

CHINATOWN

Directed by Roman Polanski
Produced by Robert Evans
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1974

Los Angeles is a city that shouldn't exist. Years ago, it didn't have much to brag about. It didn't straddle a major river, it anchored no trade route. Yet, despite its advanced age, the sleepy town seemed to shrug off its cocoon at the beginning of the 20th century and emerge as a metropolitan titan, a jostling juggernaut bound and determined to have its own way in the world. Blessed by temperate weather and convenient to mountain peaks and breaking surf, what L.A. needed was fresh water, and lots of it.

So it began to devour its neighbors.

Hollywood wanted to stay independent. Primly conservative, and wary of the behemoth at its gates, it even voted to ban liquor in 1904. But Hollywood was thirsty. Wells went dry. And its proud populace wouldn't get a drop unless they agreed to merge with Los Angeles. They gave up in 1910.

Today, the city demands the Colorado River and the Owens River, draining Mono Lake, Owens Lake, the Salton Sea...sucking Southern California dry.

It took decades of labor, salesmanship, bluffs, lies, bribes, schemes, scams, and political mega-fights that reached into the White House before William Mulholland succeeded.

A man who can bend rivers to his will is not to be trifled with.

Jake Gittes is a stubborn, stylish private eye who normally doesn't make waves unless he's paid for his troubles. He's learned, from his days as a cop in Chinatown, that, despite your best efforts, sometimes you're actually making things worse when you charge into the fray to protect the innocent.

Somewhere along the line he stopped bothering. He'd profit from despair. But, deep down, he's got a big heart. He tells the fake Mrs. Mulray (Ida) to go home to her husband and forget about her husband's philandering. When the banker in the barbershop criticizes him for ruining a marriage just for a little publicity, Gittes reacts violently; despite his vehement assertion that he's just doing an honest day's work, he's actually ready for something different. He's got something to prove, to himself.

He's not afraid of Noah Cross. Perhaps he should be. It's not that he's stupid; he's smart.

His nonchalance, even after getting his nose sliced, is stupefying. It doesn't make sense. But dreams don't make a lot of sense either. A city of millions surrounded by desert isn't any stranger.

What impresses is the dream-like quality of the piece (accentuated mightily by Jerry Goldsmith's greatest score). From the very first shot (resurrecting the eerie, ancient Paramount logo) we're drawn into another world. It's a carefully constructed period piece told from a relentlessly single point of view, just like a dream. And it's set in a city that, by this point, had

set itself up as Dream Capital of the World, a realm unto itself, full of beautiful people doing unspeakable things.

And just like a dream, it's difficult to keep track. There are few guideposts on this journey. We don't even know for sure what year we're in. After all, dreams don't include subtitles. But there is an inevitability to it all that carries us forward. We are happy to be associated with a free-wheeling, wise-cracking whirling dervish like Jake Gittes. We trust him. He seems to understand human weaknesses, like when he sympathizes with the understated ambition of the new Water & Power director, Mr. Yelburton. We think Jake would understand *us*. But then...it's too late; we're stuck with him. We're doomed; we know we're being drawn back to Chinatown, and we shudder at the prospect. And all the lies he told come back to haunt us when, in those last desperate seconds, he can't get the lieutenant to heed his warnings about Noah Cross. Why should anyone believe him now, especially when it looks like he's just trying to get himself out of another jam?

Chinatown feels like a darker, more explicit variant on dozens of femme-fatale-laden '40s detective films, a characteristic that informs the ironic, self-referential quality of this splendid, '70s-sour reinvention, as does the fact that similar schemes played out in real life, at the turn of the century. This is a sordid tale of greed and lust situated in a lovely, long-lost milieu. It's surreal, kaleidoscopic, all-enveloping. It's a wistful idyll-turned-nightmare that remains one of the great achievements of cinema.