

The Post-Noir P.I.:

The Long Goodbye and *Hickey and Boggs*

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Film noir has often used the character of the male private investigator to illustrate the alienated and paranoid nature of men in postwar America. As detectives these men become involved in dangerous situations that they feel compelled to control and change while attempting to reestablish morality in a world that appeared to ignore it. After the classic period of *film noir*, the private detective still remained an occasional protagonist in a traditional mystery film. Only a few times in the post-*noir* era of the 1960s and 1970s did filmmakers evoke the *noir* sensibility through the "p.i." Two prominent examples from the early 1970s are *Hickey and Boggs* and *The Long Goodbye*. Both share a self-consciousness of the history of *film noir*. The former film, written by Walter Hill who went on to write and direct many other post-*noir* films, has two protagonists and a convoluted plot line that recalls elements of the caper film and the gangster genre. *Hickey and Boggs* co-stars Bill Cosby and Robert Culp (who also directed), played against the personas established in the *I Spy* television series. *The Long Goodbye* based on a novel by Raymond Chandler and adapted by Leigh Brackett and director Robert Altman was the second post-*noir* incarnation of Chandler's universally recognized character, Philip Marlowe. The earlier *Marlowe* (1966) was cast according to type with James Garner in the title role systematically, and somewhat unimaginatively, recalling the earlier portrayals of Marlowe by Dick Powell, Robert Montgomery, and Humphrey Bogart. By using Elliott Gould as his Marlowe, Altman cast strongly against type. As with *Hickey and Boggs*, part of the underlying irony of the *The Long Goodbye* is that in the early 1970s the classic p.i. such as Marlowe is a human anachronism.

While the detectives of *Hickey and Boggs* share the independent spirit of their earlier counterparts, they differ in the extent to which they can control their situation. Through ten years, the *film noir* protagonist had steadily lost any ability to effect change in a modern world, and this increasing powerlessness is a correlative of diminishing social morality. This powerlessness is sardonically expressed by Frank Boggs when he says, "I gotta get a bigger gun. I can't hit anything." His revolvers, small and large, are trademarks of his profession, icons that recall the

"gats" and "roscoes" of a more colorful era. As symbols of both his personal power and genre identity, they are nothing compared to the modern arsenal of weapons possessed by the gangsters and the political guerrillas, who annihilate each other with carbines and high-caliber automatic rifles at the film's climax. Hickey and Boggs are too small, too unimportant, to control anything.

Even the film's plot only marginally involves them. The cache of stolen cash hidden from the syndicate by a Latino convict named Quemondo and his wife Mary Jane is the real cause of all the film's action. Hickey and Boggs are initially hired by Leroy Rice, a crooked lawyer trying to find the cache, merely as unwitting decoys. Eventually Rice and his Black Panther-like partners just want Hickey and Boggs out of the way. There is also a trio of syndicate "soldiers" on the trail of the money. When they murder Hickey's wife in an attempt to frighten the detectives away *from continuing their investigation and to avenge Boggs' killing of their associate in an earlier shoot-out, it is more of a professional than personal act.*

In one sense Hickey and Boggs are the film's protagonists by default. They are after all the title characters and because the film's events are seen and/or evaluated mostly from the point of view of these down-at-the-heels private detectives, the film *Hickey and Boggs* is more a character study than a narrative thriller. In the beginning, the behavior of the syndicate killers is mechanical and psychopathic; but in certain ways their peculiar code is a counterpart to Hickey and Boggs' fallen romanticism. By the end, the last survivor, the feeble-minded, strong-arm man, enraged at the killing of his partners, attacks Hickey for emotional reasons. Hickey and Boggs themselves seem to alternate in their desire for money and revenge. At the end Hickey is forced to the realization that vengeance is futile. He had previously complained that "there's nothing left of this profession, it's all over. It's not about anything." But Boggs, the dissolute believer in a bygone heroism, seemed to understand their existential dependence on this profession and insists it is important to "try and even it up, make it right." As the smoke clears over the carnage and destruction of the final scene, Hickey again asserts, "Nobody came, nobody cares. It's still not about anything." Boggs wearily replies, "Yeah, you told me."

As if to epitomize the underlying disorder of the modern society, all of the sequences involving the search for the missing money in *Hickey and Boggs* take place during broad daylight. It is events in the private lives of the detectives that take place at night. Contrary to any heroic iconic archetype, even that of the hard-boiled p.i., these men are not strikingly handsome or romanticized loners but weary, displaced persons. Hickey's nighttime arrival at the home of his estranged wife scares and angers her. Her off-handed complaint that she is not running a boarding house, captures the transitory nature of Hickey's lifestyle. Boggs is an alcoholic, who spends his off hours in bars, where he watches television commercials and broods about his ex-wife. His fixation on her leads him to frequent the sleazy nightclub where she works as a strip teaser. Her mockery psychologically castrates him. This is a severe statement about the place of men in the world that

is as a dismal as any from the classic period of *film noir*. Both of these men are adrift, alienated from their environment and their families, clearly out of any mainstream lifestyle. They are superfluous figures, wandering through the urban landscape.

Instead of the anonymity provided in many *film noir* by crowded city streets, much of the action of *Hickey and Boggs* occurs in large areas of unoccupied public space. The violence that takes place in a deserted stadium, ball park, neighborhood park, and coastal beach underscore the sense of decay of social strictures. It sets the same tone as many classic *film noir* by suggesting that society has lost control on the subversive and antagonistic forces within it. The sheer firepower of the final shoot out verges on satire as the gangsters' helicopter gunship shoots a Rolls Royce full of holes. The absurdity of the gangsters and Panther clones slaughtering each other in this sequence also recalls a similarly extravagant moment as the unstable "great whatsit" explodes at the end of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). In a closing, sardonic variant of the old-fashioned happy ending the detectives walk off into the sunset, together but not side-by-side. Hickey and Boggs are the only survivors; but they have survived only because they are unimportant.

Like *Hickey and Boggs*, *The Long Goodbye* is as much about friendship and betrayal as it is about violence and murder. P.I. Marlowe's primary purpose is to clear his friend's name and to help a woman find her disturbed husband, whom he believes she loves very much. As in *Hickey and Boggs*, there is a vicious gangster, Marty Augustine, looking for the person who took his money. The mystery that ensnares the characters is something that Philip Marlowe stumbles upon. He does not wish to unravel it but cannot help doing so. The 70s Marlowe is a man lost in a world he does not understand. Rather than facing the fact that his profession is "not about anything anymore," Marlowe constantly attempts to convince himself that each antagonizing incident is "O.K. with me"; but obviously it is not. All film Marlowes carry the baggage of Chandler's literary urban knight, a man who lives by a code as rigorous as that of chivalry. For such a man, nothing is as it seems and nothing is right. As Chandler himself wrote in his oft-quoted essay, "The Simple Art of Murder": "But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.... The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything.... The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth." Because he is such a man, Marlowe can ignore the whacked-out girls next door or the rude market clerk, but he cannot ignore what he supposes is a convenient frame-up of his friend and, finally, he cannot be indifferent to his friend's exploitation of his trust. When Terry Lennox tells him, "But that's you, Marlowe... you'll never learn, you're a born loser," Marlowe righteously kills him, because Terry is wrong. Marlowe is a loner but not a loser. He lives in a world of other values "neither tarnished nor afraid."

Given Chandler's chivalric attitude towards women, it is ironic that *The Long Goodbye* depicts a considerable amount of violence towards them. Women, too, are murderously beaten like Sylvia Lennox, casually struck like Eileen Wade, and even willfully disfigured like Augustine's girl friend. For Marlowe this is the ultimate in savagery. The first thing Marlowe notices about Eileen Wade is the bruise which she tries to hide with her long blond hair. When Marlowe touches it gently, she politely ignores his concern. He admires her stoicism and, correspondingly, she admires the loyal friendship he has shown Lennox. Marlowe and Eileen Wade greatly resemble each other, which is a considerable departure from Chandler's novel, wherein Eileen is a *femme fatale* and murderess. In the film she, like Marlowe, tries to hide her alienation. But her method is to hide behind a facade of cheerfulness and beauty. She attempts to conceal her bruised face, a symbol of her internal suffering. She also conceals her belief that her husband murdered Sylvia Lennox. She knows Roger Wade is capable of extreme violence when drunk, for she bears the mark of it; but she cannot betray him. Conversely, she shares Marlowe's inaccurate conviction that Terry Lennox is incapable of murder. Marlowe and Eileen work at cross purposes to achieve the same goal, neither realizing that the goal is worthless. From the enddistanced perspective of the disaffected 1970s, this is the additional irony that filmmakers Altman and Brackett have imposed on Chandler's character.

Even in a post-noir context, *The Long Goodbye* evokes the emotions of a mainstream *film noir*. The powerlessness of its independent protagonists, Marlowe and Eileen Wade, to untangle a moral dilemma in a modern, corrupt world make them prototypically *noir*. While Marlowe may not verbalize his sense of anachronistic despair as directly as Hickey or Boggs, he shares their ability to endure physical and emotional punishment. As a p.i. Marlowe is expected from genre convention to understand and discern a solution to this puzzle; but even the police know more than he does.

Unlike the attitudes of the police conveyed in *film noir* of the classic period, the "modern" corruption of the police in *The Long Goodbye* is not caused by individual ambition and greed but by overload and burn-out. All the police want is their paperwork completed, a murder confessed, and a suicide certified by the proper official. They crave simple solutions regardless of conflicting facts because they lack energy and time to explore alternative answers. While Chandler's novels use the police as identifiable personalities and antagonists, Altman makes the police relatively anonymous and surly, interchangeable and unimportant. A policeman's face is never lingered upon in the film without a distracting element occurring simultaneously. When Marlowe is interrogated at the station, he is the center of the frame while the police circle about him like gnats firing questions. All the while Marlowe plays with the inky smears left by the fingerprinting procedure. He does this while looking at his reflection in a two-way mirror, as if to demonstrate his contempt for the police authorities he knows are watching on the other side of

the glass. Later, when he confronts the police face to face at the scene of Wade's suicide, Marlowe drunkenly waves a wine glass in their faces while they exhibit little expression.

Altman uses glass throughout the film as a fragile and reflective prop to express the illusory nature of clarity and appearances. Just as the plot will reveal that Lennox has deceived everyone and that Roger Wade, for all his rowdiness, directed his murderous violence inward, even simple textural details are not as they seem. The Wades' beach house is made almost entirely of glass. While Roger and Eileen stand inside and watch Marlowe out on the beach, Roger condemns the detective as an ignorant slob. A few minutes later, Marlowe watches the couple argue fiercely, and his image is placed between the two of them in the window's reflection, suggesting that he brought them back together and that he may have to protect each one from the other. Marlowe's quizzical look indicates that he isn't sure what to do. Later, Marlowe and Eileen argue over dinner inside, while outside, visible through a window, Roger commits suicide; but their plain view of his action does not make them able to help him. Marlowe again watches through the window while the gangster Augustine intimidates Eileen; but is unable to make a clear connection between the two until he sees her leave Augustine's building. The undraped picture windows in the gangster's office do not hinder Augustine's attempt to get at the truth and would not hold him back from killing Marlowe, even though literally anyone passing by could watch the crime. But the city is silent and indifferent. As Augustine's girl friend is carried out screaming and bleeding profusely, the neighboring girls are too self-engrossed to notice her plight. Malibu neighbors crowd around the scene of Roger's suicide with the tinkling wine glasses they have carried from their parties. In *The Long Goodbye*, Altman adds society's conscious indifference to the long list of alienating elements that comprise *film noir*.

This social indifference is at the heart of the post-*noir* films of the 1970s. It is the reason that the profession of Marlowe and of Hickey and Boggs is "not about anything anymore." In a world where no one cares, men with a code are out of place. Hickey and Boggs come to admire Quemondo and Mary Jane for trying to beat the odds. The shot of their bodies lying peacefully in the sand reflects that sentiment. It is that same sentiment which compelled Marlowe to suffer brutalization and almost be killed rather than betray his friend Terry. In the end it is that same sentiment which makes Marlowe react so violently to Terry's perfidiousness. For Marlowe his act is not about revenge. Like Boggs, he acts out of a motive that is "about making it right."