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Forget it, Jake

Searching for the truth in *Chinatown*

Don't ask us how many times we've seen it—it's embarrassing. *Chinatown* is a justly famous triumph of American filmmaking, acting, directing, cinematic sound, and more. The screenplay is ingenious, filled with puzzles, puns, and side plots. Too much ink has been spilled discussing the merits of the film as history. That's beside the point. What's more interesting is to lay film and history alongside one another—as Robert Towne so clearly did in writing his screenplay—and see how they compare. In that spirit, and recalling what a friend of ours recently said (“the movie is wrong and right all at once”), here are some thoughts—in the midst of the Los Angeles Aqueduct's one-hundredth anniversary—about the movie and its nonfiction counterparts in Los Angeles history.

What's with the eyes? Eyes are the organizing principle of the film—more so than Jack Nicholson's nose stuck where it shouldn't go. We're hardly the first to point out that so much of the movie revolves around ocular metaphors and both missed and

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gotten clues. Jake Gittes is a private eye, of course, but he doesn't see very well in the film. He misses a lot. He can't detect. He tries, in the county archives, to see the truth, but the light works against him and truth is obscured. He can't see "across," or "a Cross," even when the truth is right in his face. Faye Dunaway has a flaw in her eye, and she can't see what's going on, either—and ends up getting shot through the eye in the end. And who can forget the fish staring up at Jake from his luncheon plate, seeming to dare him to see, at long last, exactly what's going on? Seeing is often a long way from understanding, as Jake Gittes makes plain in the film.

And what about our eyes—the eyes of the viewer? We might as well admit it: we've seen the movie, collectively, fifty times or more. *Chinatown* demands some patience, which it amply rewards. Let's take a closer look.

What is going on?

Conspiracy

Chinatown revolves around businessman Noah Cross, who plots to bring Sierra Nevada water to his recently acquired agricultural acreage in the "Northwest Valley" by murdering an opponent of a \$10 million bond issue that would finance the building of an aqueduct and reservoir. Cross uses hired muscle and city personnel to enforce the secrecy of the fraud. Private investigator Jake Gittes eventually uncovers Cross's plan to convince Los Angeles taxpayers that drought necessitates that they pay for the transfer of water, which would irrigate his land, raise prices, and make him another fortune.

The conspiracy theory concerning the origins of the actual Owens Valley project evolved in the early 1900s as newspaper editor Sam Clover, local Socialists, and others sensed a plot by regional capitalists to use public funding to enrich themselves. In 1910, William T. Spilman wrote a little booklet called *The Conspiracy*, which spelled out the ramifications of the theory embellished by others ever since. But Steven P. Erie, Abraham Hoffman, and other scholars have demonstrated that the overall theory does not hold up. A syndicate—including newspaper publishers Harrison Gray Otis and Edwin T. Earl, railroad magnates Henry E. Huntington and E.H. Harriman, banker Joseph F. Sartori, developer L.C. Brand, and several others—publicized their plans to develop agricultural land in the San Fernando Valley long before the aqueduct project was even a possibility. In fact, one invited investor, Dr. John R. Haynes, confided to

Upton Sinclair that he declined to join the syndicate precisely because there was no mention of a water project. The syndicate did not become aware of the aqueduct project until city engineers had already decided to pursue it; one of the water department commissioners most likely passed the inside information to them. After that, the syndicate members acted as typical Angeleno boosters, campaigning for a project that would advance the interests of the city as well as themselves.

That said, there certainly was plenty of conflict of interest to go around, including on the part of a former Los Angeles mayor (Fred Eaton) purchasing land in Owens Valley, a water commissioner who was also an investor in the San Fernando Valley, and an engineer working for the federal government and city of Los Angeles at the same time.

Who do we see in Hollis Mulwray?

The easy answer is that he's supposed to be William Mulholland, chief engineer of the Los Angeles water department.



Their names at least kind of echo off one another anagrammatically. But he's really multiple personalities and puns wrapped into one character. Somehow the reception of the film has tended, in popular consciousness, to amalgamate the real Mulholland with Noah Cross, the searing and sneering figure so brilliantly played by John Huston. But Mulholland is more like both Mulwray and Cross, somehow. He's the civil servant who wants merely to provide water to the people whose water bills pay his salary, and he's also the vainglorious titan who will stop at nothing to bring about an imagined future for the metropolis he both serves and rules.

But there's a dash of Collis Huntington in here, too. After all, it was Huntington atop the Southern Pacific that tried—and failed—to shove Santa Monica down the throat of Los Angeles as its Pacific port at the tail end of the nineteenth century. And it could be that the screenwriter wanted to at least whisper, by way of Hollis-as-Collis, that filmgoers

contemplate Henry Huntington, too. Collis's nephew, Henry, later married Collis's widow (and thereby kind of became his own uncle?) and did exercise a lot of clout on the Los Angeles landscape at just this same time.

Fred Eaton is in here, too; the former mayor of Los Angeles figured that the aqueduct offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do good and do well, very well, at the same time. Making the aqueduct happen was very much part of Eaton's role, and he also thought he'd get very, very rich in the process, especially if he could see his "long valley" site in the Owen's Valley as a holding reservoir for a lot of money. He couldn't, and thus the aqueduct's managers ended up, with Mulholland as the chief instigator, building a storage facility behind the fated St. Francis Dam. When it fell down in the late 1920s, it took hundreds of lives—and Mulholland's fame and reputation—with it. In the film, the dam that has fallen down is the Vanderlip, which calls up yet another titanic figure—far lesser known—in Frank Vanderlip, banker, financier, and the



man who laid out, with the help of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Palos Verdes as a would-be Italian hill village on Portuguese Bend in the same era as the aqueduct.

“My sister, my daughter”

One of the storylines that explodes toward the end of *Chinatown* is Jake Gittes's discovery that Evelyn Mulwray, wife of the murdered water department head, had been raped at fifteen by her father, Noah Cross. The daughter from this union is then rendered vulnerable to Cross at the movie's shocking conclusion (thus evil, whether incest or corruption, moves forward through Los Angeles generations). This revelation of incest explains some of Evelyn's erratic behavior throughout the movie and, more important, casts Noah Cross (and perhaps the Los Angeles elite) as irredeemably treacherous. Greed is but one of his/their

vices; he/they aim to control everything within reach. “You see, Mr. Gittes,” Cross points out, “most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place, they're capable of *anything*.”

While there is no known rape or incest incident attributed to any of the Los Angeles figures involved with the Owens River Aqueduct project, rape became a common description and metaphor for what the city did to the Owens Valley. Critics such as Carey McWilliams (whom Towne read closely) castigated city officials for their actions in altering the environment while removing the valley's water, its life blood. Author Morrow Mayo entitled one chapter of his 1933 book *Los Angeles*, “The Rape of Owens Valley.”

The Mar Vista Rest Home

In order to hide his true identity in purchasing land that would increase in value when the water project is completed, Noah Cross had the title for his purchases placed in the names of residents of a senior citizens' home. The movie depicted these seniors as uninformed about, or incapable of understanding, their role, as Cross could then easily manipulate them and see his nefarious plans through. Thus, he exploited the seniors while hiding his machinations until the property was secured, all before news of the water project would encourage others to invest in acreage on the verge of a big increase in value. Jake Gittes shows them the truth so that they can see it—even if they don't comprehend it.

It is true that city water department officials quietly began to purchase property in the Owens Valley without informing residents there of the possible water project in order to avoid the escalation of land values. As to the syndicate with land in the San Fernando Valley, it already had options on big chunks of thirsty land well before the aqueduct project had developed—and it proudly trumpeted news of its actions in city newspapers.

In the mid-1950s, the incorporators of the City of Industry in eastern Los Angeles County expanded the proposed boundaries of the new municipality in order to harness the in-residence population of a sanitarium and its employees. As journalist Victor Valle has noted, critics complained that the patients there did not have the mental capacity to be concerned citizens of the new city, but that did not stop incorporation.



Drought

The real-life argument in favor of the city's need for more water was based on the needs of an expanding population coupled with the effects of crushing drought. In *Chinatown*, there is a heat wave, but the drought is treated as a myth generated by the elite conspiracy to bring Owens Valley water down from the mountains. In fact, it is depicted as man-made in several sequences in which water gates are purposely and secretly opened to allow runoff of thousands of gallons of water held in a city reservoir. Wasting water was an important component of the overall conspiracy to grab more water for the city and enrich Noah Cross. The motion picture made the most of it.

William Mulholland's granddaughter Catherine has shown that there was a water shortage in the early twentieth century. The previous decade saw below average rainfall and more of the available ground and below-ground water was consumed by the expanding population. There do not seem to be any substantiated reports of water being purposely drained away by water department personnel. There were always breakdowns in aging infrastructure at the time, but claims about dumping water seem more like overheated campaign accusations made by opponents of the project.

That said, the demand for water would prove largely insatiable; one aqueduct became two, the Colorado River would soon be brought to the very borders of Los Angeles, and the state water project would follow in due course. As William Mulholland said of Los Angeles, its growth, and its water needs: "If Los Angeles does not secure the Owens Valley water supply, she will never need it."

Government officials, noir, and the Depression-era setting

The film is set in the late Depression, calling up noir settings and plot lines. The events that the film is wrapped around are events of twenty-five years earlier. We like the later setting. The Depression setting has the better cars. The distinctions between rich and poor stand out sharper. The Depression setting helps create characters, too. Jake Gittes, for example, calls out his antagonist in the orange groves of the "Northwest Valley" as a "dumb Okie," a nod to the heavy migration of Dust Bowlers throughout the 1930s to greater Los Angeles. It's not that someone wouldn't have used the regional and ethnic slur in, say, 1913. They could have. But the prevalence of the epithet—and its

regional elasticity, expanding well beyond the boundaries of Oklahoma—is a product of the Depression years.

To state the obvious, that neo-noir atmosphere of *Chinatown* does not present public servants in the best light. Los Angeles City Council members are treated derisively in a scene in which a flock of sheep bleat their way through not-so-august chambers. Are they sheep, too? Water department employees seem to be aiding the secrecy of the water project, and the doomed chief engineer Hollis Mulwray is pictured as the lone dissenter. LAPD officers appear reasonably able, but in the end they are not going to pursue the wealthy and influential Noah Cross for his crimes.

Given its setting in the 1930s, *Chinatown* is actually soft on local government officials and employees of actual Depression-era Los Angeles. Political reformers charged Mayor Frank Shaw's administration with many misdeeds—city commissioners accused of corruption were fired or convicted of crimes, and Shaw was finally recalled from office in 1938. This followed a major police scandal based on an attempted murder and a cover-up of widespread corruption. Several county officials were also removed for malfeasance in the 1930s. The county district attorney was often accused of ignoring official corruption, protecting the leaders of an underworld syndicate amid gangland

killings—and kowtowing to the demands of the anti-labor business elite (of which Noah Cross would have been a stalwart member). The Depression did not favor those who vowed to protect and serve the city and county rather than their private pocketbooks.

Let's see. Water, power, intrigue, greed, corruption, murder, incest, rape, echoes—even shouts—of Raymond Chandler, Nathanael West, James M. Cain. A dash of Carey McWilliams. Faye Dunaway in her prime. Jack Nicholson as J.J. Gittes: dashing and bumbling all at once. Los Angeles as its own metropolitan character actor: on the make, grasping, secretive. Depression-era costumes and cars. Ensemble cast. Haunting, gorgeous soundtrack. What more could you want? Asking a feature film drawn to storyline and narrative and make believe to be true to history is missing the point. Better yet to sit back and watch the film, eat some popcorn, clean your glasses, and then engage it. Talk about it. Read about it. Then go out into the greater Los Angeles landscape, a landscape at least partially remade by the Los Angeles Aqueduct a century ago, and see for yourself. And see the movie again. And again. **B**

Note

Images from *Chinatown*, Paramount Pictures, 1974.

