

Artistry in Film

by Earl P. Holt III

Some of the great film directors were true artists, and in certain scenes were able to reveal volumes of emotion and background to viewers without the benefit of an explanation by any character or narrator. In a way, such scenes are an *homage* to the silent film era, before sound became such an integral part of film. Not surprisingly, most of these directors are among the film industry's most celebrated, such as Orson Wells, John Ford, King Vidor, and David Lean.

After the resounding critical success of *Citizen Kane* -- which at one time was considered the greatest film ever made by both the *American Film Institute* and the *British Film Institute* -- an interviewer asked Orson Wells where he had learned his craft. Wells humbly and graciously replied in this manner: "*I learned at the feet of the masters: John Ford, John Ford and John Ford.*"

An example of such artistry appears in the famous sequence of scenes in *Citizen Kane* that illustrate the decline of the title character's first marriage. Each scene shows *Charles Foster Kane* (Orson Wells) seated at breakfast with his wife. In the first scene they are clearly enamored of each other, and gaze into each other's eyes. In a second scene appearing later in their marriage, he is depicted ignoring her incessant chatter while quietly reading his newspaper. In a third scene years later, she is still chattering at him, but by now he has resorted to hiding from her behind his morning newspaper, which he uses as a shield. In the final scene in this sequence, they both seek silent refuge behind their respective morning papers to avoid interacting in any manner. A subsequent scene features a newspaper headline chronicling their divorce.



Early scene from a marriage



Later scene from a marriage

An example of the artistry of John Ford that inspired Orson Wells appears in a scene from Ford's classic Western, *The Searchers*. Prodigal brother Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) has finally returned home three years after the conclusion of the Civil War. The very next morning he volunteers to substitute for his brother and join a punitive expedition against some renegade Comanches who stole a neighboring rancher's prized bulls during the previous night. His brother's wife has fetched his coat, and is helping him into it before he rides off with a handful of deputized Texas Rangers. While no one is observing them, Ethan Edwards kisses his sister-in-law on the forehead and they gaze longingly at one another while conveying unrequited love that has remained unspoken for many years.



Unrequited Love in *The Searchers*

Likewise, there's a famous scene in King Vidor's *Stella Dallas*, where Barbara Stanwyck portrays a single mother who's been abandoned by a wealthy husband and forced to raise their daughter on her own. Although endowed with few social graces, herself, she has devoted her life to ensuring her daughter marries well to guarantee her daughter's security and happiness, even at the expense of her own. In the film's most memorable scene, she stands silently in the rain outside the church during her daughter's formal wedding and her entry into comfortable and polite society. Without uttering a word, her face reflects her pride in her daughter, her selfless maternal love, and the strain of the physical and emotional sacrifices she has endured through the years to ensure her daughter's happiness.



Stella Dallas, an outsider at her daughter's wedding

Finally, one of the most sophisticated scenes in cinema appears in David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai*, where the relevant dialogue is not absent but almost exclusively in Japanese. Colonel Nicholson, the commanding officer of British P.O.W.s in the film has volunteered his men's expertise to help his hapless Japanese enemy build a bridge to complete their Bangkok to Rangoon Railway.

In this scene, Colonel Nicholson and his officers are seated at a table with the brutal Japanese Commandant, Colonel Saito, and his subordinate officers. Midway through the technicalities -- wherein Nicholson questions his subordinates and they, in turn, candidly offer their opinions to him -- Colonel Nicholson asks Colonel Saito if it would be possible to have tea served, so the meeting might continue uninterrupted.



Meeting with Colonel Saito

In his imperious command-voice, Saito immediately hollers to the nearest subordinate officer, who in turn hollers to the nearest subordinate, on down the chain-of-command six or seven times. Each of the British officers is clearly bemused by this display of inefficiency.

What David Lean illustrated with this simple scene was nothing less than the essential distinction between democracies and all forms of tyranny, whether Feudalism – as in the case of Imperial Japan – or any of the various forms of Marxism evident today. In the presence of democratic institutions, the flow of information occurs both up and down the *chain of command*, whereas its flow is exclusively DOWN the chain of command in their absence.

By the end of this meeting, it was evident from his demeanor and posture that Colonel Saito recognized that Imperial Japan could not possibly defeat the hated West, with its superior managerial skills and infinitely more efficient methods of organization.

There have been many filmmakers whose audiences were content with the unfolding of a film's plot and the entertainment it conveyed. The truly great ones sought more from film, and recognized it as an art form beyond its role as an entertainment medium. Although some scoffed at the suggestion -- like crusty, old John Ford -- they pursued true artistic expression through film-making. That's why these directors are held in the greatest esteem by the industry, and why they received so many accolades. It's also why many of their films are considered "*classics*."