Do You See What I See? The Impact of Delsarte on Silent Film Acting

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Abstract/Synopsis
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.

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Before I saw the movie, my sister and I knew every song by heart. (Out of all the albums my mother played—Jerry Vale, Bobby Vinton, Perry Como, Doris Day, Nat King Cole—Funny Girl was our favorite.) One more thing in the movie, that made a personal impact on me was the bonding between Red and Andy. Red is street smart, extroverted, someone who seems to have been smart enough to work around the prison. Yet beneath that bluster, was a man insecure, who really had no hope in life. The sound tracks, the acting, the stories, the insight into humanity, the persistence of memory. Fellini’s movies are sheer beauty. Who do you think is the most impactful figure of the silent film era? What impact does an editor of a movie have on the film? 14. Silent film in sound films: watching a silent film within a film—A Cottage on Dartmoor (in this silent film, there is a scene of audience members watching a silent film within a movie theater); Hamlet’s Mousetrap in Hamlet (dir. Michael Almereyda, 2000); The Spiral Staircase; The Fall (2006 film); Sunset Boulevard; Jean-Luc Godard, Vivre sa Vie; Alain Resnais, Muriel. “Nearly everyone who scores silent films uses what can be described as the Delsarte technique (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/François_Delsarte ). D. W. Griffith and Mary Pickford led the way in America away from this method as it looked ridiculous on screen (the exaggerated acting many associate with early silent film is actually Delsarte acting). This keeps the audience out of the film.