

## The History behind *Chinatown*

The political conspiracy that dominates the plot of *Chinatown* is based on an actual corruption scandal that took place in Los Angeles in 1904: A group of investors had illegally acquired knowledge of a plan to build a new aqueduct for the city. As a consequence, they bought masses of cheap land in the San Fernando Valley, that would turn into a fertile and precious region. (Jacobsen 1986: 138) Robert Towne, who wrote the script for *Chinatown* was shocked about the fact that Water Commissioner William Mulholland, who had been at the center of the corruption, is not despised today: "Some crimes are so monstrous they can't figure out how to punish them. They actually sort of reward them. [...] Mulholland's name is on the scenic route of the city. [...] Criminals are on plaques – as city founders, rather than in jail where they belong. " (quoted in: Pratt 2001: 118)

Mulholland indeed has been credited with having more to do with the creation of the modern city of Los Angeles than anybody else (Wexman 1985: 102). A shocked disillusionment about pioneer entrepreneurs like Mulholland is central to the bleak view of American history that *Chinatown* promotes. The founding fathers of American civilization, the heroes of the westward expansion are revealed to be associated with greed, crime and corruption.

Noah Cross, the arch villain of the film, is a paragon of the heroic American entrepreneur: A stout and energetic old man, wearing a broad-rimmed hat like the pioneers of the west and rolled-up-sleeves that suggest hands-on-experience and Protestant work ethic. They contribute to the image of a "self-made-man" in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin. He is a charismatic leader who, as Paul Werner has noticed, hides his true character behind the jovial bonhomie of American businessmen or politicians (1981: 161). His stereotypical depiction that recalls countless western films and fictional texts about American history leaves no doubt: He is the mythical fulfillment of the American dream, a man who came from rags to riches to build the country and become a wealthy and influential upper-class citizen. Characters like Noah Cross are traditionally associated with values of hard work and honesty and are often pictured to be the patriarchs of a prosperous family dynasty.

Through the character of Noah Cross, *Chinatown* reveals the myth of the self-made builders of the nation as a hollow façade beneath which lurk the most grotesque depths of greed, crime and perversion. Cross's greed is so boundless that it is beyond the imagination of Gittes and possibly beyond that of the audience (Pratt 2001: 118). When Gittes asks him what he could buy with the new land, that he could not already afford, Cross simply answers: "The future". Cross's criminal energy lives up to his greed. He knows no scruples or any moral boundaries, is – as he himself admits – "capable of anything". His greed is the spur for his gross perversion of his status as the patriarch of the family (Cawelti 1979: 567): The violent sexual abuse of his daughter as well as – possibly – his second daughter/ granddaughter indicates a past, present and future of endless incest and abyssal depravation that mocks traditional family values.

The most frightening and gloomy aspect about Cross's personality is the fact that he has retained his power and agency. While Gittes, who is trying to adhere to traditional values and moral standards is rendered powerless to the point of paralysis, the reckless and profoundly immoral Cross possesses a virtually unlimited power that allows him to take action in literally any way he wants. (Cawelti 1979: 567) It is a deeply pessimistic statement that agency can only be retained through crime and corruption.

But the movie also makes clear that it is not Cross alone, not a mere individual who is at the root of all evil. His entanglements with influential businessmen in the Albacore Yacht Club and the city council indicate a highly corrupt system, a conspiracy of the powerful. It is the most pessimistic and cynical message that Polanski could possibly convey: To suggest that the American self-made-men are integrated into criminal systems and that thus the foundation of the American nation is greed and corruption above anything else. It is the nightmare of the paranoid American come true. Note too Evelyn's cry that her father owns the police.

It thus becomes clear that Polanski chose the late 1930s for the plot of *Chinatown* in order to reveal obvious parallels to the (then) contemporary America of the 1970s. The evils that he identifies in prewar America are the same ones he suspects and fears in the American society of the 70s. This point has been made by various critics. Wexman wrote about *Chinatown*: "[...] the story's portrayal of scandal and corruption in the highest places during the 1930s bears striking similarities to the post-Watergate climate that prevailed in the United States when the film was initially released " (1985: 102). In Pratt's view Gittes is brought by the end of the film "to the (then) historical present – to the disillusionment characteristic of the Watergate and post-Vietnam era " (119). *Newsweek* film critic Paul Zimmerman even called the plot of *Chinatown* a Watergate with actual water (quoted in: Werner 1981: 164).