

# Introduction

## *The Long Goodbye*

**T**HE *LONG GOODBYE* begins with a beautiful picture of a man asleep: Elliott Gould playing the detective Philip Marlowe is shown stretched out and fully dressed on a bed, his deep breath a purr fueled by dreams, the lights still on, magazines and cigarettes hard by.<sup>1</sup> He has dozed off while reading and smoking. How fragile and vulnerable he could seem. Except that the camera's silent creep toward this bedroom scene, accompanied by soft jazzy music, conspires not to disturb a brief look at our protagonist, who remains safe and still, hugged in the oceanic comfort of slumber. All ideal movie detectives begin this way, passively but charismatically *there*, hard to get moving at first, but often dogged and even obsessive by the end; finally hard to stop. What gets Marlowe up and away from the calm shore of sleep is a cat leaping onto the bed, wanting his feed, and the detective wakes to find the day's first demand on his time. Before it introduced us to Gould's Marlowe on the bed, director Robert Altman's camera glided past a decorative plaque on the adjoining wall which is adorned with icons of Los Angeles including the famous HOLLYWOOD letters that beam their claim to artistic and industrial authority across the valleys etched below. This is a showbiz world of languor and late nights and lonely but comfortable apartments. We are already in a dream world looking at a dreamer.

It is also a world that announces itself as a world that is made, that is shown. It is a commonplace thought to see the activity of cinema as akin to that of the detective with its scrutinizing of things

and people and sights and sounds; but movies are not metonyms for detection, they *are* a form of detection. The camera and microphone are primarily instruments of selection after all, and what they select they detect, pull out of the world for special attention, point to. Marlowe may be at rest before his cat wakes him, but the camera is already on the move, already searching; it notices the plaque on the wall, the way that Gould is lit like an actor backstage waiting for his cue, and the way that the white wall behind his head, blank and broad and white like a cinema screen, is streaked with black lines, the signs of matches lazily struck by a lengthened arm behind and above one's head. Cinema is a detective too: what moves it to these recursive spectacles, this self-absorbed self-involvement?

What is it that moves us? What keeps us still? Is the desire for and pursuit of knowledge an exclusively animating force or can it paralyze the knower, erode their determination to know in some strange way? How does cinema connect to our desire to know, to hunt down knowledge and meaning? How does it show it to us? How does it calibrate and pattern the force and magnitude of our commitment? These are questions that I find most urgently addressed in the detective movies examined in this book. Is what we do only purposeful to us on the stage of the social, and does cinema, in its detective hunt for meaning, socialize what it selects? The solitude of our movie detective avatars seems to articulate their and our embeddedness in and separation from society. Their solitude is the ledge from which they see emerging enigmas more completely, but it isolates and distances them from the world that they must know intimately in order to apprehend its mysteries. Hence, perhaps, their reluctance to get started. We see movie detectives moved by their job as knowledge seekers, but this often gets all messed around as they find out more about what they purportedly wanted to know in the first place. Messed around by the world, by their own hesitation, as their picture of it enlarges and congeals into the frightening thing that they should have left alone. But then they seem to already have known that before they started their pursuit. How strange.

Again: what moves us, gets us going, prompts us to shift from rest to action? Why would we leave the pretty realm of sleep and stillness to do anything at all? Where does the pressure come from? What conscripts us from the recusant privacy of sleep? Sure, there are external demands—pets, job, loved ones; and internal demands—

appetites, a yearning for autonomy and freedom, the thirst for meaning. But internal and external are mixed up together too, as in the case of the search for love or for dignity or honor. Detectives search for the truth behind the mystery, for the inner that expresses and is expressed by the outer, trying to get at the way things work, at the secret of the world, its name. But they have their privacy too, their dreams. They don't come to that search all ready to go, eager and keen to tear back the curtain and set wrong to right. They are in various ways, *reluctant*. And then, after a time, they are, in various ways, determined, committed, obsessed: *true detectives*.

At the start of *The Long Goodbye* all this important stuff seems muted, otherworldly: we see only an easy dozing interrupted by feline need—not too bad, given all else that will come to pass. (What is delicious about the cat's role as a prime mover is how inconsequential it appears to be to the plot of the rest of the film.) Falling asleep smoking and reading in dreamy Los Angeles, home to the movies, to cool cats and their pets. At the end of the movie when he's solved the enigma and something like justice has been done, Marlowe is seen walking away from us in the distance, humming, lively, happy, half-dancing, all movement and far away as if this was the dream he was dreaming at the start of the film, as if the stillness of the dreamer enabled a dream of dance and song at its end. As noted before, behind Marlowe's sleeping form his white wall is marked by the curved lines made by matches being struck on it: it resembles the dirty white of a movie screen waiting for its thirst to be slaked with dream images.

This is a book about detectives and their eventual emergence as wholehearted pursuers of meaning in five *noirish* films: *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), *Vertigo* (also Hitchcock, 1958), and *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). Each of them explores the issue of what it takes to move a human being from a kind of reluctant, everyday passivity (a reluctant sleuth) to a mode of passionate engagement with the world (true detectives). It tracks our experience of these films in relation to that question of motivation and movement. For me these films more than most capture the compelling strangeness of thinking about and trying to discover why human beings are driven or moved to do anything at all. They concentrate this issue within dramatic patterns where murder, deceit, betrayal, and the threat of knowing (and not knowing) why people do what they do are critically important, just

as they also raise the issue (sometimes obliquely, sometimes directly) of whether it would have been better for their protagonists to stay in bed after all. But being a detective (or more broadly, a sleuth) is a job, and one can pursue one's job with vigor and enthusiasm or passive tolerance (or hatred and resentment). In movies we also can observe the work of observation, both of sleuthing as a job, and of cinema-making as the aesthetic force of the work of selecting views, sounds, and movements that give us (and hide from us) an angle on what is going on and why.

The films are also notable for the way in which they evoke peculiarly cinematic tropes, figures, and gestures in their representation of the detective's growing involvement. As the detective begins the work of finding out, of knowing, quite often the manifold apparatus of the cinema itself, including its fundamental relations of seer-seen/camera-object/spectator-screen (not an exhaustive list, but indicative), is *evoked*, especially in the framing and composition of shot, and especially in relation to whether characters are facing (looking at, observing something) the camera or turned away from it. This is not quite the same thing as a self-conscious or self-reflexive *assertion* of cinema and its relevance (as in the case of the Modernist artwork internalizing the processes of its own making); but it rather seems to emerge in these films when the process of finding out what is happening as a detective is aligned with the cinema's forms of knowledge which are, naturally, in the showing and seeing of objects and faces and settings. Baked into these evocations we might feel a tension between the materiality and automatism of the cinematic apparatus as it is ambivalently conjured and the fact or presence of intentional authorship or creativity. These moments of cinematic evocation offer a weak kind of self-consciousness (if such a thing is possible), a vague self-awareness not necessarily critical to meaning-making, not often there to be noticed at all, but something that registers on whatever we call the mentation associated with viewing movies, whatever it is that happens to us when we do that. One (admittedly paradoxical) way to frame it is as a kind of demotic or populist modernism, one that is so obvious we hardly notice it as seasoned viewers of audiovisual entertainment. (Perhaps we do not credit either the makers or the audience with the capacity to acknowledge or register such things.) The detective's growing involvement in the film's plot, and the emerging crystallization of what it is he/she wants, is somehow tangled up in such repeated

and surprisingly insistent evocative gestures.<sup>2</sup> The detective hunt of the camera/microphone apparatus can end up capturing itself, its own forms of being in its medium-specific locutions.

“Look, this isn’t my line. I’m supposed to be retired. I don’t want to get mixed up in this darn thing.” Scottie Ferguson’s (James Stewart) initial reluctance to tail Gavin Elster’s (Tom Hellmore) wife in *Vertigo* demonstrates the intuitive suspicion of the experienced sleuth. Scottie is a former cop, not a private detective, and Elster is an acquaintance he hasn’t seen since college; the latter’s spooky story about his wife’s mysterious behavior does not have the urgency of a murder or missing person’s case. But their discussion takes place in a room that is framed as a blend of a stage and a cinema, with Scottie himself as a kind of helpless spectator, vulnerable to the manipulations of a master storyteller.<sup>3</sup> It is only when Scottie later sees Madeleine (Kim Novak)—and notably sees her from a seated position, sneaking a look at her as she is “lit” for him artificially—that he begins on a journey that will leave him wholeheartedly obsessed. It is as if the evocation of cinema here is a solvent of reluctance. According to Robert Pippin, film noir “heroes are endlessly reluctant to act, and when they do, they are mostly responsive and often halfhearted.”<sup>4</sup> They do not stay that way, and what follows will explore the transition these heroes undergo from passivity, inertia, and caution to committed pursuit of the truth, justice, and love. Film noirs are fascinated by the transformation of reluctance and its spectrum of shadings (hesitation, caution, lethargy) into obsession and its often destructive consequences. I am treating the figure of the detective in an idiosyncratic way in the analyses that follow. What they share is a process whereby the arc of their commitment gradually evolves such that their separateness from the world becomes a kind of uneasy and dangerous inhabitation of that world. The job they have agreed to do, however reluctantly, becomes an obsession they must pursue, a quest to complete their picture of the world. And at the same time the films also create a picture of their picturing for the audience who follow them and are synchronized emotionally with this curve of rising interest and dedication.

Reluctance is the internal realization of unwillingness, the bringing to the front of the mind the desire not to act. It may be immediate and sharp—as in the response to a difficult command with which one does not agree; or ambient and dispersed, such as the reluctance to

do or continue to do a task that one knows one ought to be doing. Indeed, the pressure of “ought” carries precisely with it an internalized prompt to resist, with varying degrees of force. Reluctance is a form of behavior that can be observed but can also be invisible even to the person experiencing it. Why were you reluctant to do X? someone may ask, when X was not even a factor on the horizon of possibilities. And yet on reflection we may agree that, unknown to ourselves at the time, we were indeed reluctant for reasons we did not know but now do. Furthermore, one can be reluctant to do one thing while being strongly committed to doing another. Reluctance can shadow many of our actions, but as a category it is so diffuse, so applicable to such a spectrum of human (and nonhuman) instances that it acquires clear definition only by contrast with the activity which is its negation.

An aspect of the film noir is the way that reluctance of this kind is not only overcome, but often magically transformed by the leading detective into a fully embraced desire to uncover the truth. The private eye is approached to do a job and is immediately wary about accepting it. An index of his experience is his scenting that something is awry, doesn't sit right. But the money, or the girl, or some element piques his interest, and he goes ahead. At some point during the investigation there is a switch. No longer is he reluctant to take the case, but instead he has found the real reason behind the initial approach which is far more compelling than the case itself. The shift between the two is most emblematically pictured in the way a detective pursuing the case as just another job is suddenly transformed from a mere journeyman going through the motions to a human being propelled by a commitment to finding the truth at any cost. It is often said that this happens when the male protagonist catches first sight of the femme fatale, and as we shall see it is a moment so baked into the genre that other members of it can knowingly deny it to us. So, in *Out of the Past* Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum) seeing Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) walk into the bar in Mexico, or in *Vertigo* Scottie seeing Madeleine walking past him in the restaurant are often pointed to as moments of epiphany, a picture of “falling for the dame” in an instant (although as we shall see this is not quite true). Whereas *Notorious* starts by making a point of showing us that we *cannot see* the reaction of T. R. Devlin (Cary Grant) to Alicia

Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) since to begin with we see him only from behind in silhouette; *Chinatown* contrives the moment when the detective, J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson), eyes the woman (Evelyn Mulray/Faye Dunaway) as one of embarrassment and humiliation. In each of those films, in complicated ways, the detective has up to this moment taken the job in his stride as just another piece of work. From thereon, it is something more.

Hence, a reluctant sleuth finds himself a true detective by virtue of being held captive by an appetite in himself he did not formerly have or know he had. And by becoming committed to one thing, a person will ipso facto be reluctant to do whatever gets in the way of that commitment. What it means, then, to be a true detective in these films is not merely a matter of having of a strong work ethic or commitment to justice or truth: it is something more like philosopher Harry Frankfurt's sense of "making up one's mind" and becoming wholehearted:

Wholeheartedness . . . does not consist in a feeling of enthusiasm, or of certainty, concerning a commitment. Nor is it likely to be readily apparent whether a decision which a person intends to be wholehearted is actually so. We do not know our hearts well enough to be confident whether our intention that nothing should interfere with a decision we make is one we ourselves will want carried out when—perhaps recognizing that the point of no return has been reached—we come to understand more completely what carrying it out would require us to do or to sacrifice doing.<sup>5</sup>

And whatever internal authority, stable or not, we might impute to the fictional detectives we follow in these movies, they, too, are in the business of tracking the reasons why people do the things they do. Choosing detectives as a focus allows a concentration on a central aspect of Hollywood movies: their interest in and staging of characters in the midst of an enigma or puzzle about the *reasons* they are doing or wanting to do what they are doing or want to do. Rather than following legible chains of cause and effect, our experience of movies is far more an involvement in the drama of characters discovering, rejecting, deciding, ignoring, or obsessing over the things they want

or don't want, things that they believe or do not believe, desires that they follow purposively or without knowing what it is they have as a purpose, and yet acting anyway. As Frankfurt notes:

We are particularly concerned with our own motives. It matters greatly to us whether the desires by which we are moved to act as we do motivate us because we want them to be effective in moving us, or whether they move us regardless of ourselves or even despite ourselves. In the latter cases we are moved to act as we do without it being the case that we want wholeheartedly to be motivated as we are. Our hearts are at best divided, and they may not be in what we are doing at all.<sup>6</sup>

This is a familiar enough aspect of our own inner lives that it can be credibly deployed in movie fiction. Frankfurt goes on to discuss the matter of duration of a commitment, particularly when it comes to a time (or the repetition of the time) when that commitment is cashed out in action or inaction. For me, the matter of wholeheartedness, and its mysterious obscurity both as a secure, durable sense of having made up one's mind, and as a feeling or appetite for one action in preference to another, is an important aspect in general of these films. More than this, it is of course part of the *modus operandi* of the detective that he or she is skilled in figuring out what it is that motivates others to do what they do, especially given that many other characters are either deceivers or self-deceivers or likely both. And if the picture of commitment that Frankfurt outlines has any purchase on our experience of fictional characters, such motivation is likely to be obscure, provisional, or precarious at best. More than that, the detective protagonists even when wholehearted in their own made-up minds frequently encounter a further moment of transformation when the true nature of the world and its evil is made fully apparent to them. Any commitment stands to be drastically revised in the face of the now revealed truth. This is certainly pictured in *Out of the Past*, *Vertigo*, and *Chinatown* where late in their narratives the scale and depth of the evil ranged against the detective is shown to be deeper and more intransigent than previously assumed.

If any of this is descriptively accurate—if not to the noir genre as a whole, then at least to the films I am considering—an import-



ant question is why these works engage with the issue of, say, the duration of a made-up mind (*Out of the Past*), or of a commitment that undermines the fulfillment of romantic desire (*Notorious*), or a wholehearted commitment that seems perverse or pathological (*Vertigo*), or naïve (*Chinatown*). One answer from Robert Pippin is that the films are attempting to make “some feature of human life more intelligible that it otherwise would have been.”<sup>7</sup> He argues that “some films can be said to attempt to illuminate something about human conduct that would otherwise remain poorly understood. The point or purpose of such narrating seems to be such an illumination,” for example, “that a film noir’s credibility and illuminating power might throw into doubt that we ever really know our own minds.”<sup>8</sup> In doing so these films connect with and evoke their own powers of knowledge, modeling our shared sense of the desire to search for meaning. Domesticated, such a search may seem harmless, but once we associate it with the ultimate stakes of our shared evolutionary past, the tracking and hunting of prey, or of foe, we can see the danger. Perhaps our detectives apprehend all too well the consequences of involvement in tracking dangerous prey.

In *Out of the Past* Jeff Markham is notably cool about taking on Whit’s (Kirk Douglas) job to find the lover (Kathie) who shot him and stole his \$40,000; Jeff senses that something bad could happen to her if he finds her; only the money is good, plus expenses, so what could he say, especially in front of his partner Jack Fisher, who will also come to regret his eagerness to take on this case? And it is only when he sees Kathie framed in the arch of a bar in Acapulco that he becomes committed—but not to the job. *Notorious* is a symphony of reluctance: government agent Devlin has to drag daughter of Nazi spy Alicia Huberman into a realization that her patriotism demands practical allegiance to the national interest. And after they fall in love their shared discovery about what they both have to do in order to honor that allegiance produces a deadly dance between their commitment to each other, to their flag, and the Nazi organization Alicia has to infiltrate by marrying its leader. And despite Scottie saying that he does not want to “get mixed up” with the case of Gavin Elster’s disturbed wife and her unexplained wandering around the city in *Vertigo*, he, too, is swiftly absorbed into a world of obsession and death and repetition, like the others becoming self-propelled by his appetite to know the name of the world, its secret. And, on finding it out, he

is left paralyzed, suspended above it. Jack Nicholson's J. J. Gittes in *Chinatown* moves through the film with too much finesse, too much faith in his ability to compass the political corruption he imagines; what impedes him is a failure to realize the extent political and familial corruption are in the service of something transcendently evil. This way of figuring detectives continues into more recent period of noir on television. In *True Detective's* first season (2014), as in *Notorious*, the detective role is split between two central characters, cops Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) and Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey), the former reluctant to pursue a serial killer case to its end, the latter obsessive to the neglect of all else. That season paints a picture of detectives finding their "truth" in their capacity to work together, properly, outside the police system. Later seasons of the show circle around the theme of what it takes for human beings in great difficulty to find their true commitment in an apparently irredeemably corrupt world. In each instance, we see variations on the theme of commitment and hesitation, obsession and paralysis, often not as linear alternatives, but intermeshed and interacting as characters and their performers seek ways to demonstrate determination and its discontents.

Since things like reasons, obsession, reluctance are aspects of interior processes, we experience them as film viewers only externally, as surface movement of events and characters. Part of the great mystery of film is how we experience these outer aspects of character and plot as having an inner life—indeed, that most of the time such outer things—talk, movement, action—make little sense unless we ascribe an inner life to them. Why is it that the characters we are so close to do the things they do? Detective narratives tend to make such inner drama prominent since it is the job of the detective to find out what happened, and a large portion of doing that involves them speculating on the inner motives, often well hidden, of those involved in the mystery to be solved. In *Chinatown* this culminates in the scene where Gittes, having finally uncovered the villain behind the murderous events in Los Angeles, the elderly Noah Cross (John Huston), and confronts him asking the *reason why* he did them: "Why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?" When he hears the answer, Nicholson holds his face perfectly still (he is shot in profile), expressionless, as if now with the enigma "solved" he has entered into an entirely new universe of mystery, and he has no ready-made or spontaneous way to express the fact. For the first time Gittes is speechless.

Caught up in these films' depiction of obsession, determination, and pursuit of truth are the contrary forces of avoidance, evasion, and other kinds of turning away from what must be done. There is the peculiar but common aspect of human experience where we avoid or delay doing precisely those things we most want to do. And some of our detectives appear suspended and motionless before they are moved. What is Scottie actually doing during his retirement up to the point when he takes on Elster's mission? In *The Long Goodbye* Marlowe appears to have nothing to do before he is woken by the hungry cat and then by his friend Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) demanding a lift to the Mexican border; Alicia seems committed to the life of a wanton before Devlin recruits her; and Gittes is building a reputable business with "finesse," doing mostly "marital" work (his "métier"), hardly the white knight driven to bust political and industrial corruption in Southern California. In *True Detective* Cohle's obsessive detailing of crime scenes in his large black notebook is seen by his colleagues as peculiar, earning him the nickname "The Taxman"; his partner Hart enjoys an easy, if immoral, life as a career detective in a local force. None of them start off wanting to do what they end up wanting to do. And this brings us back to Elliott Gould's Marlowe about to be woken by his cat at 3 a.m. in his Los Angeles apartment; for *The Long Goodbye* is a film that tutors us to see the way in which wholehearted commitment is less the product of a sudden Damascene moment or decision, but something that emerges gradually, born of adhesive dogged habit: a kind of steady and consistent being in a world which cannot help but shed its signs and clues.

### *The Long Goodbye*: Floating above the Genre

In a remarkable essay on the film Murray Pomerance rightly claims that its characters are "all self-promoters, except Marlowe, who seems to float among them like an alien" and notes that he "is a kind of phantom detective"<sup>9</sup>:

His soft voice, his kinky locks, his sheepdog bearing, his tranquil but also weary (but intensely observant) eyes, his ease of manner, his proclivity toward rational and verbal, rather than physical, response, are all post-Beat, vaguely poetic, intoxicating . . . He moves like a dancer,

yet without the anxious impulse, without “drive”; he even drives without drive . . . Marlowe’s repartee is snide, sarcastic, self-defeating, self-deprecating, mushy, modest, mumbling. He’s a charmer, a tender heart. In the opening sequence (a tour-de-force of acting, animal wrangling and cinematography) he demonstrates that he and his cat are brothers under the skin. The cat . . . is also a Beat hero; Marlowe is a cool cat.<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen the movie begins with Marlowe being woken by his hungry cat, just after we have been ostentatiously shown a plaque on his apartment wall with “Hollywood” prominent. So what we are going to see is already “in a frame,” the frame of the movies, of showbiz, acting, performance. By the end of the film we might reflect that this plaque is an early declaration that this is an end-of-genre movie, one that declares that the genre it inhabits is no longer workable, no longer intelligible as dramatic art (another instance would be Arthur Penn’s *Night Moves*, 1975). It sets out to show us why this is so and starts by crosscutting the de-dramatized business with Marlowe and his cat with the fast-paced shots of Terry Lennox speeding in his sports car toward the Malibu home of his lover. Only later do we find out that as Marlowe was sleeping Lennox was killing his wife, and this car journey is a rendezvous with his lover, the blonde femme fatale Eileen Wade (Nina van Pallandt). But this is all plot to be cashed out. Altman overtly blends Hollywood action and European art cinema nonaction as he cuts between Marlowe/cat and Lennox/car. That heady generic mixture that characterizes much of New Hollywood in the early 1970s is worked up eloquently in this dream born out of a dream.

Marlowe wakes to be confronted by an emblem of reluctance, his fussy cat (is there another kind?) who won’t be fed except what it wants. Its owner first makes what he mumbles is a “concoction” out of cottage cheese, an egg, and some salt, a feeble substitute for cat food which the animal sensibly rejects by knocking it to the floor with its paw; “Don’t believe it, huh?” With the cat still mewling for food, Marlowe leaves the apartment; strikes a louche, lovely figure, greeting his hippie female neighbors with bemusement but no erotic interest, and drives to a twenty-four-hour store, where he discovers that they are out of stock of his pet’s favorite brand, Coury cat food.

He returns home with a different cat food, locks the cat out of the kitchen, and spoons the new non-Coury-brand food into an old Coury-brand empty tin. The cat, however, is not fooled for a moment and exits through his improvised cardboard flap.

Raymond Chandler's love of cats was turned in Robert Altman's mind to the notion that the scene was, as he told Gould, about the fact that you can't lie to a cat. Its reluctance to take the meal is the obverse of its wholehearted liking of Coury brand. If the cat is a mirror of Marlowe and he is the detective in the film, what picture of the detective is this? It must mean that being a detective and doing "detection" is, like appetite, both driven and fickle. It floats above the world seemingly uncaring ("It's OK with me" is Marlowe's response to the world around him for most of the film), and yet it is single-minded in its pursuit of what ends up driving it. You can't lie, or fake, that kind of commitment. Marlowe gets it later in the film, but for a long while it seems that he will not get it at all.

Shortly afterward Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) arrives at Marlowe's apartment. They are clearly long-standing friends: they banter a bit, play a game of liar's poker, which Marlowe loses before he notices scratches on Lennox's face. Lennox admits he's had a fight with his wife, Sylvia (the one he has just beaten to death), then asks Marlowe to drive him to Tijuana. And Marlowe couldn't be further from suspicion; he acts the patsy, the good friend. We see them arrive at the Mexico border just before dawn, and when he returns to his apartment Marlowe is confronted by two plainclothes detectives, Dayton (John Davies) and Green (Jerry Jones). They arrest him, and he is booked and interviewed by Detective Farmer (Steve Coit) who tells him Sylvia Lennox has been found brutally murdered. It looks to the cops like Marlowe aided the chief suspect's escape over the border. He did. Everything is in a frame, everything a kind of performance, a spectacle of a film spectacle: as Marlowe is interviewed under pressure from the cops he rubs the ink from his fingerprinted hands on his face, offering a desultory Al Jolson "mammie"; they assume he's making a performance to protect his friend. He's just a performer.

Three days later Marlowe is released—the case is now closed, because Lennox has been found dead with a suicide note that confesses to killing Sylvia. Marlowe then goes to a bar which stands in for his office, where he accepts a phoned-in job from a literary publicist to locate a missing alcoholic writer, Roger Wade (Sterling Hayden).

The floating dancer's mission is to find a Hemingwayesque novelist played by one of the greats of the Hollywood Golden Age. He drives to Wade's house on the beach in a gated Malibu Colony where he meets Wade's wife Eileen. The Malibu complex was where Robert Altman was living at the time, so its scenes have a further dimension hidden from the audience. She tells Marlowe her husband may have checked himself into a private rehab clinic. We seem at once to be in a regular detective movie. There is some nice sleuthing as Marlowe infiltrates the clinic and locates Wade's room. Watching from outside the window (another frame: the film is like a fertile womb blossoming with its own self-consciousness), Marlowe sees the clinic's chief, Dr. Verringer (Henry Gibson), asking a reluctant Wade to pay his bills. Marlowe collects Wade and takes him home, job done. As he does these things Marlowe seems to be behaving as he was at the beginning of the film: waiting for events and appetites to emerge from the world into his view.

Once home Wade is drunk and belligerent and goes to bed. Eileen asks Marlowe about Terry Lennox who, it transpires, lived nearby. Not much is made of this until later, but when Marlowe gets back to his apartment he is confronted by a gangster, Marty Augustine (Mark Rydell), accompanied by a motley crew of hoods and his mistress Jo Ann (Jo Ann Eggenweiler). We discover that Lennox was carrying money in a bag (which we see at the beginning of the film), some \$335,000, that he was due to deliver to Mexico City, but didn't. With Lennox dead, Marlowe is the final link to it. Before they leave Augustine performs his capacity for violence by breaking a Coke bottle across Jo Ann's face, disfiguring her. Such performances punctuate a film where all the characters seem to know they live in the City of Movies and tend toward large performative gestures as if they are auditioning for an unseen employer. Marlowe follows the hoods to the Malibu Colony—in fact to Wade's house where he watches Augustine intimidate Eileen, and the next day the sleuth returns to ask the couple how they know him. Eileen is evasive and asks Marlowe to step outside on the beach.

We are already some way into the film and it has presented a thickened plot that always feels less important than the performers and the settings in which it slowly unfolds. At the Malibu beach house Marlowe witnesses another scene, one of marital disintegration, as Wade, clearly made impotent by his age and alcoholic condition, expresses

violent contempt, prompted by sexual jealousy, toward Eileen. Back at his apartment Marlowe finds a five-thousand-dollar bill (a “Madison”) in his mail with a note from Lennox thanking him. Prompted by this unexpected delivery, Marlowe travels to the Mexican village, Otatoclan, where Lennox was found dead. There he meets the chief of police and coroner and sees the documentation associated with Lennox’s death and burial. Again, Marlowe’s investigation, if that is what it is, seems inconclusive. He’s caught between whatever is going on in the Wade household and the strange mix of criminal activities that Lennox was clearly involved with. At the heart of all this we might wonder what it is that Marlowe wants: he is floating above all this, and it is hard to see that anything has involved him beyond that sad fact of losing his friend. And yet he has continued in his pursuit of things, albeit in a louche seemingly disconnected fashion. It is as if he is awaiting the moment of commitment to occur.

Returning to the Malibu Colony, Marlowe finds the Wades having a party on the beach. This is promptly interrupted by Dr. Verringer demanding payment for Wade’s rehab bill. When the drunken Wade refuses and insults the diminutive doctor (“Minnie Mouse! Peter Pan!”), Verringer strikes him hard across the face, and the party collapses. A strangely humiliated Wade writes Verringer a check and seemingly falls asleep. Eileen invites Marlowe to stay for dinner. Their dinner conversation is pleasant, but Marlowe gently presses some questions, with Gould gently revealing Marlowe’s expert sleuthing instincts. There is a flavor of flirtation in the air, but nothing is said. Eileen tells him Wade also owed Augustine money, but her husband hates repaying his debts. For the first time we hear that Marlowe suspects Wade may have had an affair with Sylvia Lennox, although we do not hear his line of reasoning since while they are talking we see that Wade is awake and walking into the ocean in the dark. And once again, this is shown to us via cinematic shapes and tropes, this time the wide rectangular windows looking out onto the beach at night, such that both reflect the interior scene with Marlowe and Eileen but also show Wade “wading in” to the Pacific ocean where he drowns himself.

In a lengthy rescue attempt, both Marlowe and Eileen are drenched (and nearly drown) but fail to save the old man. When the police arrive the beach is lit up as a crime scene, becoming a stage where Marlowe, agitated and angry at Eileen, for the first time expresses his theory about the Lennox deaths. It is that Roger Wade,

an abusive “looney tunes” drunk, beat Sylvia Lennox to death. Marlowe thinks this is connected to whoever killed Terry Lennox. Eileen says that perhaps Wade did kill Sylvia. And she admits her husband was having an affair with her: Terry found out about the affair, and when it stopped Roger killed her out of jealousy. Marlowe then says to her, “I know what to do and I know what to think.” But when he tells Detective Farmer, the cop says he knows Wade saw Sylvia the day of her murder but that he has an alibi—he was at Verringer’s clinic sedated at the time of death. But for Marlowe this just confirms corruption—Wade promised to pay Verringer to supply this alibi to the police (which explains—almost—the business over the check), who in turn have no further interest in finding out the truth. Marlowe is incensed: “You don’t deserve to be alive you fucking pig!” he bellows at Farmer as leaves the beach scene. This moment of heightened emotion, perhaps the closest Marlowe comes to rage, ought to be the generic moment of commitment, but it falls short of that.

As viewers we may not be at all sure where the movie is going to take us next, but it has at least two more surprises. Marlowe is taken to Augustine’s office, where Marty once again threatens him in a bizarre performance where he demands they all remove their clothes. Unexpectedly (as if cued by the director) the money just turns up, and Marlowe is free to go, but as he leaves he notices Eileen leaving Augustine’s office in her car. In a remarkable action scene, he chases it through the streets on foot, calling her name, but another car hits him and he wakes up, unhurt, in hospital. (Next to his hospital bed is a patient almost entirely wrapped in bandages, a clear reference to the Universal *Mummy* movie series of the 1930s and 40s.)

After looking for his cat one more time, we see Marlowe travel again to Otatoclan. There, he bribes the officials with the “Madison” note, and they reveal the true circumstances of Lennox’s death. Appropriately enough for this film, it transpires that the whole thing was a bit of theater, a fake death. Finally, we see Marlowe walking down an avenue, eventually arriving at Lennox’s hideout. Lennox, reclining in a hammock, is pleasantly surprised to see him: he admits he killed Sylvia because, after Wade told her about Eileen and him, Sylvia was going to tell the cops about the cash Lennox was moving for Augustine. So Lennox killed her and used Marlowe to take him to the border, knowing he would be interrogated. “You’re a born loser,” Lennox tells him. “Yeah, I even lost my cat,” says Marlowe and, quite



unexpectedly, shoots him dead. The film ends with Marlowe walking into the distance back along the tree-lined avenue, seemingly jovial as Eileen passes him in her jeep; instead of yet another rendition of the Johnny Mercer number, “The Long Goodbye”—versions of which have been ubiquitous throughout the movie—his exit is accompanied by “Hooray for Hollywood” on the soundtrack.

This is a strange ending to a peculiar film, but at least we can see it depicts its protagonist as enthusiastically satisfied with the outcome of events, even if we don’t know quite why. For *The Long Goodbye* offers us neither a satisfying picture of reluctance nor of wholehearted detection: Marlowe instead has, until the ending, appeared passive, noncommittal, and largely low-energy. That he even owns a gun, let alone shoots dead his unarmed friend Terry Lennox, is a surprise to viewers who have followed his languid and louche journey through its blurred plotting. For although the movie has a central noir aspect—its dogged insistence on narrative confusion, on deceit and betrayal—it feels as if there is something more, another lining of meaning.

Certainly audiences and reviewers experiencing it on first release were confused: the poster for the film has Marlowe/Gould in profile (and somewhat handsomer) pointing a Colt Detective Special .38 (not in fact the gun he uses in the film), with the tagline “Nothing says goodbye like a bullet.” But while the poster, possibly an allusion—equally misleading if so—to the poster for *Dirty Harry* (1971), suggests action and confrontation, apart from the disfiguring of Jo Ann and the killing of Lennox, there is little physical violence at all in the film and no threat of it emanating from Marlowe whose typical response to encounters and events in the movie is, “It’s OK with me.” Only when the film was released in New York in October 1973, with a different *Mad Magazine*-styled poster that emphasized its zany “fun,” as well as referencing the previous Altman-Gould collaboration *M\*A\*S\*H*, was it a critical and commercial success. Subsequent posters, including the cover of the tie-in release of Chandler’s novel, have Marlowe/Gould with the cat on his shoulder. By the end of 1973 it had been rereleased at the Beverly Canon where Kevin Thomas for the *Los Angeles Times* tried to account for its uneven reception: “Altman’s far-out updating of Chandler had been both praised and dammed as a desecration of its source. Needless to say, the casting of a shaggy, sloppy, hangdog Gould in a part made mythical by Humphrey Bogart has also been considered a sacrilege.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to

praise the film for placing Marlowe in a contemporary setting (Altman described the script as about “Rip van Marlowe”), which allows it to be: “Alternately and sometimes simultaneously outrageous, hilarious and chilling [he] has given us a moral perspective that is profoundly disquieting and challenging in its subtle and complex ambiguities.” Part of the “sacrilege,” as Jeremy Kaye points out, is in the casting of Gould (born Goldstein): his Jewish appearance, as well as his youth and the colorful contemporary setting, replete with the markers of adult cinema (nudity and cursing), are in friction with the Anglo-Saxon tarnished knight depicted by Dick Powell (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1944), Humphrey Bogart (*The Big Sleep*, 1946), or even twenty years later Robert Mitchum (*Farewell, My Lovely*, 1975—set in 1941) that had been absorbed into the cultural imagination. And yet there is something about the privacy embodied in Gould’s performance that connects him in particular to Bogart’s version of Marlowe. As David Thomson says of Gould’s performance:

If you lifted off the music in *The Long Goodbye*, the endless attempts at the title tune, you might not realize that Elliot Gould’s performance is like a brilliant, very cool, stoned musician—Art Pepper, say—doing “I Can’t Get Started” in a Bogart mood. He’s hunched over his instrument, very sad, very alone, yet chronically musical. It’s a great performance with a lovely, secret beat that everyone else in the movie feels but cannot quite get. Who knows if even Altman got it?<sup>12</sup>

That Bogart mood is, in Stanley Cavell’s words, one of “private heroism,” the heroism of privacy: there is a secret, banked resource that propels Gould’s Marlowe, but it seems lighter, more democratic, than Bogart’s tense, focused version. Cavell designates Bogart as the greatest instance of the cinematic dandy, a figure defined by his capacity for self-knowledge whose depth of private passion establishes confidence and resolve in the face of betrayal and evil.<sup>13</sup> We need to keep this Cavellian sense of the Bogart mood in mind if we are to make sense of why Gould’s Marlowe acts as he does in the film.

In one sense Gould plays Marlowe as a cat in the sense of languid, cool, aloof, and distant, and he carries some of that Bogart mood in terms of the intense privateness communicated to us through his odd,

often incoherent mumbling. But Thomson is wrong to suggest that Altman may not have “got it.” Altman’s interest in Leigh Brackett’s script was prompted by the ending—indeed he insisted in his contract that he would only complete the film if the ending where Marlowe kills Lennox was left intact. One reason for this is that, while the film has all the plot confusions associated with noir, its engagement with those traditions is bracketed by an interest in Los Angeles as a place where Hollywood, and therefore the spectacle of performance, is the dominant reference for the rest of the world. Hence we get a series of frames—achieved through *mise-en-scène*, imagery, and soundtrack—around the plot that consistently irritate our attempts to define the meaning of what the characters say and do.

It does so most of all by framing the entire film between two apparently unconnected scenes, one of reluctance—the cat’s refusal to eat—and one of wholeheartedness, Marlowe’s execution of Lennox. The opening business with the cat and its food is one of several sleeper moments where events seemingly tangential to the plot are banked and then cashed out later. (This structural design echoes the “banked” resources of the Bogart/dandy that Cavell writes about that are “cashed out” when the hero applies his inner code to the corrupted world around him, as a kind of shield as much as a revelation.) Nor is this the only frame in a movie that revels in its visual and thematic composition around literal and figurative frames.

One of these frames begins before we see the first shot and ends way after the final one. This is the usage of Johnny Mercer’s “Hooray for Hollywood” number lifted from the 1937 Busby Berkeley musical *Hollywood Hotel*. The film begins with the sound of a band playing the song as we fade up on a plaque mounted above a bookshelf in Marlowe’s apartment, an object just slightly more substantial than something a tourist might pick up from a gift shop near the Walk of Fame. It is silver metal mounted in a thick rectangular wooden frame (part of it is in shadow but its dimensions are close to the film’s aspect ratio of 2.35:1), and shapes are cut into the metal to represent iconic emblems of the region: Los Angeles City Hall, swooping searchlights, some palm trees, the hills with the HOLLYWOOD sign, the ocean. The iconography and soundtrack of the dream factory are shown as literally a frame within a frame. The same musical number carries us out of the final moments of the movie, beginning just before the credits are supered over a continuing shot of Marlowe celebrating

in the distance on the avenue (as we shall see this is not music that we are led to believe Marlowe can hear or the tune he is dancing to). In the latter case we hear the extended version with vocals sung by Johnnie Davis and Frances Langford from the sequence at the beginning of Berkeley's film. Why bookend a movie that uses familiar sleazy noir touch points like murder, betrayal, adultery, deceit, and sudden violence with reference to this song, which gently mocks the desire to make it big in the industry even as it celebrates that desire at every Academy Awards show?

One answer to this is that it is a comment on the false, even deceitful, nature of that Hollywood fantasy that the film intends to undermine or counter with its own content. This would be in keeping with auteurist accounts of Robert Altman's work, which tend to emphasize his anti-Hollywood, maverick, or at least whimsical approach in his films, and the way he uses satire, irony, and black humor to disturb genre convention. But that only gets us so far into the "why?" For there must be something further, something relevant to the first and final times we see Marlowe being so proximate to this music that we need to consider. Marlowe is not presented as a dogged incorruptible detective from the 1930s and 40s, but a young man living in LA in the 1970s; he does not deal with corrupt aristocratic disputes from the past but contemporary gangsters and crooks living on Malibu beach. Which is to say he lives in a world where the stories, performances, genres, and tropes of Hollywood cinema, including film noir, are already part of the cultural imagination. One of the problems with using irony and satire as evaluative positives is that they tend to fetishize distance (and in Brechtian terms, distanciation) as positive aesthetic values. *The Long Goodbye* can be confusing and even irritating on occasion, but it is not difficult to watch and nor do its gestures toward the attractions of a confected Hollywood fantasy necessarily sneer at those who are attracted by them.

In framing Marlowe as a construction, a Hollywood *figure* who also delivers a new, fresh kind of inhabitation of the detective, *The Long Goodbye* offers us not reasons for why people do what they do, but more a collection of stances toward reality that are pictured in offbeat, often lightweight, and funny ways. That Marlowe can shoot Terry Lennox dead, a former friend, relaxed and unarmed, and moments later dance down an avenue without so much as a care in the world suggests that the stakes of successful sleuthing have reached