

**Robert Towne, CHINATOWN and the
Bewitchments of 'Tone'**

Evan Wm. Cameron

**Professor Emeritus
Senior Scholar in Screenwriting**

**Graduate Programmes,
Film & Video and Philosophy**

York University

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In summer of 2005 the Writers' Guild of America invited its members to name the ten movies they deemed to have been made from the best screenplays ever written. The Guild then published in rank order the one-hundred-and-one titles most often cited, pretending to have distinguished thereby the '101 Greatest Screenplays' of all time.¹

As a record of merit, the listing was a joke. Few of the contributors had read the screenplays they were supposedly distinguishing from one another, save for their own, or had screened even a representative sampling of the movies made from them, much less recently. None had been prohibited from citing movies, or movies of comparable kind, in which they or their agents, producers, friends, colleagues, spouses, ancestors, descendants or 'significant others' had a past, present or wishful financial interest. No attempt had been made by the Guild to ensure that any of those contributing had bothered to ponder any of the thousands of screenplays written and realised elsewhere than in America that would have had to have been gauged were any listing of 'greatest screenplays' to be representative (though five managed nevertheless to find a place far down the list).

As a snapshot of transient repute, however, the survey had the historical virtues of a half-staged family portrait of striking consequence. The three movies commended most highly by the participating members of the Writers' Guild of America at the conclusion of the first century of movie-making were in order CASABLANCA, THE GODFATHER and CHINATOWN. Thus,

Robert Towne, writer-on-set during the making of THE GODFATHER and sole screenwriter of credit for CHINATOWN, had been in large part responsible for the reputation among his peers of two of the three top-ranked screenplays 'of all time'.²

¹ See the website of the Writers Guild of America [west, but east will do as well], <http://www.wga.org/writers-room/101-best-lists/101-greatest-screenplays>

² Though Towne received no screen credit for his contributions to the design of THE GODFATHER, he had, for example, written the memorable last conversation between the once-and-future 'godfathers', enacted by Brando and Pacino, a scene nowhere to be found in the novel or the original screenplay; and, as screenwriter of credit for CHINATOWN, he had won both the American and British academy awards for 'best original screenplay' (the only 'Oscar' given the movie in America despite eleven nominations) to accompany the comparable Writers Guild of America, Edgar Allen Poe and Golden Globe awards he had earned for the same movie.

The conclusion confirmed a chorus that the screenwriting choir of Hollywood had long before learned to sing, namely that Robert Towne, arguably the most accomplished screenwriter of the last third of the twentieth-century, had earned a place among the best screenwriters that Hollywood had ever known.

Remarkably, however, one of its members refused resolutely to sing along with the others – Robert Towne himself.

In 1995, for example, twenty years after the release of CHINATOWN, Towne was requested by the author of a volume of interviews with contemporary screenwriters to contribute a foreword to the book. He did so, beginning the piece with the sentence, 'Borden Chase was a Hollywood screenwriter', compelling readers to attend to a writer, mentor and friend who had died three years before the making of CHINATOWN, whose name would remain unmentioned by any of the other writers interviewed in the book and whose best works would find no place a decade later within the Guild's listing of '101 Best Screenplays'. With evident admiration, Towne gave an example of Chase's "... wonderful way with scenes involving confrontations between men" (Montgomery Cliff and John Wayne in *Red River*; Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper in *Vera Cruz*; Jimmy Stewart and Dan Duryea in *Winchester 73*).

There's an especially memorable Mexican standoff between John Ireland as Cherry Valance and Montgomery Cliff as Matthew Garth, two young bucks who it appears will inevitably shoot it out, in *Red River*. The scene is not one of tough-guy, in-your-face posturing. On the contrary, it is playful and polite. They engage in target practice on the open plains, taking a break from the business of driving John Wayne's cattle herd to market. Ireland shoots and knocks the shit out of some bottles and rocks. Cliff admires the display. Then Cliff shoots the shit out of some bottles and rocks on the ground *and* in the air. Ireland is hugely admiring of the display. "Now I know who you'd be," he says with a wide grin, fairly licking his lips at the prospect of facing a gunfighter of Cliff's skills and reputation, "you'd be Matthew Garth! You're as good as they say you are." Cliff returns compliment for compliment. They exchange weapons to see what the other fellow's got for equipment in a shamelessly Freudian I'll-show-you-my-gun-if-you'll-show-me-your-gun display. They admire the hell out of each other's long barrels, stroking them, purring over them, before they return them, Ireland wistfully adding, "There's nothing like a good gun or a Swiss watch – or a woman from anywhere. Ever had a ... good Swiss watch?" ...³

³ From Towne's 'Foreword' to Joel Engel's *Screenwriters on Screenwriting* (New York, New York: MJF Books, 1995), pages ix-xii, page xi.

The paragraph was calculated to entice readers to ponder in historical context the lesson with which the foreword would conclude, for after recalling with characteristic grace an aspect of the Christmas dinners that he used to share with Chase and his family, Towne ends with a sobering judgment of the modest heights of his own achievements from which he never wavered.

There was one particular part of the Chases' Christmas dinner that sometimes involved a bit of writing. Everyone at the table was obliged to come up with a toast. They were sometimes inventive, amusing, elaborate, but there was always one that brought the table to a respectful silence – "To absent friends."

I'm old enough to have glimpsed those writers and their times but too young to have lived and worked with them. I have no regrets about having missed that semifabled epoch when men were men, women women, and writers rogues, but I increasingly feel – I suspect we all do – that the history of life on earth is not one of evolution so much as devolution. With each succeeding generation we get weaker and smaller; the Titans are always in the past. They're the original, we're the Xeroxed copies, each generation growing progressively more blurred and degenerate.

This is a romantic fancy of course, but having succumbed to it I should add that the writers interviewed here have talents that would serve them well in any age.

Still, I can't help but look back from the vantage of relative respectability and say, "To absent friends."⁴

In Towne's estimation, the core of the work that he had done had failed to measure-up to the standard of excellence set by the best of the screenwriters who had worked before him.

⁴ Ibid., pages xi and xii.

Towne's contemporaries within Hollywood, conditioned to regard humility as a mortal disease, have tended to dismiss his assessment as slyly self-serving – a curmudgeonly act of inverse meaning. I, on the contrary, believe that he meant what he said, and that what he said accords with the evidence. Towne sensed, I think, that the movies whose screenplays he has written himself (CHINATOWN, for example, or THE TWO JAKES or TEQUILA SUNRISE), unlike those that he helped to rewrite in the course of the making of films from derivations of literary sources or screenplays structured by others (BONNIE AND CLYDE, for example, or THE LAST DETAIL, THE GODFATHER or MARATHON MAN), have failed to conclude with the power of the movies made from screenplays by screenwriters, often of far lesser renown, working long before and alongside others within the confines of the fabled 'film factories' of Hollywood's studio era.

As a tribute to Towne's uncommon sense of the nature of the weakness of his own work, and the courage that he has exhibited in reminding others of it, I wish to show how CHINATOWN exemplifies the problem of 'endings' that Towne never learned how to solve and to draw from it consequences that will clarify the scope and nature of the curious art of screenwriting. How often I have had to remind even the best of my students that, if the ending of a movie is weak, one will never by tinkering with it remove the flaw, for the causes lie embedded within misconceived scenes preceding it having roots often difficult to detect, much less correct. Contrary to common belief, CHINATOWN encompasses scene after scene with which we can engage only from within the isolating immediacy of the limited temporal boundary of our immediate perception of the scene itself. When the scenes are pondered retrospectively *in sequence*, they become causally incoherent.

The characters of CHINATOWN behave so incoherently within crucial scenes, indeed, that the movie becomes well-nigh unwatchable for viewers having registered it (or rather, encounterable only as an 'object lesson' from which serious students may learn better how to avoid entrapment within the most pernicious of the contemporary misconstruals of screenwriting).

Towne, Polanski and the Ending of CHINATOWN

When CHINATOWN was released in 1974, both Robert Towne and Roman Polanski, the director of the movie, thought less highly of it than others.

Polanski, while directing the movie, had deemed it an unimportant but lucrative commercial exercise upon which he had agreed to work reluctantly, for it obliged him to return to Los Angeles, a city that he would have preferred to avoid (his wife, Sharon Tate, having only recently been murdered by Charles Manson and friends). Three

decades later, however, Polanski had changed his mind, conceding that 'history has been kind to CHINATOWN' and suggesting that the merits of his directing of the movie ranked second only to the work that he had done subsequently upon THE PIANIST.

Before and while directing CHINATOWN, Polanski had contributed significantly to the form and substance of its screenplay as well. He, rather than Towne, had insisted that a love scene between Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray be included, and the ending of the movie, inserted over the objections of Towne, was his own invention – an ending whose dramatic ineptitude he has never acknowledged.

Towne's estimation of the screenplay and its ending, however, was and has remained modest, considered and provocative. He complained loudly and in particular at the time of its release about the ending that Polanski had substituted in place of the original, and he reaffirmed twenty years later his nuanced dissatisfaction with it:

"At the time the movie was being made and came out, I was angry about the end of the movie, which was not what I wanted. We [he and Polanski] had a disagreement that was well publicized at the time. In hindsight, I've come to feel that Roman was probably right about the ending, that I don't think what I had in mind could have been done; that an end with the ambiguity and ambivalence that I had in mind simply could not satisfactorily be done as the tag to a movie with such complexity; the end had to have a level of stark simplicity that at the time I thought was excessively melodramatic. Roman rightly believed that the complexities had to conclude with a simple severing of the knot. ...

My ending originally had her kill her father, and be unable to tell why, which was to protect her daughter; so she had to go to jail. Gittes couldn't help, because she just didn't want to harm her daughter by discussing the incest as the motive. Everything else would have been the same except for the ending. ...

... It even had a nice line of dialogue in it. There was a lawyer in it who early in the film declines an offer to have his cigar lit. He says, 'No, thanks. It's one of the two things I always do myself.' Later, when it's clear that the lawyer can't help her and that she's going to go to jail for the rest of her life, Gittes asks him what the other thing is that he always does himself. 'Put on my own hat,' he says. And with that Gittes puts his hat on and walks out of the office – accept responsibility for your actions. It was good, but it's more of a literary ending,

and very difficult given the complexities of the cinema story to do that adequately. What I wrote was good, but Roman, I now think, was right in recognising that it was excessively complex."⁵

Careless readers, entrapped within mythologies of the 'director as auteur', have often misread Towne's remarks. As Towne confirms, Polanski had sensed correctly that the original ending of the screenplay would have been ineffective, but hardly, as Towne suggests, because it would have been 'ambiguous', 'ambivalent' or 'excessively complex'. As any competent director would have realised, the problem was that the effects of the proposed ending upon Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray, the principal characters, being *internal* and provoking no reaction by either of them or anyone else that could have been photographed with power, could never have 'ended' the movie to any viewer's satisfaction. Polanski had therefore, and rightly, jettisoned Towne's ending as unworkable and had tried to improve upon it.

Notably, however, Towne has never suggested that Polanski's revision solved the problem of how to end the movie, enabling it to conclude with the behaviour of its characters secure! For, as he is aware, CHINATOWN fails to provide audiences with the kind of 'conclusive punch' that the 'film noir' movies of no more than ordinary reputation upon which it was modeled achieved as if effortlessly.

You may have begun to sense, by now, the symptoms of an intriguing historical and pedagogical puzzle. Towne wrote over twenty 'lengthy step-outlines' while trying to complete the screenplay for CHINATOWN, some with Polanski's assistance. Neither he nor Polanski, however, despite the effort, were able to devise a satisfactory ending for the movie.

Why couldn't they solve the problem? More exactly, how had they *mistrained* themselves to be incapable of sensing its structural roots – a failure of 'hands-on intelligence' that any competent screenwriter, trained within the studios a few generations before them, would have avoided?

Towne hinted unwittingly at the blind-spot when affirming (above) that, had his original ending rather than Polanski's been implemented, "everything else [that is, the scenes and their sequencing before it] would have been the same", a remark that would have astonished screenwriters at work within the studios long before accustomed to working within a secure awareness that a causally-definitive sequence of events cannot have

⁵ Excerpts from pages 201 and 202 of an interview with Towne in Engel, op. cit., pages 297-223.

multiple conclusions. If the writers of a movie cannot imagine how it *must* end, then many things within the script have gone awry before it.

To gauge the scope of the problem that Towne and Polanski were unable to comprehend, much less solve, we must register how crucial scenes of the movie, however fascinating when perceived, fail upon reflection to cohere causally.

How could pervasive structural defects of a movie, precluding its successful conclusion, have escaped the attention of millions of viewers, thousands of screenwriters and the writer and director of the movie itself, during and after its design and construction?

More broadly construed, what kind of *art* is this? What kind of art could permit a work to be constructed within it to well-nigh universal acclaim from components whose surfaces are so distracting in their perceptual immediacy that they forestall attention, even after repeated encounters, to defects of structure that, once registered, destroy its coherence?

Scenes and Sequences of CHINATOWN Lacking Consequence

Following the release of CHINATOWN and long before I knew or cared who Robert Towne might be, I sensed, with him and others, that it failed to conclude with the power of its promise. The depth of the problem long eluded me, however, for although I had noticed that the movie encompassed events of little or no consequence and others of such coincidence that they sapped the development of characters, I presumed that the weakness of its ending was a cumulative effect of them alone. Let me note a few of them that for a time deflected my attention from the fundamental cause.

Scenes without Consequence:

The scene of the chase through the orange groves could have been lifted from the movie without anyone noticing, for it has no causal consequences whatever.

The scene of the slitting of Gittes' nose by the 'midget' (played by Polanski), the vaunted 'threat' of which Towne was so proud, likewise goes nowhere. Towne, when asked to explain why he had included the scene within the script, replied:

I was trying to think of something that would scare me. I remember thinking of slitting the mouth or ears, but that seemed gruesome and witless. There was just something about slitting a nostril that is both painful and terrifying, and also oddly appropriate for a nosy guy. He's a detective who puts his nose in other people's business. There was just something slightly humorous about it, and at the same time it's really terrifying. I think that combination, for a guy who's a peep, a snooper, seemed just right. I didn't want it to be something that potentially fatal, just scary and funny. It's a curious thing about that scene. Many people have called the movie violent. But it actually has very little violence in it. ...

The use of the nose-slitting is something that suggests violence rather than is violent. It's humorous and appalling. It suggests worse things to come. As Roman's character [the man doing the slitting] says, 'Next time I'm going to get serious.' That admonition to the hero is also in a sense an admonition to the audience: *The next time something happens, it can be serious*. I think the threat of violence is there precisely because the act is both appalling and funny."⁶

"Next time I get serious" says the 'midget' [Polanski]. Really? When? Where? Never! Nothing happens because of the slitting of the nose or the subsequent behaviour of the character responsible for it. The 'midget', with another thug, chases briefly after the car within which Gittes and Mulwray flee from the old folks home, but to no avail. He never reappears in the movie, and the momentary pursuit of the car has no bearing upon the remainder of the story or the subsequent behaviour of any of the principal characters.⁷

Scenes of Undue Coincidence:

Gittes just *happens* to be standing at the side of the pond of the Mulwray mansion when the gardener just *happens* to be rummaging about near the discarded bifocals, and he just *happens* to be there again when the gardener just *happens* to mention that the pond contains 'salt water'. Even more fortuitously, he just *happens* to be in the morgue when the 'drunk drowned in the dry riverbed' just *happens* to be undergoing examination.⁸

⁶ Ibid., pages 222 and 223.

⁷ Chekov is reputed to have once remarked that, if a gun is hanging on the wall at the beginning of a play, it ought to be going off at the end. The two scenes cited are about as exemplary of 'Chekov's Maxim' as one could imagine.

⁸ Note the contrast between the unenlightening reactions of Gittes at the pool and in the morgue when compared to his reactions within the scenes wherein he is permitted to register decisive features of his environment that a lesser detective might well have overlooked (his noticing, for example, of the names on the wall in the old folks home or his ripping of the half-page from the city record books), the latter reactions, unlike the former, manifesting the

Since no scenes of comparable weakness occur within the 'film noir' movies whose effect CHINATOWN was designed to emulate (THE MALTESE FALCON, DOUBLE INDEMNITY, THE POSTMAN ONLY RINGS TWICE, etc.), I presumed that they alone were responsible for the cumulative weakness of the movie. I was wrong. They were minor infelicities augmenting a far deeper source of devastation.

Where does the story of CHINATOWN go off the tracks? Or, more precisely, after reflecting upon what *scene* ought an intelligent ten-year-old to be able to conclude that its characters have misbehaved inexplicably? Let me describe the scene whose inadequacies, once registered, turned me toward the light.

The Dawning of the Light

A few years ago, while reviewing CHINATOWN yet again, I paused, perplexed by the scene within which Gittes responds in the early hours of a morning to the enticement of a pair of phone calls from an unknown caller urging him to come to the home of the murdered 'Ida Sessions'. Suddenly the incoherence of the behaviour of the characters within the scene, when measured against how they had behaved within prior scenes, awakened me from my 'dogmatic slumber'.⁹

As the scene opens, Gittes is supposedly an aware, intelligent, experienced and competent detective who has become a suspected accomplice in the murder of the husband of Evelyn Mulwray, having been 'set-up' by Ida Sessions, an actor pretending to be Evelyn. He has also by now become aware of the murderous capabilities of Evelyn's father, Noah Cross. Gittes would therefore have been profoundly suspicious of the motives and possible subsequent actions of anyone calling him (twice) in the early hours of a morning to suggest that 'Ida Sessions wants you' and leaving an exact address. Gittes is also a former policeman of supposedly broad experience, cognizant of how cops behave and what would happen to anyone who messes about with 'evidence' at the scene of a murder.

unique capacities that make him who he *is*. Result? Rather than the course of events of the film shifting because of the calibre and insight of Gittes' as a character, he seems simply to have been lucky. (Luck may be dramatically productive within a romantic comedy, as Jhabvala exemplified when reworking A ROOM WITH A VIEW, but can seldom be so within a 'film noir' supposedly showing the unintended consequences of the interaction of complex characters.)

⁹ I echo the famous phrase of Immanuel Kant's referring to the effect upon him of remembering what David Hume had said about 'causation'.

Why, then, would Gittes respond to the phone calls by motoring to the address suggested by the caller and entering the house? Why, upon encountering the body of the murdered Ida Sessions lying on the kitchen floor, would he retrieve her purse and rummage about with its contents?

Has he *forgotten* that someone has directed him to that house? wants him there? would be watching for him to arrive? might well be hiding in the house awaiting his arrival?

Switching gears, why would Lieutenant Escobar instruct Loach, his assistant, to call Gittes (twice) to suggest he come to Ida Sessions home? Because Gittes' telephone number is on the wall? What reason could Escobar have for playing a game of this kind at this time? Had Gittes been using Ida Sessions to set up Mrs. Mulwray for extortion, as Escobar suggests, why would Escobar think that he would come to her home *in response to their call*?

Most astonishingly, what would Escobar and his men have expected to do after making the calls? – wait around, as in the movie, to see if Gittes would be stupid enough to come while scheming to hide in the bathroom if he did?

Gittes and Escobar behave so incoherently within the scene, when measured against how they behaved in the preceding scenes that have supposedly established their characters, that one can in retrospect only marvel at the ineptitude of its design. How could Towne, on the one hand, have failed to notice it while working his way through 'twenty step-outlines'? How, on the other hand, could his work on the scene have prevented *me* from recognising it, even after repeated viewings?

Suspecting that I had stumbled upon the tip of an iceberg, I began to examine other scenes of CHINATOWN, and, sure enough!, the behaviour of characters within scene after scene, before and after, crucial to the unfolding of the story of the movie, proved to be as incoherent as the scene just cited – and, yet again and remarkably, unobviously so when encountered unreflectively as part of the 'passing show'.

Four examples.

(1) Consider the scene near the beginning of the movie within which Gittes receives a call in his office from Ida Sessions, the actor who had misled him into believing that she was Mulwray's wife. How would Ida Sessions, an actor for hire,¹⁰ have become acquainted with, much less have committed to memory, the obscure names of a host of fake 'land owners', housed in an old folks home, being used by Noah Cross as pawns to advance his grand scheme to bring water to the vast lands that he is trying to acquire, one of whom has just been listed in the obituary column [Jasper Lamont Crabbe]? Why, indeed, would Noah Cross have informed her of any of the details of his plans?

Were Ida Sessions as frightened as she pretends to be, having surmised that Cross killed Mulwray, why, having decided to trust Gittes with her fear (her address, after all, is in the phone book!), doesn't she tell him who hired her? who she suspects killed Mulwray?

Indeed, what was the 'set-up' for which she was hired in the first place supposed to accomplish? Why would Noah Cross, a shrewd, savvy and savage man well-aware of the impeccable character of Mulwray, his former partner and rescuer and husband of the daughter he impregnated, and of the existence, as we discover later, of the second 'daughter/granddaughter' that resulted from the impregnation, send an imposter to Gittes (Ida Sessions) with a story about Mulwray having an 'affaire'? To generate 'bad publicity' against Mulwray, knowing that he would not succumb to that kind of pressure? Why waste time playing the game?

(2) Or consider, yet again, the scene of the entrance, chase, fight and supposed 'resolution' of Gittes incursion into the orange groves. Why is Gittes there? What could he expect to find? What's the point of the chase or the fight? Worse, what fruit farmer in his right mind, convinced that Mulwray, the powerful head of the Water Department of Los Angeles, is out to destroy him and his farm, would, after being shown by Gittes a letter of employment signed by Mulwray's *wife*, telephone *her* to come and rescue him – a man caught snooping on his property? The farmer would assuredly have concluded that Gittes was working for Mulwray by way of his wife.

Except as an excuse to get Gittes and Mrs. Mulwray together, the scene has no consequence – and a simple telephone call could have brought them together.

¹⁰ We see her 'Guild' membership card as Gittes flips through the contents of her purse after finding her murdered.

(3) Or consider the penultimate encounter between Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray after the murder of Ida Sessions, when Gittes, after calling Lieutenant Escobar to come to the house, is then told by Evelyn of her 'rape' by her father, meets her 'sister/daughter' and sends them hurriedly away with Chan. Why would Gittes, his car parked in the driveway, remain in the house awaiting the arrival of the police, knowing that he will thereafter have to escape from them?

Had Gittes behaved 'in character', he would have driven away before the police arrived, perhaps to pursue Noah Cross but assuredly saving us from having to endure the tall tale of his 'rescue by Curly'.

(4) Lastly, and perhaps most astonishingly, why would Gittes, having escaped from the police, telephone Noah Cross to invite him to come to the Mulwray house and then wait *alone* for him to arrive? Gittes awaits his arrival as if unaware that the psychotic Cross, having abused his daughter and murdered Mulwray, is perhaps the most powerful and dangerous man that he will ever encounter. He waits for Cross as if incapable of imagining that Cross will (of course!) be accompanied by a thug who will (of course!) get the drop on him, and that Cross and the thug will then (of course!) compel him to take them to the 'daughter/grandchild' in Chinatown, etc..

Why would Gittes do any such thing? To confirm that Cross wears bifocals? – something that Gittes, his associates or the police could later have determined quickly and easily after Evelyn and her daughter were safely gone? (Despite the chatter, I shall pretend here that Towne knew better than to waste time constructing a scene so Gittes can have a chat with Cross about 'power and money'!)

The Bewitchments of 'Tone'

No wonder Polanski's band-aid-ending to CHINATOWN failed to bring the trajectories of the prior behaviours of its principal characters to a unified conclusion. The preceding events of the story, when measured in sequence against the identities of the characters, are an incoherent mess.

But how could this have happened? What prevented Towne and Polanski from registering the yawning gap into which the story of the movie was falling as it fell?

Both Towne and Polanski, in a nutshell, had been diverted from the accumulating effects (that is, defects) of the scenes of the movie by a myopic concentration upon the niceties of their *surface* – as they had unwittingly trained themselves to do.

Polanski's myopia, unlike Towne's, was attuned exactly to the kind of work that a director must do, for he learned long before to concentrate to the exclusion of all else upon the immediate appearance of the actors as they perform before the camera while being photographed. Towne's myopia, however, was of a different kind.

Unlike the best of the writers of the studio era, Towne came to screenwriting untrained in the literary arts, having never written plays, novels, short stories or even articles for newspapers from which he could have acquired a working sense of the priorities of structure. He learned rather to do what he was later and often to do well – reworking screenplays on set or on location for the better by honing, reshaping and augmenting scenes written by others that had *already* been positioned within a sequence culminating causally in a coherent climax. Before writing the script for CHINATOWN, Towne had written only a few original screenplays and none from which a successful movie had been made (THE LAST DETAIL, made just before CHINATOWN, was an adaptation of a novel), and, with the exception of SHAMPOO, co-written with Warren Beatty, he was never again to write a movie of his own to broad popular and critical acclaim.

Towne was later to pin-point exactly the target toward which he had unwittingly trained himself to aim when polishing screenplays written by others, clarifying the mark that had distinguished his important achievements. What 'makes a movie'? Towne's answer was unequivocal.

The most *difficult* thing to capture, and what finally makes a movie, is its tone. Tone is a very delicate matter. It requires a keen understanding from everyone involved, the director, producer, stars, writer; it's called the Lubitsch touch.¹¹

By 'tone', Towne meant the 'feel' of a film occasioned within and across each of its scenes by the enticing sights and sounds of the actors and their environment. By deifying the merits of 'tone', Towne was elevating into primacy the narrowly *scenic* dimensions of a movie upon which he had learned as a novice to concentrate when reworking the screenplays of others, embedding within himself the seeds of the conviction that if the surface of the scenes of a movie have been rendered uniform, consistent and engaging, the movie as a whole will succeed.

¹¹ Ibid. page 214.

Unfortunately, as CHINATOWN confirms, the belief is misguided.¹² The generation and maintenance of 'tone' within and across the scenes of a movie, however engaging, will never suffice to carry a movie to a conclusion of cumulative power, for 'tone' is no assurance of causal significance.

Robert Riskin, the writer of many of the most notable movies directed by Frank Capra, once summarised the understanding of 'structure' shared by the best of the screenwriters working within the studios whose work Towne has always admired more than is own. An movie of cumulative power, Riskin said, will almost always encompass three acts comprised of three or four scenes each of which tells a story on its own.

Every scene must have a beginning, middle, and end, no matter how small. Each little scene has a climax of its own ... This, in turn, builds up to the end of the film in cumulative fashion. In all, a picture should have about ten small climaxes, each one completed by a laugh, a tear, or any other emotional period.¹³

Each of the scenes of a movie ought therefore to encompass a 'short story' well-told – a unified interaction characters having a beginning and middle leading to a significant end. As Riskin knew without need of saying so, however, a sequence of cinematic 'short stories', however engaging in themselves, will never in itself 'make a movie', anymore than a collection in prose will constitute a novel, *unless* the 'tales told' within them are encountered as a integral part of the unfolding of a cumulative 'story'.¹⁴

Each of the troubled scenes of CHINATOWN tells a 'short story' of its own, cleverly and with such consistency of 'tone' that the movie earned eleven Academy Award nominations for the uncommon capacity of its acting, photography, music, etc., to

¹² Towne's citing of 'the Lubitsch touch' the decisive factor that 'makes a movie' would have astonished both Lubitsch and Samson Raphaelson, the screenwriter of the finest of the movies that Lubitsch directed. One can indeed almost hear them laughing as they contrive to put the suggestion into the mouth of an inept screenwriter within one of their movies.

¹³ Robert Riskin, writing as a guest columnist for Sheila Graham, Cincinnati Times-Star, 31 July 1936 [as quoted within the 'Introduction' to *Six Screenplays* by Robert Riskin, edited and introduced by Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), page xxxvi.

¹⁴ No wonder accomplished writers of short stories, trained to construct in brief compass scenes of immediate 'tonal' engagement, have seldom fashioned memorable novels requiring the gradual deepening of a reader's engagement, or conversely. No wonder composers, trained to write short sections of music of immediately gripping 'tone' for radio, movies or television, have seldom been able to fashion sustained works of musical power, or conversely. To have trained oneself to excel at the one is to have engrained within oneself habits precluding the other.

engage viewers with unceasing fascination. The problem is that the 'short stories', when registered in sequence as parts of the whole – as contributions, that is, to the unfolding 'story' of the movie – fail to cohere.

Working Alone on 'Tone'

...your article definitely promises the screenwriters that eventually they will be able to control the screen destinies of the stories they work on. I can imagine nothing that would kill this business any quicker. Moving pictures are not made by any one individual. Many minds are essential if success is to be desired. Many contributors are required ...

Darryl Zanuck¹⁵

Moviemaking at its best has always been a collective art, and the writing of screenplays is no exception. Screenplays for movies made within the studio system in particular were never written by a single screenwriter, even if the titles pretend otherwise. Writers often worked alone upon screenplays, but almost always in sequence with other writers before and after them. They were reworking for the better what others had written before them while knowing full well that their work would in turn be rewritten by others.

With many heads working together for good upon every screenplay, albeit sequentially, it is unsurprising that few of the movies made during the studio era failed to 'end' powerfully, whereas a strong ending to a movie is now an uncommon cause for celebration. The best among the 'film noir' movies, indeed, though lacking even the rudiments of the surface polish of CHINATOWN, provoke even now within viewers a cumulative sense of the causal and thus historical importance of their 'stories', even when those stories as conceived pretended to no such significance.

CHINATOWN, on the other hand, as Towne has acknowledged, never found an ending worthy of its pretensions, and, while pretending in everyway to be 'significant' –

¹⁵ From a memo of 28 April 1936 to Ernest Pascal, contract writer at Twentieth Century-Fox and president of the Screen Writers Guild as the Guild was striving to be recognised as a union, as reproduced on pages 3-4 of *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golder Years at Twentieth Century-Fox*, selected, edited and annotated by Rudy Behlmer (New York, New York: Grove Press, 1993). Zanuck, who began his career as a screenwriter working under contract for \$125 a week, presided over the studio from 1935 to 1956, contributing significantly to every screenplay of significance produced within it while earning a well-deserved reputation among screenwriters as the most knowledgeable, effective and respected producer in Hollywood.

historically, geographically, socially, politically and ethically – it fails to be so. Towne is as skilful at envisaging memorable scenes as any of the writers of the studio era whom he admires, and when he has been able to build upon work well-structured by others, he has augmented what they left behind. When working unassisted on a screenplay, however, its problems have remained for him unsolvable.

What kept Towne from solving the structural problems of CHINATOWN as the movie was being made? What prevented him from registering in particular the cumulative incoherence of its characters? Towne, by his own account, generates his own screenplays by drafting, reworking, compiling and arranging scene after scene of articulated dialogue between characters, seeking a consistent and riveting 'tone' across them while trying to envisage a 'story' that will encompass them. Notoriously, he presents directors, as he did Polanski (and later, when directing his own work, even himself), with several hundred pages of material that, if enacted and photographed uncut, would require three or four hours of screen time. He must then 'prune' away half or more of the mass before and during production to arrive at a 'shooting script'.

When confronted with the task of eliminating scenes in whole or part that will necessarily reduce the nuanced complexity of 'tone' of his characters, Towne has been unable to do it – and no wonder! Having once envisaged a character as contributing scene-after-scene to a multifaceted 'tonal' whole, he is unable to reimagine it as an attenuated 'echo' of itself.¹⁶

But that is only a symptom of the problem enervating even the most accomplished of screenwriters within the industry as I write, namely there are now no 'studios' within which a screenwriter as good as Towne could have learned how to write screenplays by being required, as a matter of course, to work in sequence with others upon them, the whole benefitting from the input of all. Screenwriters ought never to work unassisted, and CHINATOWN exemplifies what happens almost always and in particular to screenwriters who try to go it 'alone' while entrapped, like Towne, within the boundaries of 'tone'. The problems of reconstructing on their own a screenplay of their own prove insolvable.

¹⁶ The problem is hardly unique to screenwriting. The structure of a story rests upon the behaviour of its 'characters' as that of a symphony or sonata rests upon the transformations of its 'themes', and I know of no significant literary, poetic, dramatic, cinematic or musical work of art that has ever been created by anyone obliged to cut away half or more of a larger work.

Conclusion

When Darryl Zanuck was asked to summarise what 'makes a movie', he responded succinctly.

Success in movies boils down to three things: story, story, story.¹⁷

Robert Towne is among the most accomplished screenwriters of the last half of the twentieth-century, and CHINATOWN, with respect to the 'tone' of its scenes, is among the most fascinating movies ever made. As Towne has acknowledged, however, CHINATOWN lacks cumulative power, and the 'reasons why' are evident. Working alone while convinced that 'tone' rather than 'story' makes a movie, he was unable to sense much less solve the root problems of its screenplay.

Out of respect for Towne, I commend CHINATOWN and its lesson to you. Screenwriting is rewriting, and screenwriters must strive to rework again and again what they have written – assisted by others working independently and in sequence upon it – if they are to have any hope of redoing for the better what they have done, especially so when tempted by the siren call of 'tone' to divert their attention from 'story'.

¹⁷ A quotation as recalled by Zanuck's son, Richard, and reproduced on page xxiii within Rudy Behlmer's 'Preface' to the collection of memos by the father cited in footnote 15 above.