The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

Daub, Peggy; Gomis, Melissa; Hallman, Phil

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Altman & Genres

Robert Altman’s early work was part of the transition from easily recognizable genres of Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s to riffs on those genres in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Long Goodbye* (1973) shattered the audience’s expectations of the detective story while both *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976) did the same for westerns. Even when working closer to the norms of genres such as science fiction (*Quintet*, 1979), gangster film (*Thieves Like Us*, 1974), or the English manor house mystery (*Gosford Park*, 2001), Altman found ways to put his own stamp on the style and feel of each of his movies.

Detective Story

*The Long Goodbye* [1973]

Raymond Chandler’s sixth and last mystery featuring private eye Philip Marlowe, *The Long Goodbye* (published in 1953), was surprisingly not made into a film until Robert Altman’s treatment of it in 1973. Altman places the story in contemporary Los Angeles, while keeping the lead character true to Chandler’s original. During filming Altman and the crew referred to the lead character as “Rip Van Marlowe,” emphasizing the anachronism of this 1950s man living in 1970s Los Angeles.

While Detective Phillip Marlowe (Elliot Gould) tries to solve a murder, he stands apart from the rest of the characters in *The Long Goodbye*. Isolated by his dress and appearance, he is a throwback to the 1940s-50s, but the dark shadows and gritty scenes of earlier versions of Marlowe’s world have been changed into sunny southern California beachfronts.

Photographs from the set of *The Long Goodbye*.

In this letter to Italian screenwriter and director Gian Luigi Rondi, Altman comments on Chandler’s writing and the “moral man” character represented by Marlowe.

“I wasn’t attracted by the story at all except that I wanted to make a movie the way Chandler made a detective novel. The story is very complicated, but it’s really just a framework on which to suspend a hundred thumbnail sketches.”

“In the 1950s…he helped us to delude ourselves into thinking that not only could good guys finish first, but that there were indeed moral men who were clearly definable from the bad guys. In the 70s…he’s a man who cares, going up against the controlled tidiness and sheen of the surrounding chaos. A moralist in an immoral world.” - Robert Altman