



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# The Long Goodbye

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Leigh Brackett was one of the few women to publish science fiction in the pulp magazine era, albeit under a gender-neutral byline. She was also unusual among contributors to *Amazing Stories*, *Planet Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction* in working as a screenwriter; her contributions to fantasy cinema extend eccentrically from *The Vampire's Ghost* (1945), an unusual B-picture based on John Polidori's seminal story 'The Vampyre', to the first draft of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). However, the oddest book-ends to her complicated career are that she has script credits on Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946) and Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Thus, Brackett helped adapt the 1939 and 1953 novels in which Raymond Chandler introduced and bade farewell to private eye Philip Marlowe (though Chandler dragged Marlowe out again for the hasty *Playback* in 1958 and the uncompleted fragment *The Poodle Springs Story*).

In 1973, the conventional reading of Altman's *The Long Goodbye* was that it was a critique of Chandler's worldview, just as Robert Aldrich had turned Mickey Spillane's fascist bully hero Mike Hammer inside out in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Altman's film is set in the smoggy, muted colour 1970s, photographed through a suitable haze by Vilmos Zsigmond, rather than the gorgeous, rainy noir-look monochrome 1940s of *The Big Sleep*.

Hawks casts Humphrey Bogart as Chandler's white knight of the mean streets. The star plays the role with a lip-curl and a smart mouth, trading sexually charged banter with every dame in sight – even a female cabbie perks up when Bogey slides into her back seat – and finally hooking up with innocent party Vivian Rutledge (Lauren Bacall) in a reprise of Hawks's earlier *To Have and Have Not* (1945) and the couple's real-life romance.

Altman's Marlowe is a shabby-suited, mumbling insomniac played by Elliott Gould, who can't even keep a cat, is treated as asexual by the stoned nude hippie chicks who live in the apartment opposite and is tagged as 'a born loser' by his only friend, who has ruthlessly exploited him to get away with murder. Bogart is always in control and keeps running into characters who engage in flirtatious tough talk with him as if they were playing verbal chess. Gould can't get anyone to play with him, except perhaps the security guard of a gated community (Ken Sansom) who only lets through people who identify his impersonations of old movie stars. On the few occasions Gould uses a Chandler line (cornered by two cops, Marlowe says: 'Is this where I'm supposed to say, "What is all this about?"' and he says, "Shut up, I ask the questions."') no one pays attention. Gould's Marlowe keeps muttering, and people ignore him or talk over his head or behind his back. If he went down a mean street, he'd step in something.

Brackett must have noticed Hawks and Altman both set out to betray Chandler in similar ways, transforming the author's distinctive world into playgrounds for auteur visions. Altman uses the script as a launch pad and encourages improvisation, highlighting random overheard snatches of talk (his sound mixes are fiendishly contrived to seem casual) at the expense of plot details. Crucially, both films tinker with the mysteries. Hawks was prevented by the Hays Office from having Vivian's nymphomaniac junkie sister Carmen turn out to be the killer – as that would have made Vivian, Marlowe's lover, an accessory to murder, which breached the production code – and calmly pinned the crime on someone else.

Altman, presumably not pressured by censorship, also exonerates Chandler's chosen culprit – in almost all the Marlowe books, the strongest female character turns out to be the killer, which eventually devalues them as whodunits – and makes the wretched Terry (Jim Bouton) guilty of murdering his wife, though Marlowe has suffered for believing in his innocence. Like Bogart, Gould shows a vigilante streak – personally and shockingly gunning down the hammock-lounging lunk, then dancing off to 'Hooray for Hollywood' on the assumption he can't be charged with murdering someone who has already faked their death and doesn't legally exist.

The oddest reaction to Altman's film, expressed in almost all contemporary reviews, is the assumption that updating Marlowe to the 1970s is somehow a radical notion. Only four years earlier, Paul Bogart's *Marlowe* (1969) was taken as a regular adaptation, though that has James Garner's tan proto-Rockford Marlowe share office space in the Bradbury Building with a gay hairdresser and set loose in a contemporary, counterculture-inflected LA he surveys with amused detachment.

Altman lacks Chandler's puritanism, but his Los Angeles is closer to the author's city than any other director. It's a world of all-night thrift markets that don't stock the brand of cat food Marlowe's choosy pet insists on, freeways stretching between distant nowhere-in-particular locales, enclaves of the unhappy and violent rich, crooked drying-out clinics where alibis can be purchased for a cash down-payment, crowded and scuffed police stations full of irritable folk (including David Carradine, busted for possession and ranting, 'Someday all the pigs gonna be in here and all the people gonna be out there').

John Williams (before he went over to the Dark Side) and Johnny Mercer provide a song that is literally heard throughout, in arrangements from muzak to Mexican funeral band, creating an unshakable earworm. An indulgence in the novel is Chandler's self-portrait in the person of alcoholic novelist Roger Wade. Altman compounds this by casting Sterling Hayden – an actor who was also a drunk, a novelist and a seaman, and who was wracked with lasting guilt over his showing before the House Un-American Activities Committee – and allowing him to write or improvise his own scenes, hijacking a section of the film for an unflinching self-portrait.

Altman teases readers familiar with the book by pausing briefly in a party scene where Chandler has Marlowe meet the major characters Linda and Dr Loring. The director holds the camera on two extras (one is Carl Gottlieb, screenwriter of *Jaws*) we might take to be the Loring, only to move on before they get a word in, shedding another whole strand of Marlowe's life (in *Poodle Springs*, Marlowe is married to Linda) while Wade/Hayden makes a scene. Gangster Marty Augustine (Mark Rydell) makes a point by smashing a bottle in his girlfriend's face and telling Marlowe, 'That's someone I love. And you I don't even like,' while diminutive quack Dr Verringer (Henry Gibson) slaps six-foot-six hulk Wade across the face in public and cows the bullish giant into paying a debt... these instances of facial assault, practically the only violent moments in the film before the punchline, echo the photos we don't see of what was done to the murder victim Sylvia Lennox and serve to ground the movie, making it hard to enjoy in the way we all love *The Big Sleep*. Hawks could poison Elisha Cook Jr, but he'd never have smashed a bottle into Dorothy Malone's face, forcing her to be masked and braced in later scenes. Jo Ann Brody, bleeding profusely, drifts through, not understanding what has happened, like some refugee from *Carrie*.

And yet, 40 years changes things. *The Long Goodbye* is a key film in Thom Andersen's montage movie *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and Gould's lost world has accrued its own nostalgic appeal – the apartment Augustine sneers at seems a desirable space, even without the sweet hippie neighbours – which mingles with nostalgia for a Hollywood that would greenlight such an odd project. Glimpsed among Augustine's gang of hoods is a young, unbilled Arnold Schwarzenegger – he strips off his shirt to show his pecs to balance the scenes in which Marlowe's neighbours do nude yoga in long-shots. Along with Williams and Gottlieb, the body-builder would ride changes in the movie business that made films like *The Long Goodbye* much harder to find within a few years of its release.

**Kim Newman, *Sight & Sound*, February 2014**

THE LONG GOODBYE

Directed by: Robert Altman  
©: United Artists Corporation  
Production Companies: United Artists Corporation, Lion’s Gate Films  
Presented by/Executive Producer: Elliott Kastner  
Produced by: Jerry Bick  
Associate Producer: Robert Eggenweiler  
Production Assistant: Jean D’Oncieu  
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson  
2nd Assistant Director: Alan Rudolph  
Script Supervisor: Adele Bravos  
Screenplay by: Leigh Brackett  
From the novel by: Raymond Chandler  
Photographed by: Vilmos Zsigmond  
Camera Operator: Joe Wilcots  
Key Grip: Ken Adams  
Electrical Gaffer: Randy Glass  
Edited by: Lou Lombardo  
Assistant Film Editors: Scott Conrad, Tony Lombardo  
Property Master: Sidney Greenwood  
Make-up: Bill Miller  
Music by: John Williams  
Sound Engineer: John V. Speak  
Dubbing Mixer: Richard J. Vorisek  
With Special Remembrance for: Dan Blocker

uncredited  
Production Company: Elliott Kastner Corporation  
Casting Director: Joan Tewkesbury  
Men’s Wardrobe: Kent James  
Women’s Wardrobe: Marjorie Wahl  
Hairstylist: Lynda Gurasich

Cast:  
Elliott Gould (Philip Marlowe)  
Nina Van Pallandt (Eileen Wade)  
Sterling Hayden (Roger Wade)  
Mark Rydell (Marty Augustine)  
Henry Gibson (Dr Verringer)  
David Arkin (Harry)  
Warren Berlinger (Morgan)  
Jo Ann Brody (Jo Ann Eggenweiler)  
Jim Bouton (Terry Lennox)  
Steve Coit (Detective Farmer)  
Jack Knight (Mabel)  
Pepe Callahan (Pepe)  
Vince Palmieri (Vince)  
Pancho Cordoba (doctor)  
Enrique Lucero (Jefe)  
Rutanya Alda (Rutanya Sweet)  
Tammy Shaw (dancer)  
Jack Riley (Riley, piano player)  
Ken Sansom (Colony guard)  
Jerry Jones (Detective Green)  
John Davies (Detective Dayton)  
Rodney Moss (supermarket clerk)  
Sybil Scotford (Sybil Tooksbury, real estate lady)  
Hubie Kerns (Herbie)

uncredited  
Leslie Simms (Olive)  
Leslie McRay (Lucille)  
David Carradine (prison cellmate)  
Arnold Schwarzenegger (muscle man)  
Kate Murtagh (nurse)  
Danny Goldman (bartender)  
Tracy Harris (detective)

USA 1973©  
112 mins

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Sun 23 May 18:30; Thu 27 May 20:50; Wed 2 Jun 14:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:30  
**Robert Altman, Outsider and Innovator: An Illustrated Online Talk**  
Mon 24 May 19:00  
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Mon 24 May 20:50; Mon 31 May 15:45; Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30  
**3 Women**  
Wed 26 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 20:30; Thu 10 Jun 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 15:00  
**The James Dean Story**  
Sat 29 May 15:30; Mon 7 Jun 20:50  
**That Cold Day in the Park**  
Sat 29 May 17:50; Tue 8 Jun 18:00  
**M\*A\*S\*H**  
Sat 29 May 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:00; Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40  
**Brewster McCloud**  
Sun 30 May 19:00; Sun 13 Jun 16:00; Fri 18 Jun 17:50  
**McCabe & Mrs Miller**  
Mon 31 May 18:30; Wed 2 Jun 20:45; Sun 20 Jun 18:30  
**A Perfect Couple**  
Tue 1 Jun 17:50; Mon 14 Jun 17:50; Wed 16 Jun 20:45  
**Images**  
Tue 1 Jun 20:50; Sat 12 Jun 15:30; Fri 25 Jun 18:00  
**Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean**  
Thu 3 Jun 17:50; Sat 19 Jun 12:30  
**Thieves like Us**  
Thu 3 Jun 20:40; Tue 8 Jun 20:30; Mon 21 Jun 17:50  
**Fool for Love**  
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