

Film REVIEWS

Chinatown

There is a moment in *Chinatown* (CIC) when one wonders if one has seen aright, or simply been caught up in the spell cast by the scattered, elusive memories of time past: a single shot in the sequence where private eye Jake Gittes gets his dangerous charmer to bed for the first and only time, and the soft bedroom light momentarily transforms her chalky 1930s make-up and blood-red lips into the inscrutable mask of a Chinese dancer. Sleek, seductive, and likely to turn up in all the wrong places to thicken the plot with an appallingly plausible explanation, she is of course the enigmatic enchantress without whom no Chandleresque plot would be complete; but at this point she is something more, and the traditional lure of the East begins to pervade the film with its twin auras of romance and corruption.

At the very beginning, though, we might almost be back in Bogart land. Sitting comfortably in his office, Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) watches as a client flips agitatedly through a series of photographs of his wife taken *in flagrante*. 'All right, Curly,' says Jake as the distressed client clutches for support, 'you can't eat the Venetian blinds, I just had 'em installed Wednesday.' 'She was just no good,' moans Curly. 'You're right,' Jake agrees cheerfully. As a classic example of the wise-cracking private eye, Jake Gittes rightly follows a classic pattern from the moment he is hired by a wife to find out what her errant husband is up to. The wife turns out to be no wife but an impostor hired for purposes unknown; the husband is duly murdered; and the real wife (Faye Dunaway), turning up initially with icy disapproval but melting gradually into clinging dependence, leads him into a nightmare web of intrigue ranging from civic corruption to incest by way of some bizarre but equally classic encounters in a morgue, an old people's home, a nocturnal wasteland inhabited by a smiler with a knife (Polanski himself), a house behind whose windows the secret is momentarily glimpsed.

Hollywood is clearly good for Polanski, not necessarily in that he makes better films there, but because its disciplines make him give audiences (and indeed critics) something neat, firm and familiar to hold on to instead of leaving them to—hopefully—pluck the meaning of a film like *What?* out of its airy, apparently intangible insouciance. With *Chinatown*, as with *Rosemary's Baby*, he handles the mechanics of the plot with a ruthless brilliance that is immediately involving.

From the moment he pulls the voyeur trick of showing us a puzzled Gittes watching his prey through field-glasses as he stares enigmatically out to sea, one is hooked, watching intrigued as Jake slips a watch under the wheels of a car, tremulously preceding him as he enters an apartment where a cabbage on the kitchen floor loudly proclaims that all is not well. Twice, reverse angle shots from hunted back to hunter as Gittes trails his quarry make one shrink back with him in fear of discovery. An angled long shot down into a parched river bed, where a man brooding over a handful of

pebbles exchanges some tantalisingly unheard words with a boy ambling by on a horse, lends a touch of surrealist mystery to a scene later revealed to be quite mundane. Above all, a beautifully judged line of dialogue invariably picks up the threads of the plot seconds before one gets there oneself, to send one scampering down new avenues of speculation. 'The guy's got water on the brain,' mutters a colleague as Gittes describes where he has been while tailing the supposedly errant husband; and immediately the hint sends one washing along on a flood of speculation, as the references to water really begin to multiply and its role in the plot gradually emerges.

Paradoxically, however—and it is done with cool, Hitchcockian cunning—as the mystery clarifies, the sense of disorientation begins. This starts at a fairly innocuous thriller-convention level, with noises off never quite what they seem—sinister scratching outside a door proves to be workmen scraping off the name of a deceased partner, the roar of an express train turns out to be water gushing down a conduit pipe—but gradually escalates in inverse ratio to Gittes' conviction that he is at last reaching solid ground. The key factor in this disorientation is the setting, Los Angeles in 1937, with the familiar city of today reduced to its former more modest dimensions by being surrounded with a suburbia of rocks and arid desert. Presented with hallucinatingly accurate period detail (never for a moment overplayed for fashionable nostalgia), it yet remains curiously elusive: a city caught at a vital moment of change when the 'desert community', as one of the characters describes it, is about to step out of the past into the future. Here, in this American city which seems to become more alien the further one penetrates into it—Mexican policemen, Japanese gardeners, Chinese servants, and finally the

mysterious Chinatown itself—the appropriately named arch-villain Noah Cross (John Huston) prepares to steer his ark of respectability—which he founded on the good works of his son-in-law (the past) and launched by recourse to civic corruption and the murder of that same son-in-law (the present)—towards the haven that will crown his wealth with immortality: the future.

Poor Jake Gittes, meanwhile, remains locked in the past, and for all the ingenuity and accuracy of his sleuthing, is no match at all for his adversary. 'Want to know what happens to inquisitive guys?' says the evil little gnome with the knife as he delicately slits open Jake's nostril. 'They lose their noses.' Somewhere along the road Jake loses his sense of direction, caught in a romantic fantasy of his own making which locks him into the past and leaves him helpless against the man of the future. There is a sense here, almost, of a time loop as he lies in bed after making love and reluctantly confides his memory—or premonition?—of the woman he once tried to help during his days on the Chinatown police force but instead destroyed. 'Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown,' says a friend as he stares brokenly at the ghostly white car in the dark street where the woman he loves has just died a horrible death; and as Noah Cross, the man indirectly and directly responsible, fades discreetly away, presumably to become a respected citizen again.

'It's Chinatown': a warning not to stir up forces that cannot be controlled, that are better left to stir agreeably in the no-man's-land between unconsciousness and memory. Sam Spade was once lured into a love as hopeless by the faithless Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*, but where Jake Gittes falls headlong into the trap he digs for himself, Spade was enough of a realist to retain, while always hoping, one eye open against the possibility of betrayal. Cynics, as someone commented of Hemingway, lean so far backwards to avoid sentiment that they inevitably overbalance; and once their defences are down, there is no limit to the romantic imagination.

It is in this subterranean passage of *Chinatown* that Polanski rejoins his more overtly personal self of *What?*, wryly commenting on the sad fact that art and life so seldom coincide. 'Yes, yes, I remember, I remember now. What splendour!' cries the old art collector in *What?*, sinking back in ecstasy on his deathbed as the innocent intruder vouchsafes him a glimpse of the perfection of her breasts. For him, reality at last merges with imagination, past with present,

and he dies, happy to have added one authentic treasure to his collection. But for Gittes, fashioning his great love from some ideal in his past, and then watching his imperfect creation crumble to nothingness in the light of reality, there is no such reconciliation. . . and will perhaps never be until he is as old and wise as the patriarch of *What?* or Noah Cross himself.

TOM MILNE

Black Holiday

In 1931, the Italian government forced all university professors to sign a loyalty oath, swearing allegiance to the Fascist regime. In the whole country, only thirteen refused to do so. *La Villeggiatura* or *Black Holiday* (The Other Cinema), Marco Leto's first feature film, tells the story of one Professor Rossini, a fictional invention nevertheless closely based on fact, who might have been one of those thirteen. Rossini is incarcerated on a small island with other political prisoners—communists and leftists. Despite his courage in refusing to sign the oath, he is relatively apolitical: he believes in free speech, democracy, his own *lehrfreiheit*, but he doesn't feel close to the leftists who comprise most of the prison population. In fact, he quickly discovers that he has much more in common with the island commandant (Adolfo Celi), an old admirer and friend of his father, than with his prison companions.

Rossini has some money; and they don't: there lies all the difference. He rapidly receives permission to leave the barracks and find lodgings in the town and, through the good offices of the commandant, his wife and child are allowed to join him. They spend much time on the beach and in the garden of their new 'home' and generally lead a superficially idyllic life as Rossini works slowly on an historical essay, or plays the piano, a gift of the commandant. There's the irony of the title, for as Leto says, the film is also 'the story of a moral holiday, during which, then as now, there are enough alibis to convince one to give up the struggle.' The seduction of Rossini by the commandant very nearly succeeds, despite Rossini's occasional outbursts of righteous anger (as, for instance, when he is forbidden to hold history classes with the other prisoners). But when Scagnetti, the unofficial leader of the prisoners, is murdered by the guards, Rossini

explodes. The moral holiday is over and he must choose sides. He escapes from the island, presumably to join the budding resistance to fascism. The film ends with a title that explains that Rossini 'died' twice: first in Spain in 1936, then on April 18th, 1948. The first date is understandable enough; the second indicates the moral and spiritual death of many Italian left-liberals which is symbolically marked by the first victory of the Christian Democrats in Italian postwar elections.

Leto was born in 1931 and studied law and film before becoming a critic. He later collaborated on a number of films with Franco Rossi and Mario Monicelli (among others) before directing several television films and plays. He comes late to feature films and his background obviously stands him in good stead, for *Black Holiday* has a power and depth that stem both from intellectual maturity and sure technical expertise. It is a hypnotic gem of a film, carefully cut and crafted, revealing a depth of irony and understanding that are as rare as they are valuable. *Black Holiday* is a profoundly political film: both because it is *about* politics and because it is itself a political instrument. And it is exceptionally successful within its prescribed limits, as so few political films are.

Leto's talent is to understand that 'there are no political choices which are not at the same time moral choices' and to build on this truth a kind of mildly Brechtian structure that fascinates, and eventually forces us to analyse our own actions in the light of Rossini's story. Leto has directed the film to a specific audience: intellectuals of the left, the people who do most of the writing and thinking about films and books in Western culture. For Marco Leto, we are all, like Rossini, 'imprisoned without knowing it in the villa with the piano and the books.' It is only once in a great while that we are roused from our intellectual lethargy to real action by some event as pointed and dramatic as the death of Scagnetti is for Rossini. If we take sides it is with our words and not our lives, and the tyrannies of contemporary government take their slow pendulum swings between 'fascism' and 'liberalism' regularly and contemptuously.

In a key scene, the benign commandant explains to Rossini that his great liberal hero Giolitti had been tapping phones as early as 1907; it isn't a fascist invention. 'Why, in 1916,' the commandant continues, 'we listened to *Mussolini* plotting on the phone. The state is not

liberal or authoritarian by chance,' he pointedly notes. 'In twenty years, freedom will be back. I'll be retired and choose a party to vote for,' he smiles. That is the irony and the tragedy that *Black Holiday* paints for us with fine compassion and finer intelligence. It is an engrossing film about our *own* deaths, for we died with Rossini—in '36 and '48, in '54 and '56, in '65 and '68 especially, and in '72 as well. Like Rossini, we 'return day by day to our own habits, aided by our upbringing,' and that is the special tragedy of the enlightened middle class—in the Seventies as clearly as in the Thirties, trying 'to the very end,' as Leto says, 'to find ways of agreement, feigning not to understand that compromise is impossible.'

JAMES MONACO

Amarcord

Amarcord—I remember. All Fellini's films could be called that, one way or another. To such an extent that those who do not naturally turn on to Fellini, faults and all, have long since ceased even to complain about the endless succession of mountainous ladies, as menacing as they are sexually provocative, of visits to the seamy underside of show business in rundown circuses, tatty touring companies and fleapit cinemas, of *vielloni* and aimless promenades among the dwarfs and freaks and eccentrics of which, it would seem, Italian provincial towns are full to overflowing, of sado-masochistic childhood encounters with organised religion. And indeed it is undeniable that by now we must all know Fellini's imaginative world inside out, or at least be familiar with every stick of his mental furniture.

The question, though, is *what does he do with it on any given occasion?* *Roma*, perhaps, contained nothing very new, but who could remain totally unaffected by the sheer brilliance and virtuosity with which Fellini assembled his materials, the relish with which he plunged into the camp-apocalyptic ecclesiastical fashion parade or the scarifying evocation of freeway chaos? Not to mention the whimsical charm of the passages summoning up his own childhood and his relationship with Rome as a myth. There were dull bits, mostly around the arrival of a teenage Fellini in the physical reality of Rome, but they could be overlooked or taken as a necessary leavening, lest the mixture prove over-rich. In the circumstances, then, the prospect of a new film which would continue the line of Fellini's discursive, first-person films of the last few years and go more extensively into his childhood recollections did seem tempting.

Alas, *Amarcord* (Columbia-Warner) does not live up to hopes. It is very much the mixture as before (which was to be expected), but Fellini somehow does not seem to be interested in doing much with the basic material to transform it. Compared with his other recent films, *Amarcord* is simple and classic to the point of self-denial. It resolves itself into a succession of scenes from provincial life, strung loosely round the experiences of Bobo, the representative of Fellini in the film, during the summer of 1935, aged about 15-16. In a sense, the film consists of nothing but set-pieces, but hardly anything is played up to the pitch of frenzy which usually seizes a Fellini film somewhere along the way. This seems to be very much Fellini playing it cool, toning down the extravagances, trying, heaven help us, to make a tasteful film. As *A Tale of Two Cities* is supposed to be the Dickens novel that those who don't like Dickens like, so one could conceive that *Amarcord* would be the Fellini film for someone who normally hates Fellini.

But who really wants a tasteful, restrained Fellini? Inevitably, the bits of the film one remembers are those which come closest to the old reprobate Fellini we love or loathe according