

WORLD FILM LOCATIONS LOS ANGELES

VOLUME 2

Edited by Gabriel Solomons,
Jared Cowan and Fabrice Ziolkowski

'A brilliant
guidebook to an
archipelago of
sites that exists at
the intersection of
fantasy and reality.'

GARY GOLDMAN
Screenwriter
Total Recall



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ROBERT ALTMAN'S LA

Text by
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The City of Fallen Angels

THE INTERIOR OF AN AIRLINER approaching LAX. It's been a long flight and the first-time traveller to Los Angeles peers out the window, a little apprehensive but mostly mesmerized by the seemingly endless unfurling of the city below: millions of people, stories and interconnections. Is there hope of ever getting to the essence of the tangled web that lies down there? Luckily the newbie visitor who had the foresight of packing three films by Robert Altman is just a little more prepared to make some sense of the megalopolis magma that awaits.

Robert Altman's (1925–2006) filmography ranges far and wide in a variety of geographical directions (Paris, the American West, NYC, Kansas City, Nashville, etc.) and time periods (*Thieves Like Us*, 1974 *M*A*S*H**, 1970). Within this teeming body of work stand three films that capture part of the ephemeral quicksilver nature of Los Angeles. Altman's LA is peopled with an anachronistic existential hero in *The Long Goodbye* (1973), with lost souls of various social statuses and origins in *Short Cuts* (1994) and with an array of venal movie industry characters in *The Player* (1992). With each film, Altman builds

on the daunting project of capturing the city's zeitgeist alongside other filmmakers like Polanski, Friedkin and Mann.

THE LONG GOODBYE

In his 1973 *The Long Goodbye*, Altman tackles the monument that is Raymond Chandler – the foremost LA pulse-taker back in the late 1940s and 1950s. And while the term 'mean streets' is usually associated with Martin Scorsese and New York, the phrase originates in Chandler as he describes LA's atmosphere of corruption and violence, presenting Philip Marlowe as 'a man who is not himself mean'. Altman's stab at Chandler's 1953 *The Long Goodbye* revives Philip Marlowe from his earlier milieu and drops him into post-hippie LA. It's only twenty years later, but it feels like an eternity. Yet what Chandler had decried in his work, mainly the corruption of the city and the hall of mirrors it creates where nothing is quite what it seems, is still operative.

Police corruption is not on the menu in Leigh Brackett's updated screenplay that keeps Marlowe in a time loop, stuck in an early 1950s attitude and dropped in a post-Flower Power and Charles Manson era. Chandler's Marlowe used to care, but for Altman's iteration, things have changed. 'It's OK with me', he keeps repeating in an apparent live-and-let-live attitude. But that's just a façade that comes crashing down in the film's finale. The mean streets have changed somewhat: Marlowe's apartment stands next door to ditzy hippy women, Century City is the hangout of the mobster (whose origins have been transformed from Italian to Jewish) and the Malibu Colony is a hotbed of sexual shenanigans mixed with overflowing booze, charlatan shrinks and other shady characters. A 'modern' setting of Chandler with a 'modern' LA, in direct contrast with *Chinatown* – shot only a few months later.





SHORT CUTS

Adapted from Raymond Carver short tales of ordinary lost souls, of disengagement and angst, this is a perfect fit for the LA environment Altman explores in what many consider to be his masterpiece. But disconnection is only a surface phenomenon in LA. A reminder that what qualifies as a 'surface street' in Los Angeles is any thoroughfare that is not a free-way. In other words, flying down the freeways affords you only a superficial view of what's going on. The connections only appear when you get down to the surface of things, when you take an off-ramp.

Altman argues that everyone actually is connected in one way or another and if they're not, they desperately want to be. Strange bedfellows and redemption abound. All of Carver is here though displaced from the Pacific Northwest to Southern California. But while Carver's characters are totally disconnected, Altman tries to link them all somehow in a kind of web, making them fit into the city's mosaic. Carver sets his people down in anonymous places, no addresses, no city names. Altman pins them down to specific LA locations as in the case of Lily Tomlin and Tom Waits who live in Downey.

In all three of these films, Altman travels far

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and wide through LA, but actual filming locations slip through our fingers, always hard to pin down. We're constantly on the move. Like those helicopters that zoom through the sky above the fray in the film's opening title sequence. Taking a cue

from the credit sequence of *M*A*S*H**, Altman revisits a ballet of helicopters crisscrossing the nighttime sky, this time spraying malathion to eradicate the elusive medfly down below. A sequence that both takes us back to the COVID pandemic and other disasters on the cusp of which the city is always finding itself. There's also a clear implication that LA is a war zone where love is a battlefield: cowardice, jealousy, lust, envy, sisterly or motherly love.

Finally, there is a nagging reminder that in LA more than anywhere else, you are what your car is. And if that happens to be a clown-car, well that's just your bad luck.

THE PLAYER

It's easy to be hard on the movie industry in LA. Michelangelo Antonioni once quipped that Hollywood is like being nowhere and talking to nobody about nothing.

And so Altman takes a big bite at the hand that feeds him with *The Player*. This could be the quintessential mean-spirited film about the movie industry set in its epicentre – though there are other serious contenders for that dubious honour including *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or *The Big Knife* (1976). The film industry can be a serpent that bites its own tail and here Altman is gloriously spitting in the soup. A sort of antidote to *La La Land* (2016) and closer to the acerbic humour and cynical viewpoint of *Barton Fink* (1991).

It all begins with a virtuoso long take of 7:43 minutes over the credits. It's a sweeping panorama of the studio from interior to exterior and back again – a tip of the hat to *Touch of Evil* (1958) shot across town in Venice. A tour de force which turns the backlot and offices of the film studio into a stifling and maddening labyrinth from which there seems to be no escape: projects are pitched, people are fired, murder threats are received. It concludes with the cynical realization that even when it comes to betrayal and murder, Hollywood finds a way to recycle its worst impulses into yet another movie.

Altman's is a cubist vision of the city, trying to present varying angles that show an ever-fragmented whole. You can always try stepping back to see the pattern of the photomosaic or the Rorschach test. And as our traveller lands and enters the flow of LA traffic, they realize that they're just another facet of the picture. ❖



PRAISE FOR WORLD FILM LOCATIONS LOS ANGELES VOLUME 2

'Scouting for movie locations in LA is like casting a speaking part, especially when some places actually seem to want to audition to "become" a place in the production. I've experienced this over and over again ... from *Back To The Future Part II* to *The Fabelmans*. And I think it's this spirit of the wide variety and deep cinematic quality of so many places in and around LA that this book evokes so magnificently.'

RICK CARTER

Production Designer of *Jurassic Park*,
Forrest Gump and *Avatar*

'Like walking into the frame, *World Film Locations: Los Angeles* is a perfect tour guide through film history and the hallowed grounds of the city's movie locations. Visit where Spicoli went to high school, Kelly Leak hit his home runs, the Karate Kid met Mr. Miyagi and Orson Welles constructed the opening shot to *Touch of Evil*.'

GRANT MONINGER

Artistic Director, American Cinematheque

'Like Joan Didion's deceptively simple prose, this beautifully edited book gets to the heart of what makes Los Angeles such a special place: its inherent visual messiness; its short but tumultuous architectural history and its role as the setting for some unforgettable cinema. I had been feeling a little jaded about shooting in LA, but this book restored my love for this visually unique city, in all its filth and glory.'

JUDY BECKER

Production Designer of *Brokeback Mountain*,
Hitchcock and *American Hustle*

'Los Angeles plays itself in this book, revealing something about who and what it is to the world through films that are actually set in Los Angeles, and not just shot there. In these pages you will discover places you have never visited and films you have never seen, even if you have lived in the city your entire life. You will learn something about lost Los Angeles, noir Los Angeles, iconic Los Angeles, as well as obscure Los Angeles.'

JEANNINE OPPEWALL

Production Designer of *L.A. Confidential*,
Pleasantville and *Catch Me If You Can*

'Beautifully illustrated with photographs that juxtapose famous movie scenes with present day views of the locations, this book promises to inform and inspire, making it an essential edition to any cinephile's library and anyone who is a craftsman in the art of film making ... Bravo to the editors and all the contributors that brought this book to life.'

CLAY A. GRIFFITH

Production Designer of *Dolemite Is My Name*,
We Bought a Zoo and *Lucky You*