, it utilizes them to craft a dramatic momentum that resonates with the screenplay's emotional core. What we see is history specifically made for the movies. *Chinatown* thus needs to be approached as a film that takes liberty with history, openly amalgamating facts to engender what may be termed a postmodern pastiche.

Nevertheless, the film's mythical take on history has gained wide resonance, particularly in relation to the Los Angeles Aqueduct (though, ironically, the actual aqueduct is not shown in the film and, furthermore, the fictional Alto Vallejo aqueduct remains in the planning stage).

Building on –and strongly cementing– the infamous Owens River Valley controversy, one of the founding narratives about Los Angeles, *Chinatown* made easily accessible and comprehensible, for the uninitiated, an overtly political argument about history. It popularized one particular discourse which was, by many, taken up as truth, including film fans, general audiences, and political activists. By consequence, it has, to a certain degree, acquired the status of historical fact, in both popular and political circles.

In the preface to the screenplay for *Chinatown*, writer Robert Towne makes unmistakably clear the source of his inspiration for his material. He writes: "The great crimes in California have been committed against the land – and against the people who own it and future generations. It was only natural that the script should evolve into the story of a man who raped the land and his own daughter."

*Chinatown*'s central crime, the forced incestuous relation between a father and his daughter, operates as an allegorical reference to the infamous "Rape of the Owens Valley." The film's other plot elements, in this light, assume quasi-historical reference value as well. Set in depression era 1937, the story of *Chinatown* is infused with a rumbling sense of unrest and instability that mirrors the tumultuous times during the aqueduct's construction.

What *Chinatown* says about the history of the Los Angeles Aqueduct is clear. It taps into the discourse of activist resistance, sympathizing with the residents of Owens Valley and condemning the actions of the Department of Water and Power as sanctioned by the city of Los Angeles. But in a film, a pop-culture artifact that constructs its argument audio-visually, it is just as important to consider how the argument is made, and by what means. *Chinatown*'s powerful socio-cultural impact, the so-called *Chinatown*-syndrome, to a large degree, resides in its imagery. The film is suffused with period detail and geographic authenticity. A large amount of scenes was filmed on location (in spite of a lack of permits) and Towne's literal take on the Owens Valley Rape metaphor finds visual expression in the emotionally battered face of Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) and Jake Gittes/Jack Nicholson's shocked consternation.

*Chinatown* essentially carries on the spirit of the local activist movement determined to defend the small communities in Owens Valley against the growing urbanization and geographic expansion of Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. With the release of *Chinatown* in 1974, the resistance re-gained a certain kind of momentum. To the uninitiated, a large group of potential supporters, the film presented a popular generic trope, the underdog narrative, dramatizing a conflict between the powerless country and the greedy city, the classic David & Goliath narrative. It painted a clear, easily digestible picture that emphasized the corruptibility of the urban elite and the defenselessness of the small-country workers. In this discursive space, the Los Angeles Aqueduct became the lynchpin of a scandalous city campaign to exploit the common man. The aqueduct's own legacy, its significance within the context of the growth of Los Angeles, its benefits to surrounding communities, its impact on people's lifestyle and the economy faded into the background. The *Chinatown* syndrome, as it was known among affiliates of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, has garnered tremendous exposure since the film's release and even though *Chinatown*'s status as a fictional Hollywood film, a myth-machine, informs its reception, its melancholic tone, rugged aesthetics, and unflinching storytelling cements its version of the aqueduct's history. The film, by consequence, had severe ramifications for the water department's publicity. Renditions of the past in popular culture can have a forceful impact on the making of history: the film sold myth as history, both to uninformed audiences as well as political activists, who ultimately appropriated the film as a pop-culture quasi-agitprop piece.

*Chinatown* can certainly be read as a political film, and it may very well be one. But, it remains, at its core, a *neo-noir*, and not a propaganda piece. Awarded the Academy Award for best screenplay and ranked on many critics' lists as one of the best films ever made, it is generally seen as a paragon of daring studio filmmaking from the 1970s and revered as a testament to a lost era. Yet, its reception in film circles differs significantly from other contexts. In many spheres, the film was –and still is—perceived as a historical document. In the context of new environmental legislation and the emerging sensibility towards the preservation of natural resources, particularly during the 80s and 90s, *Chinatown* was indeed upheld as the true history of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles conflict. Put concisely, in this particular sphere, fiction had indeed triumphed over fact – and myth over history. Even today, *Chinatown* remains the focal point for inquiries into the Owens Valley-Los Angeles conflict.

Nel cinema di Roman Polanski appare indubitabile, sin dai tempi dei cortometraggi girati in Polonia, un'ascendenza surrealista (da lui stesso dichiarata). Proprio la sua predilezione per il fantastico e il diverso, nel momento in cui irrompono nella 'realtà', lo rende punto di riferimento per cineasti come David Lynch e Jane Campion. Il luogo chiuso e circoscritto si rivela nei suoi film spazio privilegiato per l'incontro dei due mondi, dalla barca di *Nóz w wodzie* (1962; *Il coltello nell'acqua*) alla nave di *Bitter Moon* (1992; *Luna di fiele*), dal castello periodicamente segregato dalle maree in *Cul de sac* (1966) alla villa misteriosa sulla Costiera di *What* (1972; Che?), Inferno e Paese delle Meraviglie dove arriva una svagata Alice; dall'appartamento magico di *Le Locataire* (1976; *L'inquilino del terzo piano*) alla villa isolata di *Death and the Maiden* (1994; La morte e la fanciulla) e al castello del *Macbeth* (1971), luogo di incubi e delitti interreotti. Ma è stato soprattutto in *Chinatown* (1974) che Polanski si è dimostrato anche capace di costruire un prodotto perfettamente in linea con le tradizioni più classiche del cinema hollywoodiano (in particolare, il *noir* urbano, ai cui archetipi viene reso continuo omaggio), il cui spazio è però continuamente percorso da segrete incrinature, inquieti manierismi.

*Chinatown* è considerato come una delle più felici e originali riletture contemporanee del *detective movie* di eredità chandleriana e allo stesso tempo come uno degli esiti più convincenti della maturità del regista. La virtuosistica qualità dell'ambientazione d'epoca, l'eleganza visiva della

messa in scena sono, in realtà, al servizio dello scandaglio di un mondo marcio senza appello o riscatto possibile: seguendo l'indagine dell'investigatore privato Jake/Jack Nicholson, lo spettatore scopre insieme a lui crimini e misfatti di una lobby che, per speculare sulle aree limitrofe della metropoli, dirotta indebitamente le preziose acque della riserva pubblica senza arrestarsi di fronte al delitto.

Polanski, invitato da Jack Nicholson a trasformare in un lungometraggio di poco più di due ore l'elefantico copione - più di 180 pagine - di Robert Towne (allora tra i maggiori sceneggiatori di Hollywood), sceglie di imprimere a questo *neo-noir* (che si ispira a fatti effettivamente accaduti ma offre della storia di Los Angeles una riscrittura assolutamente romanzesca) la radicalità di uno scetticismo tipico dei suoi film migliori, quasi nascosto da una ricostruzione preziosa: nella fotografia ambrata e ricca di oscurità e nelle raffinate scenografie la regia non smette, tuttavia, di disseminare tracce che solo l'epilogo consente di decifrare. L'affinità tra la ricerca della fonte dell'acqua e il mistero dell'origine di una vita, sono al centro del film, così come la figura dell'iride macchiata e del fanalino infranto che prefigurano l'occhio deturpato nel finale da un colpo di arma da fuoco. Polanski rispetta solo in apparenza i canoni del genere, ma ne stravolge il senso epico attraverso una progressiva inondazione sotterranea del male.