

## The Craft of Silent Film Acting: Classical Traditions and Modern Innovations

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As a number of key studies of acting in early cinema have famously demonstrated, the period between 1907 (when it was first recognized that the people appearing onscreen are in fact across) and the early 1910s marked a significant shift in approaches to acting in American cinema. During these years, new performance styles that proved suitable for the longer narratives of the emergent feature era and for the cultural taste of middle-class audiences came to dominate the screen. These transformations, in turn, led to a redefinition of the understanding of what film acting is. By the mid-1910s new conceptions of what constitutes good acting, what skills a good actor should possess, and how actors can be best trained for the specific demands of the screen emerged in popular discourses about cinema. As Selig star Thomas Santschi put it in a 1915 interview for *Picture Play Weekly*, “Of late – and only of late – we have been hearing of the ‘technique of motion picture acting,’ Formerly it was just ‘acting for the movies,’ nothing at all about technique.” As his quote suggests, the fact that there are actually various acting techniques that performers draw upon started informing conversations about film only at that relatively late stage. Correspondingly, the early 1910s also saw the formation of the first film acting schools in the United States, which quickly became attractive to large numbers of young “screen-hopefuls” who were seeking to learn acting technique in order to find work in the industry. These schools were short-lived institutions of dubious quality and existed outside the professional circles (professional systematic training in film studios began only with the coming of sound). They also did not leave behind much by way of a paper trail, outside of numerous mentions in film magazines that described them as schemes and discouraged readers from attending them.



acting, which became so central in how we conceive of acting and representation of emotions today. In so doing, the writings of the 1910s demonstrate how similar questions about performance, expressions, and feelings were tackled in a distinct historical context of transitional-era cinema. In what follows, then, I discuss some of these early discourses on acting, focusing on what was considered to be the main goal of the actor, how film acting came to be considered a legitimate art form with its own distinct challenges and aesthetic possibilities, how screen acting was understood to relate to theatrical traditions, and how performers responded to the new requirements of expressing emotions not before their audience but before the apparatus.



In the beginning of the transitional era, film actors were expected to perform in a manner that would best serve the delivery of story information without words. As Eileen Bowser has succinctly claimed, “In 1908, the most important quality for film acting was clarity.” Within five years, however, the conception of quality in acting has dramatically shifted. By the early 1910s, discussion of acting repeatedly asserted that the artful communication of emotions, rather than narrative clarity, is the alpha and omega of screen performance. A 1916 article about “Psychology and the Screen,” in *Motion Picture Classic* described acting as “shorthand code of gestures to represent different emotions” which film fans must learn how to decipher. The newfound centrality of emotional expression in films meant that actors needed to master the conveyance of a wider range of feelings. “A few years ago,” the article argued, “photoplays were mostly pictures of action, cowboys and Indians on horseback, guns going off, trains being wracked, autos speeding after fugitives, and ‘something doing’ generally” but, as films started offering more dramatic narratives, “movie actors found that it was distinctly up to them to register a large number of emotions so that they would ‘get over’ to their audience.” The same year, a *Motion Picture Story Magazine* writer specified that “There are upward of a hundred and eighty emotions, classified and distinct, which have been expressed by the face alone, and the actor and actress of today must be well versed in portraying all of them to make success possible.” Perhaps the most forceful articulation of the growing importance of emotional expression in films appeared in a 1916 satirical column in *Photoplay* that quoted a fictitious future director in a 1922 film set who insists on radical minimalism, disallowing his actor to move, speak, wink, breath, or do “nothing that will interfere with expression.”

The earliest film acting guidebooks conveyed a similar message. Frances Agnew’s 1913 *Motion Picture Acting* states that “the sum total of photoplaying” is to “express the emotions and

feelings of a given situation.” Likewise, Jean Bernique’s *Motion Picture Acting* concluded that “the visual story of the film is unfolded through the pictured expressions of simulated emotions.” The focus on performer’s expression of emotions was, of course, neither new nor specific to the cinema. The centrality of emotional display has been characteristic already in Romantic theatre and remained a persistent feature in nineteenth century theatre. But already in the 1910s, commentators started addressing the specific attributes of emotional expression on screen.

In the 1910s the film actor’s unique challenge was often understood in relation to cinema’s so-called “naturalness.” In this context, the elusive term “naturalness” referred broadly to a life-like quality of expression that at times – quite paradoxically – was considered to stem from the cinematic apparatus itself. Describing her “theory of picture acting” in a 1915 interview, actress Clara Young argued that “the great thing in acting for the pictures... is the naturalness of motion pictures – the illusion of real-life which they convey – which gives them their appeal and popularity. So above all other things, I try to be natural.” For Young, acting in film is distinct from acting on the stage not only because of the lack of spoken words, changing shot scales, or the discontinuous and out-of-order nature of performing a role in the cinema, but also because of the lifelike nature of film reproduction. As she claims, “the business of the legitimate dramatic stage seems *artificial* in pictures.” Along similar lines, actor Edwin Arden stated that the art and the challenge of picture acting in “the naturalness which changes ‘acting the role’ into ‘being the role’” (a comment that may strike us today as anticipating Stanislavski or Method acting but, as I show below, actually relates to quite distinct concepts of performance).

Arden’s interview provides further information about what lies behind these statements about the specific acting that the camera requires. According to him, because dramatic pictures

are shot against the backdrop images from the real world, as oppose to the artificial setting on the theatrical stage, “the public has come to think of the pictures as more at one with life” and therefore “they want the motion picture actor to be natural.” As this statement suggests, the use of the term “natural” does not signify in this context the opposite of reproduced or technologized or mediated. On the contrary, the Arden, like Young, assume that it is precisely because of the mechanical reproduction that cinematic permeance ought to be carried out in a more natural fashion than a “live” performance of an actor on stage. Put differently, in this line of argument it is medium’s capability to create a filmic illusion of real life, rather than the actual presence of the performer, that sets the criteria for the proper verisimilitude of film acting style. The alleged ontological properties of cinema’s realistic reproduction stand here in opposition to what was considered an unrealistic performance style, as if it was not a critical judgment but the medium itself that deemed the use of artificial acting techniques unsuited for films.

Before discussing how the manuals and guidebooks of the 1910s taught aspiring actors the art of emotional expression, it is crucial to recall that the very idea that acting could be taught in a school or by a guidebook was at the time a fairly recent and revolutionary notion that became possible due to changes in fundamental theories of theatre. For centuries, the traditional manner in which actors learned their craft was closer to the form of apprenticeship – young performers joined stock companies where they could gain experience performing small roles while observing established actors on stage. As Victor Holtcamp has shown, only in the nineteenth century, when the notion of an acting ‘method’ came into being, training in acting off the stage – that is, not by way of practicing acting – became possible. The first American acting schools and theatrical acting books started appearing around 1880 (illustrated acting manuals already existed since the seventeenth century, but they differed from the newer publications since

they did not distinguish between theatrical performers and orators, and focused on modeling given sets of gestures rather than laying out a method in a fuller sense). The training offered to aspiring actors in the classrooms and on the pages of the acting books demonstrated a historical transformation in the very concept of acting pedagogy: it was not meant to prepare students for particular roles in particular plays as in older training models; rather, it intended to teach the skills needed for performing a range of situations. As Holtcamp puts it, the novel approach to acting pedagogy marked a “move away from a chromatic set of emotions an actor would be expected to know and reproduce, and an embrace of a more individualistic emotional representation on stage,” typically based on modern and scientific conceptions of emotions.

The early film acting guidebooks of the 1910s follow these nineteenth century methods by virtue of offering acting instruction off of the stage and prior to playing any role. What is remarkable about them, however, is that they simultaneously fall back both on classical (or rather neoclassical) approaches to acting instruction and on classical aesthetic conceptions. *Acting for Pictures*, for example, partakes in the old tradition of teaching how to reproduce codified conventional gestures. The book’s central section about “Expression and Gestures” includes two comprehensive lists. The first list consists of individual body, alongside explanations regarding what part each of them play in expressing and emphasizing emotions (“Arms and hands: when rubbed together – greed and gratification; when folded on breast - resignation”) the second list consists of 18 attitude and passions with instructions about how to depict them (“Pride: body – erect, legs – apart, hands – on hips, eyes – lofty, chin – raised, brows – lofty”). The erstwhile practice of learning the art of acting by observing established performers is modified here with a recommendation to “observe the faces of moving-picture artists as they flash on the screen.” As the book suggests, “Watch the expressions flitting over their countenances. Then try to do them

yourself.” Finally, like several other commentators on acting during the same period, the authors of *Acting for Pictures* suggest that the acting students practice each of the emotion before a mirror, until they proficiently control all expressive nuances – a method that has been common as early as in eighteenth century theatrical training, which chiefly concerned how the performer’s gestures look from the perspective of the viewers.



A far more elaborate process is at work in Bernique’s *Motion Picture Acting*. This book, too, aims at allowing aspiring actors to “obtain a ready knowledge of how to express the various emotions.” Not only does it encourage practicing before a mirror, but it also advises the readers to take photographs of themselves practicing different expression in order to tell if there are indeed “screen types.” However, rather than describing different gestures, the book consists of dozens of film stills, showing a total of 499 gestures and expressions of emotions, each carefully listed alongside the image, so that the reader can study them (for example, a still from *Birth of a*

*Nation* is said to show Robert E. Lee displaying “Resignation, hopelessness, crushed,” a confederate Aid being “Thoughtful, speculative, reflective,” and General Grant “Advising, counseling, instructing”). The result is something of a mass-produced version of the traditional pedagogical model of observing established actors and imitating them. Consider, however, the heavily mediated nature of this training: the books reproduced stills taken from films that captured the original actors’ performances, so that the reader could imitate them and eventually take their own photographs performing them – and all, importantly, in accordance to how the author’s interpreted the meaning of each expression. Overall, the assumption here shares the classical belief that the expressions are universal, and that the spectators will decode them just like the author does in the examples the book provides. Notably, all other aspects of acting that were already taken into consideration in the theatre of the 1910s – such as the concern with the actor’s interiority, with the motivations of the character, the particular situation within the drama –remain entirely overlooked in the film acting book.

EXPRESSION

S. RANKIN DREW  
IN  
"THE LESSON OF A NARROW STREET"



Courtesy of the Vitaphone Company of America

*Left to right:*

1. S. RANKIN DREW—Perplexed, puzzled, confused, uncertain.
2. —Interrogation, solicitation, earnestness.
3. —Derisive, mocking, pleased, satisfied.

EXPRESSION

EARLE WILLIAMS  
IN  
"HIS PHANTOM SWEETHEART"



Courtesy of the Vitaphone Company of America

*Left to right:*

1. —Cunning, sly, deceitful, artful, crafty, designing.
2. EARLE WILLIAMS—Shocked, surprised, appalled, dismayed, astounded.

In concert with the reliance on classical pedagogic approaches from the theater, the early film acting guidebooks also provided a number of stylistic instructions that directly emanate from classicist aesthetic values. *Acting for Pictures* stresses that gestures should be gracefully executed on camera and display the performers' complete control of their bodies. *Motion Picture Acting* likewise emphasizes subtlety of expression and warns against abrupt interference with the story's continuity. This way, alongside several other commentators and stars from the 1910s who alluded to classical values in writing about acting, these books may be seen as anticipating the formal concerns that will come to dominate the Classical Hollywood style.

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that the early discourse of screen acting shaped itself in accordance to antiquated views. Time and again, the continuities with classical theatrical traditions sharply contrasted in discussions of acting with the modernist terms through which the commentators understand the properties of the cinema. For example, film actress Edna May strikingly anticipated by a couple of decades Walter Benjamin's famous claim about the judging gaze of the movie camera, when she said in a 1916 interview that the acting in film is harder than in the theatre because the camera, with its "soulless eye," was more critical than any audience. Even more powerfully, actress Edith Storey described film acting as "a battle with a camera," which she in turn called a "cold calculating, winkless, cynical, soulless, sleepless, staring cyclopean eye" and "a veritable X-ray in searching out one's inner faults" – that is, referring to the cinematic apparatus not as reproducing the performers' visible appearance, but rather as penetrating and laying bare their interiority.

## Photoplay Acting is Mental Radiation BY MARY FULLER

**P**HOTOPLAY acting has been classed under the heading of pantomime and while that is a just classification, it is not complete. Old-style pantomime meant "putting things over" by physical means; photoplay acting is putting things over in a mental way—the art of mental suggestion.

It is mental and emotional radiation. Many of the big scenes are played without gestures, and it is the thoughts and feelings of the characters, rather than their action, which grip the spectator's attention. That which one "radiates" is caught by the camera and indelibly stamped on the thin film strip. Vibrations from one heart to another—the player and the audience. That is why the emotional film actresses of high rank must be sincere and instinct with feeling during their portrayals. To be technically correct is not enough; it may please the eye, but it does not stir the heart; it may arrest the attention as the motions of a mesmerist before the face, but it is not of that quality of the singing of the nightingale or the sobbing of a woman.

Mental suggestion in film work is a wonderful and unlimited field. For instance, there are moments when a player in a fleeting expression may suggest something more divine than just a person in the heights of joy or the depths of despair. They may interpret several aspects of that universal essence which takes its quirks and twists through nature in

the first function of clothes today is not to cover us but to enable us to express ourselves. Everyone has felt the joy of being expressed new and fresh in a frock just home from the dressmaker's. It is the same feeling that the

spring flowers have. If one wishes to express himself as a slovenly person, dowdy clothes and run-down - at - the - heel shoes will be half the battle. To be neat



and attractive is expressing a mind that is buoyant and fresh. And who does not prefer the latter? I do not believe in extravagance in dressing, but becoming dressing acts as a mental tonic not only on yourself, but on those around you. This is one of the many hints learned at the photoplay.

To one who is a student, acting for the movies lights and enlarges one's vision, as well as makes one more sensitive. Also (though it sounds paradoxical), it makes one more blasé; for we become so used to "effects," catastrophes, etc., that should the sun shine at midnight, we would dismiss the fact with "It is probably Director X— of the X— Company getting a light effect for a



Taking this position to the extreme, in a 1914 *Photoplay* article, actress Mary Fuller argued that movie acting is not a form of pantomime at all, but a form of mental exchange with the apparatus. As she insists, film acting is about “putting things over in a mental way – the art of mental suggestion. It is mental and emotional radiation ... it is the thoughts and feelings of the characters, rather than their action, which grip the spectator’s attention.” Echoing modern science’s interest of in theories of waves, energy, and vibrations as a key to explain the principles that govern disparate phenomena in nature, Fuller continued, “That which one ‘radiates’ is caught by the camera and indelibly stamped on the thin film strip. Vibrations from one heart to another – the player and the audience.”

To briefly conclude - in this paper, I have attempted to show how changes in film acting styles (and indeed, in the institution of cinema overall) during the transitional era brought about a new understanding of what film acting is, how it is distinguished from stage performance, and

what good film acting ought to look like. In the 1910s, discourses on acting started emphasizing the expression of emotion as the chief goal of the film actor, and considered various techniques to realize this goal. At the same time, with the rise of film stardom and fandom, the period also saw the appearance of the first film acting schools and film acting guidebooks. Although these instructional texts on film acting were written outside the professional industry and aimed primarily at fans and amateurs, they were remarkable for developing some of the earliest pedagogies of film acting that relied on newly emergent filmic practices, thereby making possible the foundations for a tradition-bound film style. To be sure, even if the discourse on acting during that period did not directly reflect actual practices in the studios, it did constitute a notably early self-reflexive discourse about the cinema, which confronted fundamental questions about the expressions of human emotions before the apparatus. In the early writings about mastering acting techniques we thus find considerations of cinema's ontology that share some of the most basic concerns of the classical film theorists. As commentators and performers found, the nature of cinema's reproduction of profilmic elements necessitated the development of a new – and supposedly natural and lifelike – performance style that is truly medium-specific.