IT’S CHINATOWN:
Orientalist Discourse and the City in the Noir Tradition

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This thesis is presented for the Honours degree of English and Creative Writing at Murdoch University 2015.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution, including Murdoch.

Signed: ………………………………………………………………………

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5 June 2015
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Thesis Title: It’s Chinatown: Orientalist Discourse and the City in the Noir Tradition

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This thesis provides an analysis of the films *Chinatown* (1974) and *Blade Runner* (1982) on the basis of three characteristics. Both films stem from the tradition of film noir. While there is debate over the use of the term as a genre category, it is widely agreed to refer to a specific period of cinema between 1940 and the late 1950s from which these two films draw stylistic inspiration. One way in which this influence is evident is in *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner’s* use of cityscape. Both films are set in LA, a city in which the majority of traditional film noirs are also set. It is my argument that in their portrayal of LA, *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner* present a highly Orientalised cityscape in which Oriental motifs function as signifiers of urban decay. Such a means of representation is not unique to these films but rather stems from traditional film noir.
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INTRODUCTION

William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) contains a haunting depiction of a city that sets the foundation for my investigation in this thesis:

Now he slept in the cheapest coffins, the ones nearest the port, beneath the quartz-halogen floods that lit the docks all night like vast stages; where you couldn’t see the lights of Tokyo for the glare of the television sky, not even the towering hologram logo of the Fuji Electric Company, and Tokyo Bay was a black expanse where gulls wheeled above drifting shoals of white styrofoam. Behind the port lay the city, factory domes dominated by the vast cubes of corporate arcologies. Port and city were divided by a narrow borderland of older streets, an area with no official name. Night City, with Ninsei its heart. By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, the holograms inert, waiting, under the poisoned silver sky.¹

Gibson’s city is perilous and dystopian, ambiguous and disorientating; but it is also specifically Oriental. This thesis focuses on the power and resilience of this central discourse in the history of films depicting the urban criminal borderland: the use of Oriental tropes as signifiers of decay and depravity. In this discussion I will examine two famous films in particular.

While superficially dissimilar, upon close examination, the historical realist film *Chinatown* (1974) and the futuristic, Sci-Fi *Blade Runner* (1982) may be seen to

share common ground on the basis of three characteristics. Most significantly, both films stem from the tradition of film noir. Although there is continuing debate over the validity of film noir as a genre category, the term nonetheless is widely agreed to refer to a specific period of cinema between 1940 and the late 1950s from which these two films draw stylistic inspiration. Both of these films were created long after this period and in their “imitation of dead styles” constitute a form of cinematic pastiche.

The relationship between these films and their noir forerunners can be understood through an analysis of the initial scene of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) in which

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3 There are numerous sources that discuss *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown* in the context of film noir. Chief among these is S. Doll and G. Faller, ‘Blade Runner and Genre: Film Noir and Science Fiction’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 14.2 (1986), pp. 89-100; and W. Luhr, *Film Noir* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 171-190. For a comprehensive list see Bibliography.


Miss Ruth Wonderly enters the offices of Spade and Archer Detectives. In the scene opening the camera zooms through the external window of a high-rise building into the office space. Spade is at all times positioned to the right of camera behind a desk with his back to the office wall. Wonderly, adorned in dark fur and a black, veiled pillbox hat, enters through a glass door opposite Spade’s desk and sits to the left. Over her left shoulder is a metallic filing drawer. Archer’s desk is located to the rear-left of shot. The office windows are adorned with the Spade and Archer logo and the office is accessible via a glass door opposite Spade’s desk. In this scene, Wonderly offers Spade and Archer an undisclosed sum of money for their services (presumably a large sum, given Archer’s exclamation when examining the cash payment). Spade later tells Wonderly, “You paid us more than if you’d been telling us the truth and enough more to make it alright”. As the plot develops it becomes clear that Wonderly is not who she at first claims to be, but rather is a smuggler named Brigid O’Shaughnessy.

Chinatown opens in a strikingly similar fashion. Jake Gittes enters his office through a glass door to a woman identifying herself as Evelyn Mulwray. She is positioned to the right of camera seated on the left side of Gittes’s unoccupied desk. The desk is directly opposite the glass door through which Gittes enters. Over the woman’s left shoulder is a metallic filing cabinet. Her positioning is virtually identical to that of Wonderly/O’Shaughnessy in The Maltese Falcon. The woman is clothed in dark fur and a black, veiled pillbox hat, a costume consciously reminiscent of that worn by Wonderly in the corresponding scene from The Maltese Falcon. Two of Gittes’s associates are in the room: one is
seated behind a desk situated to the left of screen, opposite Gittes’s desk, occupying the same position as Archer’s desk in *The Maltese Falcon*. The woman states that “money doesn’t matter to me Mr Gittes”, displaying the same financial nonchalance as Wonderly. Later in the film it is revealed that this character claiming to be Mulwray is an imposter, a hired actress named Ida Sessions. The similarities between these two scenes are too significant to be merely coincidental, particularly given the conspicuous casting of John Huston, the director of *The Maltese Falcon*, as Noah Cross in *Chinatown*.

Although not as direct a pastiche as *Chinatown*, the opening of *Blade Runner* displays an obvious debt to the same opening scene from *The Maltese Falcon*. *Blade Runner* opens as the camera pans through the external window of a futuristic high-rise building into an office space; similar to how the camera zooms through the window of the offices of Spade and Archer Detectives in *The Maltese Falcon*. The first characters to appear in the film, Dave Holden and Leon Kowalski, are positioned in the office. The office contains a desk, behind which Holden sits on the right of screen, while Kowalski sits on the left of desk. From these positions the “Blade Runner” Holden, assuming the role of detective (and hence the position of Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*), conducts a Voight-Kampff test on Kowalski, a replicant who has been successfully posing as a human. As the test unfolds it reveals that Kowalski is a replicant, thus, like Wonderly/O’Shaughnessy and Mulwray/Sessions, his identity is not what he initially claims.
The influence of film noir on each of these films is also made evident in their use of the cityscape. Both films are not only explicit about being set in Los Angeles but are also self-conscious in their presentation of the city. The depiction of LA as the quintessential “noir city” is a central feature of the film noir tradition, with a majority of canonical films noir being set there such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946). The attraction of LA as the archetypal noir city continues today, made evident in films such as *The Black Dahlia* (2006) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

In the creation of a noir cityscape, I will argue that *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner* both present a highly Orientalised depiction of LA. Such a depiction is not unique to these films, but rather originates from the Orientalism prevalent in traditional film noir. James Naremore states that if “the Far East was repeatedly associated in film noir with enigmatic and criminal behavior, it was also depicted as a kind of aestheticized bordello, where one could experience all sorts of forbidden pleasures”. Such a means of representation is not restricted to this period of cinema but may be seen to continue in contemporary detective works. For

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6 Other films noir set in LA include B. Wilder (dir.), *Sunset Boulevard* (Paramount Home Entertainment, 1950); N. Ray (dir.), *In a Lonely Place* (Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 1950); E. Dmytryk (dir.), *Murder, My Sweet* (Warner Home Video, 1944); R. Maté (dir.), *D.O.A.* (Alpha Video Distributors, 1950); J. Losey (dir.), *M* (Retro Flix, 1951); and R. Aldrich (dir.), *Kiss Me Deadly* (MGM Home Entertainment, 1955). It is noteworthy that while the novel upon which *Kiss Me Deadly* is based is set in New York, the filmic version is set in LA, providing further testament to the relationship between LA and film noir: M. Spillane, ‘Kiss Me, Deadly’, in M. Spillane, *The Mike Hammer Omnibus Volume 2* (London: Allison, 2006), pp. 347-517. Similarly, another Mike Hammer film adaptation, H. Essex (dir.), *I, the Jury* (United Artists, 1953), is set in New York but makes use of LA’s iconic Bradbury Building as the location of Hammer’s office. Given the Building’s direct association with the city of LA, its use is further indicative of the relationship between LA and film noir. The distinctive Bradbury Building also features in *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner*: H. King, *Lost in Translation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 98.


This thesis provides an analysis of *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner* on the basis of these three characteristics common to both films. Chapter 1 provides an outline of the theoretical material relevant to my thesis with regards to the concepts of film noir, Orientalism and LA as a cityscape. Chapter 2 examines Orientalism within traditional film noir, providing an analysis of the use of Oriental motifs within several films. Chapter 3 addresses the purported multicultural landscape of *Blade Runner*’s cityscape and the Orientalisation of its subjects. Such Orientalisation is also exhibited in *Chinatown* by the character of Evelyn Mulwray, who may be compared to the Orientalised Elsa Bannister in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947). Chapter 4 looks at how the spatial dichotomy of high and low is used in *Blade Runner*’s cityscape to depict a social, and ultimately racial, hierarchy. While *Chinatown* depicts LA in terms of its horizontality, when this same reading is applied to its city a similar hierarchy can be seen to exist.
CHAPTER 1

In this chapter I outline the theoretical underpinnings of my research topic as well as some of the literature relevant to it. Of importance are the concepts of film noir, Orientalism, various theories regarding the city, specifically focused on LA, and some of the links between these texts and postmodern cultural theory.

Film noir as a genre

As previously mentioned, use of the term film noir to define a genre has generated widespread debate. For instance Raymond Durgnat, who identifies the major plot structures of film noir in the form of a family tree, states that the “film noir is not a genre, as the Western and gangster film, and takes us into the realm of classification by motif and tone”.  

Paul Schrader, citing the work of Durgnat, argues that film noir “is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood”. Similarly, James Naremore contends that “film noir has no essential characteristics and that it is not a specifically American form”. However, the paradox of this is made most clear in a response by William Luhr who states that Naremore nonetheless “follows this apparent dismissal of the genre with more than three hundred pages on film noir”.

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8 Durgnat, ‘Paint it Black’, p. 38. Original emphasis.
9 Schrader, ‘Notes on Film Noir’, p. 53.
10 Naremore, More Than Night, pp. 6, 11.
11 Luhr, Film Noir, p. 63. Original emphasis.
Rather than a genre, Naremore believes the film noir tradition to be ultimately based upon the discourse surrounding a “loose evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies”.\textsuperscript{12} Mark Bould shares a similar perspective, asserting that as with “any genre, film noir is an intersubjective discursive phenomenon: a fabrication” but that it nonetheless still constitutes a genre.\textsuperscript{13} Jon Tuska argues that, similarly to the Western (which in his opinion is dependent on historical reality if it is to be viewed as a genre) film noir may be understood as a genre “above all in terms of its themes”.\textsuperscript{14} Foster Hirsch also views film noir as a genre, arguing that it “conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions”.\textsuperscript{15} According to Hirsch, these conventions include its confusing and often non-chronological narrative structure; its pessimistic conclusion; its use of characters with multiple identities; its unique visual style; and its use of particular settings.\textsuperscript{16}

Less contention exists over film noir when viewed as a period of cinema characterised by the dominant stylistic modes of that period. Naremore indicates that, above all, film noir “describe[s] a period, a movement, and a recurrent style”.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, Schrader states:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Naremore, \textit{More Than Night}, p. 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Bould, \textit{Film Noir}, p. 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Tuska, \textit{Dark Cinema}, pp. xxii-xxiii
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Hirsch, \textit{Film Noir}, p. 72.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp. 71-111.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Naremore, \textit{More Than Night}, p. 6.
\end{itemize}
Film noir is also a specific period of film history, like German Expressionism or the French New Wave. In general, film noir refers to those Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption.\textsuperscript{18}

The debate around the generic status of film noir is the subject of voluminous scholarship, which it is beyond the scope of this thesis to recapitulate. For my purposes the term film noir will be used to describe a period of cinema from which both Chinatown and Blade Runner draw stylistic inspiration. Some of the significant details of filmic style that characterise the period will be discussed later in this thesis.

**Film noir and Orientalism**

In discussion of Orientalism, Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) is the foundational text, and is highly important in providing the conceptual frame for my discussion. While more directly related to the Levant than the Far East, Orientalism nonetheless offers an exemplary theoretical model as to how the Orient has come to be defined through the way in which it is depicted by Western cultural texts. In defining the Orient, Said indicates that rather than existing as a fixed geographical point, “the Orient is an idea that has a history and tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West”.\textsuperscript{19} This reality has come about through the ways in which the Orient has been represented in the West through “aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts”, of which American cinema is an example.\textsuperscript{20} As a result, any representation of the Orient within a text comes to be

\textsuperscript{18} Schrader, ‘Notes on Film Noir’, pp. 53-54. Original emphasis.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 12.
a reference to “essential ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to
despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness”. 21
This tradition of representation, which Said describes as “imperialist”, is not
based on a “genuinely felt and experienced force” with the Orient, but rather
“modern political-intellectual culture” and as such has “less to do with the actual
Orient” as it does with how it is represented by Western texts. 22

In Lost in Translation (2010), Homay King analyses the significance of
Orientalism within the film noir genre. King acknowledges the importance of
Oriental signifiers within film noir, citing films including The Big Sleep (1946),
The Lady from Shanghai, The Maltese Falcon, The Shanghai Gesture (1941) and
Murder, My Sweet (1944) as examples (each of which is further addressed in
Chapter 2 of this thesis). 23 King argues that within these films “seemingly
marginal Asian set dressing” comes to function “as a load-bearing narrative
element” from which the “film noir protagonist is likewise threatened with a loss
of cognitive faculties when he happens upon one of these knowing orientalist
objects”. 24 As a result, she argues, Oriental objects within film noir “come to bear
the burden of explanation for unresolved aspects of the plot; they are visually
offered up as the explanation for the inexplicable”, a phenomenon which King
terms “the Shanghai Gesture”. 25 King writes from a psychoanalytic perspective,
particularly focussing on the work of Jean Laplanche, and thus her intentions

21 Said, Orientalism, p. 205.
22 Ibid., pp. 208, 15, 13.
23 King, Lost in Translation, pp. 44-74.
24 Ibid., p. 48.
differ from mine. Nonetheless, while she recognises the significance of Orientalism within the film noir genre, King’s work neglects to recognise the extent to which these motifs are employed in order to symbolise moral decay.

King’s discussion extends to both Chinatown and Blade Runner, analysing both films in psychoanalytic terms. Although her research identifies the Orientalism prevalent in these works, her analysis fails to address how the Far East comes to be portrayed through these texts. Rather than emphasising the psychological impact of Oriental motifs within film noir, the aim of my thesis is to examine how East Asia comes to be associated with negative meanings within the structure of discourse established by these films. A major point of investigation for King is the relevance of the psyche of the protagonists in each film and the role of their psyches as enigmatic signifiers. For Jake Gittes in Chinatown this involves the recurrence of his past as mirrored by the events of the film’s conclusion. For Rick Deckard in Blade Runner this has to do with the origami unicorn left at his apartment at the film’s end, a form of “Shanghai Gesture”, and the bearing of this on his identity given that most critics “concur that this final origami sign is meant to indicate that Deckard himself is a replicant”. As King indicates, such a reading is limited in that it neglects to account for the underlying Orientalism in each film:

Just as Chinatown is a sign not simply for the unknown in Jake’s psyche but for much larger unknowns about desire and signification, so the origami unicorn at Deckard’s doorstep does not simply reveal that he is a replicant but rather becomes a cipher that evokes and plays into the very unknowns that define human subjectivity more generally.

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26 King, *Lost in Translation*, pp. 77-79.

27 Ibid., pp. 95-97.

28 Ibid., p. 96-97.
King identifies one such key enigmatic signifier in *Chinatown* as the moment in which Gittes visits the Mulwray household and is told by the Asian gardener that the pondwater is “bad for grass”. The gardener speaks accented English and pronounces “grass” as “glass”. While initially appearing as a form of “ethnic comedy”, the “parataxis also seems to reference a pair of eyeglasses that Jake spots in the pond, the bifocals that belong to Noah Cross and thus identify him as Mulwray’s killer”.  

According to King, this stems from a traditional trope of film noir in which Asian characters are privy to secret knowledge, and in doing so “*Chinatown* comments on the representation of East Asia in those classical film noirs that cast these characters as the senders of enigmatic signifiers and withholders of their meanings”, further evidence of the prominence of Orientalism within film noir.  

King sees the same trope operating in *Blade Runner*. For example, “an Asian shopkeeper has specialized knowledge that allows her to differentiate real snake scales from fake ones” and in “another scene, the replicant leader Roy harasses the Chinese geneticist Hannibal Chew in an attempt to gain information about the length of his own lifespan”.  

King falls short of explaining the implications of tying this code of the “inexplicable” to a specific Orientalist (East Asian) signifier. In her analysis of both films, King recognises how, as pastiches of film noir, they also come to reference the Orientalism prevalent in film noir. In her analysis of *Blade Runner* King indicates that this is not coincidental but rather is done to pay “explicit homage” to the

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30 Ibid., p. 81.

31 Ibid., pp. 81-82.

32 Ibid., p. 82.
tradition of film noir, citing several examples of intertextuality in support.33 King points out a Thai statue in Deckard’s apartment similar to one in Geiger’s house in *The Big Sleep*, and posits a similar link between Deckard’s chase of Zhora through Chinatown in a similar scene in *The Lady from Shanghai*.34 These moments in *The Big Sleep* and *The Lady from Shanghai* are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

**Postcolonial cityscapes**

In discussion of postcolonial theory such as that of Orientalism, cityscapes come to be of relevance, a link made evident by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1991). In his work, Bhabha indicates that cultures are largely understood through how they are represented, a representation which is largely “unequal and uneven” due to “the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order”.35 Such misrepresentation, which Bhabha cites as a form of discrimination, is common among “Third World migrants” similar to those working at street-level in *Blade Runner* or Evelyn Mulwray’s servants in *Chinatown*.36 As such, issues of culture come to be linked with space due to the “spatial histories of displacement” occurring through migration, a relationship which associates “colony and metropolis”.37 This link is evident in the cityscapes

33 King, *Lost in Translation*, p. 82.

34 Ibid., pp. 97-98.


36 Ibid., p. 176.

37 Ibid., pp. 176, 212.
of literary texts, which come to represent both ethnic majority and minority, a
discourse Bhabha terms “daemonic doubling”:

When this discourse of a daemonic doubling emerges at the very centre of
metropolitan life, then the familiar things of everyday life and letters are
marked by an irresistible sense of their genealogical difference, a
“postcolonial” provenance.38

Such a disorientating “doubling” of location is evident in the cityscapes of Blade
Runner and Chinatown. Both films depict a cityscape in which Eastern and
Western culture exist simultaneously but nonetheless are separated in terms of
social order.

LA as an imagined city

Central to Bhabha’s argument is the concept of Third Space, the ambiguous space
that develops when different cultures interact.39 This:

challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture … It is only when
we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in
this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to
understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or “purity”
of cultures are untenable.40

The concept of Third Space is peculiarly applicable to LA, as demonstrated by
Edward Soja in Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-
Imagined Places (1996).41 Peter Brooker, in his analysis of Blade Runner,
explains how in applying Thirdspace to urban theory it is Soja’s intention to bring
“the resources of empirical social science, theory and literature together so as to

38 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 213.
40 Ibid., p. 37.
41 For an analysis by Soja of Bhabha’s work on the topic see E. Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 139-144.
outline a newly configured and politically engaged urban imaginary". Soja argues that in engaging with space two common perspectives exist. These are “Firstspace”, which is “focused on the ‘real’ material world”, and “Secondspace”, which “interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality”. The urban spaces presented through cinema fall under this second category. However, Soja contends that Thirdspace (Henri Lefebvre’s “lived space”), is in reality a combination of the both of these categories. As such, Soja defines Thirdspace as:

an-Other [sic] way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicality-sociality.

The LAs presented in Blade Runner and Chinatown, while only presenting simulations of LA as an actual geographical location, nonetheless form an experiential part of the city, contributing to our understanding of LA as a whole. Soja builds upon this idea in his later works. In Postmetropolis (2000), Soja compares LA to the video game SimCity, indicating that LA as a city is “actively replacing reality with insidiously diverting simulations”. As such, the city is “prone to be understood through its creative imagery” in the form of film production, a characteristic that has rendered LA “the dystopian Main Street of the world’s most visible Noir City”.

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43 Soja, Thirdspace, p. 6.

44 Ibid., p. 10.


46 Ibid., p. 137.
Soja’s depiction of LA is an example of a trend in urban studies, identified by Rosalyn Deutsche, in which spatial theory and film noir are compared. According to Deutsche, given “the centrality of the city as both scene and object of noir investigation, the analogy practically suggests itself”. Of particular note in this critical turn is Mike Davis, who goes so far as to posit film noir at the forefront of understanding LA. In *City of Quartz* (1990), Davis indicates that while LA exists as an actual physical locale, the city is understood “not so much in the history of culture in Los Angeles, as the history of culture produced about Los Angeles”. As such, LA “has always been about the construction/interpretation of the city myth” as presented in media, primarily in the form of cinematic representations of the city due to the presence of Hollywood. According to Davis, while LA “lacks a scholarly municipal history… Los Angeles understands its past, instead, through a robust fiction called noir”, of which both *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown* constitute what Davis deems are part of its “new wave”. Noir presents the “great anti-myth” of LA, repainting “the image of Los Angeles as a deracinated urban hell”. Nonetheless, given that LA is not “planned or designed” in an infrastructural sense to the extent that it is “infinitely envisioned” through media, LA as depicted in noir comes to form a part of our actual understanding of the city. Davis posits noir’s “dystopianization of Los Angeles” as politically

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49 Ibid., p. 23. Original emphasis.

50 Ibid., p. 36. Original emphasis.

51 Ibid., p. 37.

52 Ibid., p. 23. Original emphasis.
motivated, indicating that in doing so noir is able to provide a critique of the rampant capitalism at play in the city.\textsuperscript{53}

Davis has also written extensively on both \textit{Blade Runner} and \textit{Chinatown} and their relation to L.A. Brooker explains that Davis “sees how \textit{Blade Runner} has haunted the city’s sense of itself but dismisses it as out of date, since the city has already outpaced the film’s worst projections”\textsuperscript{54}. Davis indicates that \textit{Blade Runner}’s cityscape is far more akin to that of \textit{Metropolis} (1927) or H.G. Wells’s \textit{The Future in America} (1906), both of which simply reference the work of “contemporary American futurists” and the “core modernist vision” as envisioned in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{55} As such:

\begin{quote}
Ridley Scott’s caricature may have captured ethnocentric anxieties about multiculturalism run amok, but it failed to engage the real Los Angeles – especially the great unbroken plains of aging bungalows, stucco apartments, and ranch-style homes – as it erodes socially and physically into the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Instead, Davis cites the LA presented in realist works of science fiction, such as William Gibson’s \textit{Neuromancer}—which it is worth noting features the highly Orientalised “Chiba City” that bears great similarity to the cityscape of \textit{Blade Runner}—as providing a more realistic depiction of twenty-first-century LA. However, Soja argues that while Davis attempts to distinguish the real LA from that as depicted in \textit{Blade Runner}, his constant reference to the film has resulted in

\textsuperscript{53} Davis, \textit{City of Quartz}, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{54} Brooker, ‘Imagining the Real’, p. 215.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
it becoming invariably attached to his reading of LA.\textsuperscript{57} Soja even goes so far as to indicate that the “rigidly binarized” and “apocalyptic” LA depicted by Davis in actuality bears a striking resemblance to the metropolis of \textit{Blade Runner}.\textsuperscript{58}

In contrast to his opinion of \textit{Blade Runner}’s LA, Davis indicates that \textit{Chinatown}’s depiction of the city is more realistic. Davis indicates that, apart from \textit{Blade Runner}, most cinematic representations of LA neglect to depict an “enlarged low-wage working class, living and working in the central city, and creating its own spatialized world”, a reality of contemporary LA.\textsuperscript{59} As a result, such films fail to recognise the growing tension between the working and middle classes of LA which has come to be heightened due to the “overaccumulation of bank and real-estate capital” and the “reflux of low-wage manufacturing and labour-intensive services”.\textsuperscript{60} It is interesting to note that Davis cites East Asian investment in California as a factor contributing to this crisis, a scenario which seems to mirror the economic underpinnings of \textit{Blade Runner}’s LA. Not only did this crisis begin, according to Davis, in the same period in which \textit{Chinatown} is set, but it also bears similarity to the plot of \textit{Chinatown}:

The CRA has quietly municipalized land speculation – just as in the early-twentieth-century aqueduct conspiracy upon which \textit{Chinatown} was based, except on a vaster scale, with dirt and increments instead of dirt and water as the magic formula for super-profits.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} Soja, \textit{Postmetropolis}, p. 319.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 319.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 67.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 71.
While the economic make-up of contemporary LA is not of direct concern to my project, Davis’s work provides an example of the close link between LA as represented in film and LA itself.

**Jameson’s Postmodernism (1991), Chinatown and Blade Runner**

In discussion of architectural style of a city, Fredric Jameson’s concept of pastiche is of note. Considered a central feature of postmodernism, pastiche can be defined as the imitation of other artistic styles. While inherently similar to parody, Jameson draws a distinction between the two. “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style… but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter”. According to Jameson a form of pastiche is the “nostalgia film”, for which he cites *Chinatown* as an example. Defined by John Cawelti as a mode of filmmaking in which “traditional generic features of plot, character, setting and style are deployed to recreate the aura of a past time”, *Chinatown* may be seen to be a nostalgia film in the way in which it “deliberately invokes the basic characteristics of a traditional genre”, film noir. Nonetheless certain theorists contest Jameson’s categorisation of *Chinatown* as postmodern.

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63 Ibid., p. 17.

64 Ibid., p. 19.

Michael Eaton argues that Jameson’s argument (in relation to Chinatown) is not entirely correct due to the cinematography of Chinatown. During the film’s production, Polanski replaced cinematographer Robert Evans due to his use of out-dated filmic techniques. Eaton, Chinatown, p. 50. His replacement, John A. Alonzo, was characterised by his contemporary methods, resulting in a film “which doesn’t draw attention to itself in any expressionistic manner (unlike, of course, many of the ‘classic’ film noirs)”. Eaton asserts that Chinatown cannot simply be viewed as a “phoney reflection of the past”, but instead is relevant for its “romantic anxiety about the present”. Eaton, Chinatown, p. 50.

As such, Eaton asserts that Chinatown cannot simply be viewed as a “phoney reflection of the past”, but instead is relevant for its “romantic anxiety about the present”. Eaton, Chinatown, p. 50.

Ian Scott also contests Jameson’s argument, asserting that Chinatown is a predicative text in filmic, social and economic terms and thus concerns the future rather than the nostalgic past. Scott argues that the film is not a nostalgia film as it presents a cityscape that “is really a precursor to the transformation of L.A. in a number of more contemporary pictures”. Scott, “Either You Bring the Water to L.A. or You Bring L.A. to the Water”: Politics, Perceptions and the Pursuit of History in Roman Polanski’s Chinatown’, European Journal of American Studies, 2.2 (2007), p. 4.

While the film makes no mention of Hollywood, a peculiarity considering the film is set in LA during a time in which the film industry was booming, the film is nonetheless “self-reverential by virtue of and in connection to its cinematic heritage”, particularly given the prominent casting of noir-icon John Huston as Noah Cross. This cinematic legacy

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66 Eaton, Chinatown, p. 50.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p. 51.


70 Ibid., p. 6.
continues to exist given the way in which later films have referenced *Chinatown’s* cinematography in their use of “effusive colors and hues; light and darkness matched and constrained by primary pallets”, further evidence of *Chinatown’s* “contemporary cinematic relevance” according to Scott. Scott also suggests that *Chinatown* provides a “prophetic vision of L.A. to come and a resemblance of the developments and personalities that have dominated recent times rather more than the depression era”, arguing that the LA depicted in *Chinatown*, consisting of “drought-laden and disused riverbeds, together with and mapped onto the final scene’s garish, neon juxtaposition of the eponymous neighbourhood”, is closer in resemblance to the dystopia of *Blade Runner* than to a traditional depiction of LA. Nonetheless, the film’s mythic representation of LA has come to be tied up with the city’s actual history; Scott indicating that the fictitious interpretation of LA’s past as depicted by the film has come to be more “emblematic of the state’s past” than the actual events which served as *Chinatown’s* original thematic inspiration. It is for this reason that Davis deems film noir as being the “surrogate public history” of LA. Although Scott attempts to break the link between *Chinatown* and the theory of postmodern culture posited by Jameson, this argument only further strengthens the link between the two. Jameson suggests that late capitalism has resulted in a “new depthlessness”, in which reality comes to be replaced by a series of images, or “simulacra”. As such, postmodern

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72 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

73 Ibid., p. 6.

74 Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 44.

society’s understanding of history is weakened, a product of which, according to Jameson, is the nostalgia film. The fact that the LA of Chinatown has arguably replaced the city’s actual history demonstrates its link to Jameson’s loss of historicity.

Similarly, the relationship between Jameson’s work and Blade Runner has also been a topic of discussion. Giuliana Bruno argues that the “postmodern condition is characterized by a schizophrenic temporality and spatial pastiche”, of which Blade Runner’s cityscape provides example. Thus it is no surprise, as Bruno indicates, that “Jameson has derived his view of postmodernism from the field of architecture”. David Harvey shares this view, and both he and Bruno read the LA of Blade Runner as a form of pastiche:

Architectural designs are a post-modern mish-mash – the Tyrell Corporation is housed in something that looks like a replica of an Egyptian pyramid, Greek and Roman columns mix in the streets with reference to Mayan, Chinese, Oriental, Victorian and contemporary shopping mall architecture.

Bruno also notes the significance of Orientalism within this cityscape, stating that the “explosive Orient dominates, the Orient of yesterday incorporating the Orient of today. Overlooking the city is the ‘Japanese simulacrum,’ the huge advertisement which alternates a seductive Japanese face and a Coca Cola sign”. Harvey cites this Oriental presence as an example of the effects of late capitalism in which “third world systems of labour organization and informal labour


77 Ibid.


79 Bruno, ‘Ramble City’, p. 66.
practices are everywhere” and sub-contracting is rife, given that “scales for a genetically produced snake are produced in a tiny workshop, and human eyes are produced in another (both run by Orientals [sic])”.  

Bruno and Harvey’s analysis provides an indication that a postmodern reading of Blade Runner is able to account for the Orientalism prevalent in the film.

However, critics have also questioned the view that Blade Runner’s cityscape is the epitome of postmodernism. As discussed above, Davis views Blade Runner’s LA as an extension of the city in Lang’s Metropolis, which in itself was a projection of the modernist vision. Similarly, Scott Bukatman indicates that while Blade Runner is not an example of the modernist “rational, planned city of efficient circulation and International style”, as exemplified by the likes of Le Corbusier, this does not altogether disqualify it from being modernist:

*That modernism is indeed rejected by Blade Runner, while the modernist experience of the city … disordered, heterogenous, street-level – is revisited and renewed… The city has existed in cinema as a place of delirious chaos, alienation, resistance and even improbable liberation. This city once again finds eloquent voice in Blade Runner.*

It is important to note that although Bukatman’s modernist reading of Blade Runner is persuasive, it neglects to account for the prominence of Oriental motifs within the film. Stephen Rowley indicates that the unattractiveness of Blade Runner’s cityscape is central to its modernity. He states that the “film’s apparent abhorrence of the disorderly city is a manifestation of the same quest for order that underlies modernist urban planning… Blade Runner is not so much a

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80 Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p. 311.

postmodern vision, as an old fashioned modernist view of what to avoid”.  

Similarly to Bukatman, Rowley provides a convincing modernist account of Blade Runner’s cityscape; however, his reading fails to address the full implications of the city’s Oriental landscape. Although the aim of this thesis is not to distinguish Blade Runner’s city as either modern or postmodern, it is important to note that scholars writing on it as an example of modernism neglect to account for the heavy presence of Oriental motifs. In comparison, a postmodern reading of Blade Runner not only takes into account the Oriental aspects of the film—it is also able to provide an explanation for them. Such a reading posits the film’s Oriental presence as a product of late capitalism, and in doing so identifies the centrality of Orientalism as a trope of urban decay.

While by no means an exhaustive account, this chapter has provided an outline of the theoretical works considered most relevant to this thesis. The following chapter examines how East Asia is represented in traditional film noir, providing close analysis of how Oriental motifs function within several films.

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CHAPTER 2

In this thesis I am arguing that in the tradition of film noir, Orientalism is a prevalent signifier for depravity and decay. This chapter examines how six examples of film noir represent East Asia through their use of Oriental motifs. Both *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown*, as cinematic pastiches of film noir, may be seen to share the discourse of these films in their portrayal of East Asia.

**Orientalia in *The Maltese Falcon***

In *The Maltese Falcon*, particular emphasis is placed on orientalia. Early in the film Sam Spade examines a hat belonging to the smuggler O’Shaughnessy. A close-up shot shows a label stating “Queens Road, Hong Kong” on the hat’s interior (see Figure 1). As King notes, a “brief motif of suspicious music plays: the hat reveals that O’Shaughnessy has spent time in Asia, and that she has likely lied to Spade. ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘lying’ are now associated with one another”. 83

**Figure 1**

![Image of hat with label](image)

83 King, *Lost in Translation*, p. 52.
Additionally, after knocking Cairo unconscious Spade discovers a series of coins with holes in their middle in Cairo’s pockets, reminiscent of “cash” coins once used in East Asia (see Figure 2). Even the Maltese Falcon itself, an exotic object for which its search results in numerous casualties, comes to be associated with the Far East when it is taken from the Hong Kong ship *La Paloma*. Collectively, Oriental motifs are used in the film as signifiers of dishonesty, danger and depravity.

**Figure 2**

![Image of coins and jewelry](image.png)

**Despotic jade and dive bars in *Murder, My Sweet***

Based on the Raymond Chandler novel *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), *Murder, My Sweet* depicts Philip Marlowe in the search for a stolen jade necklace. The jade necklace is portrayed as a deadly object due to its “exotic origins”. The search for it results in the death of three characters and Marlowe’s torture. The necklace, along with its corruptive properties, is associated with China: the necklace’s origins.

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owner Mr Grayle states that “the great rulers of the East have treated it with a reverence accorded no other stone… the Chinese government had a somewhat larger necklace which once brought as much as $125,000”. In the film’s conclusion, Marlowe declines to keep the necklace, stating that he “didn’t finish the job” and that “it’s wrong for his complexion”. Instead, he suggests to the police lieutenant Randall that he “give it to [his] girlfriend. Give it back to China”.

His reply suggests that the only choices are to give it away to a girlfriend who can wield its sexual power and perhaps still be restrained by the patriarchal chain, to send it back to its origin and those incestuous rulers of the East, or be strangled by its deadly powers.\textsuperscript{85}

Later in the film Marlowe visits the Coconut Inn, a bar that he terms a “crummy rum joint”. The bar scene opens with actress Bernice Ahi, dressed in a Chinese-style silk gown and headpiece, performing a Thai-style dance to Oriental music (see Figure 3). Ahi’s attire is clearly symbolic of the Eastern Orient, and thus her role evokes a deep sense of exoticism surrounding the Far East. The Coconut Inn is portrayed as a sleazy dive bar, and it is no coincidence that it is from here Marlowe is taken by gangsters and then tortured and drugged. Oliver and Trigo argue that:

\begin{quote}
We can diagnose the recurring Orientalism in \textit{Murder}, from the Coconut Beach Club’s allusion to the South Pacific to the jade revered by the rulers of the East, as the return of the repressed otherness and ambiguity inherent in the identity formation of “the West.” While the rulers of the East know the proper value, the invaluable value, of jade, which they revere, this indeterminate jewel is a threat to the West.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

Thus, Oriental motifs come to be a sign of decay and immorality within the film’s \textit{mise-en-scène}. As such, these values come to be associated with the Far East.

\textsuperscript{85} Oliver and Trigo, \textit{Noir Anxiety}, p. 45.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
The Big Heat (1953) and Chinese takeaway

The Big Heat features several prominent depictions of urban decay. One significant example occurs in the scene where Bannion’s investigation takes him to a car yard. Upon leaving he is stopped by the car yard’s secretary. Bannion, on the exterior of the car yard, is shot standing behind a metal wire fence (see Figure 4). Within the car yard are numerous broken down and deteriorating cars lined in rows, reminiscent of the layout of a graveyard (see Figure 5). This is emblematic in that at the time of the film the automobile was a symbol of success and industrial progress. In taking this emblem and representing it in a metaphor for death, the film provides comment on issues of industrial decay. Such depictions of decay come to be tied in the film to Oriental tropes, attaching the Far East to urban and social degeneration.

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In its portrayal of decay, *The Big Heat* utilises an Oriental signifier in order to depict the depravity of the city in which it is set. Leaving “The Retreat”, a nightclub run by gangsters, staffed by dancing girls and frequented by gamblers, protagonist Bannion exits onto the street. The buildings lining the street are covered in neon lighting advertising bars, liquor and dancing girls; all questionable establishments associated with lowlife. As the scene ends, Bannion
stops out the front of a Chinese restaurant to hail a taxi (see Figure 6). This is not only alluded to by the building’s Oriental architecture but also directly stated on its sign. By placing Chinese symbols upon an otherwise unremarkable restaurant the establishment is made to appear to be of doubtful character. The inclusion of such a restaurant on the set of this street associates Chinese culture with the criminal underworld.

Figure 6

Disorientation in Chinatown in *The Lady From Shanghai*

From the opening of *The Lady from Shanghai*, China is established as a locale denoting immorality. Elsa Bannister, the femme fatale of the film, states she is from Cheefoo, a Chinese coastal city now known as Yantai, which she describes as the “second wickedest city”; the first, according to her, being the Sino-Portuguese city of Macao, a city here emblematic of a corrupt Chinese culture of crime, particularly gambling and prostitution. Elsa also indicates that she worked in Shanghai. While refusing to disclose in what professional capacity she worked
there, Elsa’s assertion that “you need more than luck in Shanghai” is indicative of a traumatic experience. These assertions function to establish Chinese Orientalism, particularly with regards to physical location, as a signifier of lawlessness and immorality.

As the film develops, Chinese values are presented as conflicting with those of the West. When asked by O’Hara whether she believes in love, Elsa states:

I was taught to think about love in Chinese... The Chinese say, it is difficult for love to last long. Therefore, one who loves passionately is cured of love, in the end.... There's more to the proverb: Human nature is eternal. Therefore, one who follows his nature keeps his original nature, in the end.

The role of Elsa’s proverb is twofold. On the surface it functions as a piece of Confucian-style sage wisdom, constructing a clichéd representation of the Orient. Even when read on its own, the proverb’s meaning is difficult to ascertain given its circular logic, a theme which runs throughout the entirety of the film. The viewer’s ability to make sense of Elsa’s proverb is further hindered in the film by O’Hara’s constant interruptions during the proverb’s recital, creating additional ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the Chinese proverb. This presents the Orient as not only exotic but also confusing and inexplicable, establishing its foreignness and otherness. Upon closer reading, the very meaning of the proverb my be seen to construct a binary opposition between the values of the Chinese Orient and America:

Elsa throws up a different, less comforting philosophy of love – that of immersion and “cure” through satiation… It’s as if the Chinese turn American ideals on their head: permanence in love is contrasted with

88 King, Lost in Translation, pp. 73-74.
short-lived love. Being able to change human nature (the American ideal) is contrasted with following out for ever what one is, even if one is evil.\textsuperscript{89}

Thus the Chinese Orient, and the values it encompasses, are presented as corruptive and contrary to those of the West. While initially made evident through Elsa’s Chinese proverb, the overall pervasiveness of Chinese ideals within American culture is further constructed in the film through physical setting.

The film’s closing scenes in San Francisco’s Chinatown affirm such a reading. Having escaped his trial for murder, O’Hara flees to Chinatown. Set design and camera technique function to establish Chinatown as an unsettling location for the viewer:

Mike runs frantically through the streets, bewildered by a torrent of Chinese signs. Storefront signs, advertisements painted onto shop windows and hanging meats and Chinese herbs dominate the frame. Some of the film’s editing lends formal emphasis to Mike’s disorientation with slight violations of the 180-degree rule. Abrupt changes of camera position, from ground-level to high-angle shots taken above the crowded streets, add to the sense that Mike is lost in a maze.\textsuperscript{90}

This is compounded by the lack of subtitles for conversations held in Chinese within Chinatown, confusing the (presumably English-speaking) audience further and contributing to the depiction of Chinatown as impenetrable chaos.

O’Hara eventually takes shelter within a Chinese opera. The police officers pursuing him enter the Chinese theatre via its main entrance, where they are powerless to interrupt the performance in order to conduct their search, and unsuccessful in locating O’Hara within the crowd. In contrast, a trio of Chinese


\textsuperscript{90} King, \textit{Lost in Translation}, p. 71.
mobsters enter the theatre through its back door and proceed to turn off the theatre’s lights, disrupting the entire performance. They locate O’Hara immediately and kidnap him. This scene portrays the police, symbols of formal, American justice, as powerless and blind within Chinatown, unable to fulfil their normal social role of upholding the law. The Chinese mobsters, however, as symbols of injustice, are immediately able to achieve their objective within Chinatown. As a result Chinatown, a physical embodiment of Oriental culture, is literally rendered lawless, running contrary to the values of its surrounding American environment.

**China’s Tower of Babel in The Shanghai Gesture**

*The Shanghai Gesture* contains an overwhelming number of direct references regarding Western preconceptions towards East-Asian Orientalism. This may be seen in statements made by both Western and Chinese characters (all of whom are nonetheless played by Western actors). For example, one Chinese character states, “Not all Chinese are like me, there are decent ones” and “I have five wives… and I’m looking for number six”. Both statements function to associate the Chinese with depravity. This is elaborated in statements made by Western characters. For example, one female character (Poppy) states, “I’ve always wanted to meet a Chinese gentleman… You’ll protect me monsieur”, implying a person is in need of protection when in the company of the Chinese, and “Asiatics insist on trying to speak English”, a declaration expressing the primitive nature of the Chinese that is met with universal laughter by all Western characters who hear it.
What is most worthy of discussion is the film’s portrayal of the Far East within its urban setting. The film opens with text explaining the context of the film. It describes Shanghai as “a distorted mirror of problems that… grew into a refuge for people who wished to live between the lines of law and customs – a modern Tower of Babel”. The film then transitions to a ground-level shot on the streets of Shanghai. The urban environment is chaotic, reminiscent of a cluttered maze. Streets branch off in all directions. Rubbish, people and animals clog the roads. Signs, smoke and fog fill the air, not dissimilarly to the street-level aesthetic of *Blade Runner*. A white traffic conductor, the lone representative of order within the street, is clearly unsuccessful in his attempts to bring about stability amongst the chaos of the Orient. The conductor is seen to accept bribes, an indication to the corrupting nature of the Shanghai streets, later described as a “cesspool of the Far East”.

The degenerative qualities of “Chinatown” within Shanghai are made further evident when Madam Gin Sling’s casino is bought out by Charteris. Her only options are to “close up or open in the Chinese district”, the latter alternative one she refuses to consider. As the corrupting qualities of the British quarter of Shanghai have already been established by this point in the film, Madam Gin Sling’s rejection of “Chinatown” portrays it as the epitome of immorality and urban decay.

In one instance the film does question such a reading of the Orient. In a closing scene of the film:

Mother Gin Sling opens the curtains of her dining room to reveal some entertainment staged outside in the streets: girls in wooden cages on ropes
are being hoisted above a vast crowd as they are auctioned off to the highest bidder. She informs her astonished guests that the spectacle is not a real auction but rather only a show “staged purely for the tourists… Shanghai has to live up to its reputation”.\(^91\)

This sole scene provides an indication that all may not be what it seems with regards to Oriental culture as portrayed in the film. The fact that an act of barbarity, seemingly befitting the Orient portrayed in the film, is in actuality staged in order to allow Shanghai to live up to its reputation for Western tourists provides an indication that the Western characters’ perceptions of the Orient may also be false. This is somewhat affirmed in the film’s closing in which Gin Sling, the Chinese native, is revealed to have the upper hand over each of her Western counterparts. This is reiterated in the film’s closing:

Sir Guy Charteris pauses to make a patronizing remark to one of his host’s henchmen. In mock Pidgin English, he asks, “You likee Chinese New Year?” The thug responds with the same inflection, “Yes, I likee.” Later in the film Charteris wanders stunned into the midst of the Chinese New Year celebration, his daughter Poppy having just been shot by her own mother. The henchman turns to Charteris and delivers the film’s final line of dialogue: “You likee Chinese New Year?” The tables have been turned.\(^92\)

Thus the film concludes with a revelation of the superiority of the Chinese over their Western counterpart in terms of a power relationship, a complete reversal of the binary racial roles upheld throughout the majority of the film. Nevertheless, even radically reversing the binary does not destroy its power: the Orient is still “other”, still a rhetorical device rather than a complex, lived reality.

\(^{91}\) King, *Lost in Translation*, p. 65.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.
The Big Sleep and the moral decay of LA

The Big Sleep may be read as a clear predecessor to both Blade Runner and Chinatown in the link it creates between the cityscape of Los Angeles and Orientalism. The film is set in Los Angeles and is noted for its perpetual darkness and rain, factors clearly evident in the Los Angeles of Blade Runner. It comes as no surprise that scenes from Blade Runner were shot on the same Old New York Street set, a back lot area of The Burbank Studios, that was used in The Big Sleep and also The Maltese Falcon. The film functions to establish Los Angeles as a locus of corruption and decay, and this is just as evident in the subject matter of the film as it is in its actual physical locations. Illegal casinos, pornographic studios and abandoned office complexes feature as locations in the film. There is a noted absence of skyscrapers and lofty shots emphasising the vertical height of the city, with the film instead unfolding at ground-level, a metaphorical rendering of the lowlife Marlowe is involved in with his investigation.

The film utilises Oriental motifs in order to signify urban and social decay. This is most recognisable in the house of Geiger, a homosexual, pornographer, and operator of an illegal pornographic store:

Marlowe enters through a window to find Geiger dead on the floor while Carmen Sternwood, “high as a kite” and wearing a silk Chinese dress decorated with metallic dragons, is posed in a Chinese armchair. The room contains a beaded curtain, a silk tapestry embroidered with Chinese calligraphy, and an oriental rug. Incense wafts from a bronze bowl

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mounted on a wall. One object dominates several shots: a chipped, wooden Buddha head that looks to be of Thai origin.\(^95\)

Within the Buddha statue is a camera—Sternwood’s daughter has found herself on the set of a pornographic photography shoot (see Figure 7). It is directly evident how in this moment Oriental objects are used as symbols of depravity. In order to fully grasp the role of Orientalism in this instance, however, the scene is best read in conjunction with the novel upon which it is based, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939). In Chandler’s novel, Marlowe visits Geiger’s rare bookstore, a cover for his pornographic store. The first description of the store is that it contains “Chinese screens” and “a lot of oriental junk in the windows”.\(^96\) Immediately the store’s Oriental façade functions as an advertisement of its depravity to the outside world.

**Figure 7**

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\(^95\) King, *Lost in Translation*, pp. 54-55.

In Chandler’s novel, the interior of Geiger’s house is described as having:

Brown plaster walls decked out with Chinese strips of embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames… a thick pinkish Chinese rug in which a gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap… lamps with jade-green shades and long tassels.

Again, the Orientalist connotations here are clear. While in the filmic version Carmen is found clothed, in Chandler’s text she is found “wearing a pair of long jade earrings… She wasn’t wearing anything else”. By clothing Carmen in a Chinese-style gown, the film adheres to the censorship laws of the time while reinforcing an Oriental motif that has come to stand in for all that which is exotic and degrading (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

As is made evident by these films, it is clear that Oriental motifs feature prominently in traditional film noir. Such motifs function as signifiers of depravity, lowlife and moral decay within the urban spaces in which these films

97 Chandler, The Big Sleep, pp. 34-35.

98 Ibid., p. 35.
are set. Given both *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown* draw stylistic inspiration from such films, they may be seen to share the discourse of these films in their portrayal of East Asia. The following chapter will address how Oriental motifs come to feature in *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown*, and the resulting Orientalisation of characters and cityscapes in each film.
CHAPTER 3

Similar to the films discussed in the previous chapter, both *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown* feature prominent Oriental motifs within their cityscapes.

Additionally, both films involve the Orientalisation of characters. As such, these characters come to be attached to the Far East and the values signified by it.

**Ethnic diversity in *Blade Runner*'s LA**

Such a predisposition towards an East Asian Orientalised cityscape is clearly prevalent in the cityscape of *Blade Runner*, with multiple critics noting the heavy presence of Oriental motifs within the film’s *mise-en-scène*. Giuliana Bruno even goes so far as to state that the “Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* is *China(in)town*”.

Ridley Scott claims his depiction of Los Angeles in 2019 is one of cultural and ethnic diversity. The director himself states that in the future he believes:

> That’s what’s going to happen. I think the influence in L.A. will be very Spanish, with a big cross-influence of Oriental [sic]… I think various groups are developing today…What could happen in the next 40 years is that various of these groups will stick. And they will harden up, so that there will be religious, political, social, and just nut-case factions.

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100 G. Bruno, ‘Ramble City’, pp. 66.

Katherine Haber, the film’s production executive, echoes a similar sentiment. She explains that:

Every single secondhand store was looted by our wardrobe department to create the effect of a multi-national, multi-racial society… We had tons of punks, Blacks and Mexicans… a melange of absolutely every part of society you could imagine.102

On closer inspection, however, this purported multicultural landscape within the LA of *Blade Runner* is revealed to be mere empty rhetoric. Not only does the film contain no black characters, it also lacks visible Hispanic representation.103

**The Orientalisation of characters in Blade Runner**

The sole Latino character in the film is Gaff, played by Mexican American actor Edward James Olmos. Initially described as “a multilingual bureaucrat with Oriental skin, Japanese eyes, and blue irises”,104 Gaff was first conceived as an “American-Japanese-Mexican”.105 However, Olmos himself indicated he “began


105 Brooker, ‘Imagining the Real’, p. 222.
to feel that, despite his mixed blood, Gaff was more Asian than anything else” and so “asked Marvin Westmore to make up [his] skin in yellowish tones before every shot”. In *Blade Runner*’s original script Gaff is depicted as a “short Japanese guy” with “beady eyes”, and is accorded with assigned dialogue that did not make it into the filmic release, all of which is entirely in Japanese. Gaff’s most notable trait is his enthusiasm for origami that he crafts and leaves at particular locations, a trait which functions to further Orientalise the film’s lone Latino presence. Rather than referencing any actual ethnic reality, Gaff’s crafting of origami is indicative of how within the film Orientalism functions merely as a discursive device. It is a gesture at the inscrutable Oriental, the mysterious Orient.

The Orientalisation of characters is not limited to Gaff. Marvin Westmore, the film’s makeup supervisor, states that many of the film’s extras were “supposed to be Asians, so I came up with something called ‘Asian Blade Runner Blue’”, presumably a shade of makeup, indicative that such Orientalisation was an active component of the film’s production. The effect of this is made evident in the cityscape of *Blade Runner*, a dystopia saturated in East Asian signifiers, as Brian Locke explains:

The viewer's introduction to Deckard is representative of the film's saturation, to the point of absurdity, of Asian markers for its street scenes. First we see a close up of a blue and white neon Chinese dragon with a glowing red tongue darting in and out of its mouth. Then the camera pans down to the street level and into the heavy sidewalk traffic. Seated at a sushi bar, a white man with blond hair pours a cup of tea from a Japanese teapot, surrounded by a crush of Asians. Two of the patrons are Asian

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106 Sammon, *Future Noir*, p. 113-114.


men with white hard hats ringed with Korean writing. Near them sits an Asian woman with the word "Japan" stitched on the back of her jacket. It is raining. Many of the Asians on the sidewalk move by the camera holding Japanese paper umbrellas. The film ensures proper racial identification by outfitting their umbrellas with neon shafts, enabling the viewer to see their faces as they parade by the camera.\textsuperscript{109}

The fact that Deckard, the film’s protagonist, is introduced in the midst of such an overwhelmingly East Asian environment draws attention to the Oriental motifs prevalent in the scene. This is indicative of the overall significance of Oriental signifiers within the film’s cityscape, of which perhaps the most notable sign is the written word:

Much of the scene's Asiatic detail comes to the viewer through the pervasiveness of the written word. It is night; but the streetscape is crammed with so many neon signs that there is ample ambient light for reading. The signs are written in Asian characters. Just inside the window behind him is a constellation of red neon signs, all in either kanji or kana, one large sign in the shape of a medallion surrounded by an array of smaller ones. Inscribed within the central medallion are two giant characters in kana. Still more Asian writing fills the television screens in the window and promotion cards lining the bottom of the window. The camera cuts through the crowd to reveal Deckard in the midst of all this Orientalia, leaning with his back up against a television storefront window, casually reading a newspaper. The large neon array serves as a backdrop for the camera's close up of Deckard. His visage is bathed in the red light of the glowing Asian word.\textsuperscript{110}

It is worth noting that this is not the only instance in which Scott utilises a hyper-Orientalised environment in order to depict pandemonium. Mike Davis states that “Scott is notoriously addicted, c.f. Black Rain, to urban Japan as the image of hell”, and it is clear that through the prevalence of Oriental signifiers in its cityscape Blade Runner’s LA is intended to evoke similar feelings of negativity.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{109} Locke, ‘White and “Black” versus Yellow’, pp. 131.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., pp. 131-132.

\textsuperscript{111} Davis, Ecology of Fear, p. 360.
Orientalism in Chinatown

Similar to Blade Runner, the Orientalisation of Western characters plays an important role in Chinatown. Although not as obvious as the widespread use of “Asian Blade Runner Blue” in Blade Runner, this is nonetheless achieved through the use of makeup:

As the femme fatale, Evelyn is Polanski’s lady from Shanghai who, though Caucasian, is given an Eurasian quality by the make-up artist’s orientalization of her face (shaved eyebrows, monochromatic make-up) and by the way in which her face is shot, highlighting her high cheekbones.  

The association of Evelyn with the Far East extends beyond her physical composition. The concept of Chinatown as a whole, a representation of Chinese culture, comes to be “a quality or attribute that attaches itself to certain characters, like Evelyn (whose house servants happen to be Oriental as well)”.

For example, Evelyn is shown to have strong “ties to the Chinese immigrant community”. Mulwray’s butler is played by James Hong, a Chinese American actor. Her gardener is played by Jerry Fujikawa, a Japanese American actor. Her maid is played by Beulah Quo, an Asian American actress who founded the Association of Asian/Pacific American Artists, an organisation aimed at promoting the unprejudiced depiction of Asian American characters on screen, and who also co-founded the East West Players, an Asian American theatre organisation.

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113 Ibid., p. 946.

114 King, Lost in Translation, p. 77.
Coupled with her relationship to the Far East, the film associates Evelyn with sexuality. Evelyn first appears in the film while Jake retells a crude joke and, (unbeknownst to him despite his partner’s best attempts to alert him), Mulwray is present for it in its entirety:

The joke characterizes Chinese male sexuality as both different from and superior to occidental male sexual prowess. Intercourse is repeatedly interrupted by the Chinaman prior to climax in order to prolong the sex act. At the same time, it incorporates notions of sexual transgression through the white woman’s recognition that her white husband is “screwing like a Chinaman,” a recognition which supposedly betrays her intimate familiarity with the sexual habits of Chinese males. These associations reinforce the sense of otherness attached to Evelyn and Chinatown in this scene.\textsuperscript{115}

One of the most consistent aspects of the cinematography of \textit{Chinatown} is that the majority of shots are taken from the perspective of Gittes, rarely breaking from his point of view.\textsuperscript{116} This scene in which the joke is told “is the first instance (and one of only a very few times in the entire film) when the audience is given a different and a superior access to knowledge from that of the protagonist”.\textsuperscript{117} This unique break in privilege is indicative of the importance of this moment. The result of this scene is that Chinese Orientalism, the character of Evelyn Mulwray, and sexual depravity come to be tied together.

The sexualised depiction of Evelyn Mulwray extends beyond Gittes’s crude joke. From the outset of the film it is implied that Evelyn and Hollis Mulwray have an open relationship. Gittes is initially employed by Ida Sessions, an actress impersonating Evelyn, to investigate an affair her husband is having. While this is


\textsuperscript{116} Eaton, \textit{Chinatown}, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
later proven not to be the case, the fact that Evelyn can be impersonated by a presumably cheap actress for hire such as Sessions, whose surname implicitly suggests she is a sex worker, raises questions of Evelyn’s fidelity. Furthermore, Evelyn later has sex with Gittes, the detective investigating the recent murder of her husband, soon after her husband’s death. Finally, in the film’s conclusion, it is revealed that Evelyn has borne a child out of incest. Not only is the overt sexuality of Evelyn consistent with that of the femme fatale of film noir but, given her explicit link to Chinese culture, it functions to associate the Far East with sexual depravity and promiscuity. Of course, she is also a victim, but that does not change the force of the sexualized binary that implicitly Orientalises her as a site of decadence.

As aforementioned, the character of Evelyn bears significant similarity to that of Elsa Bannister in *The Lady from Shanghai*, providing further example of film noir pastiche in *Chinatown*. From the outset, Elsa is portrayed as both immoral and Chinese, intertwining the two concepts. This link is affirmed when she engages in an extra-marital affair with O’Hara. Elsa also has strong links to Chinatown and its community, eventually even being “made to ‘look’ Chinese”—as Evelyn was in *Chinatown*—through make-up.\(^\text{118}\) In Elsa’s non-subtitled Cantonese dialogue with Chinese gangsters and her chauffeur Li, Elsa appears to be “unnatural in being close to the Chinese”.\(^\text{119}\) Her relationship with these Chinese figures may be compared to those of Evelyn Mulwray and her servants. Such privileged, foreign dialogue between Elsa and these characters “is unusual given that *The Lady from

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\(^{118}\) Kaplan, ‘The “Dark Continent” of Film Noir’, pp. 193, 198.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 198. Original emphasis.
Shanghai presents action mainly from the protagonist Mike’s perspective; the film takes place in flashback, accompanied by his past-tense voice-over narration".\textsuperscript{120} This moment in The Lady from Shanghai is similar to that in Chinatown when privilege shifts from Jake to Evelyn as she first appears, and draws attention to the relationship between Elsa, depravity and Orientalism. As a result of their shared character traits, both Elsa Bannister and Evelyn Mulwray function to link depravity and Chinese culture, both characters seeming to be “absolutely at home in all this Otherness”.\textsuperscript{121}

As in the works of film noir from which they draw inspiration, Oriental signifiers are prevalent in the landscapes of both Blade Runner and Chinatown. Through the Orientalisation of characters in both films such signifiers also come to be attached to the citizens of these cityscapes. As a result the depravity and decay signified by the Orient in traditional film noir is attributed to these characters. The following chapter will further address how East Asia comes to be represented in the cityscapes of Blade Runner and Chinatown, examining the spatial dichotomy of high and low in the urban spaces of each film.

\textsuperscript{120} King, Lost in Translation, pp. 69-70.

\textsuperscript{121} Kaplan, ‘The “Dark Continent” of Film Noir’, p. 195.
CHAPTER 4

As outlined in the previous chapter, Oriental signifiers feature prominently in both *Blade Runner* and *Chinatown*. As was also the case in traditional film noir, such signifiers are utilised as symbols of depravity and decay. This is perhaps most evident in the urban spaces of both films, a topic this chapter will discuss.

The dichotomy of high and low

Viewed through the lens of spatial theory, *Blade Runner*’s cityscape may be seen as a dichotomy of high and low. The film’s plot unfolds on both a vertical plane, as seen in Deckard’s visits to the heights of buildings, and on a horizontal plane, evident in Deckard’s rendezvous at street-level. This may be compared to “private eye” works such as Chandler’s, which depend, as Steve Carper argues, “heavily upon the split, socially and geographically, between the lower classes and upper classes” and feature detectives who “manage to move from one environment to another as a matter of course”.

Such a spatial interpretation of *Blade Runner* is relevant in providing an analysis of its underlying Oriental aesthetic. From a spatial perspective, the vertical and lofty attributes of a cityscape may be associated with utopian success, as Vivian Sobchack writes:

> These images emphasise the vertical, lofty and aerial quality of the city rather than its pedestrian and base horizontality. Indeed, equating “height”

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with the active reach of human aspiration, the “loftiness” of the city stands concretely as its most aesthetically significant social value.\textsuperscript{123}

In contrast, the horizontal and low spaces within a cityscape, such as its streets, “call to mind less positive modes of passive being: resignation, stasis, asphyxiation and death”.\textsuperscript{124}

Nonetheless, the vertical city may represent “neither highness nor fullness as positive values. Rather”, argues Sobchack, “both [can be] imagined negatively – and turned in on themselves to become lowering oppressiveness and overcrowdedness”.\textsuperscript{125} Essentially, while a city may be physically tall, its mise-en-sc\'ene is capable of making it appear, in Sobchack’s words, “debased and brought low”.\textsuperscript{126} Such a vertical city, she writes:

no longer aspires but suffocates and expires. Emphasis is not on the height of the buildings but on their baseness. Verticality is no longer significant – and the city’s horizontal dimension stresses its limitations, not its openness ... it is impossibly overcrowded ... People overflow the streets and most live and huddle in dark masses and clots on the sidewalks, in the alleys, and stairwells of buildings that all look like slum tenements... The mise-en-sc\'ene is dark, claustrophobic, polluted and dirty; as Robert Cumbow points out, in “its crumbling buildings and rotting cars were the beginnings of … junkyard futurism”.\textsuperscript{127}

Such a city, as described by Sobchack, bears close resemblance to LA as depicted in \textit{Blade Runner}. Although featuring a vertical and lofty cityscape, the urban space of \textit{Blade Runner} is nonetheless oppressive and claustrophobic.


\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 82. Original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 81.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., p. 82.
Orientalism through high/low in *Murder, My Sweet*

One example of how this spatial theory links to Orientalism may be seen in the opening scenes of *Murder, My Sweet*. Although set in Los Angeles—a city associated with horizontality—the film emphasises the vertical aspects of its setting and thus may be compared to *Blade Runner’s* overtly New York-like Los Angeles.\(^{128}\) The film opens in the top floor of a downtown police station overlooking a city street. The outside street, seen through the window of the police station, is comprised of well-lit, high-rise buildings (see Figure 9). As the scene closes, multiple shots of well-lit city streets appear, each of which is a linearly composed shot taken from either an aerial or eye-level angle (see Figure 10). Through such use of bright lighting and conventional camera angles, these moments function to emphasise the positive, utopian loftiness of central LA. As the scene ends, Marlowe states, “I just found out all over again how big this city is”.

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\(^{128}\) Scott initially intended to set *Blade Runner* in a “megalopolis” called “San Angeles”, for which New York served as the inspiration. The idea of San Angeles was eventually dropped, with Scott deciding to instead just set the film in New York, opting to change the location to the East Coast due to the presence of constant rain in the film’s city. “In fact, Syd Mead had had the Manhattan skyline in mind while creating his original preproduction designs, and Scott was eager to feature the Chrysler Building”. When visiting New York Scott used to fly in a helicopter over the city, landing on what was then the Pan American Building, a logo that is also displayed prominently on a building in the skyline of *Blade Runner’s* cityscape. These flights served as the inspiration for *Blade Runner’s* “Flying Spinner” scene. The film’s location was changed once more, finally being set in 2019 Los Angeles. Production coordinator Katherine Haber states that this “was due to the simple, pragmatic fact that we ultimately cut a deal to shoot on the Warner Brothers lot, in Burbank, and on a few locations throughout L.A. You couldn’t set a film laid in New York and then show Harrison Ford driving up to the Bradbury Building without people in Los Angeles laughing us out of the theater”. See Sammon, *Future Noir*, pp. 75-76, 97.
Marlowe’s office, revealed in the film’s second scene, is on the top floor of its building. An elevator is required to get to his office. Both provide examples of loftiness. Prior to zooming into Marlowe’s office through its window, the camera transitions to an oblique angled worm’s-eye view of a street. The shot looks up
from ground-level, at an unsettling sideways angle, at a series of unlit buildings and cables (see Figure 11). This shot functions as a transition from the built-up, uniform, well-lit vertical streets surrounding the police office to a dark, decaying, claustrophobic, low-lying street. The baseness of the shot is indicative of the location of the financially stricken Marlowe’s office, emphasising that it is located in a slum. Marlowe’s office is unlit save for the periodic flash of a neon sign in Chinese characters from an opposing building (see Figure 12). Coupled with the aforementioned shot, this functions to associate the Chinese Orient as a motif of seediness and decay. The Chinese sign has a complimentary relationship with the unsettling shot of the horizontal street: both function to assert lowness and accompanying lowlife.

**Figure 11**

![Figure 11](image-url)
High/low in *Blade Runner*

In discussing *Blade Runner*’s cityscape, obvious parallels may be drawn between it and the city in *Metropolis*, as David Desser notes:

Lang’s city, like the one created by Ridley Scott and company for *Blade Runner*, is characterized by its extraordinary expansiveness upward. Lang’s characteristic shot in *Metropolis* to demonstrate this is the sight of airplanes flying through canyons created by the skyscrapers. *Blade Runner* utilizes the same type of shot when we frequently see the police hovercrafts navigating the cityscapes.129

Thus it comes as no surprise that this city served as inspiration for that in *Blade Runner*, with special effects supervisor David Dryer stating that “[s]omeday I want to take shots from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and shots from *Blade Runner* and...”

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129 Desser, ‘Race, Space and Class’, p. 113. The entertainment district in *Metropolis*, described as a “house of ill-repute” and a “house of sin”, is named Yoshiwara. It is here that the worker Georgy “succumbs to the temptations of the city and the night”, resulting in his abandonment of Freder. It is also the location where evil Maria unleashes the “seven deadly sins”, starting the riot that spreads throughout Metropolis. Yoshiwara is a direct reference to the renowned yūkaku, or red-light district, of the same name present in Edo-period Tokyo. See J.E. Becker, *Yoshiwara: The Nightless City* (New York: Frederick, 1960). In the novel *Metropolis*, upon which the film is based, Yoshiwara is run by September, a man of Asian descent. The nightclub also supplies a drug Maohee, an allusion to opium, and Georgy “falls under its spell”: T. Harbou, *Metropolis* (London: Hutchinson, 1927), pp. 86-97.
run them back to back … I was even using stills from Metropolis when I was lining up Blade Runner’s miniature building shots”. The cityscape of Metropolis is particularly relevant in discussion of the dichotomy of high/low:

This space in Metropolis is also significantly politicized. The city dwellers who live above ground are contrasted to, and in conflict with, those who dwell beneath the streets. This dialectic above/below corresponds to the difference in class. The workers labor below, the upper classes enjoy themselves above.

This spatial depiction is also evident in Blade Runner. In both films the wealthy are seen to occupy “the upper strata of society, while the workers struggle below”. All the upper class present in Blade Runner live above the sixtieth floor of the city’s buildings. Eldon Tyrell, the head of the Tyrell Corporation, lives in the Corporation’s headquarters, resembling a 700-storey Mayan pyramid. It is worth noting that the Tyrell Building may also be compared to the Stadtkrone Tower in Metropolis, the city of Metropolis’s monumental building and central economic hub. The city’s police, “representatives of power and authority, spend most of their time in hovercrafts looking down on the city”. Even Deckard has an apartment on the 97th floor of his building.

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130 Quoted in Sammon, Future Noir, p. 111.

131 Desser, ‘Race, Space and Class’, p. 113. Such a class-based dichotomy of high/low in works of science fiction dates at least as far back as to H.G. Wells’s The Time Machine (1895), which depicts the underground “Morlocks” and aboveground “Eloi”. See H.G. Wells, The Time Machine (London: Flame Tree, 2013).

132 Bukatman, Blade Runner, p. 63.


134 Carper, ‘Subverting the Disaffected City’, p. 113.

135 Bukatman, Blade Runner, p. 63.

136 Desser, ‘Race, Space and Class’, p. 113.
Orientalism through high/low in *Blade Runner*

Given the heavy Oriental presence at street-level in *Blade Runner*, the issue of class may be seen to be analogous to that of race. Desser argues:

> The issue of race is conflated with the issue of class; we see that most of the workers who run the city (the very few we actually see) live among the teeming masses. Only the fortunate few, the wealthy and the powerful, can escape life on the surface. And the difference between the elite and the masses is visually dramatized by the spatial opposition High/Low. Here, the concept of the upper class is literalized.\(^\text{138}\)

Critics have noted that racism underlies this high/low dichotomy of *Blade Runner* in that white power figures occupy the upper strata of the city while the street-level is largely occupied by Asian figures.\(^\text{139}\) David Palumbo-Liu writes:

> Whatever “peril” might be posed by their numbers is vitiated by the fact that actual Asians are relegated to the ground level: power resides above, in super high-rise structures and in the various flying vehicles of the security forces that skim the surface, make arrests, and then lift back up again.\(^\text{140}\)

Palumbo-Liu’s reading is a valid characterisation of the ways in which Asian characters are represented in the film. Ground-level industry appears to be largely run by Asian people dealing in Asian products and basic technology.\(^\text{141}\) These Asian subjects, Brian Locke writes, appear as weak, aged, dilapidated and less than human:

\(^\text{137}\) Carper, ‘Subverting the Disaffected City’, p. 186.

\(^\text{138}\) Desser, ‘Race, Space and Class’, p. 113.


\(^\text{141}\) Yu, ‘Oriental Cities’, p. 57.
The sushi master is an old Japanese man. Chew is so shrunken from age that he looks like a piece of dried fruit rattling around in the heavy husk of his animal fur suit that protects him from the cold of his refrigerated work room. The wrinkled "Cambodian lady" (Kimiro Hiroshige, a Japanese name) who identifies a piece of physical evidence for Deckard communicates with a voice so ancient that it crackles like dry parchment.\textsuperscript{142}

Locke quotes Pauline Kael, who in her review of \textit{Blade Runner} was one of the first critics to note that:

The population seems to be almost entirely ethnic - poor, hustling Asians and assorted foreigners, who are made to seem not quite degenerate, perhaps, but oddly subhuman. They're all selling, dealing, struggling to get along; they never look up - they're intent on what they're involved in, like slot-machine zealots in Vegas... Deckard’s mission seems of no particular consequence. Whom is he trying to save? Those sewer rat people in the city? They're presented as so dehumanized that their life or death hardly matters.\textsuperscript{143}

This reading of high and low is limited, however, in that it ignores the pervasive Oriental influence present in the vertical aspects of \textit{Blade Runner}’s LA. In the film’s opening scenes a wide shot of the city’s skyline is shown in which there is “an enormous electronic billboard displaying a Japanese woman in stereotypical garb and makeup repeatedly swallowing a pill and smiling”.\textsuperscript{144} According to David Dryer, the film’s special effects supervisor, the film’s creators wanted to create an “oppressive feeling throughout the landscape” by presenting “a bunch of phony oriental commercials where geisha girls are doing unhealthy things. Smoking, taking drugs or whatever”.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{142} Locke, ‘White and “Black” versus Yellow’, pp. 132-133.


\textsuperscript{144} Yu, ‘Oriental Cities’, p. 56.

A similar image appears from above later in the film. When Deckard enters Sebastian’s apartment in the Bradbury Building, he looks up through its skylight. A medium long shot shows a blimp with two large video screens facing the street. Each screen displays a commercial featuring a “traditional geisha girl”. One geisha tempts the viewer with a glass of beer, the other seems to peer directly through the Bradbury Building skylight. Her gaze is aimed directly at the camera and meets “the viewer's eye, as if she were a live person looking back at the viewer”.147

In these two instances Orientalised images appear from directly above, among the heights of the city. The presence of Oriental motifs from the heights in the city recur throughout the film. For example, during Deckard’s fight with Roy Batty on the Bradbury Building’s rooftop a large neon sign for TDK, a Japanese electronics company, shines in the background. Similarly, a neon Atari logo is glimpsed during Deckard’s chase after Zhora. All of these images described are advertisements with an Oriental aspect, functioning to link East Asia with corporate LA. Thus, the Asian presence within Blade Runner is not restricted to street-level but has seeped into the very heights of the city, both literally and economically.

This trope of Asian corporatisation is made further evident in the film’s opening scenes. In an early scene of the film a blimp broadcasts the message from above street-level:

146 Sammon, Future Noir, p. 240.

A new life awaits you in the Off-world colonies. The chance to begin again, in a golden land of opportunity and adventure. Let’s go to the colonies. This announcement has been brought to you by the Shimago-Dominguez Corporation. Helping America into the new world.

This message from the Shimago-Dominguez Corporation, a seeming ode to zaibatsu-style conglomerates, provides a further example of the heavy Oriental presence in the heights of the cityscape and how this presence has seeped into wider society in Blade Runner as a whole. Sobchack posits this concept of “Off-world” as a part of a wider trend from an era of science fiction:

By the 1980s, the idealised and lofty science fiction city is imagined as completely decentered and marginalised. The citizens of dominant bourgeois culture are either “offworld” in outer space or in the suburbs… What results from this mass bourgeois abandonment of the city, however, is a peculiar and hallucinatory screen liberation for those “others” left behind. They are the dregs of bourgeois society: punks, winos, crazies, gays, druggies, Blacks, Latinos, new Asians, the homeless, the hipsters, the poor – in sum, everyone previously marginalised and disenfranchised in bourgeois urban culture.148

The fact that “Japanese corporations control access to this off-world”, and that this is made evident by their presence among the high points of the cityscape, is evidence of the all-pervasiveness of Orientalism within American society as depicted in Blade Runner.149 It is this Oriental presence that turns LA into not only a “ghetto” but the ultimate dystopia.150

The extent of the all-pervasiveness of such Orientalism is made evident in the Tyrell Corporation headquarters. At 700 storeys tall the building is both the highest point of the city and the furthest vertical point from the street-level Asian denizens. Nonetheless aspects of Orientalism can be seen to have crept in, as is

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149 King, Lost in Translation, p. 91.

evident in the orientalia present in the room. Tyrell’s dining table, at which Deckard conducts the Voight-Kampff test on Rachel, is lined with bonsai trees. Production designer Lawrence G. Paull states that Tyrell’s room was set up “to look like the Pope’s bedroom...The headboard was a $25,000 Chinese screen and the bed was two kingsize beds put together”.\textsuperscript{151} Tyrell’s room was styled as such in order to reflect “the character of the man. He was omnipotent, a member of a rich, powerful class who has so cloistered himself away from the masses that he literally ran his empire from a tower”.\textsuperscript{152} Given the visual reference to Vatican opulence, along with the traces of Orientalism, Tyrell embodies an ode to Oriental despotism.\textsuperscript{153}

**The horizontality of Chinatown’s LA**

In comparison to *Blade Runner*, *Chinatown* does not depict LA in the same terms of high/low. Instead, LA is presented as a horizontal, decentred and fragmented space. Such a depiction of LA bears resemblance to Jameson’s analysis of the postmodern Westin Bonaventure Hotel (in Downtown LA), which he describes as being “lateral”, “a complete world”, disjoined “from the surrounding city”, “marginalized” and “impossible to get your bearings in”.\textsuperscript{154} As such, it offers “a

\textsuperscript{151} Quoted in *Official Blade Runner Souvenir Magazine* (New York: Ira Friedman, 1982), p. 50.

\textsuperscript{152} Quoted in Sammon, *Future Noir*, p. 125.

\textsuperscript{153} Paull explains that a prominent feature of Tyrell’s room was the presence of large concrete columns. Material was draped from these columns so that the office “had a very religious kind of overtone to it”, adding further weight to the papal reference. See *Blade Runner Souvenir Magazine*, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{154} Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 39-43. It is interesting to note that the Bonaventure Hotel was initially considered as a location for Tyrell’s office in *Blade Runner*: Sammon, *Future Noir*, p. 125.
contemplative spectacle of the city itself, now transformed into its own images by
the glass windows through which you view it”, a phenomenon reminiscent of the
way in which the geography of LA may be understood by way of its cinematic
representations. 155 Soja, in his analysis of the hotel, indicates that it is by analogy
representative of the city of LA:

fragmented and fragmenting, homogeneous and homogenizing, diver- 
tingly packaged yet curiously incomprehensible, seemingly open in
presenting itself to view but constantly pressing to enclose, to 
compartmentalize, to circumscribe, to incarcerate. Everything imaginable
appears to be available in this micro-urb but real places are difficult to
find, its spaces confuse an effective cognitive mapping, its pastiche of
superficial reflections bewilder co-ordination and encourage submission
instead. Entry by land is forbidding to those who carelessly walk but
entrance is nevertheless encouraged at many different levels. Once inside,
however, it becomes daunting to get out again without bureaucratic
assistance. In so many ways, its architecture recapitulates and reflects the
sprawling manufactured spaces of Los Angeles. 156

The LA depicted in Chinatown resembles the Bonaventure Hotel as described by
Jameson and Soja (who in turn view the hotel as being representative of the city
of LA). Chinatown’s sprawling, fragmented portrayal of LA results in the city
being expressed in terms of its horizontality, what Jameson terms “lateral” space.

Chinatown is primarily shot at ground-level and eye-level camera angles are
employed to emphasise this, focusing on the occupants of its city rather than its
infrastructure. Spanish Colonial Revival-style buildings, as opposed to
skyscrapers, are the cityscape’s predominant architectural structure. Much of the
film unfolds on the city’s outskirts—its surrounding deserts, waterways, beaches

155 Jameson, Postmodernism, p. 43.

156 E. Soja, Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory
and orange groves—further emphasising LA’s disjointedness, compartmentalisation and horizontality.

**The horizontality of LA in traditional film noir**

Such a depiction of LA bears similarity to the city as it is portrayed in traditional film noir. Films such as *Sunset Boulevard, Double Indemnity, In a Lonely Place* and *The Big Sleep* all depict LA from its ground-level and feature few (if any) skyscrapers, let alone scenes within them. In *Murder, My Sweet* Marlowe travels to beaches and canyons on the city’s outskirts and in *The Big Sleep* he visits oil fields and the fictitious, and ironically named, fringe town of Realito, perhaps inspired by the actual Californian fringe city of Rialto. A key scene from *In a Lonely Place* occurs at the beach, while *Double Indemnity* involves a train trip from Glendale train station to Palo Alto, both small Californian towns outlying LA. The Dietrichson house in *Double Indemnity*, which the film’s protagonist describes as one of those “Spanish houses everyone was nuts about 10 or 15 years ago”, bears close aesthetic resemblance to the style of bungalows occupied by Curly and Ida Sessions in *Chinatown*. By utilising the city’s outskirts, and highlighting smaller, traditional structures as opposed to skyscrapers, these films emphasise LA as a horizontal, flat sprawl as opposed to the towering heights depicted in *Blade Runner*. While in *Blade Runner* the high/low dichotomy of the city reflects its social hierarchy, the horizontality of *Chinatown*’s LA suggests social equality, that all its citizens are on an even level. As will be discussed, however, the horizontality of *Chinatown* proves to be deceptive, as hierarchies still exist in this apparently inclusive and egalitarian landscape.
**Chinatown in Chinatown**

The very title of the film evokes notions of Orientalism, but the fact that its titular neighbourhood only appears in the last minutes of the film raises the question of just what it signifies. When screenwriter Robert Towne was asked if the film was to be set in Chinatown, he responded that “‘Chinatown’ is a state of mind – Jake Gittes’s fucked-up state of mind”.¹⁵⁷ According to Eaton, Towne got the idea from an ex-policeman who had previously worked in Chinatown:

> “You don’t know who’s a crook and who isn’t a crook,” said the cop. “So in Chinatown they say: just don’t do a goddamned thing.” ¹⁵⁸

However, Eaton’s account is contested by Barbara Leaming, who quotes Towne’s friend as stating that the “one place I never worked was Chinatown… They really run their own culture”.¹⁵⁹ Irrelevant of whether or not either account is factual, it is clear from the outset that the locale of Chinatown is intended to carry negative connotations. This is further built upon when it is revealed to be the site of trauma for Gittes’s repressed past, the place where he states that “you can’t always tell what’s going on there”. Ultimately, Chinatown is constructed as a place “where corruption, the unnatural, and the irrational reign, where reason has no force”.¹⁶⁰

In many ways however, the film’s title also proves misleading. While from the outset it is anticipated that the film’s crimes will have some link to the Chinese community, this proves not to be the case:

> The film’s red herring of a title plays on our expectation that these horrors – incest, murder, robber-baron economics – will be associated with the


¹⁵⁸ Ibid.


The values attached to Chinatown, and the Chinese community, are instead embodied by Noah Cross. In essence, Noah Cross is Chinatown—the incestuous, despotic Oriental stereotype described by Said. He “is entirely beyond the normal protocols of social interaction” and, in the words of Evelyn, “owns the police”. In this regard it is fitting that he be compared to Tyrell, the despotic figure of Blade Runner. Leonard Heldreth makes this comparison, stating that Cross’s glasses “are echoed in the thick glasses of Tyrell”. Thus the horizontality, and equality, of Chinatown’s LA is a mere illusion and, like Blade Runner, a social hierarchy may be seen to exist, at the top of which is Noah Cross.

Instead of providing an ironic critique of the Orientalism prevalent in earlier film noir, as some critics have suggested, in detaching these values from East Asia Chinatown inadvertently continues this tradition of representation. Though Chinatown as a locale is de-territorialised, through its terminology (China-town) these values are nonetheless still linked to the Chinese community. Though in the film Chinatown comes to represent a dark space within mankind, this space is

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161 King, Lost in Translation, p. 86.
162 Said, Orientalism, pp. 183, 205.
163 Eaton, Chinatown, p. 48.
165 See for example Naremore, More Than Night, p. 227; and King, Lost in Translation, pp. 86-87.
nonetheless attached to the Chinese. Instead, these values, the values of Chinatown, may be seen as corruptive to the city of LA in its entirety:

For Towne “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. So the film’s title is a metaphor for a city which itself often seems more metaphorical than actual.\footnote{Eaton, \textit{Chinatown}, p. 13.}

Chinatown is presented as a threat to the West, its contained social decay creeping outwards into the horizontal landscape of LA:

In addition, there is perhaps yet a more alarming peril, the invisible omnipresence of Chinatown throughout Los Angeles that threatens to expose a core of alterity upon which the Western psyche props its sense of self.\footnote{King, \textit{Lost in Translation}, p. 86.}

While not depicting the city’s social (and racial) hierarchy through the dichotomy of high/low, as is done in \textit{Blade Runner}, Chinatown’s LA is nonetheless hierarchical. The flatness and horizontality of its LA is deceptive as while suggestive of social equality, it is clear that Cross, the film’s Oriental despotic figure, is above this. Cross embodies the values of Chinatown which ultimately pose a threat to the West.
CONCLUSION

In summary, both Chinatown and Blade Runner may be seen to draw stylistic inspiration from the cinematic period known as film noir. One way in which they do so is through their use of LA, the quintessential “noir city”, as a setting. In their portrayal of the city, both films depict highly Orientalised cityscapes in which Oriental motifs function as signifiers of urban decay. Such a means of representation is not unique to these films but rather stems from traditional film noir. In their use of Oriental tropes, these films construct the Far East both as a stereotype of degeneration and as “the other”, and thus reinforce racist discourses.

Chapter 1 provided an outline of the theoretical works most relevant to this thesis, namely those related to film noir, Orientalism and LA as a cityscape. While debate exists over the validity of film noir as a genre category, it may be taken to refer to a specific period of cinema from which Chinatown and Blade Runner draw stylistic inspiration. The tradition of film noir offers a means of interpreting both the Orientalism of these films and also their cinematic representation of the city of LA. Although both films can be read from a modern or postmodern perspective, only a postmodern reading offers an account for the Orientalism prevalent in Blade Runner, and by extension Chinatown. Such a reading indicates the centrality of the (stereotyped) Orient and its imagery in depicting urban decay.

Chapter 2 examined how Oriental motifs function as symbols of lowlife in traditional film noir, citing specific examples within the mise-en-scène of The Maltese Falcon, The Big Sleep, The Big Heat, The Shanghai Gesture, The Lady
from Shanghai and Murder, My Sweet. In their use of Oriental tropes, each of these films link social and urban degradation to the Far East, an association that may be seen continue in Chinatown and Blade Runner.

Chapter 3 addressed the purported multicultural landscape of Blade Runner and the illegitimacy of this claim given the Orientalisation of characters in the film and the overwhelming prominence of Oriental motifs within the film’s cityscape. It found that the film contains no black characters and lacks visible Hispanic representation. The film’s sole Latino presence, Gaff, appears to be “more Asian than anything else”.168 Similarly, many of the film’s extras are Orientalised through the use of a shade of makeup termed “Asian Blade Runner Blue”. Such Orientalisation through the use of makeup is also evident in Chinatown’s Evelyn Mulwray, a character who closely resembles Elsa Bannister from The Lady from Shanghai. Due to their close relationship with their Chinese servants, both characters appear to have strong ties to the Chinese community. Through their overt sexuality, implied immorality, and association to the Far East, these two characters function to link depravity and the Orient.

Finally, Chapter 4 analysed the spatial dichotomy of high and low in the urban spaces of Blade Runner and how this comes to reflect the film’s racial hierarchy. At first glance the film’s Oriental presence appears to be restricted to street-level, however a close analysis of the film’s mise-en-scène indicates that Orientalism has crept into the uppermost parts of the city, in both a literal and economic sense. This is made evident in the advertising messages overhead, intended to create an

168 Sammon, Future Noir, p. 113-114.
“oppressive feeling throughout the landscape” by displaying “geisha girls…
doing unhealthy things”, and also the despotistic character Tyrell.\textsuperscript{169} Tyrell’s office and bedroom, situated at the highest point of the city, is decorated with orientalia and regal fittings intended to convey a sense of papal opulence. The design scheme of this room, coupled with Tyrell’s effective omnipotence, functions to portray him as both Oriental and despotic. In contrast, \textit{Chinatown} depicts LA in terms of its horizontality, but nevertheless a similar hierarchy may also be seen to exist in this film, for instance in the sinisterly powerful character Noah Cross. In his misdeeds Cross embodies the values attached to Chinatown. He is atop the social hierarchy of the film and thus may be compared to Tyrell. While certain critics have taken an ironic view of the film’s use of Oriental stereotypes, such irony does not resolve the problem of representation: by simply inverting a binary it is not abolished.

This thesis has raised several issues worthy of future research. One possible avenue is an investigation of how East Asian films that are inspired by traditional film noir come to portray the city in which they are set; how Oriental motifs within these cityscapes function; and how these films ultimately come to portray the West. Akira Kurosawa’s take on the genre, evident in films such as \textit{Stray Dog} (1949), \textit{The Bad Sleep Well} (1960) and \textit{High and Low} (1963), are candidates for such analysis. Similarly, while not characteristically film noir, Kurosawa’s \textit{Yojimbo} (1961) draws heavily upon one example of traditional film noir, \textit{The Glass Key} (1942), itself based upon the Dashiell Hammett novel of the same

name.\(^{170}\) When compared to traditional film noir, *Yojimbo* depicts a reversal of roles in which a Japanese village comes to be corrupted through motifs typically associated with the West (gambling, firearms and organised crime). Lastly, contemporary Japanese works such as *Akira* (1988) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) are also worth examination. Both films, heavily inspired by the tradition of film noir, depict decaying, Oriental cityscapes in terms of high/low. However, this begs the question of whether this decay is presented through the Oriental motifs in each cityscape or rather through the rampant capitalism underlying the city, ultimately representative of a Western economic influence.

It is evident that both *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner* rely on Oriental motifs in order to depict urban and social decay, and in doing so transform the LA in which they are set into a dystopia. As such, the locale of Chinatown, and its Chinese community, becomes a synonym for dystopia. While this form of discourse may stem from the earlier body of cinema from which these films draw stylistic cues, it is nevertheless a means of representation that is racist at its core. Recognition of this method of cinematic representation, not just in these films but also in the general tradition of Western cinema, is vital in order for change to occur surrounding modes of discourse regarding the Far East.

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Figure 2
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Figure 3

Figure 4
Lang, Fritz (dir.), *The Big Heat* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1953).

Figure 5
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Figure 6
Lang, Fritz (dir.), *The Big Heat* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1953).

Figure 7
Hawks, Howard (dir.), *The Big Sleep* (Warner Home Video, 1946).

Figure 8
Hawks, Howard (dir.), *The Big Sleep* (Warner Home Video, 1946).
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Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12