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CHINATOWN (1974) 131 min.

Directed by Roman Polanski
 Written by Robert Towne and (the ending) by Roman Polanski
 Produced by Robert Evans
 Original Music by Jerry Goldsmith
 Cinematography by John A. Alonzo
 Film Editing by Sam O'Steen

Jack Nicholson...Jake 'J.J.' Gittes
 Faye Dunaway...Evelyn Cross Mulwray
 John Huston...Noah Cross
 Perry Lopez...Lieutenant Lou Escobar
 John Hillerman...Russ Yelburton
 Darrell Zwerling...Hollis I. Mulwray
 Diane Ladd...Ida Sessions
 Roy Jenson...Claude Mulvihill
 Roman Polanski...Man with Knife
 James Hong...Kahn
 Jerry Fujikawa...Mulwray's Gardener
 Belinda Palmer...Katherine Cross
 Noble Willingham...Councilman
 Burt Young...Curly

Won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay (Robert Towne), and was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Jack Nicholson), Best Actress in a Leading Role (Faye Dunaway), Best Art Direction-Set Decoration (Richard Sylbert, W. Stewart Campbell, Ruby R. Levitt), Best Cinematography (John A. Alonzo), Best Costume Design (Anthea Sylbert), Best Director (Roman Polanski), Best Film Editing (Sam O'Steen), Best Music, Original Dramatic Score (Jerry Goldsmith), Best Picture (Robert Evans) and Best Sound (Charles Grenzbach, Larry Jost).

Selected for the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board, USA, 1991.

ROMAN POLANSKI (18 August 1933, Paris) has directed 27 films, many of which he also wrote and produced himself. He received five Oscar nominations: Best Director for *The Pianist* (2002, which he won), Best Picture (for *The Pianist*), Best Director (*Tess* 1979), Best Director (*Chinatown*), and Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (*Rosemary's Baby* 1968). Some of the other films he directed are *Oliver Twist* (2005), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), *Death and the Maiden* (1994), *Frantic* (1988), *Le Locataire/The Tenant* (1976), *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1971), *Repulsion* (1965),

Nóż w wodzie/Knife in the Water (1962), *Le Gros et le maigre/The Fat and the Lean* (1961), and *Dwaj ludzie z szafa/Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958).

ROBERT TOWNE (23 November 1934, Los Angeles), has written 35 screenplays and teleplays, in addition to directing, acting, and producing a number of films. Some of his screenplays are *Mission: Impossible II* (2000), *Mission: Impossible* (1996), *The Firm* (1993), *Tequila Sunrise* (1988), *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984, as P.H. Vazak), *Personal Best* (1982), *Shampoo* (1975), *The Last Detail* (1973), and *My Daddy Can Lick Your Daddy* (1962). He directed *Tequila Sunrise* (1988) and *Personal Best* (1982)

JOHN A. ALONZO (12 June 1934, Dallas, Texas—13 March 2001, Beverly Hills) shot 71 films, including *Star Trek: Generations* (1994), *Internal Affairs* (1990), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling* (1986), *Scarface* (1983), *Blue Thunder* (1983), *Zorro, the Gay Blade* (1981), *Tom Horn* (1980), *Norma Rae* (1979), *The Cheap Detective* (1978), *Black Sunday* (1977), *The Bad News Bears* (1976), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), *Chinatown* (1974), *Sounder* (1972), *Harold and Maude* (1971), and *Bloody Mama* (1970).

JACK NICHOLSON (22 April 1937, Neptune, NJ) has acted in 70 films and television programs. His most recent film is Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006). He was nominated for eight Best Actor and four Best Supporting Oscars and won three of them: *As Good as it Gets* (1997, leading), *Terms of Endearment* (1983, supporting), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (leading, 1975). The nominations were for *About Schmidt* (2002), *A Few Good Men* (1992), *Ironweed* (1987), *Reds* (1981), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *Easy Rider* (1969). Some of his other films are *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *The Crossing Guard* (1995), *Hoffa* (1992), *A Few Good Men* (1992), *The Two Jakes* (1990), *Batman* (1989), *Broadcast News* (1987), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Heartburn* (1986), *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), *The Border* (1982), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Shining* (1980), *Goin' South* (1978), *The Last Tycoon* (1976), *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), *The Last Detail* (1973), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967), *The Shooting* (1967) *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1965), *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), and *The Cry Baby Killer* (1958). He directed *The Two Jakes* (1990), *Goin' South* (1978) and *Drive, He Said* (1971).

FAYE DUNAWAY (14 January 1941, Bascom, Florida) has acted in 100 films and television programs. She has four films currently in post-production and one, *Rain*, completed by not yet released. Some of her other films are *Last Goodbye* (2004), *Yellow Bird* (2001), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1999), *Albino Alligator* (1996), *The Temp*

(1993), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *Barfly* (1987), *Beverly Hills Madam* (1986), *Supergirl* (1984), *Mommie Dearest* (1981), *The First Deadly Sin* (1980), *The Champ* (1979), *Network* (1976), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Chinatown* (1974), *Little Big Man* (1970), *The Arrangement* (1969), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Happening* *Hurry Sundown* (1967). She was nominated for Best Actress Oscars for *Chinatown* and *Bonnie and Clyde* and won for *Network*.

JOHN HUSTON (5 August 1906, Nevada, Missouri—28 August 1987, Middletown, Rhode Island, emphysema) directed 48 films, acted in 47 and wrote 34. He is one of the few people to have been nominated for Oscars as Best Director (*Prizzi's Honor* 1985, *Moulin Rouge* 1952, *The African Queen* 1951, *The Asphalt Jungle* 1950), and Best Screenplay (*The Man Who Would Be King* 1975, *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* 1957, *The African Queen* 1951, *The Asphalt Jungle* 1950, *The Maltese Falcon* 1941, *Sergeant York* 1941 and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* 1940), and Best Supporting Actor (*The Cardinal* 1963). He won a Best Director and Best Screenplay Oscar for *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948. Some of the other films he directed are *The Dead* (1987), *Under the Volcano* (1984), *Annie* (1982), *Wise Blood* (1979), *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967), *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), *Freud* (1962), *The Misfits* (1961), *The Unforgiven* (1960), *The Roots of Heaven* (1958), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *Moby Dick* (1956), *Beat the Devil* (1953), *Moulin Rouge* (1952), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), *Key Largo* (1948), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *Let There Be Light* (1946), *San Pietro* (1945), *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *Across the Pacific* (1942), and *In This Our Life* (1942).

Roman Polanski, from World Film Directors, Ed. John Wakeman. V. II. H.W. Wilson Co., NY 1988

Director, scenarist and actor, born in Paris where his father, a Polish Jew, was working for a phonograph record company. His mother, also a Polish citizen, was of Russian descent. The family moved to Krakow when Polanski was three. The war began a few years later and in 1940 the child watched uncomprehendingly as German soldiers built a wall across the end of the street he lived in; they were sealing off the ghetto. The following year, shortly before both parents were taken off to concentration camps, his father led him to the edge of the ghetto: "He cut the wire and told me to run."

Polanski was then eight years old. He made his way to the country where he survived the war, living outdoors on his own sometimes but mostly staying with a succession of Catholic peasant families. He sold newspapers and did odd jobs for pocket money, spending

most of it at the movies, where he watched anti-Jewish propaganda films and dubbed Hollywood pictures indiscriminately: "I didn't care, so long as it moved." His precocious awareness of life's randomness was sharpened one summer afternoon when he was gathering blackberries on a hill and some lounging German soldiers loosed off a round at him, apparently by way of target practice. His peasant guardians tried to raise him as a Catholic but it is perhaps not surprising that he became an atheist in his early teens.

Returning to Krakow just before the end of the war, Polanski was blown through a door in one of the last of the German air raids, and seriously injured. His mother, he learned, had died in Auschwitz. His father survived and returned to Krakow, but after he remarried Polanski moved into lodgings. He continued to haunt the movies and says he was much influenced by two films he saw then: Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* and Olivier's *Hamlet*—both about loners in a hostile world. Another of the violent episodes he attracts like a lightning conductor occurred when he was sixteen: lured into an underground bunker with the promise of a cheap racing bike, he was nearly killed by a man who had already murdered three people.

At about this time his father enrolled him in a Krakow technical school, hoping to make an electrician of him. Polanski demurred, in 1950 transferring himself to an art school. Meanwhile he had become interested in acting. He talked his way into a job with a local radio station and went on to act with the Krakow Theatre and, beginning in 1953, in films (including Wajda's *A Generation*). Rejected by the State Acting School (partly, he says, because he was "too cocky"), and anxious to avoid the draft, Polanski then applied for entry to the famous State Film School at Lodz. After ten days of rigorous tests he was one of the six applicants accepted in 1954 for the five-year directors' course,

Apart from the rigorous training it provided, the Lodz school offered virtually continuous screenings of an immense variety of films from all periods and countries. In the heated student debates about the relative merits of these films Polanski says he allied himself with "the school of *Citizen Kane*." The first of his own student films to attract attention was *Rozbijemy Zabawę* (*Break Up the Dance*, 1957), for which Polanski recruited local toughs to wreck a school party and filmed the result, narrowly escaping expulsion.

In his fourth year he made the extraordinary fifteen-minute surrealist fable *Dwaj ludzie z szafa* (*Two Men and a Wardrobe*, 1958). A large, old-fashioned wardrobe rises slowly out of the sea. It is being carried by two men (Henry Kluba and Jakub Goldberg) who stagger with it to the beach. They dance with joy at their accomplishment and then lug their prize into the city. But the world they find there is full of deceit, theft, and mindless brutality, and no one wants them or the wardrobe. A gang of young thugs about to attack a pretty girl are

foiled when she sees them in the wardrobe mirror, and in revenge they break the mirror and beat up the two men. In the end the latter carry their burden sadly back to the beach and, moving carefully so as not to damage a little boy's sand castles, walk with it into the sea.

Polanski (who appears as one of the thugs) has called this "the only film I've made that 'means' something. It was about the intolerance of society towards someone who is different." It introduced a number of elements that were to recur in his movies—the circular plot, the isolation of the central characters in an indifferent society, the use of visual tricks to undermine the viewer's sense of "reality." The score is by Krzysztof Komeda, who provided the music for all of Polanski's films except *Repulsion* until his death in 1969....

The following year Polanski made his diploma film, *Gdy spadają anioły* (*When Angels Fall*). Filmed in color, it tells the story of an old woman who works as an attendant in a men's public lavatory but whose thoughts take her back into the past—to her love affair with a young soldier, her son, and his death in war. From time to time her reveries are interrupted by the squalid realities of her job, but finally her lover returns to reclaim her, crashing through the skylight in the form of an angel. Some saw the film as an attack on the sentimentalism inspired by religion and the Polish genre paintings to which it refers, but most found it a surprising and touching piece. Polanski, Goldberg, and Kluba all have parts in the film, as does Barbara Kwiatkowska-Lass, to whom the director was briefly married in 1960-1961.

Leaving the Lodz school in 1959, Polanski joined Kamera, one of the eight Polish production units, as an assistant director, working with the French documentarist J.M. Drot and with Andrzej Munk on *Bad Luck*. In 1961 Polanski directed a short of his own in Paris, *Le Gros et le maigre* (*The Fat and the Lean*), in which he plays the groveling slave of a gross and filthy tyrant (André Katelbach). This savage allegory about governments and governed is played as a slapstick comedy, a fact which only accentuates its brutality. Polanski's last short feature, *Ssaki* (*Mammals*, 1962), is another Beckettian parable about the power game in which two friends frantically cheat, lie, and mangle in a struggle to decide which is to ride in and which is to pull their sleigh. Less savage than its predecessor, and beautifully photographed in a snowy landscape, it won the Grand Prix at the Tours Short Film Festival.

Polanski's international reputation was established at once by his first feature film, *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*, 1962), which he wrote (reportedly in three days and three nights) in collaboration with Jerzy Skolimowski and Jakub Goldberg.... There were rumors of "orgies" during the filming, which was on that account halted for a time by Warsaw officials. Nevertheless, the picture was warmly received in Poland until the party chief Władysław Gomułka denounced it as a vehicle for corrupt Western

standards. In the West it was highly successful and much honored, taking the main prize and the internationals critics' award at Venice, and receiving an Oscar nomination as best foreign film. However, Gomulka's denunciation meant that Polanski could not hope to make another film in Poland. He went to Paris, where he directed an episode in the compilation film *Les Plus belles escroqueries du monde* (*The Beautiful Swindlers*, 1963), and co-authored the screenplay for Jean Leon's *Aimez-Vous les Femmes?*, about a group of gourmet cannibals with a taste for young girls. Gérard Brach, his collaborator on both scripts, joined him in England to work on Polanski's own next feature, *Repulsion* (1965), and co-authored most of his subsequent scenarios....

The world of *Repulsion* is an ugly and lonely one, in which there is lust and fear but no love, voyeurism (including the audience's) but no understanding. Here, as in his previous film, Polanski uses objects with great skill, this time to reflect Carol's (Catherine Deneuve) mounting disorientation, which causes her to murder brutally both her boyfriend Colin (John Fraser) and the landlord. The terrifying visual distortions she experiences in the apartment were achieved by building duplicate sets of furniture, larger than normal and misshapen, and photographing with a wide-angle lens....

Repulsion received the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and was greatly admired by most critics, even those who disliked it....Bosley Crowther, for whom it was one of the best pictures of the year, commended its "haunting concept of the pain and pathos of the mentally deranged." There were comparisons to Hitchcock's *Psycho* but Ivan Butler thought it fundamentally different—"even if both are masterpieces of horror"—because Polanski takes us into the mind of the killer and in this way demonstrates his compassion....

After *Cul-de-Sac* (1966)—said to be the director's own favorite among his films, but not successful at the box office—Polanski entered into a contract with the American producer Martin Ransohoff to make three films, only one of which was completed. This was *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967; called *Dance of the Vampires* in Britain), which was distributed in by MGM. ...Bosley Crowther found the picture "superbly scenic and excitingly photographed," but thought it a "dismal" spoof on the genre. Most American critics shared this view and the movie failed in the United States—in Polanski's opinion because of the cuts and other changes imposed there by Martin Ransohoff. The director denounced this version, and tried to have his name removed from the credits. There was a very different response in France, where Claude Michel Cluny wrote that the picture "attains real perfection" and Michel Delahaye called it "a great experimental film, and a great comedy."

Invited to Hollywood by William Castle to screen Ira Levin's best-selling novel *Rosemary's Baby*, Polanski made the adaptation himself. ...*Rosemary's Baby*

(Paramount-William Castle Enterprises, 1968) was the first of Polanski's movies not based on an original script of his own, but he was from the outset excited by the possibilities of Levin's novel. Indeed, the story has much in common with some of his own earlier scripts—especially the loneliness of the heroine, a lapsed Catholic, as she tries to convince an unbelieving world of her mad story. As in *Repulsion* the apartment, as Paul Meyersburg points out, "is the human body in disguise. And, of course, it has a sexual identity formed by the door which must not be opened for fear of what it will reveal, and by the passage which must not, yet has to be, entered and negotiated."

The film was cut by the British censors and condemned by the United States Roman Catholic Office for Motion Pictures because of "the perverted use which the film makes of fundamental beliefs and its mockery of religious persons and practices"—charges which some critics have angrily disputed. It brought Polanski the David di Donatello Award at Taormina, while the screenplay received a Screen Writers Annual Award, an Edgar Allan Poe Special Award, and an Oscar nomination. It was enthusiastically praised by most critics, although one found it further evidence of a "worrying absence of purpose" in Polanski's work since *Knife in the Water*. Financially it was the most successful of his films, one of the hits of the year.

Polanski has described it as the happiest period of his life. He was gratified by the success of his first Hollywood movie and he was newly married to Sharon Tate—according to Kenneth Tynan "the only girl who ever moved into his life on equal terms." He wrote and coproduced Simon Hesera's *A Day at the Beach* and then went to London to work on the screenplay of *Day of the Dolphin*. On August 9, 1969, he learned that his pregnant wife and four of their friends had been murdered in California by members of the Manson cult. After that Polanski made no more films until 1971, when he directed a screen version of *Macbeth* for Playboy Productions.

Polanski's *Macbeth* was adapted by the director and Kenneth Tynan. It deviates relatively little from Shakespeare's text but puts on screen some extremely bloody scenes which in the original occur offstage, and differs from earlier version in portraying Macbeth (Jon Finch) and Lady Macbeth (Francesca Annis) as still young. The result was chosen by the National Board of Review in the United States as the best film of the year, but the reviews were mixed....

Financially, *Macbeth* was a failure and so was *Che?* (*What?*, 1973), which Polanski wrote and directed for Carlo Ponti. It is an anarchic version of *Alice in Wonderland* in which Nancy (Sydney Rome), a naive American girl in Italy, is attacked by a gang of youths and takes refuge in a Mediterranean villa. She confides to her diary an account of her pursuit of knowledge among the crew of swingers, perverts, and assorted drop-outs she finds there. A reviewer in *Christian Century* found it a

sensitive satire on contemporary decadence, “ironic, subtle, strangely surreal-ambiguous,” and others praised its visual beauty, but most critics shared the view of Hollis Alpert, who called it a “sneaky, dirty-minded little farce.”

After producing *Afternoon of a Champion* (1972), an excellent documentary about his friend the racing driver Jackie Stewart, Polanski returned to Hollywood to make *Chinatown* (1974) from a script by Robert Towne.

...Polanski has said that he was “very uncomfortable” working with a script he had not written, and which was obviously the work of “someone who had a great talent for the verbal side but none for the visual....I was somehow constantly bored with the material.” The director is also said to have had serious difficulties on the set with Faye Dunaway and with the cinematographer Stanley Cortez, who was eventually replaced by John Alonzo. None of these conflicts is evident in the completed film, which brought Polanski the Prix Raoul-Levy, among other awards, and was one of his greatest financial successes.

A number of critics discussed the movie’s water symbolism, and even more referred to its characteristically despairing conclusion that heroism is “futile and irrelevant”—that the baddies always win; it was a conclusion that seemed very much in tune with the national mood after Watergate. Jonathan Baumbach expressed the majority opinion when he called it “an elegantly stylized homage” to the private eye genre, presenting a “romantic vision of a murderously corrupt and impotent world,” and filled with “moment to moment pleasures.” Others hailed it as a return to the political and social concerns implicit in Polanski’s early pictures.

In 1974 Polanski directed a stage production of Berg’s opera *Lulu* at Spoleto. Various other projects fell through and his next film was *Le Locataire* (*The Tenant*, 1976), adapted by Polanski and Brach from a novel by Roland Topor, and filmed in Paris. It had Sven Nykvist as cinematographer and an extremely distinguished cast, headed by Polanski himself, and including Shelley Winters, Melvyn Douglas, Isabelle Adjani, Jo Van Fleet, Lila Kedrova, and Claude Dauphin....After *The Tenant* Polanski began work on other projects, notably a remake of *Hurricane* for Dino de Laurentiis. His plans were halted by the latest in a series of catastrophes that have marked the director’s life. In mid-1977 he was arrested and charged with sexual offenses against a thirteen-year-old girl. Polanski pleaded guilty and in December 1977 he was jailed for forty-two days for psychological examination. The day before he was due to return to court for sentencing he fled to Paris. *Hurricane* was assigned to another director and for some time Polanski could find no work.

When he did secure another assignment it was to make a screen adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a three-hour epic made simultaneously in French and English, and with a Dolby-Stereo soundtrack, which is said to be the most expensive film ever made in France....

Polanski has acknowledged the influence on his films of Kafka, Beckett, and Pinter. The principal complaint about his work is that he offers no “moral perspective” on what he shows us, sharing the absurdist conviction that “man is isolated in a meaningless decaying universe.” Given the circumstances of his life, it is perhaps not surprising that this should be so; he could be seen as a paradigm of the characteristic traumas of modern man, political and personal.

It is above all the “aloneness” of his central characters that his films express, usually in profoundly claustrophobic settings. Ivan Butler writes that it “is this contrast of distance (between personalities) and confinement (of setting), resulting in a sort of atmospheric compression, that generates the tension he can build with such relentless persistence.” Paul Mayersburg says that “his films give the feeling that the stories they tell do actually arise out of the settings in which they take place,” and Polanski himself believes that “this is the most important thing in filmmaking; when you set your story somewhere it has to happen *there*....The more lies you tell, the more you have to pretend they are true.” Elsewhere he says it is not “the amount of violence I show in my films that disturbs people. It’s simply that I depict it with more care. It looks more real and what worries people is that it usually has an emotional content.”

This being so, it is not surprising that Polanski is a perfectionist, hard to satisfy and “not generous with his praise.” Kenneth Tynan said that “His knowledge of all branches of film making is daunting and encyclopedic,” and Douglass Slocombe told an interviewer that “no one can contradict Roman about any technical point. If the sound man says ‘We can’t get that,’ he’ll reply, ‘We’ll get such-and-such a microphone and you’ll get it that way.’” The producer Gene Gutkowski has commented that Polanski “sets himself almost impossible goals, personal and professional, on every level. Allied to an unusually sensitive intuition (knowing instinctively just how a scene should be handled, a camera angled, a piece of furniture placed in the set), is a most acute power of observation. He *observes* everything around him constantly and minutely: nothing escapes his attention. He is aware of an actor’s every smallest gesture, movement, expression.... It is an almost compulsive need of perfection. He can be a hard taskmaster, but he obtains what he wants by infinite patience.”

Polanski is a small man and has always looked many years younger than he is: he says he was almost denied entrance to the premiere of *Knife in the Water* because he was taken to be underage, and Shelley Winters thinks he must be a kind of Dorian Gray—“Somewhere there’s a really creepy picture of him in an attic.” Tynan said that “life schooled him and steeled him to be a one-man survival kit”: he is immensely fit and strong, and “holds himself with the compact, aggressive tension of a crossbow.” He enjoys skiing, fencing, and driving cars at

high speed. He is more sympathetic to capitalism than to communism, is suspicious of trade unions, and has “a distaste for religion.” According to Tynan, “Women’s-lib arouses him to a high pitch of bewildered fury.”

Chinatown Review by James Bernardinelli, 2001
(<http://www.reelviews.net/movies/c/chinatown.html>)

Chinatown is unquestionably one of the best films to emerge from the 1970s, a period that has been called the “last great decade of American cinema” by more than one movie critic. The production, which went in front of the cameras without a final script, marks a high-water point in the careers of both lead actor Jack Nicholson and director Roman Polanski. It also represents the finest color entry into the film noir genre (which, at the time, was dubbed “neo noir”). Yet, unlike the many hard boiled detective stories that litter the noir asphalt, *Chinatown* isn’t afraid to play with conventions. The result is a film that only seems traditional until you realize you don’t know exactly where it’s going.

At first glance, Jake Gittes (Nicholson) seems like the kind of private investigator who would be at home in the pages of a Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler novel. In fact, when we encounter Gittes, we can almost see the shadow of Humphrey Bogart occupying his space. But that’s an illusion. As we come to learn, Gittes isn’t as thick-skinned as his numerous predecessors. He cares (a decided rarity amongst the cynical lot that are cinematic P.I.s) and lives his life by a series of moral precepts that are not always governed by the principle of self-interest. Sure, Gittes can trade one-liners with the best of them, but his heart is bigger, and beats louder, than any of them....

The conspiracy he uncovers does not involve a typical noir crime—there are no jewels, gems, or high-priced loot. ...*Chinatown* requires that the viewer pay attention, not because there are lots of twists, but because the plot is complex and doesn’t stop every ten minutes to bring slower audience members up to speed. While there are some surprises, one of which is significant, *Chinatown* isn’t all about losing viewers in a maze of labyrinthine plot turns and switchbacks. Instead, it’s interested in telling a story that applies the familiar trappings of a genre, although often in ways that defy audience expectations. One of the primary reasons *Chinatown* satisfies is that it never falls back on clichés or formulaic contrivances, right down to the grim and unexpected conclusion (about which director Polanski and writer Robert Towne had a heated argument).

Consider the femme fatale, one of the most enduring figures in any film noir endeavor. In *Chinatown*, that role and function fall to Faye Dunaway’s Evelyn. Inscrutable for much of the film, she makes it as difficult for us as for Jake to determine what her agenda is, but we have been taught by countless other movies not to trust her. The femme fatale is, after all, usually a black widow—a beautiful but deadly spider who has the nasty habit of

devouring her mate. But *Chinatown* ultimately reveals that Evelyn is not what she seems to be, nor what we anticipate that she will turn out to be. There’s a core of fragile humanity in her that comes to the fore in certain key scenes. In the end, she turns out to be the lone character with pure motives.

During the course of a long and productive career, Jack Nicholson has portrayed numerous memorable characters (including Gittes a second time in *The Two Jakes*), but never has his acting skill been more on display than in *Chinatown*. Made before Nicholson started playing every role with an over-the-top sneer, this movie shows off multiple facets of his talent—tenderness, quiet intensity, bulldog tenacity, and bravery in the face of danger. Before *Chinatown*, Nicholson was known, but not a bona fide star. This film, his first lead role, changed the direction of his career. Ten years after *Chinatown*, Nicholson was not just a major actor—he was an icon.

The decision to cast John Huston as Cross was a stroke of brilliance. Not only does Huston play the part perfectly—the right mix of oil and syrup—but he brings with him the right kind of baggage. The director of such Bogart classics as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *Key Largo*, Huston’s reputation in cinema was steeped in film noir. His in-depth understanding of the genre enabled him to essay the part perfectly—a thoroughly amoral individual whose apparent good nature can’t conceal the stench of corruption that clings to him like a second skin. From his first appearance, Cross is unquestionably the film’s villain, but he is also one of *Chinatown*’s most fascinating denizens.

Faye Dunaway came to this role in the midst of the most fertile period of her career. Despite her reputation as being difficult to work with, there’s no denying her talent or her ability to light up the screen. Her chemistry with Nicholson, although not rivaling that of Bogart and Bacall, touches off a few sparks. She plays Evelyn with the right amount of ambiguity—enough to give us the sense that she’s the femme fatale, but not so much that we’re entirely sure. And, when the script requires a purely dramatic moment from her, she is capable of giving it.

Chinatown proved once and for all that a film noir does not have to be in black-and-white. While the idea of “color noir” may seem contradictory, this movie reinforced the notion that film noir is more of a state of mind than a function of film stock. A motion picture does not have to be in black-and-white for shadows to play an important part (or, in some cases, the complete absence of shadows under a bright California sun), and, as cinematographer John A. Alonzo illustrates, it’s possible to generate as powerfully ominous an atmosphere through color shots as through monochromatic ones. Set design is also impressive. The 1930s Los Angeles evoked here is the exaggerated stuff of dreams and movies, and the unreality of it all works in the context of the film. (A similar approach to another time period, the 1950s, powered Curtis

Hanson's *L.A. Confidential*, another superior color noir effort.)

For many noir films, the music is as important as the cinematography and set design in establishing the time. For *Chinatown*, Jerry Goldsmith turned in a moody, ethereal score that is unlike anything else for which he has been responsible in his long career. Goldsmith's music evokes a Hollywood when it was still a place where dreams were made, when stars were bigger than life, and when Tinseltown was more than just a worn-out nickname. It's not a rousing score, but it fits *Chinatown's* style and atmosphere more tightly than a surgical glove.

For director Roman Polanski, whose filmography behind the camera could be used as a textbook example of unevenness, *Chinatown* represents the apex of his career. His return to Hollywood after a several year absence (he left the United States for Europe following the murder of his wife, Sharon Tate, at the hands of the infamous Manson Family), *Chinatown* uses every strength in Polanski's arsenal, while falling afoul of none of his weaknesses. No previous or future effort equaled *Chinatown*—not *Rosemary's Baby*, which introduced him to mainstream audiences, nor *Tess*, his lugubrious interpretation of the Thomas Hardy novel. And certainly not his recent fare, which has included dud-like *Bitter Moon* and *The Ninth Gate*.

Could *Chinatown* be made today, in a Hollywood climate that rewards productions with no ambition and demands happy endings? Probably not. Even in 1974, screenwriter Robert Towne wanted a more upbeat conclusion, but Polanski believed that the film's true path intersected with tragedy. From the vantage point of almost

30 years distance, it's difficult to argue with the director's interpretation. Had Towne's vision held, the mediocre climax would have robbed *Chinatown* of an element of its power. One has to wonder whether it would be held in as high regard.

The most interesting aspect of the ending is how, although much of *Chinatown* is concerned with the unraveling of the San Fernando land buying conspiracy, the eventual resolution involves events that have nothing to do with the "big picture" and everything to do with the warped relation between various key characters. In its final moments, we appreciate the manner in which *Chinatown* works both as a mystery and as an exploration of a deeper, more personal human tragedy. Gittes is not an unattached observer, as many private investigators are, and his involvement lends greater impact to the conclusion—especially since we see events through his eyes. He is, after all, our surrogate throughout the film.

Ever since film noir reached Hollywood, the detective has become a type, with film noir being his playground. It takes a Herculean effort to transform this type into a character and to replace the formula with a story, and *Chinatown's* success in both of these regards is one of the reasons it is universally viewed as a classic. The movie is a nearly flawless example of movie composition, with close examination revealing how carefully it was put together. For those who take a less studious and more visceral approach to movie viewing, it's also worth noting that *Chinatown* is a superior thriller—one that will keep viewers involved and "in the moment" until the final, mournful scene has come to a conclusion.

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIII, FALL 2006:

Oct 24 Robert Altman **M*A*S*H** 1970
Oct 31 Fred Zinnemann, **The Day of the Jackal** 1973
Nov 7 Emile de Antonio **In the Year of the Pig** 1969
Nov 14 Bob Rafelson, **Five Easy Pieces** 1970
Nov 21 Nicolas Roeg **The Man Who Fell to Earth** 1976
Nov 28 Spike Lee **Do the Right Thing** 1989
Dec 5 Peter Greenaway **Prospero's Books** 1991

COMING UP IN THE UB FORUM ON TORTURE (Wednesdays 5:30-8:00 p.m., Center for the Arts 112, UB North Campus)

10.18 **Ian Olds**
10.25 **Bruce Jackson & Newton Garver**
11.01 **Eddo Stern**
11.08 **Nina Felshin**
11.15 **Jennifer Harbury & Ezat Mossallanejad**

For details on topics and speakers go to <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~cgkoebel/tor.htm>

Contacts: ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us. ...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

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