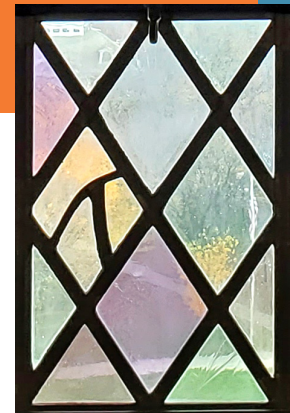


# Treasures from the Yale Film Archive



## ***Chinatown***

**Friday, April 12, 7 p.m.**

**Humanities Quadrangle Lecture Hall**

Directed by **Roman Polanski**

Screenplay by **Robert Towne**

Cinematography by **John A. Alonzo**

Produced by **Paramount Pictures** (1974), 130 mins.

Starring **Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston, Bruce Glover, John Hillerman, Perry Lopez, Diane Ladd, and Roman Polanski**

*Special Thanks to Paramount Pictures Corporation*

# Treasures from the Yale Film Archive

A SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

In 1971, Robert Towne, a “script doctor” on *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, was running into difficulties with the first screenplay on his own, an adaptation of the novel *The Last Detail*, which was to star his friend Jack Nicholson: Columbia Pictures objected to the almost non-stop profanity. While negotiating with Columbia (which would release the film, with the profanity, in 1973), Towne set out to write an original script. He happened upon a 1969 *Los Angeles Times* article, “Raymond Chandler’s L.A.,” in which contemporary photos recreated the city in the 1930s, and he conceived of a period drama with Nicholson as a Philip Marlowe-style detective. Towne, born and raised in Los Angeles, was also fascinated by Carey McWilliams’s 1946 book *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, which detailed L.A.’s development during the 20th century’s first decade via a controversial scheme. Transplanting that origin story to 1937 would give the private eye drama substantial dimensions, and Towne pitched it to Robert Evans, Paramount’s head of production. Evans had just offered Towne \$175,000 to write the script for *The Great Gatsby*, but Towne, not wanting to be known for tampering with Fitzgerald, said that instead he would take \$25,000 to write *Chinatown*. Evans, astutely envisioning it as a *film noir* in color and widescreen, embraced the project as his first personal production, provided that Roman Polanski (who had made Paramount’s immensely successful *Rosemary’s Baby* in 1968) direct. Polanski and Towne then collaborated on extensive rewrites, which often involved disputes, especially about the film’s ending (on which Polanski prevailed).

*Chinatown* was filmed over three months (October, 1973 to January, 1974), and it opened on June 20, 1974. Vincent Canby (*New York Times*) gave it a mixed review, and Pauline Kael (*The New Yorker*) called it “over-deliberate,” but the vast majority of critics were enthusiastic. Charles Champlin (*Los Angeles Times*): “In its total recapturing of a past, in its plot, its vivid characterizations, its carefully calculated and accelerating pace, its whole demonstration of a medium mastered, *Chinatown* reminds you again that motion pictures are larger, not smaller than life.” Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*): “not only a great entertainment,

---

**DID YOU KNOW** One of Towne’s influences, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), was the first film directed by John Huston, who plays Noah Cross in *Chinatown*.

---

but also a private-eye movie that doesn’t depend on nostalgia or camp for its effect, but works because of the enduring strength of the genre itself.” Rex Reed (*New York Daily News*) was remarkably prescient: “Years from now, when we look back on the really important films of the 1970s, *Chinatown* is likely to be one of the most fondly remembered.”

The film’s critical and commercial success was due largely to its having tapped into the spirit of the times. *Chinatown* appeared after a decade of disillusionment, caused by, among other events, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Richard Nixon’s presidency, culminating in Watergate. The film’s gestation and production coincided with the investigations by the U.S. Senate Watergate Commission, which issued its report one week after the film’s premiere. *Chinatown* was one of many early 1970s films featuring conspiracies, coverups, and institutional corruption, e.g. *Executive Action* (1973), *Serpico* (1973), *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* (both in release at the same time as *Chinatown*), and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). Even two films that helped to end “The New Hollywood” and to usher in the blockbuster era — *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and *Jaws* (1975) — were about coverups.

*Chinatown* received 11 Oscar nominations (winning one, for Towne’s exemplary script), and it cemented Nicholson’s growing stardom. He appears in every scene, thanks to Towne’s insistence that the various layers of the plot unfold to us exactly as they do to Gittes. *Chinatown* confounds our expectations, even for the usually convoluted film noir genre: as soon as we think we know where the story is going, it makes a surprising turn. What Noah Cross tells Gittes applies to us: “You may think you know what you’re dealing with, but believe me, you don’t.”

📖 [library.yale.edu/film](http://library.yale.edu/film)     @yalefilmarchive

Yale UNIVERSITY LIBRARY  
Film Archive

**NEXT UP** Concluding “The World of James Ivory,” his 1989 downtown New York comedy *Slaves of New York*, starring Bernadette Peters, screens on 35mm for its 35th anniversary, at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 18. Don’t miss “**Class Pictures: Student Archivist Screening Night**,” an evening of 16mm rarities introduced by students, 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 30.