

Chinatown and the Detective Story



Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) achieved a double success rare for a Hollywood release. Not only did it do immensely well at the box office (usually an indication of wide appeal), but it drew the general acclaim of the critics, whose finely tuned aesthetic judgment, at least to hear them tell it, is sensitive to qualities which transcend popular appeal. A broad spectrum of acceptance, of course, can simply indicate that the work functions satisfactorily in two ways, on what may be called the level of "what happens next" interest and on the plane of traditional artistic value. I think, however, that the explanation of *Chinatown's* success lies elsewhere, neither in its well-paced action nor in its effective use of visual symbolism, but in a deeper, more essential aspect of the film which subsumes its technical accomplishments. The nature of the world which *Chinatown* creates and the view of man which it sets forth are both, I will show, particularly and profoundly appealing to America of the early seventies.

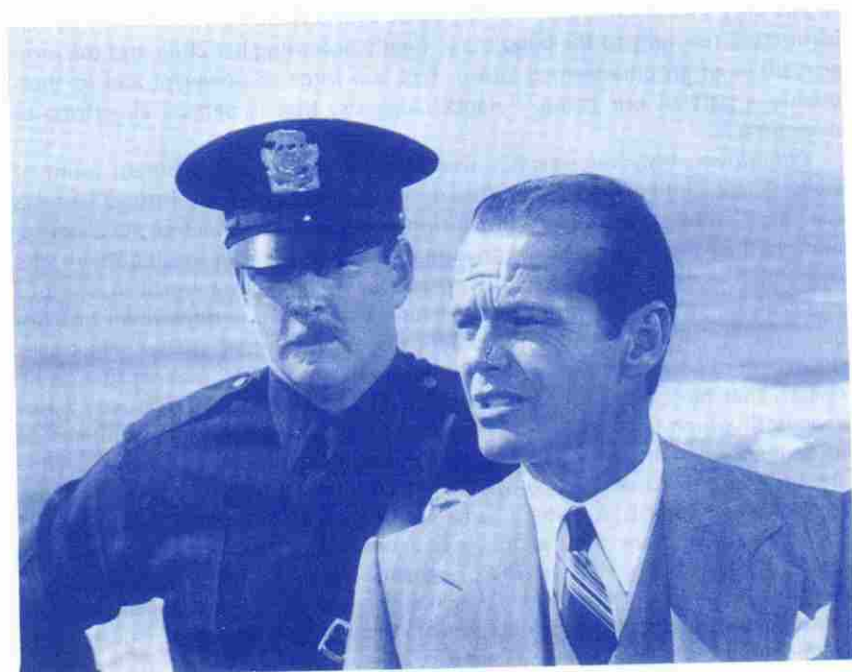
The scope of Polanski's achievement can best be explored by examining how the film, in a vital way, is a failure. According to the critical consensus, *Chinatown* is a detective story in the tradition of *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*, both of which present an elaborate variation on the whodunit genre invented by Poe. The works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler have traditionally been filmed in a grand manner which preserves both the brutal realism of their style and their thematic embellishment of solution of the case, the central and traditional concern which keeps the detective story generically distinct from the mystery. Robert Towne, the screenwriter for *Chinatown*, much influenced by Hammett, expected that the film would fall naturally into the traditional genre. The changes which Polanski imposed on his script, especially in the resolution of the plot, however, both puzzled and angered him. Like the critics, Towne did not realize that the movie, in its final form, does not belong to the detective film genre, but rather exploits its stereotyped characters and situation for a very different effect.

The appeal of the detective story lies mainly in the detective character himself. A man alone, working generally outside the established systems of justice, he succeeds in solving the puzzle of the crime by the strength of his intelligence. As the lineal descendant of the epic hero, the detective is undismayed by complexities and is able to restore order to a world which at the outset seems incapable of it. Polanski's Jake Gittes, unlike his illustrious predecessors from Sherlock Holmes to Sam Spade, however, is beaten at the end by the forces of evil which he has stripped bare. *Chinatown* does not portray

the detective, problem solver *par excellence*, in a successful struggle with a hostile universe. Instead of restoring moral order to the chaos of unexplained occurrence and motive, Gittes is drawn, against his will, into the whirlpool of its ever-increasing complexities. Ultimately the situation, contrary to the expectations of the detective story, admits of no denouement; Polanski unties the knot only to show that it cannot properly be untied. Gittes' best efforts, like those of Sam Spade, are directed toward preservation, but they ironically further the cause of the deepest human perversity.

The film's theme is easily understood within the context of Polanski's work. Two of his films from the sixties likewise explore an evil which lies mysteriously within the human heart. *Repulsion* traces almost clinically a young woman's journey from neurotic fears into the mayhem of a psychotic nightmare. It differs from *Chinatown* more in its point of view than in the inexplicable horror which it reveals. As the title indicates, *Repulsion* detaches itself from the subject it records; the protagonist is not only deliberately isolated from the viewer but also from the "normal" people in the world which the film creates. Polanski achieves this effect by concealing the inscape of the woman's personality, by capturing the truth of her experience with the eye of the realist rather than the symbolist. The later *Rosemary's Baby*, however, like *Chinatown*, presents a search after evil which finally turns inward. About to give birth, Rosemary desperately tries to flee the influence of a coven of witches who, with her husband's connivance, are trying to control her and, she fears, steal her baby. Wickedness is here hardly detached from the real world, since the witches include the friendly couple next door and her obstetrician. Like *Chinatown* again, the movie ends with a bitterly ironic discovery: the child Rosemary tried so hard to protect is the devil's offspring. But, as in *Repulsion*, the full effect of the recognition that the human spirit is corrupt to the very soul is softened. The last scene shows Rosemary, overcome by her instinctual reaction to the baby's cry, finally accepting her child and the moral realities of an unredeemed world. Evil is a force so powerful and so thoroughly a part of our being, Polanski suggests, that it defeats all efforts to overcome it.

Chinatown, however, restates this theme from a much different point of view. Gittes, unlike Rosemary, does not discover original sin. Instead he tears the mask from an evil whose dimensions he had not suspected. As a policeman, he had once tried to save the life of a girl on his beat in Chinatown; she was killed in spite of his attempt to extricate her from a world mysterious and malevolent. As the film opens Gittes is established in downtown Los Angeles doing what he euphemistically calls "matrimonial work." He tracks down and exposes a less complex kind of evil, simple lust, making sure, as he boasts, that he is never the one caught with his pants down. The easy assurance with which Gittes has circumscribed his life and his illusory competence in dealing with the essential (and hence sexual) nature of human perversity are both shattered when one of his matrimonial cases leads him away from the bright world of L. A. (where, as he confidently asserts, even the larger evils are manageable since they all proceed from greed) back to the mysterious world of Chinatown. Here he discovers once again his inability to either understand or control the darkness which confronts him. "It's still possible," he mumbles as the anguished realization of his own ultimate helplessness comes upon him in the final scene. "Forget it Jake, it's only Chinatown," says his partner at the end, but the words are an empty incantation. The film has shown that the oriental inscrutability of Chinatown is to be found in the world



Stills courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

outside as well. Human intelligence, the film suggests, must find itself finally incapable of dealing with the darkness that not only surrounds man but lies at his very heart.

It is easy to see why Towne and Polanski disagreed about the end of *Chinatown*. The movie violates the essential conventions of the detective genre. The climactic solution of the case, if the work is well done, precedes the reader's or viewer's full understanding of the facts; audience and detective are thus engaged in a race for the answer. The feeling that the riddles of human experience are capable of solution is necessary for the desired effect. In *Chinatown*, Gittes does solve the case, but his victory is empty since the knowledge he gains is ultimately fruitless and hopelessly incomplete.

At the center of the film lies instead the conflict between human will and uncontrollable evil, a conflict which is foreign to the detective mystery. We return to the question of the film's success. It appealed to audiences despite the incongruity of the ending, its utter violation of the rules of the detective story. It gained the applause of the critics in spite of their mistaken generic analysis. From the director's viewpoint, the film may well have a personal meaning; the death of Sharon Tate at the hands of the Manson family is the kind of unexplained evil which might find artistic expression in the horrible finale of *Chinatown*. The gradual transition in the way Polanski's films have treated the theme of evil may well be explained by the tragic events in his own life. But why are audiences satisfied with the defeat of goodness and the death of innocence in a film type which generically promises the opposite? The answer seems to lie in the deep distrust of the problem solving abilities of reason and logic which is the legacy of the painful and mysterious failure in Vietnam and our frustrating incapacity to deal with social problems at home. It is a distrust which has been further intensified by the pervasive corruption of Watergate, an episode whose evils could be catalogued but whose ultimate causes could scarcely be identified. Jake Gittes, seeker after truth and guardian of innocence, is defeated by forces whose dimensions he never fathoms and whose perversity he never understands; he exemplifies our doubts about the usefulness of knowledge, the healing powers of goodness, the efficacy of individual effort.

In its vision of man and his world *Chinatown* presents some striking parallels to a drama which is likewise the product of an age with incipient self-doubts. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* may not have directly suggested to Towne and Polanski the thematic structure of the film; in fact it is much more likely that the similarities in the two works proceed coincidentally from a similar *zeitgeist* reflected artistically by the author in each case. An exploration of the parallels between *Chinatown* and *Oedipus* will show, I hope, how profoundly Polanski (with Towne's unwitting assistance) has transformed the detective story genre into a vehicle for the expression of a much different theme.

Sophocles' play opens with Oedipus, as King of Thebes, receiving a suppliant group of his subjects. A plague has struck the city, the sacrifices are ineffective because of immortal disfavor. Oedipus is confident that he can correct the situation and restore the city to its former prosperity. He learns soon that the city is polluted by an unpunished murderer. To find the murderer is to save Thebes. The play then becomes a kind of detective story in which Oedipus, through a series of interviews with the principals involved, attempts to piece together the crime, which was the murder of Laius, the previous king. The setting of *Chinatown* is likewise a city beset by evil; it is Los Angeles of the

thirties, besieged by drought, a city ironically bordering on the sea but actually in the middle of a desert. Gittes, by a trick, becomes involved with the relationship between Hollis Mulwray, the water commissioner, and a mysterious young woman, who appears to be Mulwray's mistress. Gittes' investigation of the supposed affair between the two ends with the unexplained publication of his pictures of the couple together. Gittes learns at this point that he had not, as he had originally thought, been engaged by Mrs. Mulwray, but paid by an impostor. He seeks the answer to this puzzle, but Mulwray is suddenly murdered, drowned, apparently, in the dwindling reservoir of city water. Gittes, because he has been fooled, wants to solve the case, which the police classify initially as an accident. As the plot develops, it becomes clear that the murder and the drought (artificially induced) are connected. The solution of the murder, in fact, as in *Oedipus*, brings with it the potential solution of the city's problems. In both works, then, the task of the heroes, detectives in the larger sense of restless seekers after truth, has more than personal implications; it involves the fate of the community.

As characters Oedipus and Gittes possess deeper similarities. When the play opens, Oedipus is confident of his mastery of his own and the city's fortunes; he, after all, is the man who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, a feat for which no one else possessed sufficient intelligence, and thus saved Thebes from a terrible scourge. He is the living representation of the power of reason. Behind this facade, however, looms an awful truth; the oracle which predicted that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus has deluded himself into trusting that he has escaped his fate, that reason and will are sufficient weapons against forces which lie beyond man's final understanding. Jake Gittes is likewise a victim of fatal delusion. His encounter with an impersonal and inscrutable universe is symbolized by his failure in Chinatown. Retreating like Oedipus from what he cannot comprehend or control, he also foolishly regains confidence in his own powers. At the beginning of the film, he is proud of his success at matrimonial work, sure of his understanding of human nature. For both Oedipus and Jake Gittes, however, such delusions are brittle defenses against the truth which is revealed to them.

The two works do, in fact, possess a similar structure. In *Chinatown* and in *Oedipus*, a solution is found to the murder mystery, but the solution in each case conceals more than it reveals. Oedipus discovers simultaneously the answer to the question of Laius' death and to the ever-puzzling riddle of his own birth; he is the murderer of his own father. In finally knowing himself, he ironically fulfills the command of the Delphic oracle. With this knowledge, however, comes a blackness as well, represented by the blindness he inflicts upon himself, a blindness which recognizes in its own special way the futility of the knowledge which the eyes or reason can give. Throughout the play, the theme of blindness and sight, inner vision and outer vision, plays a part, largely through the contrast of Oedipus, who has eyes but cannot see, with a blind seer, Teiresias, who sightlessly gazes at the truth. This is the final riddle which, with cosmic irony, is solved for Oedipus at the play's conclusion. In *Chinatown* also there are two levels of knowledge, symbolized by the two settings for the action, the sunlit world of Los Angeles and the dark mystery of Chinatown. The contrast is likewise figured in the characters of Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray. Gittes insists on knowing the truth of the situation which he has been tricked into; Mrs. Mulwray knows that the truth is better left unrevealed. In *Oedipus* Teiresias must be threatened to tell what he knows; his reluctance, and that of others in the drama, contrasts with the persistent willingness of Oedipus to

acquire knowledge. Gittes also must literally beat the truth out of Evelyn Mulwray. When she reveals the awful secret that the mysterious young woman her husband had been seeing is her own daughter, a daughter conceived from the incestuous attack of her father, Noah Cross, Gittes is shocked. Although Cross had warned him that he "didn't know what he was getting into," a warning which the district attorney had given him before in Chinatown, Gittes had been satisfied with his own, simplistic solution of the case. He had thought that Mulwray had been killed by his jealous wife, an explanation which accounts for the facts according to the most ordinary of human motivations: lust, jealousy and anger. Oedipus, in much the same way, when told the truth toward the beginning of the play, assumes a conspiracy between Creon and Teiresias motivated by greed and ambition. The failure of human vision is suggested throughout *Chinatown* by a series of striking images: Cross's glasses, the final clue to the murder, found with one lens shattered, the one taillight on Mrs. Mulwray's car which Gittes breaks in order to follow her through the mysterious night, and, most importantly, the imperfection in Mrs. Mulwray's eye. Gittes discovers a dark spot in her left iris, which she explains is a birthmark, a flaw. In the film's final scene, Mrs. Mulwray attempts to flee with her daughter from the evil represented by her father, but is stopped by a policeman's bullet, a bullet which pierces her left eye. The impotence of human intelligence is figured for Gittes in the shattered face of Mrs. Mulwray.

The force of evil in *Oedipus* and *Chinatown* remains, even to the very end, unexplained and unfathomed. Noah Cross, whose name suggests both perversity and fatherly protection, the giver and destroyer of waters, commits incest with his daughter and murders the man he had considered a son. He sins as Oedipus does, but the horror which he makes of life is willful. When Gittes discovers that Cross had murdered Mulwray for money, although he is a millionaire many times over, he is baffled. The evil which Cross represents is neither simple greed nor simple lust, but the destructive, irrational side of human personality. Cross explains to Gittes that he has discovered within himself the capacity for anything, given the proper conditions. This is, of course, the same frightening lesson which Oedipus learns. When Oedipus and Gittes finally face this truth, they find themselves drawn away from reason and light, Oedipus to the blackness within his soul and Gittes to the oriental inscrutability of Chinatown and the fateful, Chinese beauty of Evelyn Mulwray. The solution of the case, the discovery of the murderer, does not celebrate the triumph of human reason, the ability of man to solve the puzzles of his existence. Instead, the inexorable moral boundaries of the universe are revealed and man, strengths and weaknesses laid bare, is forced to reconcile himself to them. To a society which has survived the futile sacrifice of Vietnam and the byzantine evil of Watergate, this vision of man and his world appeals deeply.

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