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Designing Los Angeles: An Interview with Richard Sylbert*

[Robert L. Carringer](#)

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At the same time that Los Angeles was beginning to discover itself as the foremost postwar American city, the Hollywood film industry was discovering contemporary Los Angeles as a major subject. Chief among the institutional practices facilitating the use of Los Angeles was the general increase in shooting on actual locations that accompanied the breakdown of the studio system shortly after the war. Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), with its numerous L.A. views--a gleaming moderne gas station, a hospital in the late International architecture style ubiquitous in the period, Angel's Flight in operation, tenements on Bunker Hill, ordinary L.A. commercial streets and residential neighborhoods, a dynamic overhead shot of a traffic-filled six-lane boulevard--is a landmark in this regard. Almost as important was the introduction of improved color film stocks in the early sixties that yielded softer, less saturated colors without loss of resolution, and were considerably less expensive than existing stocks. Between 1967 and 1974 more than a dozen important feature films set in Los Angeles were released (this was the first major wave). All but one were in color and all made extensive use of actual settings. Additionally, they were part and parcel of the new American cinema movement, [1](#) which is to say, made under semi-autonomous production arrangements and thematically and stylistically iconoclastic, especially along the lines of the French New Wave. **[End Page 97]**

Most of the films of this first Los Angeles wave were auteurist vehicles that, by and large, played to limited or specialized audiences--Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968); John Cassavetes's *Faces* (1968), *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974); Paul Mazursky's *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* (1969), *Alex in Wonderland* (1970), and *Blume in Love* (1973); and Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and

California Split (1974). But three additional films had much broader appeal. *The Graduate* (1967) was, quite simply, a phenomenon, almost of the magnitude of the *Star Wars* cycle a decade later. It grossed the equivalent of \$408 million in 1998 dollars, placing it twenty-second on the list of all-time top domestic grossers and, among Los Angeles films, second only to *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). ² It was nominated for seven Academy Awards (Mike Nichols won for Best Director) and, along with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), impelled an industry-wide shift toward less restrictive and generally more youthful subject matter and a looser, more contingent visual stylistic. *Shampoo* (1975) was the number one grosser in Columbia Pictures history up until that time, ³ and *Chinatown* (1974)--for many still *the* archetypal film of Los Angeles--was a solid critical and commercial success. Although *The Graduate* and *Shampoo* are very dissimilar to *Chinatown* in their concerns, the three films taken together instantiate a familiar representational dialectic: the bright artificiality and preoccupation with surfaces and appearances of the affluent Anglo Westside, versus the Down-town environ as its dark obverse, a site of violent crime, moral abjection, and ethnic Otherness. The three films have in common a generally cynical view of Los Angeles, and to a great extent are the work of outsiders. Polanski's explanation of why he took on the *Chinatown* assignment is typical of the attitude:

Although L.A. was the last place I wanted to be, I did want to do the movie. Not just for the money, which was good, and the profit percentage points, which I'd never been offered before, but because I was eager to try my hand at something entirely different--in this case a potentially first-rate thriller showing how the history and boundaries of L.A. had been fashioned by human greed. ⁴

Outsiders--especially New Yorkers, Midwesterners, and Europeans--are often ambivalent toward Los Angeles in this same way, and the widespread appeal of this particular group of films may be owing in large part to the fact that they so thoroughly indulge while simultaneously being repelled by their subjects. **[End Page 98]**

Only one person was involved in a major creative capacity on all three films--production designer Richard Sylbert. The title *production designer* was first given to Sylbert's idol and former mentor, William Cameron Menzies, in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to the material look of *Gone With the Wind*. Sylbert once described the Menzies ideal of production design: "If I draw every shot, then all the parts connect. And they are related to one another, to make a given whole." ⁵ Sylbert began his career as a set designer in early television, where his work included a *Hamlet* which at the time was the largest television studio piece ever and, with Menzies directing, two *Fu Manchu* pilot episodes shot in 35mm (because of litigation these were never released). From early on he was also involved in design involving actual cities. In 1953, for instance, in his mid-twenties, he served, uncredited, as an advisor on locations for *On the Waterfront* after veteran Hollywood art director Richard Day became ill and was unable to complete the assignment. When New York became the home base for a select group of prestige directors in the fifties, Sylbert emerged as the leading designer of the city's films. "I owned New York!" he said emphatically, as actors sometimes do of a proprietary interest in a particular role. The remark was not without some justification: Sylbert designed

practically every important picture made there in the ten year period from 1956 to 1966-*Baby Doll*(1956), *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) for Elia Kazan; *Edge of the City* (1956) for Martin Ritt; *The Fugitive Kind* (1959), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962), and *The Pawnbroker* (1964) for Sidney Lumet; *Lilith* (1964) for Robert Rossen; and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) for Mike Nichols. [6](#)

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Robert Carringer: So, if you "owned" New York during this period, would it be fair to say that, beginning with *The Graduate*, you then owned L.A. for almost a decade?

Richard Sylbert: Yes. Yes. And like in New York, we were a family. Me and Mike Nichols and Buck Henry and Bob Towne and Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson. Mike on *The Graduate* and *The Fortune*. Bob on *Chinatown* and *Shampoo*. Warren on *Shampoo* and Jack on *Chinatown* and Warren and Jack both on *The Fortune*. We were the same group of people from 1965 to 1975 and **[End Page 99]** we seldom ever separated. And we were all displaced people, if not from New York then at least accustomed to working there, and we had a kind of common outsider's vision of this town.

RC: Cinematographers say there's a New York look and pace and an L.A. look and pace. Did you find that too? If so, how would you describe it?

RS: This is laid back. This is sunny and hot and quiet. In 1930 it was slow. It's in *Chinatown*. If you look at *Chinatown* it moves, it's sunny and every day it's got a clear sky. You can't have anything else because you've got a drought. *Shampoo* is the perfect Beverly Hills film... it moves very slowly and it's also very pretty. As a matter of fact Laszlo Kovacs was cinematographer on *Shampoo* and we bleached the film, we flashed it, [7](#) and we got a softer, more pastel look. The tempo of *The Graduate* is very L.A. The slowness of the pool... of the whole thing... it's exactly right. Mike got it right, Roman got it right, Ashby got it right. It's a whole different tempo. A New York tempo is much quicker.

RC: Like *The Pawnbroker*.

RS: Like *The Pawnbroker*. Much more staccato. You come from New York to this town... if you've cut the mustard in New York this is a piece of cake.

RC: Why is that?

RS: Just because you're much smarter than all these people.

RC: Staccato you usually think of as editing. How does staccato relate to production design?

RS: Well, it's not a color, it's not a shape, but it's a way of looking at things. I mean, New York is energy. It really is. Look at the getting lost in the Bronx sequence in *Bonfire of the Vanities* and you'll get a pretty good idea of a New York movie. **[End Page 100]**

RC: Before we talk about specifics on the L.A. films, can I ask you a couple of general

questions about your working methods? At what point did you become "production designer"--meaning the person in total control of the material visual look.

RS: I always had it. From the time of my earliest days in television. Sometimes "art director" was the only credit available. But I was always there from the beginning to the end. I didn't have an agent until *The Fugitive Kind* and when she was drawing up my contract she asked me "When do you leave the movie?" and I said, "Well, so far I've never left 'til it was over." So, she says, "Well, OK, it will read until the end of principal photography." And it's been that way ever since. [8](#)

RC: What in your mind is the ideal of production design?

RS: Making a movie entirely in a studio. I think that pictures made entirely in a studio are the most fun in the world and they're the finest examples of production design. I don't mean post-production, computer graphics movies. Production design requires an enormous amount of structural control. The same amount of control that Mozart would have used to write a symphony, structurally. You think of designing, at least I do, certainly not in terms of static pictures in a museum, but as a musical. The ideal thing is to be able to structure and time and build it to be exactly the thing you want. It's the best of all possible worlds.

RC: But beginning in the sixties, when there's more and more shooting on actual locations, you don't have the best of all possible worlds.

RS: That's right. So then the ideal becomes like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which is all sets except for the exterior of the house and the exterior of the roadhouse. All the rest is in the studio. And you start to scout locations early.

RC: You mean you continue to exercise control over locations?

RS: Total control. **[End Page 101]**

RC: Total control over locations?



RS: Yes. When you start a picture you start not with the world but with a script. That script sometimes describes things well and sometimes badly. Some writers do a certain amount of research, but for the most part what they're doing is trying to give you some clues. When Bob Towne wrote *Chinatown*, he wrote about a city he knew extraordinarily well. Since he was a kid he used to fish out of San Pedro. He had also studied the city's past very carefully and knew it very well. But he had no idea where Evelyn Mulwray would live. He had no idea where Jack's office would be. He had a general sense of the city but he had no idea of how to organize the city.

RC: Well, then, how precisely do you go about designing a picture like *Chinatown*? **[End Page 102]**

RS: I've always believed what Kazan said about acting and it's true about everything in my own business as well, "If you're going to develop a character" --or you're going to

develop ideas for a movie--"you begin the way you make salads. First you take some tomatoes, then you take some lettuce, then you take some cucumber, then you take some feta cheese, it's a Greek salad, then you take some Kalamata olives and you get them all together element by element. And you keep adding and adding and adding until you've built this thing." It's the simplest thing in the world to sit down and write a list from *Chinatown* after you've read the script. It has to be during a drought, meaning the sky can't have any clouds. And you should shoot only with a white sky. If you need a blue sky well, that's something else then you go for it. Most cameraman prefer backlight anyway so the sky is always light. Then you say if there's a drought then the colors of this picture can go from white to burnt grass and that's it. All the variations, straw, hay, so on. Except where they have water. Which means then you can have green. Mrs. Mulwray's lawn and the orange orchard. That's all there is in the movie that's green. Then you say all the houses have to be Spanish except one. All Spanish, all white.

RC: So you're organizing the city as a production design in your mind.

RS: Oh yes. Then you say the last house, which is not Spanish, is going to be a California bungalow. But it's also going to be painted white. Now the reason it's white is because it's hotter. Then you push it a little more. Now you've got the tomatoes and the lettuce, you say, "Every house that he goes to is going to be above eye level, because it is harder to go up than down." Every shot on Hollis Mulwray is looking down. Always looking down on him because he's going to die. The only time you see him up is in city hall. After that it's all down. Down from the roof of that little place he lives in. Down at the sea. Down at the reservoir when they drag his body up. Down again at the morgue.

RC: But aren't these angles and such the prerogatives of the director and the cinematographer?



RS: Why would I have to talk to Roman about the recipe? That's what I do. We'd already done *Rosemary's Baby*. We were friends in Europe before we had **[End Page 103]** even done that. I'd say, "Roman, this is the place we're going to shoot it." "Wonderful." And he always put the camera in the right place. I didn't have to talk to Roman about those things. He knows. Stanley Cortez started the picture three weeks before we were going to shoot. We fired him after four days of shooting and it was all determined when John Alonzo came on and we just showed him, this is where you're shooting this and this is where you're shooting that... I found all these things and photographed them and made sketches and every one of my illustrations is exactly what the picture was. [9](#)

RC: Can you tell me some of the exact locations you used? Like the dry riverbed where the Mexican kid is riding a horse?

RS: Tujunga Wash. Where that little bridge is. That little thirties bridge. I found that with the helicopter too. The kid is on a pale horse, of course, the same color as the ground. It's all drought. The whole thing is burnt out. And **[End Page 104]** you're looking down at it, from the top of the bridge.

RC: Where they're spilling the water at the ocean?



RS: The old Point Fermin, where there's an old naval station on the coast. It's where the old lighthouse used to be. That's where we put the pipe in the ground. The sluice he gets drowned in, that's the Stone Canyon Reservoir or the other one, I can't remember which. We had to build all that. That long sluice where they bring the body up? That's in Brentwood. The seniors' home, that's the Eastern Star, also in Brentwood. It fit the bill. What's the bill? Spanish. And you have to go up--literally have to drive up. It was perfect. I mean look at the colors of those walls. They're exactly the color of everything else in the movie. The chandeliers, all the thirties woodwork, the board with all the names... all I did was dress the interior and put a neon sign up. **[End Page 105]**

RC: How tough was it to get location permits in this period?



RS: Easy in this case. One Bunker Hill with those beautiful elevators, I needed those elevators. You know that quick elevator scene where he meets Mulvihill? The most beautiful carved elevators section... it's just wonderful. It was easy. We had no trouble with the reservoirs. We had no trouble with anything. We had no trouble on *The Graduate* with anything. On *Shampoo* we shot right on Rodeo Drive for the entrance to the beauty shop. But it was very different then. You couldn't do a lot of those things today. Now there's a lot of restrictions. We put a dummy in the water and dragged it up on a rope. We have reservoir restrictions now and you can't put anything in the water. One Bunker Hill is owned by a different corporation and we couldn't get in there today.

RC: Can we go back now a bit? How did you become involved with *The Graduate*?

RS: Mike asked me. We had just worked together on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

RC: *The Graduate* was a phenomenal commercial success. What's your own opinion of it?

RS: Let me put it this way. Sam O'Steen, the editor, called it "the perfect movie" and he stayed with Mike for the next twenty years. Calder Willingham wrote a script for first draft, from the book. When Mike got involved, Larry Turman was producer, and Mike brought in Buck Henry and Buck Henry rewrote the entire script. We rehearsed that script for three weeks. That script and those rehearsals and that movie were identical. You know how pictures change. They change constantly. It never changed. Once it was cast and once it was rehearsed it never changed. Every idea, every shot was exactly what we had planned at the beginning and that's very satisfying.

RC: How did you go about designing it?

RS: Well, first of all, the pool is very important in that picture and I remember **[End Page 106]** getting in a helicopter and flying all around Pasadena and L.A. looking for a house with the pool in just a certain way. And I began to form a general plan. I thought: this was a study of Los Angeles, the middle class of Los Angeles--that was really perfect. And then I thought: this is the new Romeo and Juliet and the families are the Capulets and

the Montagues, except he ends up having an affair with the mother and of course doesn't commit suicide. Anyway, I decided they lived in basically the same house, except on different sides of the same street. And so it was also about keeping up with the Joneses. And this means being identical. So when I selected the exteriors, both houses were on Alpine Drive and they were the same style. Except that one would be on one side of the street and the other would be on the other side of the street. Then I designed the interiors. They were mostly white and black. There's very little else in them. Both of them were white and black and where the railings and the staircase were white in the boy's house they were black in the girl's house. If one floor was white tile, the other was black tile. All the doorways, all the arches, all the openings in the boy's house were square. All the doorways, all the arches, all the staircases in the girl's house were round. It was a game of playing black and white. You couldn't have black rooms, the walls were actually white, except her room was pink, but all the other things you could play games with. They were built to work for very well planned scenes. Like in the bar, in Hollywood it's called the lanai, that glass-walled room, which is like a jungle and she's the leopard. When you sat in the glass room with the tiger, the leopard, you could see the front door. If Ridley Scott had done this one of them would have lived in a Frank Lloyd Wright house and the other one would have lived in a Greene and Greene. Do you know what I mean? It would have been... oh boy!

RC: You say middle class, yet you say they're living in Beverly Hills.

RS: Upper middle class is what I really mean. When I say middle class that's all I think of. I mean it's true now, but this is upper middle class. These are the people that went to universities, whose fathers were successful, who had everything and that's not a lie because even today there's a lot of upper middle class people living in Beverly Hills. They're not all rich. Those are not ostentatious houses. They're very, very simple. They have a slight alpine feeling on Alpine. **[End Page 107]**

RC: But how would you know this because we never see...

RS: Except for one shot on a long lens. I needed that. You have to know what it is, where it is, where the door is, what the door shape is, because you never, we never saw the front of his house ever, I don't think, but hers we did, a couple of times.

RC: But usually those shots aren't clear. Like the one from inside the car.

RS: On a long, long, lens. On a long lens over the bushes.

RC: For a breakthrough L.A. film, this has very little of actual L.A., I mean real locations, in it. What of L.A. do you see in it?

RS: Well, the truth of it is it's not about shopping and if it's not about shopping you're not going to see any L.A. Just think of it that way. **[End Page 108]**

RC: That's a pretty cynical view.



RS: The story is so internalized. It's a pressure cooker of two families. The



parents never leave the house. They only come in. You never follow the father to the golf course. Everything is done in dialogue, in that sense. You wouldn't need L.A. You wouldn't need a shot all down the street of Alpine to help you, because they're not going anywhere. That's what I mean when I say shopping. They're not shopping. You want to do an L.A. picture like *Pretty Woman* you go shopping and everyone says, "Oh, look. They're on Rodeo Drive..." This picture has nothing to do with that... this picture is about people who you know shop, but you don't have to see them do it. Every object in the place is done by a decorator. The glass mirror. The mirrored dining rooms and the kitchens. In that sense it's a very interesting statement about the place without showing you the place. **[End Page 109]**

RC: What other actual locations did you use, other than the exteriors of the houses on Alpine?



RS: The Ambassador Hotel. I cut the lobby of the Ambassador in half so that they could stay in business and I built this round desk for Buck Henry to stand behind, which looked directly into the bar where there was this telephone booth and directly to the exterior of the hotel. The Sunset strip, at the corner where the Whiskey is, when they were going to the strip club.

RC: But again, how could we tell this, because it's...

RS: Because it's a long lens. It took me a very long time to get that church, to negotiate for that church in La Verne. I found a picture of it in an architectural book, it's La Verne, California. **[End Page 110]**

RC: It's supposedly Santa Barbara, but it's La Verne?



RS: It was perfect. It was a glass wall with a tree growing in it. What could be more Hollywood than that? There was no way to get to the second floor from the inside, because basically there wasn't, it's just a balcony. So, all I did, once we finally made the deal, was put a staircase outside the building, a fake staircase. That's one of the greatest church scenes there ever was. It was the perfect church. We waited four months before we ever gave up. We never gave up and we got it. That's the fun of making movies like that. *The Graduate* is really middle class Hollywood.

RC: Well, the whole first half of the film is claustrophobic. Then all of sudden he's driving to Berkeley and you get a helicopter shot.

RS: The bridge. **[End Page 111]**

RC: What about the bridge?

RS: The bridge. We went in the other direction.

RC: You're going in the wrong direction. Did anyone ever notice?

RS: The wrong way. Sure people noticed, but nobody cared. Nobody cared that Berkeley was USC.

RC: The Berkeley stuff is actually shot at USC?

RS: All of it was. Yes. We went to Berkeley. I remember Haight Asbury very well. We looked at it all very carefully. I still have a lot of photographs of that trip. But the purpose was not that. The purpose was to get a sense. It's a very good movie. It's not a movie where the people are moving around and you follow them. It's a picture where your transitions between a pool and a bedroom become very self consciously thought out. Maybe a little too consciously, and it's the only part of that picture that when I see it now is self-conscious.

RC: You mean the visual, the technical stuff?

RS: That's right.

RC: Some of it is French New Wave, isn't it?

RS: Sure is. Like, you know, that effect when he walks from the pool at his house and he's in Mrs. Robinson's hotel bedroom? Do you know where it comes from? *Jules and Jim*. You remember when Catherine is on the canal?

RC: You were conscious of that?

RS: We knew exactly what it was. But Arthur Penn, Mike Nichols, Warren, myself--those are the people we admired, the New Wave. We came to Hollywood to change things in Hollywood. **[End Page 112]**

RC: But why did you start with Beverly Hills to change things?

RS: It just happened. It was just an accident.

RC: Well, it's not an accident, because you went ahead and also made *Shampoo*.

RS: Well, that's true too, but it was still an accident as far as I could see. In other words, nobody sat down and said--I don't think Mike ever sat down and said, "I want to make a picture about L.A." I think it was just something that was so interesting to us.

RC: So, you said what you really wanted was to change Hollywood stylistically in terms of...

RS: We wanted to change--I'll put it another way. If you had the script of *Shampoo* today I don't think you could get it made. It's too intelligent. I mean these are intelligent movies in a way that is hard to describe. There is something about them that's so intelligent, the world they're talking about. They're not supported by guns. They're not supported by chases. They're not supported by "Let's get more laughs in the middle." They're supported by intelligence. And they're critical--let me say, warmly critical. I mean, this is not a tendentious study of Los Angeles. Europeans might want to do that. *Zabriskie Point* is exactly that, a tendentious vision of America. Pejorative and everything else. Ours is not that. Ours is a very touching story. The beauty of *The Graduate* in a way is the last shot.

In which now that they've come through all of this, what else? They're probably divorced six years later.

RC: It's also the ending of *The 400 Blows*.

RS: Yes.

RC: Did you think of that?

RS: Sure. Everybody thought of it. **[End Page 113]**

RC: Well, are you saying New Wave techniques affected the way *you* worked?

RS: No.

RC: Not at all? You would have done it the same way if you had been shooting with a conservative...

RS: No, no, no. Absolutely. There's nothing about... I was an old designer by that time, do you understand what I mean? It was Mike's second movie, but it was my twentieth or something. The cinematographer was Robert Surtees Sr. He was brilliant. He was absolutely the most charming, well read, easy going personality for that picture. He was an old Hollywood cameraman. He wasn't a new Hollywood cameraman.

RC: So, how did he adapt so easily to New Wave?

RS: He was that smart. Nothing was going to pass Bob Surtees by. He was the person who was right there with everything. Bob Surtees was really smart and he understood everything. ¹⁰ I mean we had plans here to do certain things and they worked out great. It's a great study of L.A. and it's a great study of the beginning of a period. Not only is it a comment on movies. It's a comment on life. Plastics. The truth of it is if that guy came down the stairs today and somebody said, "plastics," he'd say, "How can I get into them?"

RC: Plastics equals L.A.?

RS: No. The idea of today's generation coming back from college and going downstairs-- if someone said to them "Internet" they would say "How do I get into it?"

RC: No, I understand what you're saying. I'm saying in 1967 "plastics" kind of equals L.A.?

RS: Oh absolutely. It certainly does, without question. **[End Page 114]**

RC: Well, I don't want to push this too hard, but what if the New Wave techniques had been put into some kind of realistic film about L.A., wouldn't the course of films about L.A. possibly have been totally different? I mean *The Graduate* was enormously successful and it initiated a cycle, the Beverly Hills film, and there are more major L.A. films about Beverly Hills, overwhelmingly, than any other place in L.A. Now what if

instead there had been some kind of realistic treatment like in a New York picture, say *The Pawnbroker*.

RS: I had been in Europe for several years before I came back to do *The Graduate*. When I saw what happened in that year to Sunset Boulevard--it was the hippie revolution--to me it was an enormous shock. Kids were everywhere on the streets. The streets were jammed day and night. I remember Dennis Hopper running across the street being chased by a cop. It was a total revolution. It was another world. The revolt of 1966 is "down with the middle class," "down with the parents with too much money," "down with the parents who have no feeling about anything," "down with the parents who aren't interested in anything except getting ahead." *The Graduate* is part of the revolt but it's a story done in a much different way. He is a passive version of that. I mean, he may have grown his hair down to his shoulders finally and got on a motorbike for all I know, but this is a very passive version of it. The idea that the girl you're in love with, he's sleeping with her mother, is revolutionary. I mean, very French, very Louis Malle. Louis Malle could have done it very well.

RC: Well, one last time I'll put the question. What if the story had been from the point of view of one of those people who actually had gone to the streets and was actually involved in the revolution?

RS: *Medium Cool*, I guess. It would be cinéma vérité. And that's not what we were about. We were very interested in making an extremely careful film. It was a shock, but we made it a very sophisticated, very carefully planned, very conscious movie about the same revolution. And if anybody had come and done a picture the way you're describing... they would have done what Haskell Wexler did. *Medium Cool*. [11](#) [End Page 115]

RC: You return to the L.A. film with *Chinatown*, and then you go on to do *Shampoo*. How did you get involved with that project?

RS: It took four years. I talked to Warren and Bob for four years before the script was finished. First draft was about 288 pages. It was basically something we all knew. We knew Gene Shacore very well, we knew Jay Sebring very well.

RC: Who are they?

RS: Gene Shacore was a famous hairdresser. So was Jay Sebring. Gene Shacore had a Beverly Hills hair parlor and Jay Sebring had a Beverly Hills hair parlor. We knew all the hairdressers because we knew all the pretty girls. The hairdressers were in the swing of it. It was the swinging scene. They had the cachet. All the beautiful women and the parties. It was something we were looking at very carefully from the point of view of the hairdresser.

RC: In many places hairdresser, for males, is also a code for gay. Was that true of Beverly Hills?

RS: True, but not for Shacore and Sebring. But there were plenty of guys who worked

there with a pair of scissors who were gay. And in the script, Norman, the manager, the man who owns the beauty parlor is gay. That is such a good script. It took four years to write it. Warren had to write half of it. We used to meet at Jim Baker's Source. I think it's gone now. It was a salad bar. Health food.

RC: Yes, I know it, on the Sunset Strip. It's a Cajun place now. It's been in a lot of movies--*Annie Hall*...

RS: Oh yes. We used to meet at The Source. Warren would hand me pages. Warren is very FBI. Everything is very secret. He would say, "Read these and tell me what you think." Warren wrote both party scenes. The election party at the bistro and the big party scene at the end. Hal Ashby came into it just before I did. In other words, I had seen the script already, and once Warren **[End Page 116]** had Hal, he told him, "Dick Sylbert's going to design this picture." Hal was wonderful and his feelings about people are so good. There's nothing mean about that movie. It's not what a lot of other directors I know would be doing. Bob Altman would have been much rougher on this picture.

RC: He would have been vicious. Where did the political element come in? You know it's 1974 but the setting is the 1968 Presidential election.

RS: It's Warren.

RC: That's Warren?

RS: That's Warren, Bob. All of us, you know, all of us...

RC: Were Democrats?

RS: Oh absolutely. Just hated Nixon and it's very important to Warren, because Warren is good at that. I mean he's good, he thinks that way. What I love about it is it's all not in the middle. It's always on the side of the story.

RC: The Bistro, where the political party takes place, is on location, isn't it?

RS: No. The owner wouldn't let us shoot at the actual place. For the exterior I found a brick building I needed and fixed it up. The interior is a set, both floors--I mean when they come up the stairs and the second floor. Alex Trauner designed The Bistro. Most of it comes from *Irma La Douce*. I told the owner, "We're going to make a set of this. I'm going to make certain changes in the studio because of the scenes that I have to deal with." The owner was outraged when he found out that "I want to suck his cock" is in that scene based on his restaurant.

RC: Did Warren put that in?

RS: Yes, absolutely.

RC: Did Julie have any... **[End Page 117]**

RS: Nobody had any resistance. We thought it was hysterical. You know who she says it

to? Bill Castle. The producer of *Rosemary's Baby*. My sister-in-law was doing the costumes and she dressed Tony Bill the way I dress. We had a wonderful time making the picture. I built the entire beauty parlor. A huge set. My then wife is in there. It's a wonderful scene.

RC: That's one set? It has to be 200 feet deep.



RS: All the way back to under the curtains. Yes, the whole stage and all the mirrors. Every mirror was gimbaled. ¹² It was a great set.

RC: If *The Graduate* is keeping up with the Joneses, then *Shampoo* is...



RS: It's a study in narcissism. That's why all the mirrors and lattice work. If you could think of the "Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymous

Bosch [End Page 118] as a garden of mirrors and lattice work you would have the image that I wanted. There's mirrors all over that picture, and lattice... lattice wallpaper in the dining room of the girl's house... the lattice porch overlooking Beverly Hills at Goldie's place... the lattice tennis court and the lattice tennis house where the big party takes place. I took that idea and I kept playing it throughout the movie.

RC: Are there other design elements that are especially prominent?

RS: The color of everything--even the towels, which are a big part of the picture, like when he comes to her place to do her hair. Everything in there is a pastelized version.

RC: How did you go about choosing locations?



RS: It's the layers of the city. Where Warren lived was down in Gower Gulch, [End Page 119] that's a set. Gower Gulch, down in the flats, that's the bottom of the barrel. Goldie's up in the hills. Not the Hollywood Hills but somewhere off Mulholland I think--I can't remember exactly.

RC: But it's not a real plush place?

RS: Oh no. It's just a nice little apartment.

RC: And the place that Jack Warden puts Julie...

RS: Up on Hutton, just below Mulholland. That's a perfect place, not so much for the house as the view from above it, like when she drives up near the end and they have a scene. That was one of those lucky accidents. I just kept driving around and driving around and there it was, a piece of flat property, looking down on a great little house, charming, warm, nice. You got to that house not by the house but by an empty lot and it was too good to be true because you could see the road from both directions. We shot outside and inside of that too. There's only one scene--the bedroom and when we fogged the bathroom up--that's built in the studio. When I first came to Hollywood Charlie Feldman, the great Charlie Feldman, lived up there, on Cherokee, off Coldwater, and it

was my first vision of Hollywood. Money. I mean Hollywood money. Movie money.

RC: As opposed to...

RS: The big bucks. Holmby Hills. Where Jack Warden and his wife live. That's Jerry Ohrbach's house. Jerry Ohrbach is Ohrbach's the clothing store. Also he owns the Chianti restaurant. Jerry Ohrbach was extraordinarily wealthy. We all knew him vaguely. He had eight million dollars worth of paintings in that place. He liked to play tennis. It was the perfect place, tennis court, everything about it. That's the only building that's not a set. Inside and out. **[End Page 120]**

RC: It seems to me that in every scene someone is deliberately hustling or playing an act. Warren gives one confession and then in the next scene he takes it away. Is there any scene in that film where you can take seriously what anyone is saying?

RS: They're all looking for an edge. They all have an agenda.

RC: Even meek little Goldie has one?

RS: That's right. The women are so good in that together. I mean how they understand each other, the two girls. I mean, all the duplicity, it's all part of the way everybody lives here. Everyone has an agenda and they use each other... that's what this town is.



After *Shampoo* Sylbert teamed with Mike Nichols again on *The Fortune*, a twenties L.A. period piece with Warren Beatty (in Howard Hughes mustache) **[End Page 121]** and Jack Nicholson as inept con men trying to part heiress Stockard Channing from her money. It was a critical and commercial failure and is virtually unseen and we did not discuss it. "Totally exhausted from making L.A. movies," Sylbert told me, he accepted an offer to become head of production at Paramount, a position he held for three years. After that he spent two years abroad working with Warren Beatty on *Reds* (released 1981). By the time he undertook another film about L.A., the city had become a familiar setting for commercially successful films in a range of genres: *American Gigolo*, *Blade Runner*, *Blue Thunder*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and *True Confessions* were all released in a two year period before *Breathless* (1983).

RC: You return to L.A. films with *Breathless*, which seems to me a real oddity in your career. Does it seem an oddity to you?

RS: Yes. Oh, yes.

RC: Did you approach the design on that film in the same way as on your other films?

RS: No. There's very little there. There's a set where they live in the motel. The second floor in this fifties apartment hotel. The exterior for the building is over near the university. Which was a very good choice. You look at that building and it's just a good choice. There's not a lot you can do with it. The murals were one idea. There's a lot of big murals in Venice all around. And Ocean Park. We try to give it some kind of life and the university, the statuary at the school and the art part of it and all that, but you got to

understand something--they try to make a picture, change it around, bring a girl over from France. It was a little bit arty for me, in other words. The director has something to do with that because that's what the director wanted it to be, a nice kid.

RC: But did you storyboard it and everything the same way you did your other films?

RS: Do you mean did I write down the recipe? Did I make a salad? **[End Page 122]**

RC: Yes. Early on did you make your salad as you usually do?

RS: Yes, to a degree. But it's different now because I knew the town by then. I mean I knew what we were into. Yes. I mean, we got lucky. We found certain things like that abandoned estate that used to be Errol Flynn's place. You don't know about that until you find it.

RC: Where's the junkyard?

RS: It's a great junkyard.

RC: Yes, it is.

RS: It's not there anymore.

RC: But you found that.

RS: Oh yes. You've got to look hard too. I had a wonderful time with it. I had fun. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed planning it and everything, but it's arty to begin with. It was arty in France. I mean, it was French and even without Belmondo and without Jean [Seberg], the picture's not much to begin with.

RC: So there's no concept holding it together?

RS: Not really. It's hard writing recipes all the time--and by the way, those pictures you can't write one for are seldom remembered. And remembered not just for my reasons, but for anybody's reasons. If you can't sort of get this, construct this thing...



RC: You say you can't construct this thing and that's what they're all trying to do too and they can't quite do it. She's an architecture student and Jean-Pierre Melville from the original *Breathless* is replaced by an old architect and her boyfriend is an architect and the center of the thing is the Bonaventure. So, maybe it's about inability, but you say you're an architect in a way, so, maybe that's your film. None of you could quite get it together. **[End Page 123]**

RS: No. It's pretty hard to do. The more you look to tie it up, the more harm you do, in a way.

RC: To that particular film.

RS: If you just threw it away it might be, like they did. You know, get in a Citroen, stick a camera in it, spit on the lens...

RC: You mean like the French did?

RS: That's right. The more you try to do it the worse it is.

RC: Yes, but that's not been true of all the other films we're talking about, because you say you have absolute control from the very first thought. **[End Page 124]**

RS: I know. Yes, that's true. If you miss the ball seven times out of every time you get up to hit, you get into the Hall of Fame. You know why? You have a 300 average.

RC: So, you're not very proud of *Breathless*?

RS: Oh, it's not proudish, man, it's charming. I mean it's fine.

RC: It's got more L.A. in it than most of your films, except for *Chinatown*.

RS: Yes, I know. Well, that's part of the gag. The gag, the idea is how to get L.A. into the movie. *That* L.A. That muralized sense of the city. Those are all good choices. There's nothing wrong with the choices, but it just doesn't add up to much. It just doesn't, it's pretentious.

RC: You say the original *Breathless* is just Belmondo and Seberg, but it's also Paris. Have you ever looked at it again?

RS: Oh sure, but it's movie Paris.

RC: Those inserts, you know that have no place except it's about a city.

RS: Yes, but that's what we did. We manufactured this in inserts. It is inserts.

RC: You mean like the murals and stuff?

RS: Yes, you walk around a corner and there's suddenly this image. You do this and there's that image and... there's another image... you chase another image.

RC: So, in that sense it's like the original *Breathless*.

RS: Yes and in a way it's sort of jazz. Yes. It's a jazz piece. In other words syncopated. It's improvised. It's meant to be. It's meant to look improvised, but it's not. It's conscious, but it's... **[End Page 125]**

RC: But you were involved in making it look improvised. That's what the intent is, to make it look improvised.

RS: You know what that picture is a little like? "*Day in the Life of L.A.*," by a photographer. It's very L.A. The range goes from something in the twenties to something in the eighties.

You've got this broad range of contrasts that you can play on.

RC: With *Tequila Sunrise* four years later you work with a whole different L.A. again.

RS: Manhattan Beach.

RC: But you were back with Bob Towne. Was it mainly shot at Manhattan Beach?

RS: No. I found this house that was just exactly what I wanted, and the woman was going to tear it down, so I could put in the windows that I wanted put in, and then build the entire house in the studio, including the backyard, the pool and the trailer that he lived in.

RC: Wait, you found the place and then you built it in the studio.



RS: The only shots in the original house were in the kitchen and of course the exteriors were on location, but all the backyard scenes at night, the love scenes, all that was done in the studio, including both floors of the house. Both floors. The restaurant was mildly based on two places that I knew. Valentino's, on Pico; Bob Towne's wife was once married to the guy who owns Valentino's. That's where he met her. That's where he got the idea of an Italian restaurant with a girl who was very beautiful, who was working there. I looked at Valentino's, it didn't work at all. Then I went to Mateo's. I had been going there almost since it opened. I knew Matty very well. I went to a lot of others, but the back of Matty's was just what I wanted. So, I got a chance to do things you would like to do in real life, I designed a restaurant. (I've designed restaurants incidentally.) But to get an Italian restaurant that would work I built it in a studio. The same studio. We've cut this huge warehouse in half. **[End Page 126]** We put one there and one there. Then all the rest are really interesting locations exploiting that part of the world. The Manhattan Beach part of the world. I remember it all worked out very well, the motel was perfect where he could hide, get down in the riverbed. All the riverbeds. I must have gone through riverbeds until I was blue in the face, to get all of that. But the nice part about that picture is the picture doesn't travel very much. It's really very interior. The police station, I was going to use Inglewood police station, we were all happy to have it. It had something I had never seen before, it was white. But it got to be a problem like there are on movies. Night shooting. We were running out of money and I did something that I'd never done before, I looked at a set that already existed for a series called "Hunter." A police station in a little separate building by itself over on Washington Boulevard near Exposition Boulevard. I looked at it and it was a television version of a cops' place, papers and stuff like all this junk, this and that. The woodwork was dead visually and I said, "I want every single thing taken out of this place, except the **[End Page 127]** desks. Everything, every piece of paper." Repainted it, the woodwork, to put some life into it. Put in some glass partitions. Never put anything back on the walls. Shot it. It was perfect. I took everything a television designer would think belongs in a police station and threw it out.

RC: You did some shooting at San Pedro, right?

RS: All the big night bang, bang, bang, all that is set there.

RC: The stuff on the boat? The blow-up on the boat?

RS: All that's gone. That place we shot at is actually gone. I mean the water is still there. There's a big hangar there, where people used to do videos there, right behind us. It got so difficult with the boat scene with "I love you," smack, "I love you," that we brought the boat in to that room and we put it on gimbals and blackened out the whole room and fogged it up. We shot the whole scene, fake, right there, right behind us and then we shot twenty nights out on the water. Then that yacht that I found. It was a great yacht. It was docked out there at San Pedro. It was docked right near the bridge. It was perfect. The boat was perfect. It was a lot of fun to make that picture, very pleasant picture to make. The timing was very good. Then the beach scene with the swings? Well, we had the swings. We just carried them around, because the sun kept moving and we never knew when we would get to it so, finally, we found enough piece of a beach so we could place it right to the sun. It was a very pleasant picture. It's truly Manhattan Beach. It's the L.A. beach world. Which is a whole mind set itself.



Following major production difficulties and lengthy postponements, *The Two Jakes*, the sequel to *Chinatown*, was released at last in 1990. Robert Evans produced, Robert Towne wrote the script, and Jack Nicholson starred. With Polanski still a fugitive from U.S. justice, Nicholson also directed. The production was designed by Jeremy Railton, an unknown. Sylbert had been involved at an early stage but backed out because he thought the script lacked a center. In 1995, without much enthusiasm, he had designed *Mulholland Falls*, [End Page 128] an L.A. crime period piece in some ways reminiscent of *Chinatown*. At the time of our conversations, he was once again designing a city. At Playa Vista, near the site of the proposed DreamWorks studio complex, on a large open tract of land once used by the Hughes Corporation for testing helicopters, a crew of 150 were constructing a Beijing *hutong*--a maze-like neighborhood of alleys--for the MGM legal thriller *Red Corner*, starring Richard Gere. It was a single continuous set covering four and a half acres, meticulously designed down to the last detail so that it would appear to the camera to be a literal reproduction. (On the day I visited the set with him he ordered all the window treatments in an immense courtyard torn out--they were too busy to be comprehended visually onscreen--and replaced with a simpler design he drew in pencil directly on the wall.) Sylbert had spent almost two months in Beijing doing research and brought back more than twenty-five thousand dollars worth of artifacts, including manhole covers, sections of wall, and even automobiles. Construction costs for the set eventually totaled \$2.2 million. Sylbert's Beijing [End Page 129] *hutong* is descended directly from the Menzies ideal of production design. The *Los Angeles Times* observed, perhaps somewhat unfairly, it was "a Hollywood relic, a throwback to the days when studios churned out epics with gargantuan sets that matched moguls' aspirations." ¹³ Sylbert later reflected:

RS: You know, I would love to see somebody like Ridley Scott do an L.A. movie.

RC: *Blade Runner* is not an L.A. movie?

RS: Well, it's not. It's a parallel world. Just like *Dick Tracy*.

RC: You don't care for doing parallel worlds?

RS: Yes, I loved *Dick Tracy*, but it's the only one. I've done my comic book.

RC: OK. But that's what I say, you're not crazy about them because you've only done one.

RS: No. Who's done another *Blade Runner*?

RC: They've tried with *Terminator* and so on.

RS: Oh, those are post-production movies. Actually, *Blade Runner* was not a post-production movie. But now they're post-production movies. They're computerized. With rocket ships in the air. It's a metropolis and all the things you've dreamed of and things to come and all that. It's fine I suppose, but they blow up everything. I mean... two things I'm not crazy about, talking vacuum cleaners and explosions.

RC: Do you have a favorite among your own pictures, in terms of how the final result best realizes the intention?

RS: Yes. I think *Reds*, *Chinatown*, *Baby Doll*, *Shampoo*, *Cotton Club*, and even *The Pawnbroker* for what it is, are really great examples of having an image that you want to see come out on the screen. Even *Tequila*. *Tequila* was not as complicated, [End Page 130] not as difficult, but still just excellent in that sense. *Dick Tracy*, of course, is exactly what it's meant to be. Those stand up extremely well in my mind. *The Graduate*, excellent. Actually, *The Graduate* was probably the best example of getting exactly what you went for. The rest are pretty damned close, very close.

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Notes

***The content of this article was corrected on 23 September 1999 and differs from the print version. An erratum will appear in issue 20:4.**

1. See overview essays in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
2. "All-Time B.O. Champs," *Variety*, 2-8 March 1998, 105.
3. Joseph McBride, *Daily Variety*, 29 December 1975.
4. *Roman by Polanski* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 347.

[5.](#) "Dialogue on Film," *American Film*, December 1989, 22. Also see: Boris Kaufman, "Filming *Baby Doll*," *American Cinematographer* February 1957, 92-93, 106-7; Herb A. Lightman, "On Location With *Carnal Knowledge*," *American Cinematographer*, January 1971, 34-37, 86-87; Christopher Michaud, "Richard Sylbert Works His Magic By Design," *New York Times*, 23 September 1990, II: 13, 18-19; Mike Bonifer, "Production Design... or Sylbert Design Plans Unveiled," in *Dick Tracy: The Making of the Movie* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 74-91; Vincent LoBrutto, *By Design: Interviews with Film Production Designers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 49-62; Peter Biskind, "The Joy of Sets," *Premiere*, December 1993, 88-96, 142; Robert S. Sennett, "*Chinatown*," in *Setting the Scene* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994), 58-60.

[6.](#) The following conversations with Sylbert took place over a two week period in April 1997. Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) contains extensive background information on the films discussed here, much of it derived from no-holds-barred interviews with the principals involved.

[7.](#) A process in which the film is partially pre-exposed in order to reduce grain and contrast in the finished image.

[8.](#) Sylbert was listed as production designer on one of his first films, *Crowded Paradise* (1956). He was subsequently listed as art director until 1962, when the production designer credit resumed with *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *The Manchurian Candidate*.

[9.](#) John Alonzo gives a more expansive account of his own role and Polanski's--though without devaluing Sylbert's work, which he calls "brilliant" and "perfectly" designed. See: *Masters of Light*, ed. Dennis Schaefer and Larry Salvato (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 30-33.

[10.](#) For Surtees's own account of his innovations and ingenuities on *The Graduate*, see "Using the Camera Emotionally," *Action*, 10 September 1967, 20-23. The article is also included in the supplementary material to the Criterion Collection laserdisc edition of the film.

[11.](#) *Medium Cool* is filled with homages to Godard (as in the last shot, panning to reveal Wexler behind a camera looking into the film's recording camera, like cinematographer Raoul Coutard in *Le Mépris*), but is most Godardian in that it is filmed entirely on actual locations. The foregoing exchange suggests that Sylbert's commitment to the well-made film is antithetical to a radical politics.

[12.](#) Suspended on a frame and therefore moveable.

[13.](#) Scott Collins, "Playa Beijing," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July 1997, F6.