Shreyan Jain

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The Detective as Psychoanalyst in *Chinatown*

In the early 20th century, the hardboiled detective novel took American fiction by storm. In an era when the Depression had fatigued the belief in the American Dream and given way to cynicism and institutional mistrust, a new wave of crime novelists led by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler captured the mood of the national audience with their detached, worldly antiheroes’ wry humor and grim outlook on life. With the birth of film noir, these very same characters soon came alive on the big screen, embodied in performances like Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* and Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown*. The latter gives a good case study of why the allure of the genre has persisted for more than 70 years. Nicholson’s performance vividly brings to life the psychological struggle of the individual to make sense of a world in rapid moral decline while knowing, deep inside, that nothing he does will be quite enough. A psychoanalytic reading of Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* suggests a comparison between the detective’s act of solving a mystery and the psychoanalyst’s act of dream interpretation, vividly illustrating the limits of rationality and justice in a world driven by unconscious desires and urges.

The very opening of the film provides the first suggestion that Jake Gittes, the film’s protagonist, can be simultaneously viewed as both a private detective as well as a psychoanalyst-like figure. The film opens with a closeup of photographs depicting a couple engaged in intercourse in what appears to be a leafy field, before the camera pulls away to reveal Gittes sitting comfortably in an armchair at his office. This opening sequence thrusts the viewer immediately into the space of hidden and forbidden sexual desire, the realm historically studied by psychoanalysts, as we soon discover that Gittes procured the photographs to provide his distraught client with evidence of his wife’s adultery. Visually, the scene also functions to place Gittes (dressed in an all-white suit) in the “doctor’s chair” in the position of power. The suggestion, then, is that Gittes, as someone who procures evidence of extra-marital affairs in exchange for a generous fee, jointly occupies the literal role of detective and figurative role of psychoanalyst. After all, both the detective and psychoanalyst use rational, scientific methods to uncover hidden, irrational, or inexplicable truths.

This first impression of Gittes shapes the way we view his actions for the rest of the film; long after the man he was tasked with following, Hollis Mulwray, is found dead, Gittes remains obsessed with uncovering the secret behind why he was killed, going far beyond his “duty” as a private detective. This becomes apparent in the scene where he rebukes Hollis’ wife Evelyn Mulwray for continuing to keep secrets from him after they dine together:

Okay, go home. But in case you're interested your husband was murdered. Somebody's dumping tons of water out of the city reservoirs when we're supposedly in the middle of a drought, he found out, and he was killed. There's a waterlogged drunk in the morgue -- involuntary manslaughter if anybody wants to take the trouble which they don't. It looks like half the city is trying to cover it all up…And I still think you're hiding something.

Hidden behind Gittes insistence on understanding the reservoir scheme, which could be chalked up to the archetypical detective’s inability to rest until the entire mystery is solved, is a subtler insistence on unearthing the secrets that Evelyn herself is hiding. Gittes seems to believe that if only he could know what Evelyn has not yet told him, he would be able to solve the mystery and “save” the city. This motivation to delve deeper into Evelyn’s repressed memories aligns with Freud’s conception of the psychoanalyst. In his landmark work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud justifies his search for a method by which to perform dream interpretation by arguing, “For these [psychopathological structures], experienced as symptoms of illness, the unravelling and the cure, solution, and resolution, amount to the same thing” (Freud 80). In other words, Freud believes dream interpretation is not just a means but an end in and of itself; if the dream can be unraveled, then the disease may be cured. In this way, as someone who believes that if Evelyn’s story can be unraveled then the town may be saved, Gittes is performing the quintessential act of psychoanalysis itself. It it fitting, then, that it is ultimately because of a Freudian slip – the gardener’s substitution of the word “glass” for “grass” – that Gittes is finally able to fulfill his role as psychoanalyst of the film by discovering Noah Cross’s buried “glasses” and solving the mystery of Hollis’ murder.

This reading of Gittes’ detective activities as a metaphor for the act of psychoanalysis then sets up a further metaphor: the events of the film themselves can be viewed as a dream. In other words, if Gittes is meant to be read as a psychoanalyst-figure in the spirit of Freud, then his actions in the film’s narrative may be read as an attempt to perform dream interpretation, which implies that the events of the film themselves may be read as the literal dream that is the subject of Gittes’ investigation. This theory helps explain the dual nature of *Chinatown’s* narrative in which the solution of the mystery unearths not one but two distinct “twist” reveals: Noah Cross’s ploy to take control of the Northeast Valley by manipulating the water supply, and his incestuous relationship with his own daughter Evelyn that led to the conception of Katherine. If the film is read as a dream, it suddenly becomes clear that the distinction between these two parallel narrative arcs is really a distinction between manifest and latent content, or “between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts concealed behind it” (Freud 94). In sifting through the dream-content of the film – investigating the water releases, researching the surreptitious land acquisitions in the Valley, finding Hollis Mulwray’s murderer – Gittes sets out on a path that eventually leads him to the revelation of the underlying dream-thought of Evelyn’s incest in the film’s climactic scene.

If the way by which Noah’s desire for Evelyn, and later Katherine, is metaphorically disguised in his acquisition of the Valley appears, at first glance, neither obvious nor logical, this fact only serves to strengthen the metaphor of viewing the film as a dream. Indeed, when presented with the same challenge to his theory that all dreams are wish-fulfillments, Freud responds by claiming, “where the wish-fulfillment is unrecognizable, disguised, there must have been a tendency to defensiveness against this wish, and as a consequence of this defensiveness the wish was only able to express itself in distortion” (Freud 112). It is this process of dream distortion that explains how the desire for the incestuous relationship encodes itself into the events of the film. When Gittes struggles to understand what more Noah wants to obtain by taking control of the Valley, Noah responds, “The future, Mr. Gittes—the future. Now where's the girl? I want the only daughter I have left.” Just like the city’s water source confers fertility to the land and thus creates the possibility for future prosperity, so too does Evelyn represent, for Noah, fertility and the possibility for future generations of Cross children. By linking both “water” and “daughter” to ideas of fertility, life, and the future in a form of dream condensation, the film suggests that just as Noah wants to monopolize the city’s water source, and thus the potential to bring into being future generations of Los Angeles, for himself, he also secretly wishes to gain sole control of his family’s reproductive potential to spawn future Cross generations. This interpretation is strengthened by Noah’s insistence that Gittes hand over his granddaughter (and daughter) Katherine back to him, presumably so that Noah can rape her in turn and continue monopolizing his family’s possibility to create life.

By comparing Gittes’ investigation of the film’s central mystery to the act of interpreting a dream, Polanski ultimately demonstrates the force of the unconscious on human existence. For Freud, the dream interpretation process was an avenue to reach a much greater truth: “the impressions which have had the greatest effect on us—those of our earliest youth—are precisely the ones which scarcely ever become conscious” (Freud 352). For Freud, then, unconscious desires or memories are intimately tied to who we are and will become; in the film, it is Chinatown itself that manifests this force of the unconscious. As Lacan put it in his seminar on Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, “the Unconscious is the discourse of the Other,” and nothing in the film is viewed as more foreign, more alien, more Other than Chinatown itself (Lacan 45). Throughout the film, the racial Otherness of the Chinese characters is continuously emphasized, and at one point Gittes himself remembers being told that Chinatown was a place “where you never quite know what you’re dealing with.” And when Evelyn asks Gittes about what happened to the woman he loved back when he worked in Chinatown, the conversation is immediately disrupting by the ringing of the telephone, indicating that his memories of Chinatown are repressed and unavailable to us. It is this repressive yet omnipresent force of Chinatown – a place we are reminded of constantly in the film but never physically see until the very last scene – that visualizes how the unconscious permeates our lives while simultaneously always eluding us. And the ending of the film, in which the innocent Evelyn is shot dead by the police while the villainous Noah goes free and is able to reclaim his granddaughter, tragically illustrates how the normal rules of society break down in the realm of the unconscious, as the repressed incestuous urges and desire manifested by Noah’s lust for Katharine win out against Gittes’ attempt to reveal the truth and bring justice to the city’s scheming villains.

If this conclusion is read as a failure of Gittes’ psychoanalytic approach to resolving the

city’s corruption, then the film can ultimately be read as a criticism of the psychoanalytic process itself. As mentioned earlier, Gittes views the process of uncovering Evelyn’s secrets, and thus uncovering the mystery of what’s going on in the city, as the solution to the town’s shady activities, just like Freud conceived of dream interpretation as therapy for hysteria. In other words, Gittes is fixated on the value of *truth* – if he can discover the truth, he can reveal it for all to see and bring an end to the corruption consuming his city. And yet Polanski constantly reminds us of Gittes’ own blindness to the truth. Throughout the film, Gittes views the world through a series of intervening filters: the photographs he takes of the people he follows, the binoculars he uses to spy on Hollis, the window through which he can see but not hear Evelyn and Katherine. This visual motif of seeing through lenses or filters emphasizes the constrained perspective of Gittes, a form of physical distance or remoteness that simultaneously allows Gittes to secretly “see” others but also obscures what he sees, withholding important details or context from him. His limitations in perception extend much further than sight; consider, for example, his mutilated nostril, or the little distortions in the tidbits of conversation he overhears (“Albacore” becomes “apple core” and “grass” becomes “glass”). Much like the Prefect of Police in Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, who cannot find the hidden letter because he is constrained by the rational rules of the Symbolic, it is the intervening influence of the Real in these little obscurations of detail that prevent Gittes from ever seeing the whole truth.

The ultimate irony of the film is that, as a scientist, the psychoanalyst (represented here by Gittes) attempts to use rational means to understand what is fundamentally irrational, dooming him to failure. In performing a psychoanalysis of a world that he is always seeing from the “outside,” Gittes never subjects himself to the same analysis and thus is completely blind to his own unconscious desires. One suggestion the film offers is that Gittes subconsciously wants Evelyn to be captured, which explains why he contradicts his own advice to do “as little as possible” and decides to hide Evelyn from the police by telling her to go to Chinatown. Of all the places he could have chosen, he leads her to the very place that brought tragedy to the life of his previous lover. Whether by accidental blindness or purposeful unconscious desire, the film ends with Gittes fully acknowledging his guilt in directly causing Evelyn’s death, as he mutters to Lou the same advice that he himself ignored: “as little as possible.” Although Gittes has succeeded in interpreting the dream – in performing the act of psychoanalysis he set out to do – he ended up killing his own patient in the process.

Thus, *Chinatown* ends in the classic film noir fashion: with a tragic re-affirmation of its detective protagonist’s cynical world view. What is perhaps most interesting about the final scene of the film is the accompanying sense of fatalism. As we slowly recognize that, in causing Evelyn’s death, Gittes has achieved nothing less than an exact repetition of the same atrocity that has haunted him since his early days in crime enforcement, we get the impression that nothing Gittes could do would have been enough to prevent the tragedy from taking place. The fatalism of the final scene, and in a broader sense the futility of attempting to subjugate the force of the unconscious, is ultimately best embodied by Walsh’s closing line: “Forget it, Jake—it's Chinatown.” This is, of course, not an accident; in a world governed by unconscious desire, “‘a letter always arrives at its destination’: one can never escape one’s fate…the symbolic debt has to be repaid” (Zizek 16). The symbolic debt that Gittes must repay is not merely owed to the diegetic world of *Chinatown*, the symbolic order in which he merely occupies the role of the detective who is repeatedly hard-boiled by tragedies of his own making. It is also a debt to the structure of the film noir genre and to the unconscious of film itself, to the forces of historical and literary convention that condemn Gittes to failure from the very beginning.

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