

Chinatown

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“Chinatown” is about thirst: literal thirst, but also thirst for power and control, thirst for money and sexual thirst. Roman Polanski’s 1974 neo-noir film shows people at their thirstiest.

“Chinatown” gets its cinematography from the film noirs of the 1940s and ’50s. But it hits something deeper than the usual plot twists and troubled dames of its predecessors.

Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) is a private investigator who has stumbled upon a cover up at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power while spying on its chief engineer Hollis Mulwray. A woman claiming to be his wife suspects infidelity. But Mulwray’s real wife, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) appears and points out that she has never before met Jake Gittes, much less asked him to investigate her husband. Gittes’ research leads him to Noah Cross, a powerful businessman who had a deal with Mulwray for a housing project. He is also Evelyn’s father. Cross asks Gittes to investigate the disappearance of Mulwray’s mistress. Gittes then discovers Mrs. Mulwray, with whom Gittes has been having an affair (this is a film noir, after all) has been hiding her, but why?

As [Roger Ebert points out](#), Nicholson could have played Gittes as nothing but the tough guy; the bitter, hard investigator of the Raymond Chandler screenplays where “Chinatown” found inspiration, but his private eye is more conflicted. He finds a broken, brittle woman who has known only violence and sickness her whole life and tries to save her, even as she drags him around and hides her story from him.

The film’s story comes from a dark period in Los Angeles history. Hollis Mulwray’s inspiration, William Mulholland, was the city’s water engineer in 1908. He designed the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which takes water from Owens Valley to L.A. The Aqueduct destroyed the agricultural industry in Owens Valley, and it’s likely that shady deals were involved with its controversial construction. Los Angeles is a desert, and in a desert, water is money and control. Noah Cross is a millionaire who wants for nothing. Still, he involves himself in a scheme to control the one thing he can’t currently purchase. “The future, Mr. Gittes, the future.”

Thirsty people are desperate people. They’re people who are easy to exploit. “Chinatown” shows the ugliest elements of humanity: the thirsty people and those who know how to control them.