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**Lillian Gish**, silent film actor.

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# DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE? THE IMPACT OF DELSARTE ON SILENT FILM ACTING

Hilary Hart

*Delsarte's influence over American oratory, theatrical training, and dance has long been established. Should cinema be added to this list of fields shaped by American Delsartism? Those who received Delsartean training, either professionally or in public school oratory classes, most certainly found their way into filmmaking, as actors and directors. An examination of the context into which Americans enthusiastically embraced Delsarte's ideas reveals that Americans shared the following precepts regarding the experience and representation of human emotions: emotions have universal expression; the job of the artist is to study these universal expressions; hitting upon a universal emotional expression is the quickest route to exciting an audience's emotions; and finally, the primary role of art is the stirring of emotions. As long as these ideas flourish, so do the performance practices that aim to meet these goals. A review of Griffith's feature films demonstrates a persistence of gestures, pantomime, and postures common to acting and oratory manuals and handbooks that profess to help the student discover universal human expressions. These findings demonstrate a greater endurance of conventional acting styles than is currently represented in film scholarship and recommend further research into Delsarte's influence upon cinematic acting practices of the silent era.*

That François Delsarte profoundly shaped theatrical training, oratory, and dance in the United States is well established. Using Delsarte's principles, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn initiated the modern dance movement in the United States. Delsartians were also instrumental in opening schools of expression around the country in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and providing instruction in departments of oratory at universities.<sup>1</sup> Delsarte's ideas and those of his followers also enjoyed tremendous popularity with the public. Middle-class Americans bought and

Lillian Gish, silent film actor.

consulted heaps of popular manuals and handbooks professing to expound the “Delsarte system.” In fact, according to Ted Shawn, “One publishing company, the Edgar S. Werner Publishing Co., based its entire business almost exclusively on books which used the word ‘Delsarte’ in some way in its title” (Shawn 12). Advertisements exhorted “every elocutionist, every singer, every teacher, and every other cultured person” to study the Delsarte method as a way of “acquiring grace, dignity, and fine bearing for society people” (quoted in Cole and Chinoy 187).

While American Delsartism was transforming dance in the United States, another important performing art was underway and evolving rapidly: American cinema. Should film acting be included in the list of performing arts influenced by American Delsartism? After all, for anyone acquainted with the writings of Delsarte or prominent Delsarte scholars and teachers, such as Genevieve Stebbins, Emily Bishop, Marion Lowell, or even with the catalogue of the Edgar S. Werner Publishing Co., much in silent film performance looks familiar. The actors employ gestures, postures, facial expressions, the positions of their hands and fingers to convey ideas, narrative information, and characterization.

In many ways, Delsarte’s teachings had more to offer the silent medium of early film than even the theater and oratory because the actors of the silent era relied much more heavily on their bodies to produce meaning. With the exception of musical accompaniment and, very early on, live narrators, as well as sporadic experiments with synchronous and non-synchronous sound, American cinema was silent until the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> The legibility of a silent narrative film depends greatly upon the actors’ ability to communicate meaningfully without dialogue and without the constant interruption of inter-titles (i.e., frames of printed text that announce change of location, provide dialogue, summarize the action in the following scene, or comment editorially). Delsartean techniques and theories would then seem especially useful with their emphasis on unspoken communication using gesture, a term that included the face. In fact, one of the principles upon which all of Delsarte’s practitioners agreed was the primacy of gesture over the spoken word. No professed Delsartean (while they may question his credentials) would likely disagree with the following quotation from Delsarte’s friend and student and the author of *Pratique de L’art Oratoire de Delsarte*, Abbé Delaumosne:

Gesture has been given to man to reveal what speech is powerless to express. For example: *I love*. This phrase says nothing of the nature of the being loved, nothing of the fashion in which one loves. Gesture, by a simple movement, reveals all this, and says it far better than speech, which would know how to render it only by many successive phrases. A gesture, then, like a ray of light, can reflect all that passes in the soul. (In *Delsarte System of Oratory*, 43-44.)

The very popularity of American Delsartism also recommends it as a possible source for silent cinematic performance since the actors certainly had to draw upon performance signs with which the audience was familiar. According to James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema*, "Ultimately, the 'Delsarte Movement' was so deeply embedded in the culture that a good many actors could be described as Delsartean whether or not they ever studied with him—just as middle-class Americans once behaved according to Emily Post whether or not they actually read her advice" (53). This is not to deny that other sources, such as the theater, especially stage melodrama, and vaudeville (not to mention the actor's own observations of life) contributed significantly to acting in early cinema; however, these were media in which dialogue also carried a substantial burden of the actor's total semiotic load.

Delsarte's emphasis on emotional expression would also seem especially useful to a medium steeped in emotion. For Ted Shawn, Delsarte was "a true scientist: setting out to discover how the human body moves under the stimuli of emotions..." (10). When Steele Mackaye, Delsarte's American protégé and theorist in his own right, gave his first lectures on the Delsarte system, he included a demonstration he called the "gamuts of expression," a virtuoso performance of a wide range of human emotions (Ruyter 1999, 20). Both Lowell and Stebbins provided extensive instruction in emotional expression, analyzing the body's movements into micro-expressions. Melodrama dominated narrative film in the era of the silent film, and the narratives of these films drive relentlessly toward emotional peaks at which the actors emote athletically and spectacularly. These are the points at which one would likely find evidence of Delsartism in American cinema.

One might expect to turn to film studies to learn whether or how American Delsartism influenced film acting. However, Delsarte rarely receives mention above a footnote or beyond a passing remark. No one, not even the scholars who specialize in film performance, has conducted such a study. In *Acting in the Cinema*, James Naremore discusses the work of Delsarte, Mackaye, and the pantomime Charles Aubert, arguing that Delsarte's "influence persisted alongside psychological realism during the period of silent cinema, and in some ways he deserves reconsideration in our own time" (52). He also goes on to remark, "We make an error...if we assume that theorists like Desarte and Aubert are relevant only in the realm of arcane histrionics" (65). Despite Naremore's contention, the consensus among film historians is that the style of acting to which American Delsartism contributed was largely obsolete, at least among the most capable actors, by 1912. Delsarte is instead considered a master of melodramatic acting, or an artist and innovator who sought to reform the "cookbook" style of acting inherited from the stage, but whose ideas were perverted to reinforce a canned performance style (Pearson 20). Richard Dyer, whose definition of performance is the standard in film studies, refers to Delsarte in his germinal work on acting, *Stars*, and

even reproduces a chart of Delsartean hand gestures; however, Dyer considers Delsarte important only as a systematizer and recorder of melodramatic performance signs rather than as a contributor to cinematic performance (137–38).

Roberta Pearson, the scholar who has written the most detailed account of silent film acting, specifically about performances in the pictures D.W. Griffith directed for the Biography Company between 1908 and 1913, equates Delsarte with a style of acting, the *histrionic* style or code, which Griffith and his players helped make obsolete. Whereas Pearson defines the histrionic code as highly stylized and relying upon a standard repertoire of gestures, Griffith's actors derived the *verisimilar* code "primarily from knowledge of culturally specific notions about the mimesis of everyday life" (20)<sup>3</sup>. Essential to the verisimilar code is the use of "bits of business" or byplay, the establishing of character with the handling of props or through physical mannerisms. The histrionic code, on the other hand, is characterized by broad, heavily stressed gestures. Quoting Genevieve Stebbins, Pearson writes, "Delsarte, it would seem, desired to challenge the hegemony of the histrionic code, but the wholesale acceptance of Delsartism perverted its founder's intention. His system, in its debased form, became emblematic of histrionically coded performances. His followers forgot about following 'nature sufficiently close' in the enthusiastic determination to 'idealize nature'" (22).

Pearson acknowledges that what she calls the histrionic codes persists through 1913, as occasional deictic gestures (i.e., using a gesture to serve as a kind of pronoun by pointing at oneself for *me*, or at another for *her*, etc.) and is sometimes "resorted to" at emotionally climactic moments (59). Of Delsarte's influence, Pearson writes, "If one were so inclined, it would be possible to present numerous instances, complete with frame enlargements and plate reproductions, of poses found in...Delsarte manuals," but only in the early Biograph pictures (23). In fact, Pearson contends:

By 1912 most performers, under most circumstances, in most Biographs employed the verisimilar code, some being more adept than others.... What does *adept* mean in this context? Those performers skilled in the new style used smaller gestures, gave them less emphasis, and melded them into a continuous flow. The less skilled retained elements of the histrionic code: while they might not use conventional gestures, their movements tended to be larger, more emphasized, and more discrete. Skilled performers also used more byplay and bits of business to construct their characters. Those performers whom subsequent generations have valorized as good (i.e., Blanche Sweet, Bobby Harron, Henry Walthall, Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Mae Marsh) are the ones who mastered the verisimilar code, so that it is possible in this instance to identify the components of "good acting" in the Biographs. (50)

What I intend to show is that American Delsartism continued to have an influence over film acting beyond the 1913 date, in the films of D.W. Griffith and over one of Hollywood's most adept performers, Lillian Gish. The larger point I hope to make is that American Delsartism fits into a broader conceptual framework involving beliefs about the emotions, how they are experienced and expressed, and the role they have to play in art and society. Recovering this conceptual context lends greater legibility to silent film performance and may even explain why original audiences found themselves moved by what now seems so strange, even laughable. As film scholar Kristin Thompson observed in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, "Few aspects of silent films seem so alien to the modern viewer as the performances of their actors" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 180).

One reason for focusing on Griffith and Gish is their connection to the Denishawn school of dance, founded by Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis upon the Delsartean teachings of Henrietta Hovey. According to Suzanne Shelton's *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis*:

Hollywood studios sent their stars to Denishawn, and D.W. Griffith required his actresses to attend twice-weekly sessions to learn emotional expression through movement. In addition to Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Denishawn trained Florence Vidor, Ina Claire, Ruth Chatterton, Louise Glaum, Mabel Normand, and Louise Brooks, among others who created a language of silent film gesture based solidly on Delsarte. (137)

Shelton also mentions that in the summer of 1915 St. Denis and Shawn rented their house to one of their students, Lillian Gish (129).

Evidence of Gish's Delsartean training is visible in her most signature performances, those moments in Griffith's films when Gish's characters find themselves imperiled, the camera coming close in to capture her performances of intense emotions. I have chosen stills from three of D.W. Griffith's films, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), which are among his most popular feature films. In my readings of Gish's performance, I will apply the lenses of a number of Delsarte practitioners, mainly Lowell and Stebbins as they provide in their own writing detailed descriptions of emotional expression.

The first film, *The Birth of a Nation*, presents itself as a history of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, but is a notoriously racist version of events. In the scene from which the still has been chosen, Gish's character Elsie has been imprisoned by Silas Lynch, identified as a mulatto political leader endorsed by whites from the North including Elsie's father. Elsie has rejected Lynch's proposal of marriage and now faces his sexual advances. Given the white supremacist message of the film, the horror

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Gish as Elsie in *The Birth of a Nation*.

of her predicament is intensified by Lynch's race, which is visually underscored in the shot: Lynch's black hands (or rather blackened hands, since Lynch is played by a white actor in blackface) are visually contrasted with Elsie's very pale face. While Lynch threatens Elsie, blacks are shown killing whites, looting their homes, and rioting in the streets outside. At another location a group of blacks have laid siege to a white family in an isolated cabin. Griffith

develops a great deal of dramatic tension by interspersing the shots of Elsie in her predicament, the rioting blacks, and the besieged family, with members of the Ku Klux Klan gathering to put down the riot, rescue the family, and save Elsie.

In the racist economy of the film, Elsie faces a fate worse than the proverbial "fate worse than death," and to express the extremity of the situation Gish draws upon the more emphatic Delsartean performance signs. In the still, Gish has tilted her head back and rolled her eyes skyward with the whites showing beneath the iris. Her mouth is open and gagged and her face is largely slack beneath the eyes. For a Delsartean reading of Gish's chosen performance signs, I will begin with the position of the head. According to Marion Lowell's *Harmonic Gymnastics and Pantomimic Expression* (1895), the "head thrown back" expresses the mind "in a passionate prostration or despair" (71). Similarly in Genevieve Stebbins' *Delsarte System of Expression* (1892) the "head thrown back midway between the shoulders" signifies "exaltation, explosion from self as a centre, a lifting to the universal" (133). The head is slightly tilted to the side, which Stebbins indicates is the way to signify "resignation or abandonment to sense or soul" (Ibid). Initially Elsie fought Lynch and called out for help, but in this moment, bound and gagged, she has ceased fighting and certainly appears to have abandoned herself to her fate.

Gish uses a similar combination of gestures and facial expressions in *Orphans of the Storm*, a melodrama set in revolutionary France. In the still below, Gish's character Henriette is about to be lowered into the guillotine. Her brow is raised, her eyes are directed skyward, and her mouth is slightly open, the corners drawn downward. The expression is similar but with some important differences. Gish has not slackened her face as she did in the previous still from *The Birth of a Nation*. According to Stebbins' chart of



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At the guillotine in *Orphans of the Storm*.

and Henriette, Gish directs her gaze to the space above her head, the area identified by Delsarteans as the spiritual zone. As described by Shawn, “the realm of space above the top of our heads is the supernatural realm (literally—above, more than normal) and so in that realm we express the emotions of ecstasy, aspiration, prayer, etc.” (32). Shawn goes on to explain Delsarte’s Doctrine of Special Organs: “...the meaning of a gesture was strongly colored by the part of the body in which the movement originated, but also was further modified by the realm of space in which the gesture culminated” (33). In relation to Gish’s performance in the stills from *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Birth of a Nation*, she gestures with her eyes toward this spiritual realm. In doing so she conveys the grave nature of her predicament and also the spiritual nature of her character. For Griffith, Gish always played virtuous characters who are selfless, gentle, often courageous—and almost always sexually pure. Gish’s performance as imperiled and terror-struck young innocents, utterly vulnerable in their predicaments, are essential and titillating elements in a number of Griffith’s films.

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Gish as a horrified Lucy in *Broken Blossoms*.

“Expressions of the Mouth,” with her lips apart and the corners of her mouth depressed, Gish in this moment conveys horror (Stebbins 1892, 162). The emphasis here is on the horrible death Henriette faces, which is visually foreshadowed in the shot by the way Henriette’s body is cut off from view at the neck, rather than on helplessness or the more abstract threat to “honor” faced by Elsie in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Nevertheless, both as Elsie

In *Broken Blossoms*, Gish expresses horror and fear separately. In the film Gish plays Lucy, a girl brutalized by her father, the prizefighter known as Battling Burrows. In the climactic scene, Lucy has retreated to a closet, and on the other side of the locked door her father rages, threatening murder. In the first still, the raised brow and the open, down-turned mouth along with the back-tilting

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**Lucy in an ecstasy of fear.**

transport, which Gish performs by relaxing her shoulders, slackening her face, dropping her head back, drawing her eyes up, and listing as if about to faint.

In demonstrating Gish's use of Delsartean techniques, one could make the argument that Gish is drawing upon legitimate Delsartean sources, while the contributors to the histrionic code that Pearson describes were illegitimate, perverted sources, those exemplified by the elocution manuals described by Shawn in his *Every Little Movement: A Book About François Delsarte*:

Of the many so-called "Delsarte" books that appeared, many of them are collections of selections for...elocutionary readings, some with directions as to the proper gestures to be used, and illustrated with pictures of men and women in the costume of the period (not an aesthetically beautiful period!) in poses representing (falsely and ridiculously) every human emotion. (19)

However, in another moment from *Orphans of the Storm* Gish strikes a pose found in just such a book. When Henriette is drugged and kidnapped by an evil Marquis, she awakens to find herself at a party of debauched aristocrats who plan to ravage her in a midnight orgy. As Henriette pleads with the Marquis's decadent party guests, she takes on an emphatic version of a pose found in Edward B. Warman's *Gestures and Attitudes; An Exposition of the Delsarte Philosophy of Expression, Practical and Theoretical* (1892). As Shawn notes in his "bibliography with commentary" of Delsartean texts, Warman's book features pages and pages of illustrations "of ladies in dresses of the period, or in 'Greek' costume, and of Prof. Warman himself, a portly middle-aged gentleman in a 'swallow tail' coat. These are 'poses' that are intended to illustrate emotions—and gazing on pictures of Prof. Warman expressing 'Indecision' or 'Shame' are almost more than one can bear!" (97–98).

head indicate horror.<sup>4</sup> With her hand and her eyes she indicates toward the threat, her father outside the closet door. Gish has also raised her shoulders and drawn in her limbs. For Stebbins, a contraction in the torso, like the drawing in of the arms, indicates "different degrees of timidity, effort, pain, or convulsion of will" (Stebbins 1892, 122).

As Burrows breaks the closet door down, Lucy is overcome with terror. Fear amplifies into



"Pleading" from Edward B. Warman's *Gestures and Attitudes* (1892: 209).

To signify pleading, Warman counsels that "the body should first retroact, in opposition to the forward movement of the arms; then the body should move forward while the arms are extended" (208). The illustration shows the body in the initial position of retroaction, while the still of Gish shows her in the second position, leaning into the gesture. To this Gish adds the tilted back head, a lifted and contracted brow, and an open and slightly down-turned mouth. For Lowell, the "Brow lifted at center, inner corner lifted and contracted," as Gish's are, indicates "Painful, passional excitement appropriate to passions of a timid or despairing order" (192). Gish has also brought the lids of her eyes partially down,

which combined with the raised lid, signifies for Stebbins "pain, agony, mental despair; vital force prostrated, depressed" (Stebbins 1892, 145). Also, Gish has spread her arms out wide. Such a motion outward and to the sides of the torso Shawn considers of a "stronger emotional signification" than movements made in front of the body (33). The expansiveness of Gish's gesture and the higher emotional register it conveys corresponds with Stebbins' observation, "Passion tends to extreme expansion of the muscles" (Stebbins 1892, 168).

As the correspondence between the illustration from Warman's text and Gish's performance demonstrates, it is difficult to distinguish definitively the legitimate and illegitimate source of Delsartean technique. Even Shawn, who poked a bit of fun at Warman's costume and some of his postures, also indicates that he found Warman's explanations of Delsarte philosophy and the "laws of the science" to be sound (98). Moreover, one person's *bona fide* Delsartean technique is another's sham, and much ink has been devoted to making the distinction, often with contradictory results. For instance, Shawn considered statue posing among the travesties of Delsartean principles; while Genevieve Stebbins, a student of Steele Mackaye's, prolific author, teacher, and theorist of Delsarte's methods, engaged in statue posing

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**Henriette pleads with the debauched aristocrats in *Orphans of the Storm*.**

and trained her students in the activity (Ruyter 1999, 116–120). Therefore, with regard to early film, it is more useful to think of Delsartism as a general set of commitments and practices rather than a unified, internally consistent system.

While Gish's performances of horror and the paroxysms of fear correspond nicely with the teachings of Stebbins and Lowell, they also match well with another, non-Delsartean source: Charles Aubert's *The Art of Pantomime*, first published in Paris in 1901 and later translated and published in New York in 1927. Gish's two expressions resemble very much Aubert's illustrations of "Ecstasy/Rapture" and "Fright/Terrifying Sight," a fact that introduces yet another difficulty in determining whether film actors used Delsartean techniques during the silent era. Delsarte and his practitioners were working within a larger set of practices, to which Aubert also belongs, and its manifold set of influences provides the backdrop against which silent cinema is best viewed.

Yet another facet of the context informing the reception of Delsarte's work is the American oratorical tradition. Thanks to work beginning in the eighteenth century, by the time Mackaye brought Delsarte's teachings to the United States in 1871, the ideas that form the premises of Delsarte's theories were already in broad acceptance. These ideas were threefold.

*Arousing the emotions was the surest way of persuading an audience.* The very definition of eloquence in the eighteenth century became closely associated with a speaker's ability to move an audience. *One arouses the emotions by representing them dramatically.* As literary historian Jay Fliegelman argues in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance*, persuasion was elevated to the primary goal of oration and delivery was thought to outstrip content as a persuasive device (30). The most effective way to move an audience lay not in the shape of one's argument, or even the

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words spoken, but in the delivery. *There are universal ways of representing the emotions.* Rhetoricians and orators privileged the emotions because they were thought to have expression and universal legibility. Witnessing certain emotions, or credible representations of them, was thought to have universal appeal by inspiring in the witness, or audience, similar emotions. They also privileged gesture, posture, and expressions of the face as the greatest vehicles of emotional expression because they were thought to have preceded the spoken word in the evolution of language.<sup>5</sup> In fact, emotions were said to have a language, a “natural language” because of its transparency and universal legibility.

Two Scottish rhetoricians, Lord Kames and Hugh Blair helped popularize in the United States the idea that the successful public speaker performs his emotions. I say “popularize” because their works, especially Blair’s, were almost ubiquitous throughout the nineteenth century. Lord Kames’ *Elements of Criticism* (1762) went through at least thirty-one American editions, the first in 1796 and the last in 1883. Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) went through fifty-three editions, fourteen of them after 1835. By the first decade of the nineteenth century many colleges included rhetoric in their curriculum and used Blair’s *Rhetoric* as the standard text, and many abridged editions were printed in small towns, most likely for use in local schools (Chavet 30–31).

Both Blair and Kames emphasize persuasion and the role the passions play in persuasion. In fact, Blair makes a distinction between conviction and persuasion that hinges upon emotion: “It is the business of the philosopher

to convince me of the truth; it is the business of the orator to persuade me to act agreeably to it, by engaging my affections on its side" (262). Like a number of other rhetoricians influential during the nineteenth century, Kames contends that the external signs of emotion constitute a "universal language, which no distance of place, no difference of tribe, no diversity of tongue, can darken or render doubtful..." (208). To witness these signs is invariably to be moved: "None of these signs are beheld with indifference: they are productive of various emotions, tending all of them to ends good and wise" (209). In fact, Kames argues that every emotion has a corresponding physical manifestation: "So intimately connected are the soul and the body, that every agitation in the former produces a visible effect upon the latter" (204). Kames considers the physical signs of emotion a "natural language" because they express "to all beholders emotions and passions as they arise in the heart" (204).

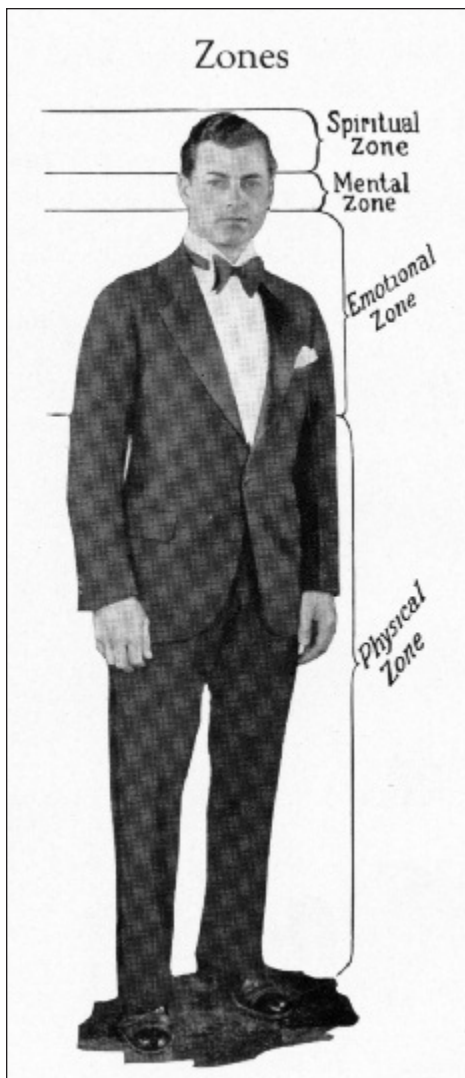
Delsarte echoed the words of Kames, Blair and the other proponents of natural language that came before him. Like them, Delsarte privileged gesture as our most direct form of communication:

Gesture is the direct agent of the heart. It is the fit manifestation of feeling. It is the revealer of thought and the commentator upon speech. It is the elliptical expression of language; it is the justification of the additional meanings of speech. In a word, it is the spirit of which speech is merely the letter. Gesture is parallel to the impression received; it is, therefore, always anterior to speech, which is but a reflected and subordinate expression. (In *Delsarte System of Oratory*, 466–67)

Delsarte also viewed persuasion as a fundamental goal of art, an end reached by stirring the emotions through gesture. Accordingly, Delsarte counsels the artist to have, "three objects: To *move*, to *interest*, to *persuade*. He interests by *language*; he moves by *thought*; he moves, interests and persuades by *gesture*" (Ibid 465). Finally, Delsarte and his practitioners believed that artistry was the search for eternal emotional types.

These connections are remarkable because they make clear that American Delsartism was able to be the nineteenth century's most detailed account of human expression because it shared fundamental principles with the preceding models. The connections also help explain why Delsarte's ideas received such a warm reception from Americans: he was, in a deep sense, already speaking their language. And this is why Judy Burns is right to argue "[T]he many and varied manifestations of Delsarte in America—the ways in which it was used and abused, recycled and reconstructed—are valuable evidence of the complex cultural values of the time..." (Burns 204).

Thus far I have tried to show the deep but complex impact of American Delsartism on silent cinema, and to explain how the American oratorical tradition helped make that impact possible. But how lasting was that impact?



Recall that some see little evidence of American Delsartism after 1912, as least as far as silent cinema goes. But note that the films I have considered appeared a good deal later, namely, *The Birth of a Nation*, (1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921). Consider also another piece of evidence of American Delsartism's longevity and also of its impact on Hollywood from *Developing the Motion Picture Player*, a 1928 acting manual written by the actor and director John E. Ince (1878–1947) for the Cinema Schools, Incorporated, of Hollywood, California.<sup>6</sup> According to the forward, Ince designed the manual "as a daily companion and first aid for pupils entering upon a course of training to develop him or herself either for the silent or talking motion pictures." In the "Home Studies" chapter is a photograph of an actor with the "Zones" of the body indicated.

Nowhere is Delsarte mentioned; however, Ince is clearly drawing upon Delsarte's own divisions of the body. According to Delsarte's *Doctrine of Special Organs*, the meaning of a gesture depended largely upon from

which part, or zone, of the body the gesture originated (Shawn 33). Delsarte divided the body into three major expressive zones. As Ted Shawn reports it, Delsarte worked on the divisions over his lifetime and described them variously as:

- Head: Concentric, mental, intellectual zone.
- Upper torso: Normal, emotional, moral, spiritual zone.
- Limbs: Excentric, vital, physical zone. (32)

Or:

Head: Concentric, mental, intellectual zone.

Upper torso: Normal, emotional, moral, spiritual zone.

Lower torso: Excentric, vital, physical zone. (Ibid)

In his manual, Ince combined the lower torso and the limbs. Delsarte theorized that the three zones were then further subdivided into three, which Ince has reflected only with the division of the head into the spiritual, mental, and emotional zones. Regardless, Ince's manual suggests the presence of American Delsartism in film actor training as late as 1928.

I have tried to demonstrate that Delsartism not only informed silent cinematic practices, but remained a vital influence until the introduction of sound. If I am right, film historians should now give Delsarte, his followers, and even his casual imitators a more significant role in their accounts of early film, though not as solitary or even discrete influences. Rather, American Delsartism belonged to a complex web of theories, techniques, and practices that also included elocutionary training, oratorical theory, and pantomime. Taken as a whole, this web brings us further into the world of silent films, and into what it might have been like to view them. Alongside the technical wonders that initially attracted them, audiences schooled in natural language theory were most likely emotionally interested, moved, and persuaded by the dramas unfolding before them.

The conception of human emotional experience prevalent in the silent era is very different from what is currently accepted. The idea that we express our feelings the same way, no matter where we are from or what language we speak, experienced a tremendous reversal in the twentieth century. Human communication of any kind came to be thought of as culturally and socially determined and therefore quite variable, even within the same geographical location. However, as long as these universalistic ideas were commonly accepted, that is, until other sociological and psychological models came along, it is reasonable to assume that performance practices foregrounded emotion and relied upon gesture and facial expression for its representation. While the Delsarte "craze" may have passed by 1900, the *Zeitgeist* characterized by an abiding preoccupation with emotional representation and a belief in emotional types persisted. Moreover, Delsarte's teachings continued to have currency long after the fad ended, as evidenced by the extensive careers of Hovey, Stebbins, and others, and most especially by the success of the Denishawn and its connection to Hollywood.



## Notes

- 1 For a history of the American elocutionary movement and professional acting schools, which includes the role of Steele Mackaye and other Delsarteans, consult Wallace. For biographical information about Delsartean leaders in oratorical and actor training, see Ruyter, especially pp.17–29.
- 2 “By 1930 fully 70 percent of motion picture theaters were wired for sound,” and in the same year the major studios announced a “total cessation of silent film production” (Doherty 31).
- 3 An important distinction between the histrionic and verisimilar codes is the reflexivity of the former. Pearson chose the term histrionic because it denotes “theatrical in character or style, stagey” (21). The histrionic code, then, is largely “reflexive, referring always to the theatrical event rather than to the outside world” (Ibid). The verisimilar code, on the other hand, is drawn from culture’s coded expectations about artistic representations of real life. Thus, when an actor using the histrionic code portrays anger, it is really *stage* anger. However, hundreds of years of theatrical performances render the portrayal legible to the audience.
- 4 According to Lowell, the “Brow lifted at centre, inner corner lifted and counteracted” indicates, “Painful, passional excitement appropriate to passions of a timid or despairing order” (192).
- 5 The new rhetoric’s concept of persuasion also depends greatly upon ideas that Adam Smith (1723–1790), and other moral sense philosophers forwarded about sympathy and its specular nature. Kames and Smith, along with philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) and philosopher and historian Adam Ferguson (1723–1815) formed the Poker Club, which later became the Select Society. Smith regarded Kames as the master of literary matters, and Smith also provided many ideas for Blair’s book (Chavat 33).
- 6 John Ince came from a theatrical family and was the eldest of three film-making brothers. His younger brother Thomas Ince was a director instrumental in forming the studio system; he joined D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett to form the Triangle Motion Picture Company in 1915. The youngest brother, Ralph, directed silent movies and worked as a character actor for a time before directing films in the United Kingdom.

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