

A fun film with no larger meaning, right?

The Big Clock (1948): *the detective in the rat race*: this classic noir moves us closer to the issues of postmodernism I raised two weeks ago. The detective story has historically embodied our faith in rationality. But George Stroud, editor of Crimeways magazine and artful wielder of the “irrelevant clue,” winds up searching for himself - or rather trying to hide while pretending to search for himself.





FRA FILIPPO.



FILIPPINO.



SIGNORELLI.



BRAMANTINO.



MANTEGNA.



GIOVANNI BELLINI.



BONIFAZIO.



BOTTICELLI.

The clue chart and the irrelevant detail. All the clues and evidence he compiles wind up, of course, being totally irrelevant to the crime at hand.

Simultaneously  
Stroud is engaged  
in an introspective  
search for  
himself, for his  
true character.  
But can we be any  
more confident  
about the sincerity  
of that search?

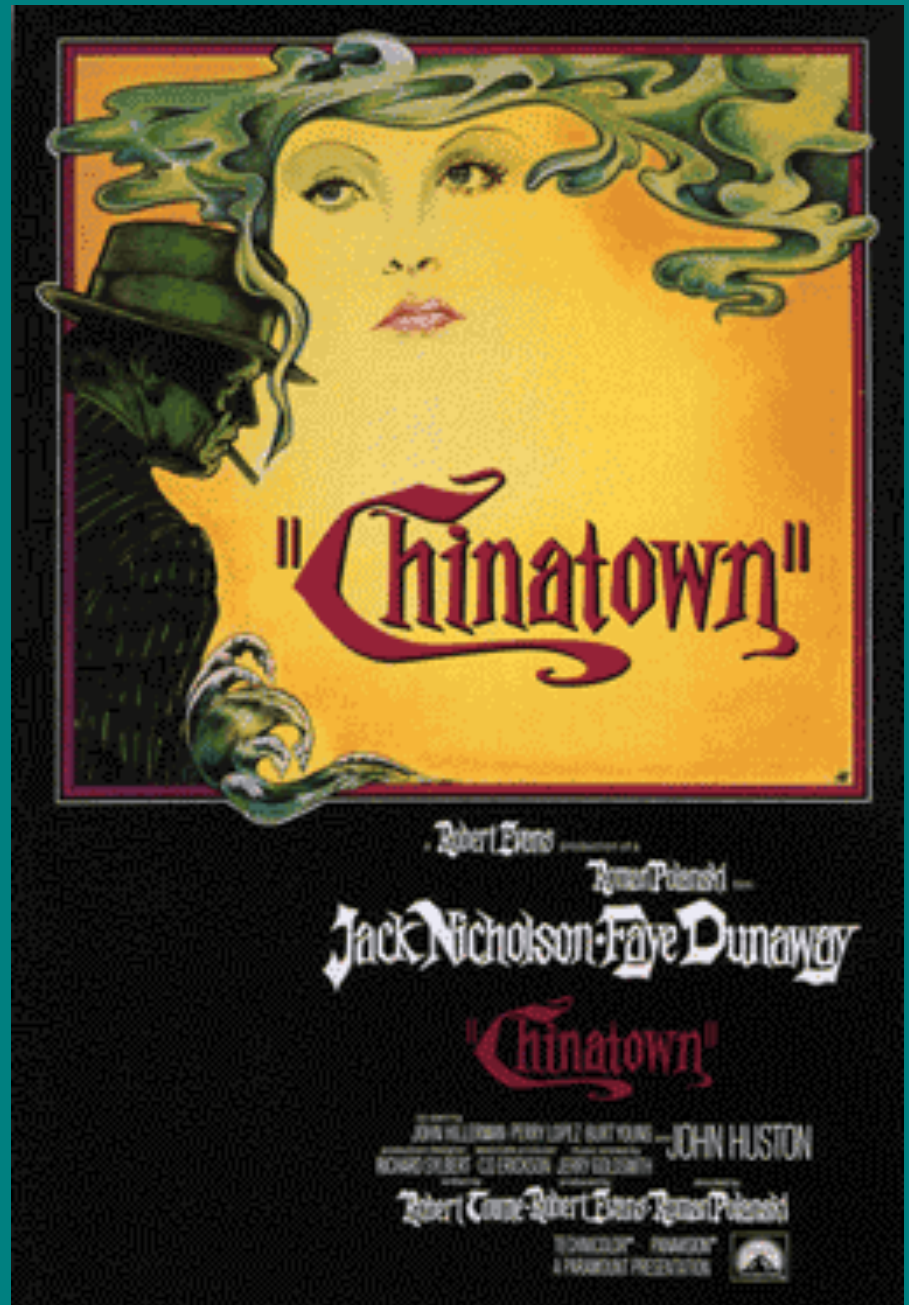


"Much of film noir is concerned with people cut off not just from Nature, and from their own natures, but from one another and from any vital knowledge of the environment they themselves have created." Nicholas Christopher, Somewhere in the Night, 1997

“For Towne (the screenwriter) ‘Chinatown’ became a synecdoche for the entire City of Los Angeles, a place where you have no idea what’s going on and where it’s best to let it alone for good or ill.” - Michael Eaton, Chinatown

Towards Blade Runner:

“So the film’s title is a metaphor for a city which itself often seems more metaphorical than actual.” - Eaton



EINE ROBERT EVANS PRODUKTION / EIN ROMAN POLANSKI FILM

**JACK  
NICHOLSON**      **FAYE  
DUNAWAY**  
"CHINATOWN"



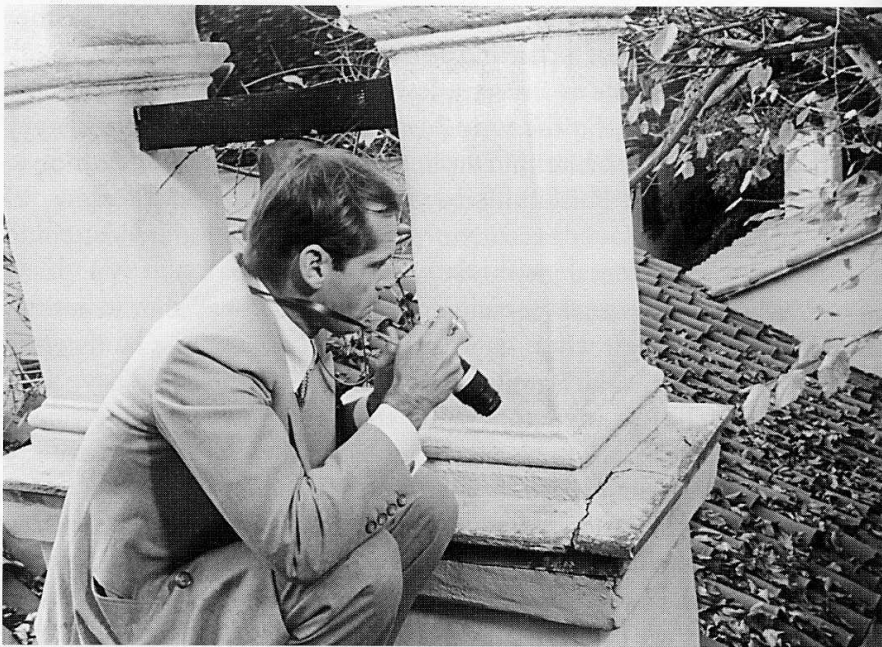
JOHN HILLERMAN    PERRY UFFEL    **JOHN HUSTON**    Production Designer    Adaptation    Music Arrangement    EDITOR OF  
BOB TAYLOR    and    RICHARD DYKST    C. D. FRICKSON    JERRY GOLDBERG    FRANKFURTER  
Screenplay    Produced by    Directed by  
**ROBERT TOWNE**    **ROBERT EVANS**    **ROMAN POLANSKI**    IN PARASCENT FILM IN VERBUNDUNG MIT  
CINEMA INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION

*Panoramas and Labyrinths:* These are present, of course, in The Big Clock. But don't expect to see them in Chinatown (1974). What you should see in Chinatown, however, is a rumination on *mastery and surrender*, the competing stances toward the world that stand behind the panorama and the labyrinth.



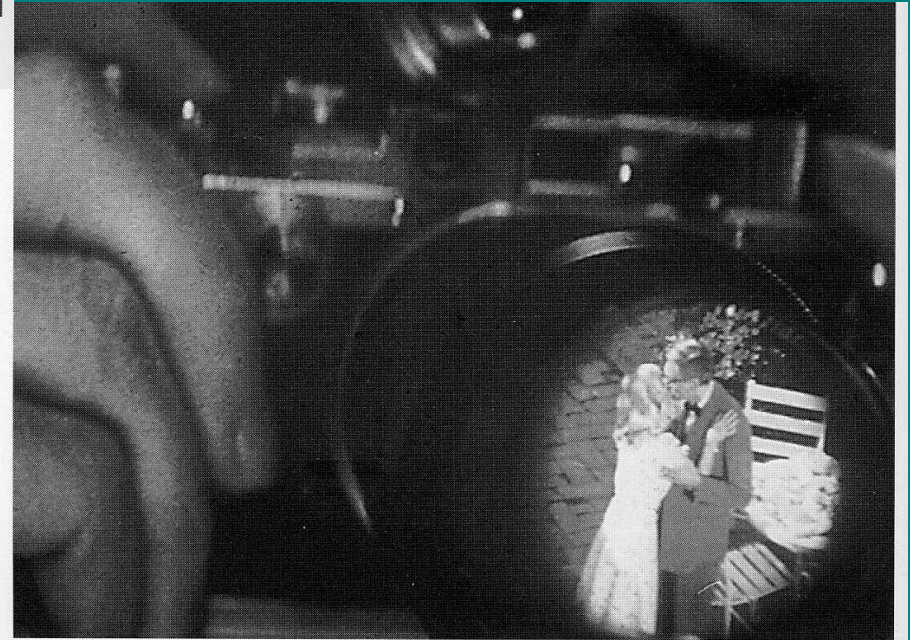
Illicit sexuality and voyeurism: 'what kind of guy do you think I am?'

THE question of the film? The detective detected? But also Mrs. Mulray's "need" to know - what good is knowledge?



'I make an honest living'

Are you sure you know what  
you're seeing?

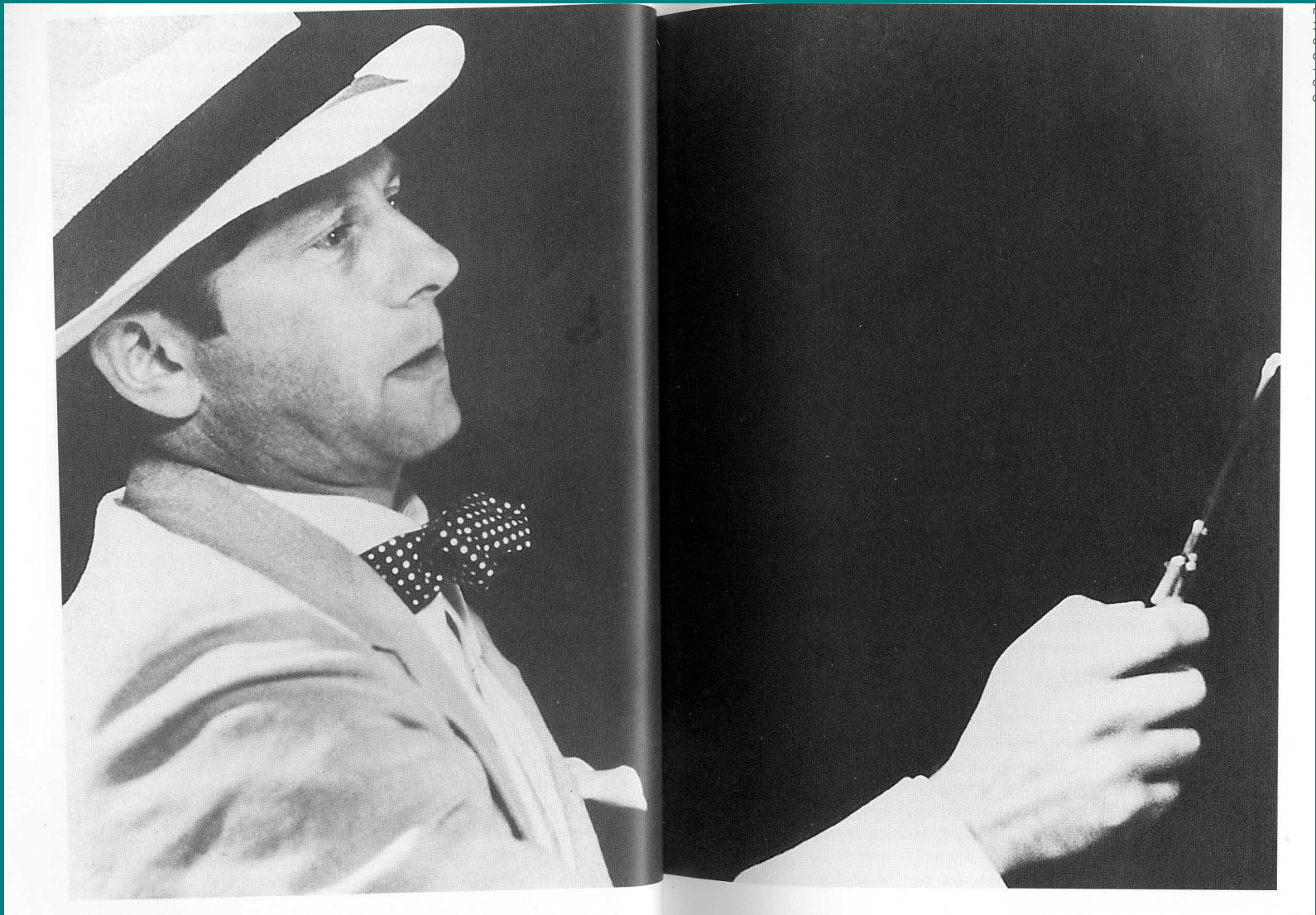


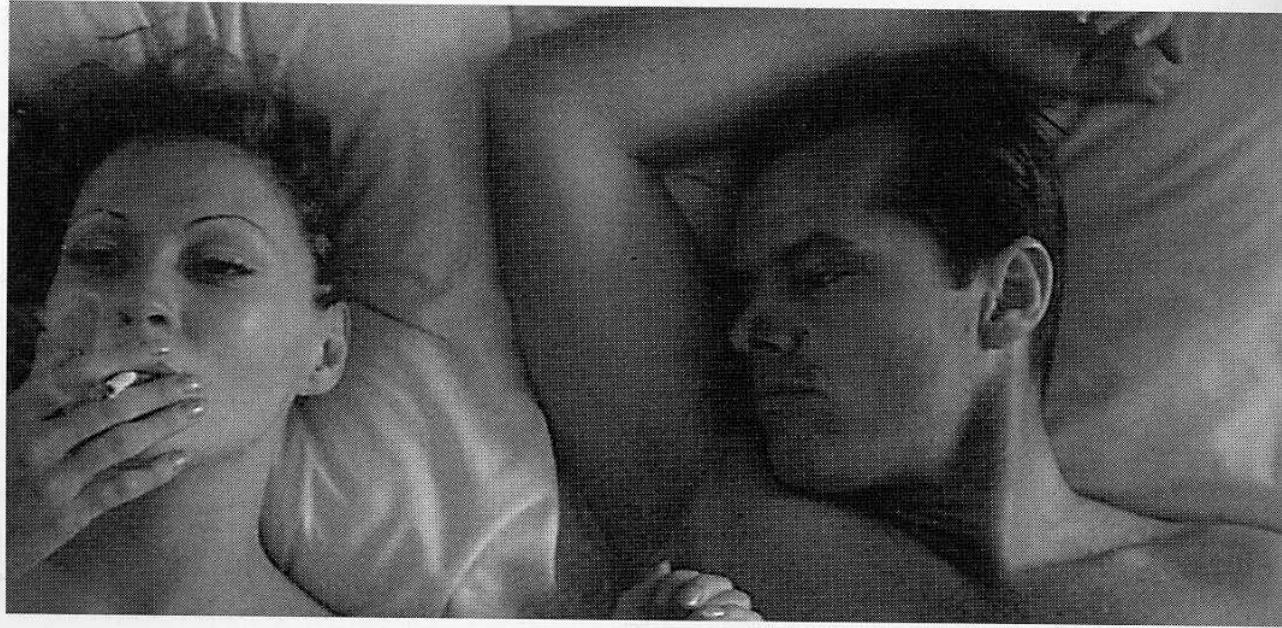
8 'This business requires a certain amount of finesse'

Or is something more at stake?



“If the world is nothing but the constructions we place on it [which might serve as postmodernism’s central conception], then we would do well not to push too hard for additional meanings that are likely to topple whatever structure we have put in place [which might serve as a critique of postmodernism].” Paula Marantz Cohen in Hitchcock’s America





5 4 A bloodied nose and a defective eye come together

**MASTERY:** The self-confident, successful, affluent detective unravels as mystery: but with what intended or *unintended consequences*? In the last scene, Jake Gittes has possession of all the relevant information. But what does it do for him?



5 6 'I was trying to keep someone from being hurt. I ended up making sure she was hurt'

## Private and Public

**Scandals:** From the very beginning, the film revolves around a private and a public scandal. We learn more and more about the public scandal as the film proceeds. We also learn that we were initially wrong, totally wrong, about the private scandal. There is a private scandal, but not the one we thought there was.



Does the *depth of the private scandal* negate the importance of the public scandal? Surely there is a difference between violating one's child and violating everyone's children. But if people are that corrupt, that evil, that impervious to both rationality and shame, is there really any point in politics at all?



'This guy's got water on the brain'

Incidentally and parenthetically: a 1974 death by water gate

**What does “Chinatown” really mean**, really stand for? Does it stand for *SURRENDER*? Is it a fear of action, a determination to do “as little as possible” as Jake puts in more than once, a paralysis that stems from uncertainty about the unintended consequences of one’s actions?



Cross and Mulwray – power and water

Is “Chinatown” the place where reason and rational action have no meaning, no power? Is it Noah Cross’s land? What sort of order is restored when the police order everyone “On the sidewalk” at the end of the film?



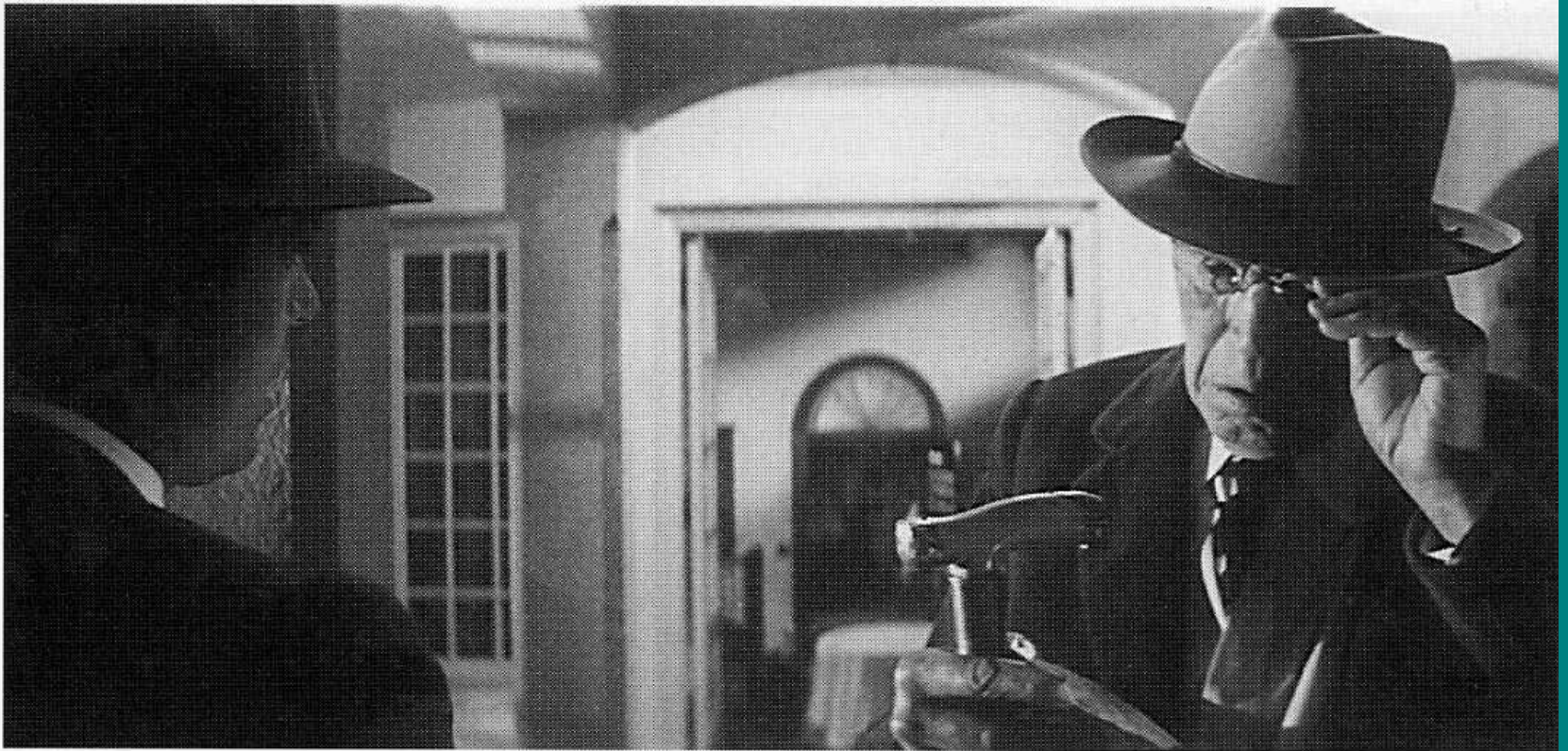
The dark lady, the spider woman

5 7

**“She’s never going to know that?”** This line, uttered in the final scene, is the firmest statement of moral purpose in the film. And its uttered by the woman we’ve been led to believe is the femme fatale. Where does that leave our faith in rationality, in knowledge?

She's been telling  
the truth all along -  
and look what it gets  
her.





The split vision of the adversary: capable of anything

Surrender arises from the conviction that resistance or amelioration is impossible in an evil world of corruption and sin. Evil exists, inside of all of us, to be sure. The major form that evil takes is precisely an unwillingness to accept the limits of life, a will-to-power that seeks to master all things and all people.



The rockpool – where life began. ‘Velly bad for glass’

It had been right in front of Jake all along. And in the most primordial of places.

“Be reasonable.”

What’s that got to do with  
it?

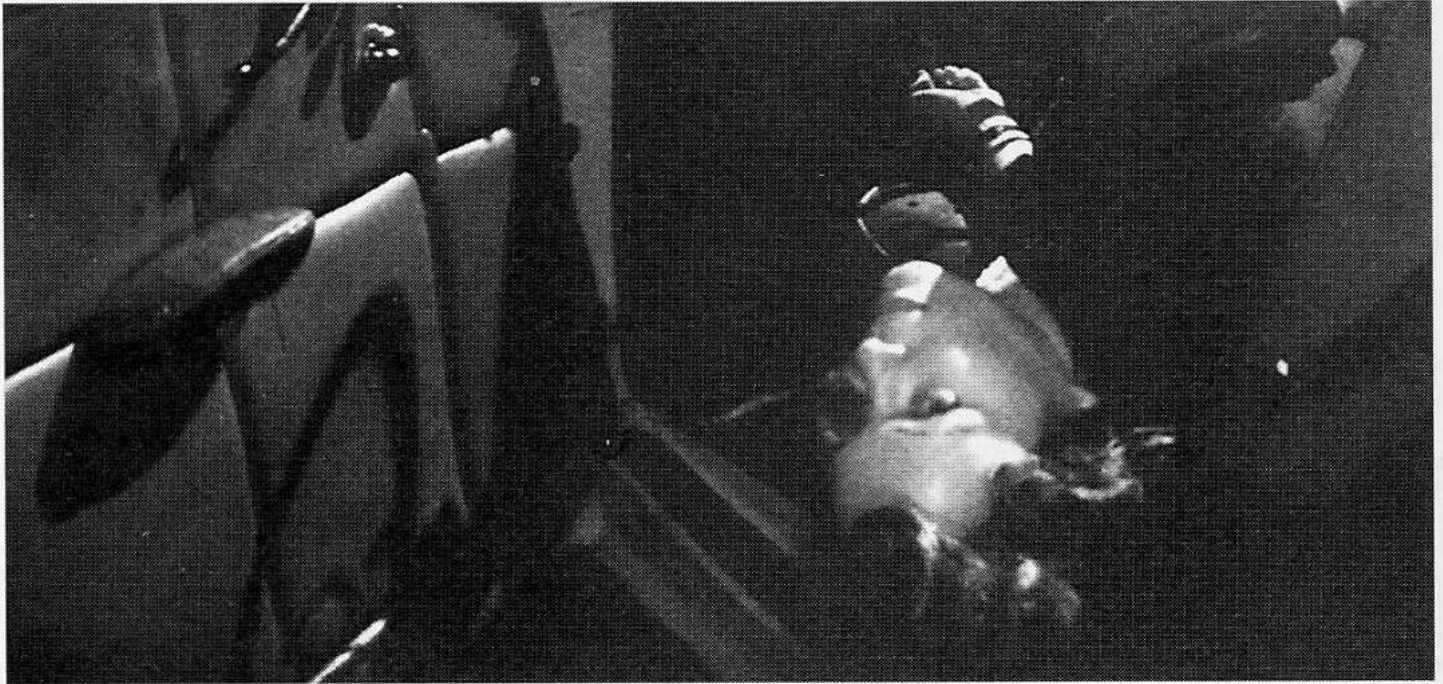
“She’s mine too.”

She’s never going to know  
that.”



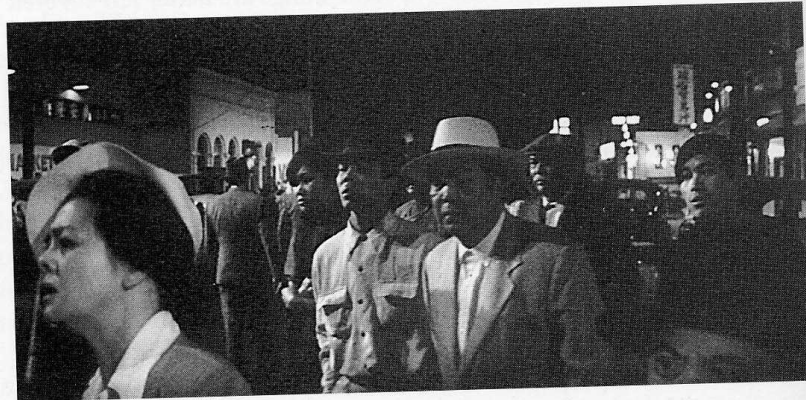
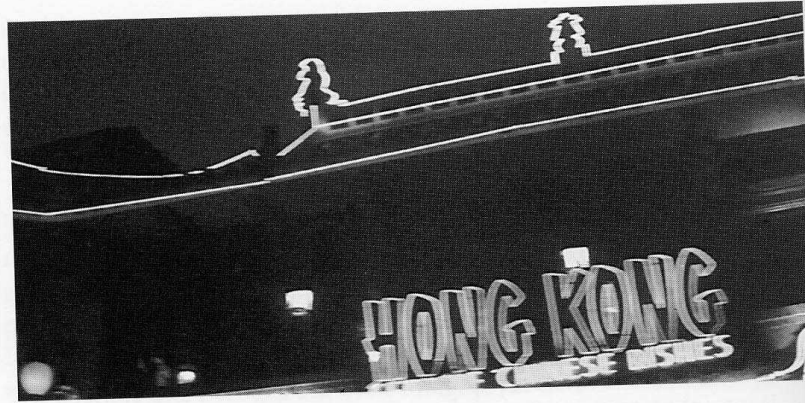
The patriarchal demiurge triumphant

“I was trying to keep someone from being hurt. I ended up making sure she was *hurt*.” Jake on his previous experience in Chinatown.



The futility of good intentions

“Forget it Jake. It’s Chinatown.”





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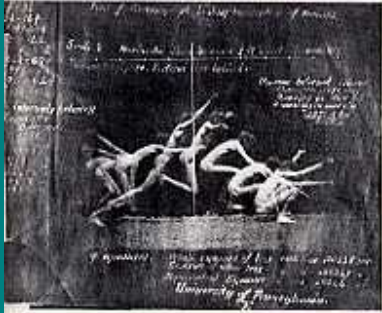
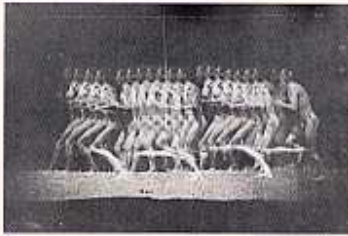


Fig. 230. Thomas Edison at fluxion of a jump. 1879. No. Photograph in boxes. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel E. Knicker, II. Philadelphia.

Fig. 231. Thomas Edison's 'Fluxion of a Jump' with multiple exposures. 1874. From The Edison Magazine, November 1874.

Fig. 232. Thomas Edison's photograph of one of his 'Fluxion' apparatus suggested by Edison. 1874. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of Charles Hughes.



Here's the final exchange between Rita Hayward and Orson Welles in Lady From Shanghai: Welles: "You said the world's bad. We can't run away from the badness. And you're right there. But you said we can't fight it. We must deal with the badness, make terms. And then the badness deal with you, and make its own terms in the end, surely." Hayward: "You can fight. But what good is it? Good bye." Welles: "You mean we can't win." Hayward: "No, we can't win. Give my love to the sunrise." Welles: "Well, we can't lose either. Only if we quit." Hayward: "And you're not going to." Welles: "Not again."