

Cyan Martinez-Escobar

RTV 14-03

Mldterm: *Chinatown* Media Aesthetics Analysis

Roman Polanski's masterpiece *Chinatown* follows private investigator Jake Gittes as he takes on a case to uncover the secrets of the Los Angeles Water and Power department. Hollis Mulwray, the chief engineer of the department, is killed after discovering the underlying plot to sabotage the local valley's water supply in order to undercut the price of the land. As this political plot is continuing to unfold, Gittes and Hollis' wife Evelyn become emotionally entangled as Gittes is uncovering the identity of Hollis' mistress. Jake Gittes serves as the protagonist of this story, as the audience is taken along as he pieces together the case and he constantly fights against the corruption he is surrounded by. In the barbershop, Gittes picks a fight with a man who is questioning the morality of his occupation to which Gittes responds "I make an honest living. People don't come to me unless they're miserable and I help 'em out of a bad situation" [17:00]. His struggle as the protagonist serves as a moral latitude test at the beginning of the film because of Gittes' resolution to maintain neutrality but this quickly unravels as he finds himself involved with Evelyn. His neutrality is obscured by his obsession with the truth, and he finds himself diving deeper into this mystery as a way to try and do what's considered right. As the film progresses, Gittes seems more isolated by his experiences than surrounded with love or friendship, when Ida Sessions asks if he's alone, Gittes responds with a joking, but illuminating, "Isn't everybody?"

[44:05]. Through the perspective of Gittes, the underlying political crime of water theft and his personal struggle against the corruption of Chinatown is shown.

Chinatown is a neo-noir historical fiction film, but at its core it features two interwoven genres. The A-plot is the political crime story, as Noah Cross is planning on cutting the cost of the San Fernando Valley land by draining its natural water supply. Water is at the center of this conflict and serves as the dominant image system throughout the film. As a currency of power, water is an essential resource so controlling it allows Noah Cross to maintain and continue gathering power. Near the climax of the film, Cross tells Gittes “Either you bring the water to L.A. or you bring L.A. to the water” [2:02:07]. Cross’ hunger for more power fuels the corruption and violence throughout the film, pushing Gittes to try and crack the case. Throughout the film, water and conversely the drought is featured in order to heighten these themes. Hollis is first spotted at the sparsely wet areas of the Los Angeles river, which features the overexposed scenes that exemplify the heat and dryness of the riverbed [8:28]. Sets like this starkly contrast settings such as the Mulwray’s home, where a delicately maintained Japanese pond is an overly-consumptive expression of wealth of the government employees [27:47]. Juxtaposing the overindulgence of the upper class is only heightened as the film progresses as newspapers and flyers continue to show the extremity of the water crisis. Power through the control of water permeates the entire film. Even the cause of Hollis’ death is caused by water, as the mortician states, “We got water out of him. He drowned” [37:56]. Even in scenes where Gittes is conducting his business without the influence of the outside world, he is still surrounded by water. In both the scene where Curly is showing Gittes the developed photos from their work and

the scene at the morgue, a light water noise can be heard as the dialogue plays out. Gittes cannot escape the persistence of water, as it represents both power as a currency for the wealthy as well as life itself.

The secondary plot in *Chinatown* deals with Jake Gittes' troubled past with Chinatown and his moral dilemmas about participating in harmful social structures that seek to give a few men unlimited power. Gittes is painted as a somewhat contradictory man, both quick-witted and foolhardy at times, he adapts to situations as they come to him, even to his own detriment. Beyond his belief in making an honest living, Gittes has a troubled past with Chinatown and the work he did there. Chinatown to Gittes, and the rest of Los Angeles, is a symbol of corruption and the propensity to cast the troubles of the city onto people that have been othered. Cross tells Gittes "You make this you know what you're dealing with, but believe me, you don't" [1:03:16] to which Gittes replies "That's what the District Attorney used to tell me in Chinatown" [1:03:26]. Moments like this show Gittes' insight into corrupted systems and he no longer wishes to participate in them. This struggle against the system is futile in the end as the final piece of dialogue is faintly heard before the crowd begins to dissipate, "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown" [2:08:23].

An image system implemented throughout the film that served both main and subplot was images dealing with eyes or sight. Gittes is seen with both binoculars and cameras to conduct his work, leading him to capture more evidence than just observation, but these tools also serve to conflate his understanding of the situation as Gittes finds himself more wrapped into the case. At the El Macando Apartments, Gittes views Hollis and the young girl through the lens of the camera which warps his

perception of their relationship [16:08]. The glasses that Noah Cross dropped in the Japanese pond are obscured through the water, which bars Gittes from realizing their significance because he is interrupted by Evelyn [27:47]. Each of the dead bodies shown, Hollis Mulwray, Ida Sessions, and Evelyn Mulwray, all have their eyes open when their bodies are found. Each of their deaths represent the corruption and secrecy of Noah Cross and particularly Hollis eyes bulged out, representing the knowledge that Hollis possessed [33:18]. Evelyn's eyes are a point of interest as well, as her left eye was damaged when she was younger, representing her past trauma with her father and how her perception is skewed by these traumas. Gittes points out that "there's something black in the green part of your eye," a representation of the corruption that has deeply affected her [1:22:58]. This eye is eventually the one she is shot in, a consequence inflicted by Noah Cross as a punishment for trying to take control back from him, he even attempts to cover his daughter's eyes to attempt to shield her from her mother's dead body [2:07:23].

Each of the image systems build together throughout the film as this mystery is uncovered by Jake Gittes. His propensity for following a moral code while trying to participate in a corrupt world leads Gittes away from the detachment he had at the beginning of the film, but at the higher cost of both love and justice in the deaths that followed this case and Noah Cross' plot ultimately succeeding. Both a story as much about life as death wrapped in the flawed justice of 1930's Los Angeles, *Chinatown* provides a gritty and morally gray tale about seeking power and the lengths taken to secure it.