

BACK STORY

FILM REVIEW: CHINATOWN

(1974, ROMAN POLANSKI, DIRECTOR)

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*“Do you have any idea what this land would be worth with a steady water supply?
About \$30 million more than they paid for it.”*

~ J.J. Giddes, Chinatown (1974) ~

Chinatown – critical review:

What is there to say about Chinatown that hasn't already been said in the years since its release? Possibly just “see it,” since an informal poll of acquaintances and co-workers reveals that many movie-watchers under the age of 40 haven't yet checked this one out.

In this 1974 classic, director/auteur Roman Polanski skillfully takes on the noir genre, painting a picture of 1930s Los Angeles, where political machinations and power-plays are not all that different from today. The high-level corruption, in this case, takes place not within the banking industry but among those leaders and businessmen tasked with keeping arid Los Angeles watered enough to support its booming population. An unlined and appealing Jack Nicholson plays private dick J.J. Gittes. Gittes is a man who makes his living exposing the tawdry affairs of his clients' spouses – until he's put on the trail of a much bigger conspiracy. While Gittes sees himself as hard-boiled, he is revealed – with each turn in this twisty plot – to be more naïve than he thinks he is. He follows the clues and the apparent femme fatale (a luminous Faye Dunaway) to unexpected answers that prove him right in giving some very decent advice to a client early on in the film: “Don't ask the questions, if you don't want the answers.”

Eschewing his own advice, Gittes does ask the questions and, finally, gets his answers – but only after it is far, far too late. At this point, all of his actions (motivated by a surprisingly strict personal moral code) have almost inevitably transformed him, in the manner of Greek tragedy, into a tool of destruction, obliterating the meek and boosting the power that has been pulling his strings from the very outset of the story.

Chinatown – a legal analysis:

If you need yet another reason to check out Chinatown, then “see it” because the water rights issues that form the backdrop of the film could not be more relevant to those of us living in Nevada in 2009.

The Los Angeles portrayed in Chinatown is in the midst of a grueling controversy over water rights, pitting urbanites in desperate need of a stable, plentiful water supply against the rural residents of Owens Valley, who rely on the valley's water resources for their agricultural livelihoods – from orchards to livestock – and way of life. Ultimately, Los Angeles prevails, obtaining the rights to Owens Valley's water and diverting it south, where the water supports Los Angeles' growth for decades to come. While the issues, interests, and even the outcome of Los Angeles' Owens Valley water grab are complicated, the incident has, nevertheless, become a symbol of big-city greed and power overwhelming and overriding the defenseless citizens of a rural community.

Nevada in 2009 is, likewise, in the midst of a grueling controversy over water rights. In Nevada, Las Vegas is the booming metropolis in need of a reliable water supply, and the agricultural areas to its north – most notably Spring Valley – play the role of the outraged rural communities. With the Southern Nevada Water Authority forging ahead with its plans for a pipeline to bring water from these communities south to Clark County, and rural citizens voicing their substantial opposition, the specter of Owens Valley hangs over Nevada.

As in the Owens Valley situation, the issues, interests and potential outcome of the pipeline project are complex and must not be caricatured. It is clear, however, that the atmosphere of distrust portrayed in Chinatown is alive and well in Nevada today. With Las Vegas demanding water to support its position as the economic engine and main population center of the state and with rural areas fearing the destruction of their communities as well as environmental catastrophe, the time seems right for Nevadans to contemplate the legacy of Owens Valley.

Ultimately, Chinatown is primarily about entertainment. But a movie that makes you think and possibly gives you a new perspective on an old problem – as well as entertaining you – is more than worth the price of the DVD rental. **NL**

