

Student Podcast Transcript

Los Angeles: On Film and On Record digital exhibit

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**Podcast Transcription: Bringing LA to the Water: The Past and Future of LA's Water Problem in Polanski's *Chinatown***

[MUSIC]

MB: Los Angeles has always been a city of immense contradictions. The glamor and sheen that attract so many to its famed streets are often facades that hide a darker side, one that separates winners from losers. These are more often than not the rich and powerful against the poor and disenfranchised, respectively. Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* seeks to explore this dichotomy through the story of water, how the lack of it and its acquisition affected the politics of LA in the early part of the twentieth century. How it made some men rich, and impoverished others. While it is ultimately fiction, the underlying story and the principles they represent are not.

The conspiracy at the center of *Chinatown* comments on the history Los Angeles that has, through boosterism and self-promotion, attracted more people than it can sustain with its naturally occurring water supply, and it continues to do so. While the diversion of natural resources occurs in many urban areas, there is a particularly dark and interesting past associated with Los Angeles Water and Power, the Owens Valley, William Mulholland, and the LA Aqueduct. *Chinatown* probes these issues, using many details subtly woven into its script.

The city council scene at 5:49 is the first example. As the scene opens on a gallery in City Hall, the mayor is trying to convince the council to approve a bond issue to pay for a dam to be

built. He says “Los Angeles is a desert community. Beneath this building, beneath our streets is a desert. And without water the dust will rise up and cover us as though we never existed.” The mayor is expressing a sentiment that many city planners and a few Angelinos knew all too well, that there is not enough annual rainfall to sustain the population of LA, which had already outgrown the LA river as its main source of water.

He then states the cost of the project as being “eight and a half million dollars.” Later, as Jake is sitting in a restaurant waiting to meet Evelyn Mulwray, he is reading a paper whose headline reads “\$10,000,000 Bond Issue Passes Council.” This is Polanski’s way of referencing the corruption, real or imagined, that taints LA water politics while incorporating it as a device in the plot of the film.

Hollis Mulwray is called on the speak as a representative of LA Water and Power, his name clearly a play on William Mulholland, the man largely, though not solely responsible for bringing water to Los Angeles through the construction of the aqueduct. He stands up and tells the council that he will not build the dam they have proposed, as he believes it will fail. The farmers in the gallery boo and jeer this decision. They represent the agricultural interests who need the additional water that would be brought about through the construction of the dam being proposed. The disaster he mentions, the failure of the Vanderlip Dam, is actually referencing the St Francis Dam failure, which occurred on March 12, 1928, killing 431 people. Mulholland designed that dam, and after a jury determined that engineering flaws had caused the collapse, Mulholland was devastated, and his career was all but over, though he never fully accepted the findings as definitive.

Immediately following Mulwray’s speech, a rancher bursts in with a flock of sheep, telling the council that he has no place for them. He looks at Mulholland and says, “You steal

water from the valley, ruin the grazing, starve our livestock. Who's paying you to do that Mr. Mulwray?" Meanwhile, the other farmers are booing and jeering the rancher and his sheep. This is because the rancher is talking about the Owens Valley, the place that the water for Los Angeles had been diverted from, some 200 miles to the north. The farmers of San Fernando Valley and the ranchers of the Owens Valley are competing for the same water, along with the ever-expanding population of the city, encouraged to come from all over the US by LA's relentless self-promotion. By the way, in answer to the rancher's question, The City of Los Angeles was paying Mr. Mulholland.

[MUSIC]

Later, Jake goes to the Water Department to try and gather information. As he is leaving, he runs into Claude Mulvahill, a former cop that he knows and Yelburton, the official from the Water Department who Jake has just spoken with tells him that Mulvahill is working for the department because of threats to the reservoirs. Yelburton explains the threats by telling Jake, "Well it's this damn drought. We've had to ration water in the valley and the farmers are desperate, but what can we do? The rest of the city needs drinking water." Not only is Polanski indicating the connection between the police force, or government agencies, and the people controlling the flow of water, he is pointing out the conflict between the agricultural interests and the municipal interests that lies at the heart of the water issue in southern California, and, in fact, throughout the west. The farmers Yelburton is referring to are the same ones who were sitting in the city council meeting earlier in the film. Yelburton doesn't at all take into account the ranchers of the Owens Valley, represented by the man with the sheep, who have had their businesses decimated by the lack of water caused by the insatiable thirst of LA. The need for water drove the city throughout the early part of the twentieth century to take much more than its

fair share. In his book *Thirsty* Marc Weingarten writes, “In 1901, Los Angeles residents used 306 gallons of water per person each day, three times the rate of consumption in Eastern cities. The runaway rate of consumption would exceed supply by a huge margin in just a few years, when the city’s population was expected to top 150,000.” What made things worse still was that the population of LA from 1902 to 1906 nearly doubled, from 128,000 to 240,000. The relentless boosterism of the various economic organizations was wildly successful. But where was the city going to get the water that all these thirsty new residents would need to drink, bathe in, and water their lawns with? That was what kept William Mulholland up at night.

[MUSIC]

The scene that takes place an hour into the film, in which Noah Cross and Jake Gittes are eating lunch is densely packed with meaning and is really the scene that made me realize what a masterpiece this movie is. First of all, there’s the character of Noah Cross. The character’s first name invokes Biblical connotations, not coincidentally having to do with water. His last name bridges the Old and New Testaments, granting divine right to Cross’s subtle threats. Polanski used John Houston, a legendary figure in cinema and practically royalty in Hollywood. Polanski needed someone with that kind of clout as Cross is the real heavy in this story, the man behind all the machinations and corruption connected with the acquisition and distribution of water. It was brilliant of Polanski to cast him in this role, his voice and gravitas are formidable, especially when combined with all the history he brings with him.

There is the fact that in 1941 he directed *The Maltese Falcon*, a genre defining film version of Dashiell Hamlett’s book. The central character in that film was the noir archetype Sam Spade played by Humphrey Bogart. Bogart’s depiction of the private eye set laid the groundwork

for the role that Nicholson is playing in this scene, though in a very different way. And as Alfred Hitchcock said, “In feature film the director is God . . .”

On top of that, Huston portrayed the original, and by original, I mean the builder-of-the-Ark Noah, in a film adaptation of the Bible that he directed himself. In that same film, he also did the narration, speaking as God. So, Polanski gives us a character named Noah, being played by the Old Testament Noah, interrogating Gittes with the voice of the Almighty. This is the scene that Polanski has set up, with real life encroaching onscreen and informing the film with even more authenticity. In this scene, there is the old juxtaposed against the new in terms of role, actor, director and film. All these contrasting elements reflect Los Angeles and the cost of the progress required to satisfy the needs of its growing populace, then and now.

This scene also contains some provocative imagery and water motifs combined with revealing dialog to go along with all that history. The lunch the two men sit down to consists of fish. The fish motif is a fairly obvious reference to water, but the close up shot of the eye is a visual reference to the fact that no one really sees what is going on. Add to that the fact that Huston ostentatiously picks up his glasses and looks through them at the fish before the close up on the eye reenforces this idea. These glasses are exactly like the pair that Jake will find at the bottom of the pond at Evelyn’s house, in water mind you, that will implicate Cross in Mulwray’s death. Cross sinisterly points out that he believes they should be “served with the head still on.” He likes to look his prey, and his victims, in the eye.

Cross then asks Jake about Escobar, his former boss, and Jake replies with another fish reference, saying “Of course he has to swim in the same water we all do.” If everyone is swimming in the same water, how much power would the man that controlled that water have? Jake seems to be indicating that he knows just how powerful Cross is.

Then another meta moment happens when Cross asks Gittes “Are you sleeping with my daughter?” While the character of Gittes had not slept with Evelyn yet, Jack Nicholson was at that time involved in a relationship with Huston’s daughter Angelica, which adds weight and menace to Huston’s delivery.

After Gittes gets up to leave, and Cross again mispronounces his name and Gittes again corrects him, Cross delivers the most consequential line in the scene. He says, “You may think you know what you’re dealing with, but believe me, you don’t.” Jake smiles and tells Cross that the district attorney used to tell him that about Chinatown. There are two more times that this line gets used in the film, both in reference to Chinatown. After Jake and Evelyn sleep together, Jake is talking about his past and he says, “You can’t always tell what’s going on.” In the final scene, which takes place in *Chinatown*, after Jake tells Lt. Escobar that Cross killed Mulray because of the “water thing” (2:05), he yells from offscreen, “Lou, you don’t know what’s going on here, I’m telling you” (2:05:07). This repeated idea creates in *Chinatown* a symbol of the deception of the powerful economic movers and shakers in Los Angeles and the way they manipulate the political machinery to their own ends. Their own ends being to get rich by supplying more water to a city that they have encouraged to grow beyond the capacity of its surroundings.

[MUSIC]

It’s at this point that Cross offers Gittes \$10,000 to find the Evelyn’s daughter. Just as he begins talking about her, Mexican music can be heard getting louder, and horses can be seen in the background. Cross tells Gittes, “Sherriff’s Gold Posse . . . bunch of damn fools who pay \$5000 dollars apiece to the sheriff’s re-election. I let ‘em practice up out here.” Polanski is again

indicating the power and influence the rich have over law enforcement. These men get what they want.

[MUSIC]

The scene at 1:09 opens on a long shot of a sign that says “Farmland for sale: make offer and the word SOLD is pasted across it. Then there’s a slow pan behind Jake to an old zanja, an irrigation ditch that is nearly dry. The very bottom of the ditch is green near the little trickle of water that still flows but the surrounding hills and fields are brown and dry with overgrown trees on the horizon. The imagery is indicating the power of controlling the flow of water. Where water is made to flow, things grow. You can drive up the five today and see the billboards in the acres of orchards on either side of the freeway that say, “food grows where water flows.”

The next scene, Jake is in the orchard and gets accosted by a group of farmers. The leader on horseback asks him, “All right Mr., who you with, the water department or the real estate office?” The farmer sees no difference between these two entities as both are involved in a conspiracy with Cross to drive down the land values in the area. The leader, who is actually quite reasonable in questioning Jake while keeping the other men in check, looks incredulous when Jake tells him he is trying to see if the water department is irrigating his land. He tells Jake the water people have been blowing up his water tanks and poisoning his wells in order to drive him off the land. Polanski is commenting on the practices of many wealthy landowners and developers of the day.

The next scene is of Jake and Evelyn riding in Evelyn’s car. Jake says to her “Dam’s a con job.” He then lays out the entire scheme of a syndicate that’s buying up land in order to make a fortune when it becomes valuable, the central conspiracy at the heart of *Chinatown*. The

persistence of this conspiracy theory is amazing in that there are many in Los Angeles who believe it to this day.

The big landgrab in the north west San Fernando Valley actually took place years before anyone knew there was going to be a steady supply of water from the north to sustain communities. The syndicate hinted at in *Chinatown* did exist in reality and included Harrison Gray Otis, publisher of the LA Times, E. H. Herriman the railroad magnate, and Henry Huntington. Together they purchased over 16,000 acres of land for about \$2.40 an acre. Another speculator named Charles MaClay bought the entire northern half of the valley for the same price, his purchase later became Porter Ranch. It is these men, along with one time LA mayor and Mulholland's partner Fred Eaton who are represented by the Cross character. But the fact is all these developers were denied water from the LA River the only nearby source. Weingarten writes, "The city had brought an injunction against the most egregious water users in order to keep more of the supply to themselves, despite countersuits the injunction stood firm." The city, with Mulholland as head of the water department had already determined that water was a precious commodity that it needed and intended to keep for itself. While this doesn't exactly fit the narrative of *Chinatown*, the conflict between the different factions that need water is ever present and exacerbated by its scarcity.

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The penultimate scene in *Chinatown*, is another conversation between Gittes and Cross, and is also layered with meaning and motifs. Gittes confronts Cross in the back of the house near the fishpond where Cross drowned Mulwray. As he pulls out the obituary column, he asks Cross, "Can you see all right in this light?" The script again alludes to vision and clarity, whether the character can see what's really going on. Cross replies, "I guess I can manage" and puts on his



glasses as he did in the lunch scene, symbolically correcting his vision in order to be able to read the proof of his own conspiracy. Immediately after this, Gittes pulls out the glasses he found in the pond and presents them to him. Cross then delivers a speech about Mulwray and his ideas about water preservation finishing by delivering for the second time the line “He made this city.” Polanski is reenforcing the idea that Mulholland and water are responsible for LA’s existence. Without his vision and drive, the city would not have been able to sustain itself. Again, we see the composite character of Cross, embodying the rich and powerful controlling the government to have their will imposed on the landscape at any cost and further enrich themselves at the same time. The scene reflects the vicious circle employed in LA of boosterism and promotion, followed by population growth, then figuring out how to get more water to the area to fill the need. Critic Ian Scott writes, “And nor do these controlling forces just get tied up in the evil personification of Noah Cross in *Chinatown*. They are about the forces of federal power, of political and economic association still about to be unleashed on the southland.” The US government was entirely complicit, in fact encouraged through legislation the types of shenanigans represented in *Chinatown*.

Cross and Gittes banter continues and Gittes says “There are going to be a lot of irate citizens when they find out they’re paying for water they’re not going to get” Cross replies, “Oh that’s all taken care of. You see Mr. Gittes, either you bring the water to LA, or you bring LA to the water.” Cross then reveals his scheme to incorporate the San Fernando Valley into the city, at which point Gittes becomes more fascinated by the hubris and greed of Cross than his guilt. He questions how much Cross is worth. Gittes asks, “How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can’t already afford?” Cross replies “The future Mr. Gittes.” This prophetic statement exemplifies the idea of LA from the second half of the nineteenth century up to today.

The issues addressed in *Chinatown* are the same ones that have plagued the city since the film was made. Scott writes, “it is the expansion of Simi Valley, the control of the LAPD, zoning, immigrant segregation and ghettoization that bind together the historical and the cinematic. Together with these social inequities, the “windfall profits” from the Owens Valley created today’s ruling class.”

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The clash of past and present in *Chinatown*, the march of progress at any cost represented by Noah Cross and the hard-boiled nostalgia of Jake Gittes is what makes *Chinatown* such an enduring piece of cinema. The things it asks the viewer to think about are relevant today. LA still has a water problem, one that will only get worse as climate change has a greater impact on the west and years get drier and temperatures hotter. A recent Politico article highlighting water management measures along the Colorado River, the river tapped when the Owens Valley water referred to in *Chinatown* proved to be inadequate, praises efforts to bring together the opposing forces represented in the film. Of the cooperative program author Annie Snider states, “It’s a vision that makes farmers not just the producers of America’s food and fiber, but the essential buffer in the system that prevents the whole of Western society from tearing apart when the inevitable dry years come. And it’s also a potentially powerful model of the kind of win-win environmental policy solution that will need to be replicated in regions and industries across the country if the United States is going to adapt to the challenges caused by climate change.” The urban centers and surrounding agricultural interests must engage in a common solution to the problem of water. The problem of LA and water presented in *Chinatown* is only going to get worse and will need to be constantly revisited. Fortunately, *Chinatown*, the film is such a brilliant and beautifully textured composition that revisiting it only makes it better.

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