

English 1102

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Logic's Despair in Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974)

During the 1960s and 1970s, comic books and superheroes dazzled America. Colorful costumes, vexing villains, and mysterious metropolises captivated readers, but nothing delighted readers more than the superhero. By definition, a hero will persevere through tribulations, will win the fight for good, and thus will satisfy the audience with a job well done. Performing the role of a superhero, detectives in *noir* films and novels save the day by using their powers of logic to solve a mystery and protect society from the immoral. This happily-ever-after theme, though popular, began to dissatisfy the American public as World War II, the Vietnam War, and political scandals made a perfect ending unrealistic. To comment on the terror and corruption occurring in America, Roman Polanski created *Chinatown* (1974). In his film, he concentrated on the theme of despair in classic *film noir*. Like traditional *film noir*, *Chinatown* contains a bleak, unruly despair that deceives its characters. Unlike in a canonical *film noir*, however, the ending of *Chinatown* does not provide closure for the viewer because the detective hero fails to defeat evil and succeed; the despair is never resolved. The unresolved, unchanging theme of despair in *Chinatown* serves as a representation of the horrified and confused American society; during the 1970s, salient socio-political issues seemed unsolvable.

Chinatown's cinematographic elements mimic the classic *film noir's* lighting and effects to relate the film's theme of despair. In *film noir* from the 1940s and 1950s, images were shades of black and white. To create depth and provide various moods, techniques such as using the shadow of window panes was typical. Though *Chinatown* is in color, the colors are

the depth of the black and white in classic *film noir* (McElhaney). The light, sunny colors reflect the arid setting in which *Chinatown* takes place, but they also symbolize the hidden deception in the film. Throughout *Chinatown*, Jake is dressed in cream. Also, almost every scene in which he is present takes place in the afternoon when the sun casts a golden hue over him. The yellowish

Jake is surely on the path to success. This light, however, is used in *Chinatown* to deceive (Cordaiy 121). When Jake meets with the Hispanic boy in a dry riverbed, the entire scene is painted in desert colors of yellow and beige, implying that the boy is enlightening Jake about the riverbed's drought. Though this implication makes sense, the boy's information leads Jake down a series of wrong paths. As the audience will find when the film's curtain falls, Jake's efforts to find the real truth have not been realized and his detection has been misguided. The light that seemingly uncovered evil's secrets and validated Jake's reasoning actually provided a better place for evil to hide by deceiving the audience (Cordaiy 121). Like a yellow, arid desert with unquenched thirst, Jake lacks the evil truth found at the film's end, proving that the light that once assured the audience actually deceived them the whole time. Though the evil in *Chinatown* isn't unveiled by shades of black like in a classic *film noir*, the subtle, lighter neutral colors

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despair and disillusionment throughout the film.

In *Chinatown*, the film's setting works in tandem with its color to delineate corruption and despair of the world of *Chinatown*.

behavior, and world-

Chinatown (Sayre 95; Cordaiy 121).

of the prosperous and great West (Sayre 95). Since *Chinatown* is set in California, the characters of the film are defined by this search for the boundless potential of money and power. No character has greater greed and lust for power than Noah Cross. His obsession with power is the source of incorrigible evil in Chinatown, and he is eventually revealed as the ultimate perpetrator of the film's despair.

The protagonist, Los Angeles, is defined by its greed and lust for power as is Cross's character, but the city also represents the opposition between truth and evil in *Chinatown*. Los Angeles is a desert neighbored by an ocean. Like the city's opposing geography, the patriarchal figures in *Chinatown* differ in terms of water and desert. Water is a cleansing source; it reveals truth and it represents tranquility. A desert emits heat; it is harsh and cruel, often taking lives by starvation and thirst. As the embodiment of water and truth, Hollis Mulwray refuses to build a dam he knows will produce harm. Contradicting the goodness of Mulwray, Cross acts as a constricting desert. He will do whatever he can to achieve any power, including violently killing to gain

fertility to flow freely like water, Cross constrains truth and innocence like the dams he built in the past (Docarmo 649). Cross's deadly snare of power holds back all good, and places Chinatown into a sinking despair.

Accentuating Cross's thirst for power, several of the murders he implements occur in

water. Though the riverbeds in Los Angeles are dry, Cross must drown Mulwray and other innocent people because they refuse to be corrupted by evil. Since Mulwray refuses to let Cross harm his daughter by marrying her, and harm the Los Angeles citizens by opposing the building of the new dam, Mulwray and the rest of the good and innocent characters represent truth; thus, they part the world in truth's embodiment, water. Though their deaths are symbolically pertinent to the film, the drownings of the people representative of good are not shown to the audience.

Usually deaths in a *noir*

good triumphing over evil (Cordaiy 121). In *Chinatown*, however, good cannot defeat a complex evil; thus, the murders of the good are mysterious, calm, and still like the metaphoric water of truth to which the innocent return and remain as they part the evil-overtaken, despairing world of *Chinatown*.

Jake Gittes, protagonist and detective in *Chinatown*, attempts to combat Cross's evil

interpretation of events actually contributes to the deception in *Chinatown* and the deception of the film's audience. The first-person point of view Jake provides is what gives insight into the cases he investigates, which is seemingly helpful to viewers as they calculate with him, but it

Cordaiy 122). Like a classic *film noir* detective, Gittes attempts to use logic to piece together his cases, but each answer or assumption he makes is always changed or nullified later. He assumes that Evelyn is a *femme fatale* when she is not. Because of this assumption, he believes Catherine is Mulwray's lover and Evelyn is holding her captive for reasons of jealousy or even conspiracy. Then, Jake furthers his incorrect judgment of Evelyn by

reasoning that she murdered her husband and the glasses in the Mulwray pool are proof. Later in the film, Gittes learns that Evelyn is good, and Catherine is Evelyn's innocent daughter. Jake's

rather than a series of facts

stories of classic *film noir* (Cordaiy 122). Because Jake's reasoning is continuously edited, the

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Jake's point of view is founded on syllogistic reasoning, the audience becomes fully aware that the failure of his perspective is due to the failure of his logic. In contradiction to most classic *noir* detectives or heroes, logic what the audience expects to hold true does not prevail; logic does not solve the case.

Jake does not fully realize the complexity of the exponentially changing and growing Mulwray case because he uses syllogistic reasoning. He believes that each breadcrumb clue will lead to the next toward one solution. Near the film's end, Jake finally connects Cross and his double motives (water and daughter) and the murder of Mr. Mulwray, and realizes that the Mulwray case is beyond a linear solution. Though Jake recognizes the connection, he is unable to solve the case because he still relies on logic. Since the motives and meanings of the case go beyond logical reaso ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and

(Docarmo 648). Unlike in the classic *noir* genre, the detective is unable to solve the complex case through reasoning and is unable to pierce through indeterminacy; thus, the typical

despairing cloud over classic *film noir* is not replaced by a happy, solved ending. Since Jake is incapable of solving the Mulwray case with logic, the film is defined by the despair of the

injustice of failed logic.

The despairing reality of the film is embodied in the symbol of Chinatown. Due to the film's first-person point of view, the audience's perception of Chinatown is focalized through

about it as Jake does. Thus, the audience must assume

sex, Evelyn initiates questions concerning Jake's past in Chinatown. Jake avoids the subject, giving quick responses such

has a negative connotation in his eyes; his inability to make eye-contact and his refusal to discuss the matter also indicates that Chinatown is emotionally significant for him. When Jake does reply

an insignificant entity unworthy of mentioning, yet he also suggests that its meaning is important and expansive.

When connected to Jake's logical reasoning and the final scene of the film, the importance of the unimportance of Chinatown suggested by Jake is understood by the audience.

Throughout the film, Jake's reasoning does not broaden beyond syllogistic line a

face of a mysterious, indeterminate unknown (Novak 258). When Lieutenant Estoban says,

Mulwray case, are in fact lost causes. Since the Mulwray case ends in the unknown that is Chinatown, it is understood that the case is just like Chinatown; it is too complex, too far from fact, and too obscure. For Jake, Chinatown is important because it represents the unimportance and insignificance of fact. Since logic does not lead to a solution, and mysterious evil prevails, a shadow of despair is cast over Chinatown.

When mysteries go unsolved and when facts are not enough, failure and despair are made manifest. After several wars, Sputnik, attempted impeachments, and the Watergate Scandal, Americans became an audience in despair, afraid of the unknown and its malevolence. To make manifest their greatest fears, *Chinatown* was created. In *Chinatown*, evil is brutal and complex, represented by the anthropomorphic, power-thirsty Los Angeles desert. Like in the classic *film noir*, detective Gittes uses logic to attempt to defeat an evil force, Cross, and this creates a threatening theme of despair throughout the film. Unlike in a classic *film noir*, though, *Chinatown's* despairing theme is not resolved in a happy ending. Jake Gittes follows the code of a classic *film noir* detective, follows all of the sensible logic, and pieces together all of the information that he diligently gathers to solve the Mulwray and Cross case, but he is still unable to resolve the case. Logic, what his occupation and world is defined by, fails him. For Jake, Chinatown is the embodiment of truth and reasoning's failure. Since logic and truth fail, Jake's endeavor is pointless. *Chinatown* comments that America, a country ostensibly committed to

truth and reason, is also failing because knowing the facts is pointless. Despair overcame *Chinatown* and America because malevolence is beyond facts and beyond reason; evil is too complex. Because evil prevails, all is despair.

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