



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Chinatown

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Roman Polanski on 'Chinatown'

Despite the fact that you began filmmaking at the time of the Nouvelle Vague, you always seemed to have worked to a very precise script.

The script is essential. Filmmaking is too complicated to leave things for improvisation, that's just for amateurs. How can you improvise when you need specific props for a scene, or you have to work on a specific location? When I go on the floor of the studio, I have no time to think of what's wrong or right. It has to be already down there so when I'm lost I can pick up the script, open it and look at it like a book of instructions.

But isn't it true that you did not have an ending for Chinatown until very late in the day?

I had neither the ending nor the love scene when we started shooting. Robert Towne never wanted the main characters to go to bed, and he didn't want her to die in the end. We had a hard time agreeing on that ending. Working on this script was so difficult and gruelling that we started shooting before the script was redrafted.

In the first two drafts, the culprit Noah Cross was caught. In the second draft, he was even killed inside a huge fish, which was a sign! But beginning shooting in this way was only possible because Robert Evans was producer of the film and at the same time head of the studio, so he could give us the green light. Finally he said, 'Come on Roman, we have to have an ending!' There were very few scenes left to shoot. It all became very dodgy. I had always worried about there being no scene in Chinatown to justify the title, and since Chinatown in Los Angeles no longer exists, I got Richard Sylbert to build this set for me. I asked Jack [Nicholson] to help come up with some lines – he's very good at that and so we shot it with her death.

Roman Polanski talking to David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, April 1995

A contemporary review

From *Knife in the Water* to *Repulsion*; from *Cul de Sac* to *Rosemary's Baby*; from *What?* to *Chinatown*: the teasing see-saw of Polanski's career still confounds the prognostications as to how the surrealist imagination will finally either have to part company with or be swallowed by the genre formulas. The symmetry, of course, is not perfect; *Dance of the Vampires* and *Macbeth* straddle both categories, and the balance might already have been tipped if Polanski had worked on such intriguing, projected subjects as a Western on the Donner Pass tragedy, or completed such puzzling, abortive ones as *The Day of the Dolphin*. But the most recent couplet of films satisfyingly demonstrate that not only can the director move, integrity intact, between the two styles, but can also weld them near-seamlessly together. *What?*, an unquestionably personal, probably over-precious doodle on the traps of time and the fallacies of identity, and *Chinatown*, a solid, many-layered detective puzzle on lives intersecting in past, present and future, might be two sides of the same coin.

It is also satisfying that of all his genre pieces, *Chinatown* is Polanski's most complete and self-sufficient. A vintage private eye thriller (and not – note the modest number of contemporary tunes – a nostalgic reverie on the same), the film is rendered scrupulously in period from the way it looks – the black-and-white credits, the clothes, the décor – to the way it moves, with its cynical investigator gradually drawn to the mystery of the central female character, only to withdraw at the story's end from involvement in the lives he has crossed and consign them to a bleak, professional hinterland: 'Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown'.

Yet it is also undeniably modernised: through neither a lengthening of perspective nor a recombination of the ingredients (vide Altman's *Long Goodbye*), but a strange distension of the framework, a stretching of the moral and physical spaces of the story (the Panavision format being an apt metaphor for what has happened to the Chandler world). The drought-stricken city of Los Angeles itself looms uncommonly large. 'Los Angeles is a desert community', announces one speaker at a civic meeting near the beginning, when the major plot issue of a dam that will provide irrigation and 'keep the desert from our streets and not on them' is first raised. From Robert Towne's witty, oblique treatment of the political manoeuvring and land grabbing that is to determine the growth of the city, Polanski extracts and freezes the image of a terrain that will become a timeless arena for both a public and a private confrontation. The desert and the water lend the formality of allegory to the story, much as similar settings do in *Knife in the Water* and *Cui de Sac*.

As matrimonial investigator J. J. Gittes tails water and power board commissioner and suspected adulterer Hollis Mulwray, Polanski keeps the detective in perplexed close-up while framing Mulwray as a distant figure in a landscape, conducting some obscure investigation of his own in the parched land around the city and along the seashore. Here, after the two independent vigils have continued into the night, water abruptly gushes from a reservoir outlet pipe into the sea, and Polanski cuts to the first close-up of an anguished Mulwray. A wound has opened and Mulwray is shortly afterwards found dead. His ex-partner, Noah Cross, scheming for his own profit by draining the reservoir, later waxes lyrical on Mulwray's love for water and its connection with the 'origins of life'; in an earlier apostrophe to the dead man, he also sums up how one dream has supplanted another: 'Hollis Mulwray made this city, and he made me a fortune'. When asked what else, with all his wealth, he could possibly want, Cross jovially replies: the future.

Within this parable of malevolent struggle for the fruits of the earth (John Huston's craggy, expansive presence the embodiment of smiling villainy), the private detective is the helpless player. Cynically in his element in the murky world he inhabits, J. J. Gittes is also, in the terms of Towne's conception ('a very brash, cynical and also very naive character') and Polanski's treatment, 'innocent'. Like Rosemary Woodhouse, he first makes his appearance dressed in white, and where the former character – through her later transformations into yellow, red and Madonna-and-motherhood blue – was perversely led to accept and embrace her Satanic enemy, Gittes is condemned to re-enact an obscure ritual as predetermined as the biblical motion of the political plot (this is the second time, after all, that Huston has played 'Noah', though the correspondence here would seem to be with Cain and Abel).

The other opaquely ‘innocent’ players in Gittes’ drama are first of all Hollis and then Evelyn Mulwray; and Polanski has them approach each other as remotely circling satellites, repeating the spatial effect of Gittes’ puzzled tracking of Mulwray through the desert with interior lighting and setting that emphasise the space and distance between characters. When the private eye and the inscrutable Mrs Mulwray finally reach the bed, Gittes recalls his past as a detective in Chinatown – a neighbourhood whose strangeness seeps as insidiously into his life as the desert into the insubstantial city. A legion of oriental domestics hover silently throughout – as undermining a presence as the two workmen, first heard scratching like mice in the wainscoting, whom Gittes discovers scraping Mulwray’s name from his door. The story Gittes tells is of a woman he once knew, whom he tried to help and whom he only helped more certainly to destroy. Mrs Mulwray’s question – ‘Dead?’ – goes unanswered until the final scene when her own getaway car, a white Packard, is stopped at the edge of Chinatown by a hail of police bullets, and Gittes’ past and present are closed out with an hallucinatory hint of *deja vu* and an associate’s advice: ‘Forget it Jake, it’s Chinatown’.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1974

CHINATOWN

Directed by: Roman Polanski
©: Long Road Productions
A Paramount picture
A Paramount-Penthouse presentation
A Robert Evans production
Associate Producer: C.O. Erickson
Unit Production Manager: C.O. Erickson
Assistant to the Producer: Gary Chazan
Assistant Director: Howard W. Koch Jr
2nd Assistant Director: Michele Ader
Script Supervisor: May Wale Brown
Casting by: Mike Fenton, Jane Feinberg
Screenplay: Robert Towne
Director of Photography: John A. Alonzo
Camera Operator: Hugh Gagnier
Key Grip: Bernie Schwartz
Gaffer: Earl Gilbert
Special Effects: Logan Frazee
Editor: Sam O’Steen
Assistant Editor: Flo Williamson
Production Designer: Richard Sylbert
Art Director: W. Stewart Campbell
Set Designers: Gabe Resh, Robert Resh
Set Decorator: Ruby Levitt
Property Master: Bill Mac Sems
Costume Designer: Anthea Sylbert
Wardrobe: Richard Bruno, Jean Merrick
Jewels by: Family Jewels
Makeup: Hank Edds, Lee Harmon
Hairstylists: Susan Germaine, Vivienne Walker
Titles: Wayne Fitzgerald
Colour by: Technicolor
Filmed in: Panavision
Music: Jerry Goldsmith
Music Editor: John C. Hammell
Sound Mixer: Larry Jost
Boom Man: Clint Althaus
Re-recording: Bud Grenzbach
Sound Editor: Robert Cornett

Cast

Jack Nicholson (*J.J. Gittes*)
 Faye Dunaway (*Evelyn Cross Mulwray*)
 John Hillerman (*Yelburton*)
 Perry Lopez (*Lieutenant Lou Escobar*)
 Burt Young (*Curly*)
 Bruce Glover (*Duffy*)
 Joe Mantell (*Walsh*)
 Roy Jenson (*Claude Mulvihill*)
 Diane Ladd (*Ida Sessions*)
 Dick Bakalyan (*Loach*)
 John Huston (*Noah Cross*)
 Darrell Zwerling (*Hollis I. Mulwray*)
 James Hong (*Evelyn’s butler*)
 Cecil Elliott (*Emma Dill*)
 Beulah Quo (*maid*)
 Federico Roberto (*Cross’ butler*)
 Allan Warnick (*clerk*)
 John Rogers (*Mr Palmer*)
 Roman Polanski (*man with knife*)
 Nandu Hinds (*Sophie*)
 James O’Reare (*lawyer*)
 Jerry Fujikawa (*the gardener*)
 Belinda Palmer (*Katherine*)
 Roy Roberts (*Mayor Bagby*)
 Noble Willingham, Elliott Montgomery (*councilmen*)
 Rance Howard (*irate farmer*)
 George Justin (*barber*)
 Doc Erickson (*customer*)
 Fritzi Burr (*Mulwray’s secretary*)
 Charles Knapp (*Maurry, mortician*)
 Claudio Martinez (*boy on horseback*)
 John Holland, Jesse Vint, Jim Burke,
 Denny Arnold (*farmers in the valley*)
 Elizabeth Harding (*Curly’s wife*)
 Paul Jenkins, Lee De Broux, Bob Golden (*policemen*)

USA 1974©
 130 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Chinatown

Mon 18 Oct 14:15; Sun 24 Oct 11:50;
Wed 27 Oct 14:15; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

Inside Man

Mon 18 Oct 17:50; Mon 8 Nov 20:30;
Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20

House of Bamboo

Mon 18 Oct 18:00; Thu 4 Nov 20:50;
Thu 11 Nov 14:30; Mon 15 Nov 18:10

Heat

Tue 19 Oct 14:00; Sun 24 Oct 14:30;
Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40

Kiss Me Deadly

Tue 19 Oct 18:00; Fri 5 Nov 20:40;
Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15

Devil in a Blue Dress

Wed 20 Oct 17:55; Thu 28 Oct 20:50; Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by
Empire Magazine Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)

Un Flic

Wed 20 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded introduction by film critic
Christina Newland); Fri 22 Oct 14:20; Tue 23 Nov 20:45;
Mon 29 Nov 20:55

The Long Goodbye

Wed 20 Oct 20:50; Wed 10 Nov 17:50 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer-at-Large); Sat 27 Nov 20:40

The Manchurian Candidate

Thu 21 Oct 14:15; Sun 21 Nov 14:50

Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)

Thu 21 Oct 20:30; Mon 25 Oct 14:15; Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10

Murder on the Orient Express

Sat 23 Oct 17:30; Sun 7 Nov 18:10; Tue 16 Nov 14:15

Blue Velvet

Tue 26 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:00; Sat 13 Nov 20:45; Sun 21 Nov 17:40

Dirty Harry

Wed 27 Oct 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film scholar Hannah Hamad,
Cardiff University); Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

The Silence of the Lambs

Fri 29 Oct 20:40; Wed 3 Nov 19:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor
Yvonne Tasker, author of BFI Film Classics *The Silence of the Lambs*);
Thu 18 Nov 14:40

No Country for Old Men

Sat 30 Oct 11:00; Mon 1 Nov 20:30; Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by
Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

In the Cut

Sun 31 Oct 18:30; Tue 30 Nov 18:10

Zero Dark Thirty

Sat 6 Nov 17:30; Tue 9 Nov 14:15; Sun 28 Nov 15:20

Shaft

Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk