



Only in Dreams: *The Big Sleep* and Hollywood Fantasy

It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact.
Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* ([1939] 1988: 158)

I
We begin in the heart of Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946), on a bustling Los Angeles street. Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) has been hired by a decaying California oilman named General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to investigate a man named Arthur Guinn Geiger, who has been blackmailing his youngest daughter, Carmen (a reckless wild child played with amatory verve by Martha Vickers). Geiger, it turns out, is owner and proprietor of a rare books store. Marlowe, suspecting this shop to be a front, tests the woman he finds working there (Sonia Darrin's Agnes, who will show up again later) by asking about two non-existent books (a 'Ben Hur, 1860, third edition, with an erratum on page 166', and a complete 'Chevalier Audubon, 1849'). After confirming her total ignorance in first editions, and observing a furtive middle-aged man buzzed into the store's back room, Marlowe ambles across the street to the Acme Book Shop and enlists the help of the never-named young woman working there (Dorothy Malone, in one of her first credited appearances) in identifying Geiger. Their conversation quickly turns flirtatious, and the comic nature of the banter almost immediately deflates whatever narrative momentum the mystery plot had been gaining.¹

Proprietress: You begin to interest me – vaguely.

Marlowe: Well, I'm a ... private dick on a case [she looks him up and down]. Perhaps I'm asking too much? Although it doesn't seem too much to me, somehow.

Proprietress: [smiling] Well, Geiger's in his early 40s, medium height, fattish, soft all over, Charlie Chan mustache, well-dressed, wears a black hat, effects a knowledge of antiques and hasn't any ... and, oh, yes, I think his left eye is glass.

Marlowe: You'd make a good cop

This exchange marks the end of the scene in Raymond Chandler's novel, but Hawks keeps the sequence going. It begins to rain and the proprietress notes, with perceptible suggestiveness, that it will be another hour or so before Geiger leaves his store for the day. Marlowe quickly avers that his car is parked around the corner, but then catches her making eyes at him and, alluding to the 'Bottle of pretty good rye' stashed in his pocket, states that he'd 'Much rather get wet' inside. She closes up, and they move to a desk near the back of the shop, where he gently cajoles her into removing her glasses and letting her hair down. A dissolve, signaling the hour has passed, returns us to the front window, which looks out upon a now-darkened, rain-slicked street. Lowered lighting and romantic strings on the soundtrack (the first instance of music in the sequence)

eliminate any doubt about the act that has transpired without gratuitously calling our attention to it. The proprietress observes Geiger exiting his shop and Marlowe leaves her with a conciliatory pat on the arm: 'So long, pal.'

What are we to make of this remarkable scene? For one, in a film defined in large part by digressive storytelling, it seems the most radically digressive moment of all. Andrew Klevan has written that the whole scene 'is like a "witty aside"' (2011), and David Thomson, in his BFI Classics volume on the film, presents it as Exhibit A in support of his claim that *The Big Sleep* 'is one of the most formally radical pictures ever made in Hollywood.' The scene is 'instructive,' he writes, because

it could be cut from the picture without any damage [...]. The Acme scene, the horse-riding conversation, and the screwball telephone conversation with police headquarters could all go without any loss in information or plot recognition. With this exception: without their pleasure, their fun (however queasy we might feel about it), we might be made more aware that we don't know what the hell the film is about. (1997: 63)

Thomson argues that *The Big Sleep* gambles with the idea that, in Hollywood filmmaking, narrative coherence is less important than the 'fun' and 'pleasure' of individual scenes and moments. Hawks himself would claim something to the same effect in his late-career interviews with Peter Bogdanovich, compiled in *Who the Devil Made It*, stating that, 'As long as you have a good picture – it doesn't matter if it isn't much of a story' (1998: 334).

But the explanation that the scene exists merely as a fun diversion seems somehow inadequate. Klevan, quoting Manny Farber, suggests that the scene is 'given density by [...] "those tiny, mysterious interactions between the actor and the screen"' (2011). But what is the specific character of this density, and what lies behind the 'mystery' of the actors' gestures? Thomson, elsewhere in his study, writes that 'there is not one moment in the movie of *The Big Sleep* when proceedings get out in the potent open air of southern California' (1997: 10). The claim is true on the merits: made at Warner Brothers' in the mid-40s, just before the full flowering of *film noir* and the mainstreaming of location shooting, the film is entirely studio-bound. Even the lovely, apparently bustling street crossed by Marlowe on his way to the Acme is a soundstage creation. The world of the film is a fantasy, a dreamlike construction utterly detached from the 'reality' of Los Angeles as it actually exists. And yet, I'd like to argue, the scene at the Acme points, if only metonymically, to exactly that other L.A. from which the rest of the movie so willfully divorces itself – the L.A. where, every day, people get out of bed, go to work, and come home, all without ever encountering blackmail rackets or murder plots.

Stanley Cavell has suggested that one of film's principal capabilities as an art is its ability to 'juxtapose modes and mood of reality as a whole' and 'taunt them with one another' (1978: 7). Thus, for instance, Frank Capra and his cinematographer Joseph Walker's expressionist lighting in *It Happened One Night* (1934) suggests 'the experience of an ecstatic possibility, as of a better world just adjacent to this one, one that this one speaks of in homely symbol, one that we could (in social justice, in romance) as it were, reach out and touch; if only ...' (1985: 137). In *The Big Sleep*, we find an inverted version of this relationship. Here we are presented not with an everyday taunted by the transcendent,

but with a dream world that, for a brief moment, seems to make contact with the ordinary. The ramifications of this juxtaposition of modes and moods, however, may only become clear once we consider the scene at the Acme in relation to the film as a whole. Before we can mount that particular critical examination, however, we must know something about how, and why, the film got made at all.

II

The Big Sleep was conceived in the backseat of a limousine. As Todd McCarthy tells the story, Hawks and Jack Warner were riding back to the studio together following a preview screening of *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) when the studio chief, wowed by Bogart and Lauren Bacall's chemistry and certain that the film would be a success, asked Hawks if he had any ideas for an immediate follow-up. Hawks averred that he and William Faulkner (working at Warners' as a screenwriter at the time) had been 'kicking around' the idea of adapting *The Big Sleep*, a property that had intrigued the studio since the book's initial publication in 1939. Warner, McCarthy writes, 'didn't hesitate to give the go-ahead, feeling that the Hawks-Chandler-Bogart-Bacall combination was as close to a sure thing as he could get' (2000: 379).

While an intriguing piece of raw material, the novel would not yield the Bogart / Bacall showcase vehicle Warner wanted without some significant remodeling. The first problem confronting the filmmakers was the storyline. In the novel, the character that would come to be played by Bacall – Vivian, the elder Sternwood daughter – is of secondary importance. She and Marlowe have but one romantic encounter, which he unceremoniously breaks off. Moreover, the novel's focus is on the mystery itself, and not on Marlowe's romantic dalliances. Solving this problem was a two-fold process. For the film's first cut, Hawks and his collaborators enlarged Vivian's role (at the expense of Carmen, who plays a much bigger part in the book) and wrote in the love story, transforming, in the process, their initial meeting from a more-or-less straight forward confrontation, in which Vivian comes across as merely spoiled, to a sexually-charged back-and-forth exchange (described in detail below). They maintained, however, a focus on the mystery plot. After viewing this cut, Warner demanded substantial changes, feeling the film had too much plot and too few explosive Bogart / Bacall scenes. Most significantly, a scene in which Marlowe explains the tangled story of blackmail and murder to the District Attorney, revealing in the process who was behind the murder of the Sternwood chauffeur Owen Taylor, was replaced by a scene in which Marlowe meets Vivian at a nightclub and the two engage in bit of comic flirtation built around horse racing double entendres. The murder of Owen Taylor would remain unexplained.

A second problem posed by the novel was the characters themselves, both of whom were tinged by Chandler's overriding cynicism and thus ill at ease with Hawks' tendency toward apolitical 'fun'. As Robin Wood puts it in his book on Hawks' work, the 'atmosphere' in Chandler's world was simply 'too stifling for Hawks to breathe in happily' ([1968] 2006). Thus, both Vivian and Marlowe had to be, in effect, 'De-Chandlerised', their rough edges sanded down to perfect smoothness. For Vivian, this process involved uprooting the character, and her family, from the well-defined, if somewhat over-determined, socio-economic position Chandler grants the Sternwoods. During the novel's initial scene at the family's mansion, Chandler has Marlowe note two telling details. First, over the main hall's mantel

hangs a portrait 'of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican war' that Marlowe assumes is a depiction of General Sternwood's grandfather ([1939] 1988: 4). Second, as he is leaving, he gazes down from the hill upon which the Sternwood house rests and sees 'some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money' (21). With these two details, Chandler firmly locates the Sternwoods within a concrete socio-economic context. The oil derricks invoke American industrialism, along with its attendant history of robber barons, environmental destruction, and labor exploitation. On the other hand, the portrait over the mantel, with its intimations of past military glories, suggests a vision of the family's decline from nobility to decadence. Suffice it to say, such baggage would make Vivian a tough sell as a sympathetic love interest, and so the filmmakers summarily excised both details. In doing so, they effectively mystify the source of the Sternwoods' wealth, rendering it practically mythical. In fact, Hawks never even provides an establishing shot of the mansion itself, or any clue to its exact geographic location within Los Angeles. It may as well be a castle in the sky. Freed from the novel's concrete contextualisation, and from the snap judgments such contextualisation would trigger in audiences, the Vivian character becomes an empty vessel for Bacall to fill with her nascent star persona.

Marlowe, too, is similarly stripped of many of the original character's defining characteristics. Chandler's Marlowe is, at bottom, something of a wounded idealist, an errant Romantic who, through the contingency of circumstance, has ended up in a sometimes brutal and always shabby line of work. He's the sort of character given to making pronouncements like the following, from *The Long Goodbye*, delivered after a one-night tryst with a woman he barely knows:

We said goodbye. I watched the cab out of sight. I went back up the steps and into the bedroom and pulled the bed to pieces and remade it. There was a long dark hair on one of the pillows. There was a lump of lead in the pit of my stomach.

The French have a phrase for it. The bastards have a phrase for everything and they are always right.

To say goodbye is to die a little. ([1953] 1988: 365)

Much of Chandler's handling of the character is predicated upon the interplay between Marlowe's often-gruff 'public' behavior (roughing up thugs, expressing cruel indifference toward the women he encounters) and reflective first person digressions like the above.

The two other more or less 'straight' adaptations of Chandler's work – *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944) and *Marlowe* (Paul Bogart, 1969) – largely retain this characterisation.² *Murder, My Sweet* casts Dick Powell in the role, and though visibly older, his appearance still carries unmistakable traces of the fresh-faced 'juvenile' that sang and danced his way through Busby Berkeley musicals in the early 30s. His line delivery often shifts between a hard-boiled pastiche and a drawling, Dandy-ish lilt. Slim and upright in posture, Powell has a bearing and demeanor that suggest a classic Gentleman Detective fallen on hard times – something of a slangy, *déclassé* variation on William Powell's Nick Charles. *Marlowe* updates the setting of its story to the brave new world of Nixon-era Southern California, but its Marlowe is still recognisably derived from Chandler's original conception. Anticipating his performance as TV's Jim Rockford on *The Rockford*

Files (NBC, 1974-1980), James Garner portrays the character with a mix of affable bemusement and earnest sensitivity. The look of mournful resignation on his face at the film's conclusion, after having witnessed a sudden murder-suicide brutally tie up the remaining loose ends in his current case, comes closer than any moment in any of the films to capturing the complex pathos of Chandler's prose.

The Bogart-Hawks conception of the character, on the other hand, is a different animal entirely. Though Bogart was capable of playing gruff men with a hidden sentimental or romantic side (as *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942], in particular, makes evident), this dimension of his star persona is all but entirely excluded from the film. As he did with Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday* (1940), Hawks whittles the Bogart persona down to its most basic and superficial elements, presenting an image of effortless, unflappable cool – an amused stare beneath arched eyebrows, a cigarette dangling nonchalantly between gently pursed lips. This Marlowe glides through his world like a slightly disheveled *bon vivant*, greeting violence and intrigue with a smirk. Nothing in the performance suggests the battered romanticism, or the faint stench of failure, that clings to Chandler's Marlowe. Surely, *this* is the Bogart *Breathless*'s (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) had in mind as he gazed into that movie theater display case.

The aura of effortless cool falters only once, but not to reveal a wounded idealist hiding behind the hard-boiled exterior. At the film's climax, Marlowe, accompanied by Vivian, contrives to have the gangster Eddie Mars gunned down by his own men. Mars is the man ultimately responsible for the film's many blackmail and extortion rings, and, indirectly, for his henchman Canino's (Bob Steele) murder of a small-time crook named Harry Jones (Elisha Cook, Jr.), which Marlowe had witnessed helplessly from an adjacent room, an event which spurs an acute desire for vengeance in the detective. As Marlowe reveals his plan to Mars, he seems to be overcome by waves of sadistic glee. Eyes radiating wrath, he details his plan through clenched, bared teeth. His face in this moment recalls a passage from Chandler's text, but not one having to do with Marlowe. At the novel's end, Carmen Sternwood, in the grips of a psychotic episode, attempts to kill Marlowe for earlier rebuffing her sexual advances: 'The gun pointed at my chest. Her hand seemed to be quite steady. The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal. And not a nice animal' ([1939] 1988: 219). In this moment, Bogart's Marlowe reveals a capacity for violence utterly foreign to the other iterations of the character, a capacity that seems, in the scale of its fury, to be practically inhuman. He is like a wrathful god, meting out divine judgment.

III

This process of effectively de-coupling the film's characters from their literary antecedents, along with having Bogart and Bacall play them as more or less direct continuations of their roles in *To Have and Have Not*, has a profound impact on the finished film's texture. Because its narrative line has been so systematically attenuated to make room for more Bogart and Bacall 'set pieces,' individual scenes throughout the film often feel less like moments in a developing story, featuring characters with pasts and futures, than like autonomous episodes cut off from any larger narrative 'reality.' These scenes have a strange, almost timeless quality about them, one redolent of what Erich Auerbach, in

Mimesis, identified as the Homeric approach to storytelling. Homer's style, Auerbach writes, is 'scrupulously externalized' and 'narrated in leisurely fashion' ([1946] 1968: 3). Homer, he goes on to say, 'knows no background. What he narrates is for the time being the only present, and fills both the stage and the reader's mind completely' ([1946] 1968: 4). For the Homeric epics, finally, 'delight in physical existence is everything [...] and their highest aim is to make that delight palpable to us' ([1946] 1968: 13). The episodes and digressions of the great poems detach from the ongoing stream of narrative action to establish themselves as self-sufficient entities.

Illustrative of this tendency in *The Big Sleep* is the first encounter between Marlowe and Vivian. Immediately following Marlowe's initial meeting with General Sternwood, the butler, Norris, informs him that 'Mrs. Routledge'³ would like to see him. As he enters her room, the camera frames him in a medium-long shot, tracking his movement to the left across the expansive, luxurious space of the room, until he and the camera find Vivian mixing a drink at a small liquor table near the window, her back turned. Hawks holds the shot for a beat, just long enough for us to get a sense of the characters' relative positions. As Marlowe introduces himself, Hawks inserts a medium shot of Bacall who, continuing to pour her drink, turns her head slightly to size the detective up, turns back to finish pouring, and sets the bottle down before finally turning and walking toward him, the camera following in a right-ward track and coming to rest on a balanced two-shot. Vivian immediately begins tossing well-aimed, playful barbs: 'So you're a private detective. I didn't know they existed, except in books. Or else were greasy little men snooping around hotel

corridors. My, you're a mess.'

Marlowe replies, and Hawks cuts to a second, closer two-shot, taken from a slightly more oblique angle than the first, then quickly follows with a close-up insert of Vivian as she begins to inquire about her father's reasons for wanting to hire Marlowe. As they talk, Hawks holds this shot, allowing Marlowe to offer a reply from off-screen, before cutting back to the previous shot, as Marlowe begins needling her about offering him a drink. As Vivian becomes increasingly frustrated, the film cuts on a perfect axial match to a shot giving Bacall centre stage to deliver an exasperated 'help yourself!' and theatrically point her thumb over her shoulder, directing Marlowe to the bar. She then walks past him and the camera follows, maintaining the balanced two-shot even as they reverse screen positions. It would be difficult to overstate the elegance of this re-framing, which also suggestively brings Vivian's bed into view in the background, simultaneously underlining the dialogue's flirtatious undercurrent and pointing to Vivian's relative lack of independence. While her father conducts his meetings in a lavish greenhouse, and Marlowe will conduct his in his private office, Vivian has only her bedroom.

Perhaps wishing to maintain her facade of cool detachment, Vivian soon turns and walks toward the room's opposite window, the camera following and reframing her in a long shot. After a quick insert of Marlowe tugging his ear and walking in her direction, Hawks returns to that set-up, giving us a shot that effectively mirrors the scene's initial blocking, with Marlowe in the foreground and Vivian looking at him from near a window. As they continue to talk, he employs a series of reverse-angle medium shots, before returning to a slightly closer long shot of Vivian,



who, having had her fill of Marlowe's insouciance, slams her drink down on the windowsill in frustration. Regaining her composure, she walks toward the camera, as Hawks once again reframes into a balanced two-shot. As they talk, Vivian walks away from Marlowe and toward the camera, turning her head over one shoulder to continue speaking with him. Bacall's movements in this moment are deliberate and stiff, conveying a performed aloofness on Vivian's part. The film cuts to a second close-up of Vivian and, as with the first, holds it while Marlowe offers a reply from off-screen. We then return to the two-shot, the conversation winds down, and Marlowe exits, the camera following him on the way out in a tracking movement that rhymes with the one which opened the scene.

Writing about this scene, Thomson highlights the obvious artifice of its dialogue, suggesting that it is 'only plausible if we see Marlowe and Vivian as a fond couple who make an aphrodisiac show of hostility in which she gives him the very lob he can smash' (1981: 122). Indeed, here and throughout the film, the dialogue between the two has the distinct character of a well-rehearsed routine, with some scenes (such as their improvisatory, collaborative prank phone call to the police) feeling practically like sketches from a comic variety show. Adding to this impression of artifice are the performances, with Bacall's deliberately theatrical gestures and line readings perfectly off-setting the practiced nonchalance of Bogart's. The scene conveys an unshakable sense that these two already know each other, and well.

This sense is further heightened by the scene's formal construction, which demonstrates a thoroughly planned design. Built around matching elements in both its mise-en-scène and cinematography (two windows, two shot / countershot sequences, two close-ups of Bacall, the rhyming tracking shots which enclose the sequence), the scene is almost perfectly balanced in its construction and elaboration. The compositions of each individual frame are similarly balanced, most noticeably in the scene's numerous re-framings. As Bogart and Bacall move around and past each other, circling and sizing one another up, the compositions never become imbalanced. The blocking has the thorough, worked out precision of a well-choreographed *pas de deux*. The editing, too, with its alternation between establishing two-shots and shot / countershot sequences has a rhythmic, musical quality.

The precision and balance of the *découpage* here suggest a degree of planning, and an eye for aesthetics, that would seem to challenge the generally held perception that Hawks, in Andrew Sarris's words, 'does not choose to use technique as reflective commentary on the action' ([1968] 1996: 54). In order to see just how much Hawks' treatment of the scene exceeds mere pragmatism, one need only compare it to Michael Winner's handling of the same material in his 1978 version of Chandler's novel. Moving the story (inexplicably) to London, Winner's film transforms the Sternwood home from the California mansion of the original to a sprawling manor house. Vivian's room is cavernous, high-ceilinged, and ostentatiously appointed. As the sequence unfolds, Vivian sits perched on the arm of a sofa while Marlowe stands perfectly still. Their conversation is handled with a series of alternating close-ups and medium shots, with establishing shots inserted occasionally throughout. The film cuts on almost every line of dialogue, an approach that results in the scene containing an astonishing 33 shots over the course of its 1'46" runtime. The rapidity of the editing prevents a consistent mood from developing, leaving the scene lifeless



and inert. The blocking and mise-en-scène further exacerbate its lifelessness. The scale of the room, and the distance Vivian keeps between herself and Marlowe, seem designed to communicate an icy aloofness, yet the various establishing shots interspersed throughout the sequence display oddly cramped framing. Taken from over the actors' shoulders, rather than from a more objective position perpendicular to the action, they compress the image horizontally, producing the (one suspects unintended) effect of distorting space and partially de-emphasising the distance between the two.

This comparison strikingly illuminates the artistry lurking behind Hawks' apparently functional approach, highlighting the deliberate expressiveness of his framing, blocking and cutting. These elements combine in *The Big Sleep* to suggest a world subject to an extreme degree of organisation, a world in which people seem to move as if participating in a well-rehearsed dance, even in moments of apparent conflict. Such an approach is apparent throughout the film, as in a number of shots in which Bacall is framed



perfectly by some element of the background décor. Small touches like this contribute significantly to the feeling that we are observing a world absolutely in sync with itself. Perhaps no single scene better exemplifies that rigor of Hawks' design than the one in which Marlowe goes to confront the small time criminal Joe Brody (Louis Jean Heydt), who has come into the possession of nude photographs of Carmen that were originally taken by the now deceased Arthur Gwynn Geiger, and is using them to

continue Geiger's blackmail scheme against the Sternwoods.

After a brief exterior shot of Brody's apartment building (the Randall Arms) in which Marlowe pulls up in his car and spies Vivian arriving, the sequence begins with Marlowe ringing Brody's door and portraying himself as a potential partner in crime ('You've got Geiger's stuff and I've got his sucker list. Don't you think we ought to talk things over?'). Brody lets him in and Marlowe walks past him into the apartment, while Brody, trailing behind, surreptitiously pulls a gun from his pocket. Hawks captures their movement in a single shot, which first tracks with them into the room, and then, having found a centred position, pans gently to the left just as Marlowe pivots to see Brody pointing the gun at him. The resulting composition is a well-balanced tableau, practically painterly in its precise geometric arrangement. The actors stand equidistant from the frame's edges, with rhyming elements of décor (a flower pot and a lamp) flanking them and a curtained doorway in the background between them. The barrel of Brody's gun lines up almost perfectly with the



edge of the background doorframe, while Marlowe's hat fits neatly in its upper corner.

A short shot / reverse-shot sequence follows, before Hawks presents a closer version of the original establishing shot, with the actors clearly having been re-positioned – sacrificing strict continuity – to retain the original composition's balance in spite of the tighter framing. They are closer together, and the opening of the curtain is now directly between them. Marlowe, having inferred that they were hiding in the back room, calls on both Agnes and Vivian to come out from behind the curtain. Vivian and Marlowe almost instantly get into a spat (she says she doesn't need or want his help), and Brody's attempts to take control fall on deaf ears, despite his brandished pistol. Marlowe takes Vivian by the arm and leads her to the couch, as Hawks and Hicox once again expertly recompose on the fly, settling on a new composition in which Bacall is perfectly centred between the seated Bogart and the still standing Heydt. The film then cuts to a reverse angle, bringing Agnes back into the picture, using the now-centred Bacall as a visual anchor to keep continuity.

Following another short shot / reverse-shot sequence, Hawks provides the scene's third perfectly balanced group shot. As Marlowe presses Brody for more information about the Geiger / Carmen situation he stands up from the couch and walks forward, stepping into yet another geometrically precise composition. Bacall is once again perfectly centred between the two men, and is framed from behind by the

apartment's window, the curtains of which bisect the frame. Marlowe finally talks Brody into handing over the pictures of Carmen, but as he walks toward the desk, the doorbell buzzes. Producing a second gun and handing it to Agnes to keep watch on Marlowe and Vivian, Brody moves to the door to answer it. When he does, Carmen enters, pointing a gun of her own, and backs him into the sitting area. Marlowe, taking advantage of the distraction, grabs the gun from Agnes's hand, while Brody attempts to disarm Carmen by tripping her. Carmen crawls forward to reclaim her gun, but Marlowe beats her to it and kicks it to himself, before turning the gun he stole from Agnes on Brody, preventing him from drawing his own. This action unfolds quickly, but with the precise choreography of a dance. Bogart's movements, in particular, are as elegant and exact as a practiced pirouette.

Now in the driver's seat, Marlowe takes the photographs from Brody and sends Carmen home with Vivian. After they leave, the three remaining characters settle back into the sitting area as Marlowe attempts to tie up some loose ends. Hawks stages this dialogue in yet another expertly



composed group shot. The frame is divided roughly according to the rule of thirds, with Brody standing near a side bar, Agnes sitting on the coffee table, and Marlowe perched on the arm of the couch. As the conversation unfolds, Brody eventually moves to an armchair, while Marlowe gets up and walks over to his desk, which allows Hawks to again demonstrate his mastery of reframing, as the three eventually settle into a perfectly arranged composition, the tops of their heads forming a descending line of perspective that terminates at the bulb of a lamp in the background. Marlowe, as he finally begins piecing the puzzle together, starts to pace around the room. As he does so, Hawks uses a few subtle camera movements (a dolly in, a few slight pans) to ensure that the tripartite screen division remains intact. Bogart occasionally steps between Darrin and Heydt, creating an overlap in their blocking, but this arrangement is always only temporary, as he eventually moves back to his own designated third of the screen.

At last, the door buzzes again. Brody gets up to answer, only to be greeted by two bullets to the midsection. Marlowe then runs into the hall to pursue the gunman, bringing the apartment sequence to a close. All told, the scene contains the entrances and exits of four characters, multiple pulled guns, a scuffle, and the consistent movement of characters around and within the space of the apartment. Yet, despite all this activity, Hawks never allows a hint of true chaos or disorder to disturb the austere elegance of his compositions. The scene, like the film that

contains it, seems less a realistic depiction of human struggle and conflict than a pulpy re-imagining of Keats' Grecian Urn, its characters like 'marble men and maidens' preserved in artful composition, fated to flirt with and shoot at one another for eternity in Hawks's perfectly polished urban pastoral.

IV

Returning to the scene at the Acme, we might immediately note a number of formal features distinguishing it from the rest of the film. First, its compositions are altogether more



casual and relaxed than those we saw in the two sequences discussed above. In two-shots, the actors are often just slightly off-centre, and the *mise-en-scène* simply feels more natural. Items of décor do not feel as though they were strategically placed for maximum compositional balance, as with the lamps and potted plants in Joe Brody's apartment or the twin windows in Vivian's room. The editing, too, is more reactive, following the action rather than imposing a rhythmic pattern onto it. Everything about the sequence feels less meticulous, less 'worked-up' than most of the rest of the film. It contains a whiff – if only a whiff – of genuine spontaneity and surprise largely missing elsewhere. No doubt, the scene was just as planned out as everything else, but its design is less obvious, less consciously expressed in painterly compositions or geometric blocking. Its joints are less concealed, its surfaces just slightly less smooth.

Heightening the scene's faint sense of genuine spontaneity are the performances, which differ in tone and texture from everything else in the film. With Bogart, this difference mostly results from the scene giving him the opportunity to express genuine, rather than mock, surprise. When the proprietress removes her glasses, Marlowe is distractedly looking down at the desk and saying something to himself, enabling the audience to see her new look before Marlowe. As he raises his head, he lets out a 'hello' whose tone and delivery suggest the pleasant shock that occurs when things go better than you ever hoped they could. The plot of *The Big Sleep* provides many twists and unexpected turns, but throughout them all, Marlowe keeps his head while everyone else is losing theirs. Murder, deception, betrayal – none of these seem to phase him. Dorothy Malone with her hair down, though, leaves him momentarily speechless.

But what ultimately carries this scene, investing it with a weight exceeding mere Hawksian 'fun', is Malone, who effectively sketches a life in less than 20 lines of dialogue. Clearly conveying that she is not of Marlowe's and the

Sternwoods' world, the *noir* world, her come-ons hover between confidence and reticence. She has mastered the body language of flirtation, but the gestures themselves (the bit lower-lip, the arched eyebrows) seem held in inverted commas – knowingness masking the uncertainty and felt danger of genuine frisson. In a movie dominated by a sense of intoxicating mystery, she provides a puzzle of her own. Unnamed and never seen again, we are left asking ourselves, 'Just who *is* this woman?'

Here's what we might infer from the evidence. She is reasonably well-educated (she demonstrably knows more about old books than the similarly aged Agnes, and her judgment of Geiger as someone who 'Affects a knowledge of antiques but hasn't any' suggests the sort of knowing insolence possessed only by the young and intelligent), she is romantically unattached, and she has a sharp eye for small details ('You'd make a good cop'). We might further infer that while her job may provide some degree of intellectual fulfillment, she ultimately finds it a less-than-stimulating way to spend her days and, as a result, spends a non-negligible amount of time watching the world go by outside the shop's window (how else would she know so much about Geiger's appearance and daily routine?). Finally, we might assert that the readiness with which she engages Marlowe in flirtation indicates that she knows his type and has previously thought (or fantasised) about what she might do should someone like him come sauntering in on a slow day.

Smart, with a keen visual sense, employed and in possession of disposable income with no family to support, bored by the deadening routines of daily life and in search of some temporary excitement: she is, in short, just the sort of person who might go to see a Howard Hawks movie on her day off. It should come as no surprise, then, that the scene ends with her watching Bogart walk away in the rain



through a window that is unmistakably redolent of a movie screen. The camera's position at this moment is important. Gerald Mast, in his 1984 study of Hawks, argues that *The Big Sleep* represents an interesting, subtle experiment in the manipulation of cinematic point of view. Although Hawks forgoes voice-over narration and rarely employs direct point-of-view shots, Mast argues that the director effectively maintains the novel's first person perspective. 'Hawks,' he writes, 'chooses to confine the audience's knowledge of events to Marlowe's own knowledge [...]. Marlowe is – or might be – present in every single scene and shot in the film' (1984: 279). Here, significantly, Hawks breaks this pattern and, for the first and only time, aligns

our perspective with that of someone looking *at* Marlowe, rather than with the detective himself. The film is inviting us here, for however a brief a moment, to sympathise with and see the world from the perspective of the proprietress.

This moment most draws our attention to the distance between the world the proprietress lives in and the world of fantasy Marlowe takes with him when he leaves. The window is both a screen and a barrier, allowing one last glimpse at another world before it disappears from sight. She may wish to live the fantasy forever, but she can't. Why? What makes her unfit for permanent residence in Marlowe's and the Sternwoods' world? Malone's performance provides the answer. Her flirtations and come-ons have a distinctly performative air. If Bacall's Vivian is simply the embodiment of Hollywood's ideas about glamour and seduction, then Malone may be understood as playing a character that has taken these ideas and used them to fashion a mask. She is not a *film noir* siren, but rather an ordinary woman who is playing at being a *film noir* siren.

The mask, however, occasionally slips. For instance, note the way she looks at Marlowe, after taking her glasses off and before he notices, and breaking out in a beaming smile once he signals his approval. Her face here first expresses an earnest excitement, and bated expectancy, wholly out of keeping with the icy cool that permeates so much of the film's atmosphere. The smile, meanwhile, suggests both that she has impressed herself with the success of her own performance, and that she is taking genuine pleasure in being admired. Hawks's choice to frame her in a more or less 'objective' medium shot, instead of cutting in for a more suggestive close-up or employing an 'eroticising' effect like soft focus, emphasises the complexity of her emotional response rather than simply highlighting her newfound sultriness. We are reminded, again, that we are watching an ordinary woman play at

begins to say his goodbye with a 'Well, thanks', and the proprietress' face brightens briefly. He turns to leave and she reaches out to grab his arm fondly, but her hand slips off. He's practically out the door already when, her voice betraying an eager (too eager) hopefulness, she attempts to initiate another flirtatious volley: 'If you ever want to buy a book?' Her serve, however, sails harmlessly into the net. 'Ben Hur, 1860?' Marlowe responds dispassionately and with a hint of regret. 'With duplications ...' she begins to reply, but her voice trails off into a meek 'So long,' as the hopeful smile fades from her face. Marlowe pats her shoulder once more and leaves, his playful but empty 'So long, pal' providing only cold comfort. He exits and her hand, the same hand that had reached out and missed Marlowe's arm and that, until now, had been suspended at waist height, drops in disappointment. She turns to the window, Hawks stays with her for a single beat – just long enough for us to register her dejection – and then, as if



offering his own 'So long, pal', cuts to the front of Geiger's store. The story must continue.

Many critics have noted the importance of body language and gestures in Hawks' work. Jacques Rivette, for instance, in the 1953 essay that firmly placed Hawks on the agenda of serious film criticism, writes that 'It is actions that he films, meditating on the power of appearance alone' ([1953] 1985: 128). Joe McElhaney, in a more recent essay, notes that 'the thematic and moral issues at stake in [Hawks'] films are given cinematic life through physical action' (2007: 33) and that 'throughout Hawks's work, we often find actors defining a character through the repetition of a single hand gesture' (34). In line with this general tendency, the role of gesture proves vital in the Acme scene. More specifically, it is the proprietress' gestures in the scene's concluding moments (the missed tug at Marlowe's arm, the eager smile, the dejected dropping of the arm) that mark her as unfit for permanent residence in the world of the film. In a fictional universe dominated by characters that seem at times to move with the confidence and precision of a dance troupe performing well-known routines, her awkwardness in this moment stands out. She is halting and hesitant in her movements, entirely lacking in Vivian's breezy gracefulness. Her body language betrays her, signaling the sea of emotions (regret, disappointment, longing) roiling beneath the easy-going, flirtatious façade. She is, at last, simply too human to fit in *The Big Sleep's* land of gods and monsters, so the film, like Marlowe, must leave her behind.

Thomson rates the scene as being 'among the most



Hollywood glamour rather than transform into its embodiment.

The mask slips definitively at the scene's conclusion, and the result is an astonishingly delicate moment. After the fade back to the front window, Malone enters the frame first, peers over the curtain, and then turns back to the camera as Marlowe follows. The smile is gone, replaced by a look of mild resignation. 'I hate to break it to you', she says, her voice more matter-of-fact than before, 'but that's Geiger's car over there'. As Marlowe approaches the window, she watches him and her face conveys the dawning realisation that this is, indeed, the end of the affair. Marlowe

beautiful and treacherous things in *The Big Sleep*' (1981: 124). But treacherous for whom? In Thomson's view, it is we in the audience who risk being too easily seduced by scene's, and the film's, easy-going charms. These charms, Thomson argues, mask a sinister, chauvinist, adolescent view of the world. '*The Big Sleep*,' he writes, 'is a seemingly infinite realization of male fantasies. I say infinite because the film encourages the feeling that it might go on forever. Moreover, the authority and ease of the style cloak the automatic chauvinism of the attitude' (1981: 125). The scene, for him, is a trap, slyly cajoling us into sanctioning Marlowe's behavior and the – frankly misogynist – ideology that he sees underwriting it:

Womanhood is rated in the sequence as the meek imprint of a man's dream about spectacles and hairstyles, about the facile availability of afternoon romances, and the complacency that 'So long, pal' is an adequate exit line [...]. *The Big Sleep* is so witty and cool that it seems ponderous to disapprove of its ethics. Thus there is the temptation to share in its treatment of the proprietress as just another element in the camp panorama. (125)

Sustaining this position, however, requires the suppression of both the sequence's numerous cues that we are meant to empathise with the proprietress, as well as the emotional particularities of Malone's performance outlined above. Of the scene's conclusion, Thomson writes 'She does nothing to protest, to ask what now, what next, what about me? What did this mean? She has behaved like a placid whore, an available young bitch. And Marlowe has sought no more' (1997: 62). This comment strikes me as a profound mischaracterisation of what happens. The proprietress may not scream in protest, or demand answers to the questions Thomson claims she never raises, but no one paying anything like close attention to Malone's performance could possibly construe her as conveying happy acceptance. That the scene is uncontestedly troubling from the perspective of gender politics makes the complex earnestness of this performance all the more affecting. The painful impact of acting in accord with male desire is written all over her face and in her gestures.

In his essay 'The Thought of Movies', Cavell posits that 'if it is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling or meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency [...]. It is as if an inherent concealment of significance, as much as its revelation, were part of the governing force of what we mean by film acting and film directing and film viewing' (1983: 94). Hawks neither overtly conceals nor overtly highlights the proprietress' disappointment. Her bodily gestures and facial expressions are there for anyone to see, but they are not called attention to. Just as Hawks earlier refused the expected 'erotic' close-up after she let her hair down, here he refrains from cutting in to emphasise her dismay. Cavell goes on to suggest that 'to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things – that is, to fail the perception that there is something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong – requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves' (96). Marlowe may callously ignore the proprietress' silent distress, but that doesn't mean that we must as well.

What is finally put in danger by the scene is not the audience's moral rectitude or ability to recognise the casual chauvinism of male fantasy. Rather, it is the integrity of that fantasy itself that the scene very nearly shatters. Like a

parlour trick, *The Big Sleep* only works if it can keep the audience from asking too many questions ('Who killed Owen Taylor?'). So long as the machinery hums along with balance and precision, so long as the actors hit their marks and the elegant compositions continue to assure us, as Thomson puts it, 'that the whole thing is a game, an artifice' (1997: 64) we are not likely to question the ethics of the enterprise. But the moment something like real, unguarded feeling enters the picture, things begin to break down.

We might now return to Cavell's argument about film's ability to 'taunt' fact and fantasy with one another, its 'unaided perfect power to juxtapose fantasy and reality' (1988: 188) and, at last, adjudicate *The Big Sleep*'s contribution to the history of films that take advantage of this power, that test its limits. Among the films cited by Cavell are Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), which shows the way a fantasy, believed in too fully, might fatally mangle one's relationship with the world, and Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967), which pictures fantasy as a place of escape and rejuvenation. Unlike these films, *The Big Sleep* does not explicitly thematise the relationship between fantasy and reality, but the Acme scene proves no less instructive on the topic as a result. We may take it, at last, as a parable about the very conditions of existence for a fantasy like *The Big Sleep* itself, about its necessary remove from the world of ordinary and everyday life. *The Big Sleep* can only sustain itself in the absence of human voices that might wake it.

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I would like to thank Robert Ray, Barbara Mennel, and Anthony Coman for reading early drafts of this essay.

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Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism, 6.

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¹ I have retained the gendered spelling 'propriess' throughout this discussion as that is how the credits name the character

² I am leaving aside both 1947's *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery), the two mid-1970s Chandler adaptations starring Robert Mitchum, and Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973, with Elliot Gould) from this comparison. The reason for excluding the former, a failed experiment in point of view filmmaking in which the camera is meant to 'stand in' for Marlowe, should be clear. As for the 70s films, the 60-year-old Mitchum's characterisation is simply too far afield of both the books' and the other adaptations, to be of any genuine comparative interest, while Altman's film is less an adaptation than a work of postmodern pastiche.

³ The fate of Vivian's first husband is one of the film's unsolved mysteries. In the novel, she is married to Rusty Reagan (who becomes 'Sean' in the film), a former confidant of the General who has recently gone missing. Reagan's disappearance – which turns out to be permanent – figures heavily in both versions of the story.