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"Methodologies for Madness:

Instructions for Emotional Expression in Early Motion Picture Acting Manuals"

In her 1913 handbook, *Motion Picture Acting*, Frances Agnew includes a catalog of emotions and sentiments that the aspiring "photoplayer" should practice before a mirror. The list begins with Rejoicing, moves through Tenderness with Pity, and ends with Madness.[1] A journalist by trade, with limited stage or screen acting credits, Agnew could not claim personal expertise in techniques for performing before the camera, no less methods for enacting characters in mental distress. Her advice—in this concise book pragmatically subtitled "How to Prepare for Photoplaying, What Qualifications are Necessary, How to Secure an Engagement, Salaries Paid to Photoplayers"—is based foremost on interviews with the leading players of her day. By the 1920s, there was a booming industry in "how-to" booklets and training programs related to screen acting in the United States and England. This paper focuses on methodologies surrounding the onscreen performance of madness and expression of mental distress as detailed in film acting instruction booklets published before 1923. In what ways did photoplaying instruction manual writers mimic or stray from the methods espoused in stage acting instructional texts or dominant theatrical practices around the imitation of mania through gesture or facial expression? I will argue that the techniques proposed for learning motion picture acting in these manuals—all in the name of naturalness—served, in fact, to exacerbate stereotypical manifestations of mental distress.

Advice on how to approach acting "mad" is as old as rhetoric itself; two thousand years ago, Seneca the Elder cautioned in *Controversiae* that the orator Vibius Gallus lost his mind in

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[1] Frances Agnew, *Motion Picture Acting: How to Prepare for Photoplaying, What Qualifications Are Necessary, How to Secure an Engagement, Salaries Paid to Photoplayers* (Reliance Newspaper Syndicate, 1913), 42.

trying to imitate insanity.[2] Similarly, the English actor-manager Henry Siddons, writing in 1822

on the challenge of performing madness, advised prudence in lieu of rage that "tears the hair in a

frightful manner, which throws the whole visage into the distortions of grimace, which pants till

every muscle swells, and the blood gushes up to the extended eyes." He adds: "such a rage may,

perhaps, be a true representation of nature, but is very, very *disgusting* in the imitation."[3]

Siddons is concerned with decorum, but his description also alludes to a pre-Enlightenment

understanding of hysteria as a visceral disorder; for actors, as Joseph Roach explains in *The*

Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting, this translated in keeping extreme emotions

"down," lest potentially lethal bodily forces and fluids rise up in the body.[4] The question of

bodily excess or spillage may also be seen as racialized and, as Rizvana Bradley notes, rooted in

"Eurocentric assumptions about the body and embodied expression."[5]

The distorted grimaces that Siddons discourages may also be seen as a proclivity to

embellish when playing a mad role. "Don't overact!," Agnew exhorts. "Be natural in all your

portrayals, actually living the roles for the moment, of course. Natural actions and expressions

are the secret of success on the screen."[6] There is an emphasis on self-control, on eschewing

unnecessary behavior. Hugo Münsterberg allows in *The Photoplay; a Psychological Study* that

the silent film actor may need to exaggerate expression to some degree to compensate for the

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[2] Seneca writes that his colleague went insane by choice and "as an act of judgment." *Controversiae 2* (Loeb Classical Library), 233, accessed February 8, 2020, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/seneca_elder-controversiae/1974/pb_LCL463.233.xml. In *Les Éléments de physiologie* (1774-80), Denis Diderot lists this example in his section on "Nerves." However, Bart Huelsenbeck suggests in *Figures in the Shadows* that Seneca's remark was a joke, *Figures in the Shadows* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 95.
[3] Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adapted to the English Drama from a Work on the Subject by M. Engel* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822), 45. Emphasis in original. Henry Siddons was the son of the legendary tragedienne Sarah Siddons (1755 –1831).
[4] Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 48.
[5] Rizvana Bradley, "Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 23.
[6] Agnew, *Motion Picture Acting*, 66.

lack of speech; he contrasts this with the mime who demonstrates or "exhibits" emotion, pointing

to it, and warns the photoplayer against such self-referentiality.[7] In 1916, Sam Schlappich, a

columnist for *Motion Picture Magazine* echoed this sentiment when proposing that actors "must

be able to depict the emotions without 'ranting,' and this requires the highest art of this nature

possible to obtain."[8] Schlappich does not specify mental distress in his essay on "Expressing

Emotions on the Screen"—which suggests looking to classical sculpture for the loftiest artistic

representations of the "upward of a hundred and eighty" classified emotions[9]—but many of his

contemporaries, including Frances Agnew, did conflate madness with emotion. Might this

impulse to make madness visual in the early twentieth century be residue from the highly

theatricalized images of white female hysteria that circulated across representational media in the

late 1800s? Disability culture activist Petra Kuppers suggests that hysteria may be seen as a

central conflict of this period: "At stake was the liberation of the neurological apparatus from the

gynecological one: the mind from the body."[10] Yet, during that same time, mind-body unification

was at the essence of the acting practices that dominated European and American theatre.

Early screen acting instructional texts were modeled on the nineteenth-century tradition

of illustrated guides to theatrical gestures; these books, such as Siddons and Engel's *Practical*

Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action (1822), catalogued emotions with images of facial

expressions and gestural poses said to represent inner sensations. While aimed at the aspiring

actor or public speaker, gesture handbooks—often building off theoretical works by Diderot and

Descartes— wrestled with philosophical questions related to the "mechanics" of acting and its

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[7] Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay; a Psychological Study* (New York [etc.] D. Appleton and company, 1916), 177–78, http://archive.org/details/cu31924084110653.
[8] Sam Schlappich, "Expressing Emotions on the Screen," *Motion Picture Magazine*, August 1916, 46.
[9] Schlappich, 47.
[10] Petra Kuppers, "Bodies, Hysteria, Pain: Staging the Invsible," in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 148.

conflict with true passions.[11] It is important to note that the visual representations of embodied

emotions in these books tend to focus on those that would occur in the most dramatic or conflict-

filled moments; for example, of the nearly 70 illustrations in *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical*

Gesture and Action, only two or three are subdued, while the rest are heightened emotional

states.[12] Handbooks aimed predominantly at wannabe-starlets utilize some of the same poetic

language regarding truthful emotions, but tended to be more practical. They included instruction

on hair and make-up, as well as addresses for managers and film studios, plus nuts-and-bolts

advice for how to apply for acting jobs. Moreover, while the gestural guides lean towards the

embodiment of heightened passions, the illustrated expressions in the photoplayer literature tend

to represent more nuanced—or combinations of—expressions and mental conditions. Jean

Bernique's 1916 book *Motion Picture Acting for Professionals and Amateurs* features a haunting

still of American actress Clara Kimball Young (1890-1960) from the 1915 film *Trilby* (dir.

Maurice Tourneur) to show "dementia, stupor, sorrow, remorse, grief, melancholia."[13] Emotions

and psychiatric symptoms are aligned here as if equivalently conveyed by her visible expression.

As many of the authors stress in their photoplayer instruction texts, acting for the camera focuses

on facial expression, particularly the eyes, to convey emotion. The performance seen by the

spectators, moreover, is subject to the editing of the director. Stage acting calls upon the actor to

convey character through voice, bodily movement, as well as physical gesture, often to an

audience of thousands of spectators, including those seated in the second balcony.

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[11] Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, 78. Roach adds "By separating mechanics and affections into parallel but mutually supporting tracks, Du Bos bends Descartes's interactive dualism of mind and body to the actor's purposes."
[12] Subdued examples would include "Tranquil Joy" or "Quietude," while the dramatic include "Despair," "Vulgar Triumph," or "Jealous Rage." Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adapted to the English Drama from a Work on the Subject by M. Engel* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822), vii-viii.
[13] Jean Bernique, *Motion Picture Acting for Professionals and Amateurs* (Producers Service Company, 1916), 67, http://archive.org/details/motionpictureact00jean.

French acting coach François Delsarte (1811–1871) is a key transitional figure between nineteenth-century acting instruction books and early guides to screen acting. Delsarte visited morgues, prisons, and asylums as part of his embodied research and in creating his movement-based "aesthetical science" system,[14] which would later influence modern dancers including Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. While he did not publish his writings during his lifetime, a virtual industry emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in England and the US of books and elocution programs on his method. Many focused more on the Delsarte system's applicability to exercise, vocal training, and movement than as a method for dramatic performance or public speaking per se. For example, Genevieve Stebbins's 1886 *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* emphasizes its application for "pantomime, physical culture, and statue posing."[15] Delsarte's disciples stressed that gesture was a physical manifestation of inner life. Edward B. Warman describes in *Gestures and Attitudes: An Exposition of the Delsarte Philosophy of Expression* (1892): "Delsarte's philosophy is the philosophy of expression,—the revelation of the inward by the outward agencies. Everything we produce is merely the form of what exists in our mind."[16] It should be noted that the mind here and in other Delsarte-inspired texts, with a few exceptions, is presumed to be healthy. Delsarte believed that bodily expressions such as gestures needed to be internally motivated, but that they could also be codified physically. In one sense, the systematizing and reproduction of the coded gesture was a sign of

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[14] Edward B. Warman, *Gestures and Attitudes: An Exposition of the Delsarte Philosophy of Expression* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1892), 19.

[15] Victoria Duckett, "The Silent Screen, 1895-1927," in *Acting*, ed. Claudia Springer and Julie Levinson (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 30. Scholars including Duckett and Pearson note that the second-generation Delsarte books appealed to middle-class white women and educators as a way of teaching elocution, physical exercise, and dramatic acting to children. Pearson describes the system as becoming "debased" and "emblematic of histrionically coded performances" (22). Film magazines in the 1920s sometimes referred to actors for having "Delsarte hands" both as a way to indicate class, but also to poke fun at a certain type of bourgeois (or aspiring bourgeois) gestural behavior.

[16] Warman, 24.

mechanization, but he stressed that the spiritual idea behind it was key.

The expression of the inward or internal through gesture was interpreted by some Delsartians as embodying the "language of emotion or soul; articulation of the language of reason."[17] Yet, what about unreason? Warman's *Gestures and Attitudes* does not specifically feature gestures of madness, but it does include poses of Anguish across a spectrum of intensity. Delsarte identifies the gesture of raising one's hands by or above the head to represent "Anguish: Strongest Form." He instructs the actor doing this pose to "Clasp the hands still more tightly, and drop the head still lower as the hands are raised higher. Make sure that the movement of the head is simultaneous with the movement of the hands."[18] In the *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, Stebbins uses a system of abbreviations to categorize the gestural movements as developed and identified by Delsarte: "Ex. is an abbreviation of excentric [sic], con. for concentric, nor. for normal."[19] There are several actions notated as "ex.-ex." (or, excentric-excentric) including: exaltation of passion; repulsion; "painful passion, terror, fear; vital and mental force exalted"; and madness.[20] As in Bernique's book, emotions are enumerated alongside psychiatric states.

In *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, Roberta Pearson argues that the underlying principles of the Delsarte method may be seen in Biograph films made between 1908 and 1913, a timeframe that overlaps with what cinema scholars consider to be the "transitional period" of the silent era. Pearson identifies this as an evolution from the histrionic to verisimilar code in US silent film acting and suggests that

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[17] Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1886), 36.
[18] Edward B. Warman, *Gestures and Attitudes: An Exposition of the Delsarte Philosophy of Expression* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1892), 204, https://archive.org/stream/gestureattitudes00warmuoft#page/n1/mode/2up.
[19] Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression*, 66.
[20] Stebbins, 95, 116, 146, 147.

Delsartian methods and Biograph acting share a similar semiotic approach to gestures based on

the "overall principles of histrionically coded acting."[21] In Pearson's analysis, while the Delsarte

method uses gestures to signify thoughts and emotions, it utilizes a "flow" of signification, not a

one-to-one representation between gesture and meaning. She highlights the variable of time,

claiming that actors held poses long enough to be read by the spectator.[22] This idea of gesture

containing both flow and stasis is echoed in Laura Mulvey's 2015 essay "Cinematic Gesture:

The Ghost in the Machine," which discusses the idea of the gesture itself as a kind of freeze-

frame or liminal state: "the body caught in gesture occupies a space and time of its own just as

the fragment is detached from narrative linearity or the logic of cause and effect."[23] How might

this intersect with embodied gestures of mental distress or loss of reason? Is the subject's

manipulation of time altered? Does the signifying gesture have a different relationship with

meaning, as is seen sometimes in people with aphasia? These questions of gap and flow are

especially interesting when applied to one of the core methods recommended in printed materials

from the 1910s and early 1920s for learning the craft of screen acting.

Guides to performing before the motion picture camera first emerged in the US and

England in the early 1910s, coincident with training programs for screen acting. Many of these

schools were spurious at best. For example, in an advertisement in the July 1912 *Motion Picture

Story Magazine*, Taylor's Theatrical Enterprises guarantees "Complete Training for the Stage or

Motion Pictures," alongside coursework in vaudeville and musical comedy. Taylor's—which

under a slightly different name, and just few months prior, focused on the production of novelty

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[21] Roberta E. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 23.
[22] Pearson, 25.
[23] Laura Mulvey, "Cinematic Gesture: The Ghost in the Machine," *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, no. 1 (2015): 7.

slides for singers—claimed that it was the: "only school teaching you every branch of the Motion

Picture Business. Complete Courses in Motion Picture Acting, Photo Play Writing, Moving

Picture Machine Operating and Piano Playing for Pictures. Special Correspondence Course in

Photo Play Writing." [24] By 1916, Taylor's was out of business, but there were plenty of new

programs to take its place.[25] Chris O'Rourke describes the rise of bogus cinema schools in

England in his essay "On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame: Would-Be Cinema Stars in

Silent-Era Britain," noting that reformers attacked the schools, without evidence, as recruitment

centers for prostitution rings.[26] Young women were the target consumer for both fan magazines

and acting schools, and O'Rourke outlines a parallel in England to Shelley Stamp's influential

work on the subject of US "movie-struck girls." O'Rourke notes the irony of 1920s fan

magazines turning against cinema schools "given their own active involvement in advertising

such services over the preceding decades…."[27] Screen acting instruction texts from the 1910s

and 1920s should be seen within this context of economic enticement circulating on both sides of

the glossy paper.

In film acting handbooks published between 1913-1921 in the US and England, the

predominant acting method prescribed is to practice expressions in front of a mirror. Frances

Agnew advises against simply assuming postures: "It is not enough to say that the brows

contract, eyes glare and lips are pressed together in anger…or a mournful look in the depths of

the eyes, the mouth drooping, denotes grief and despair…" She sounds nearly Stanislavskian

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[24] "Complete Training for the Stage or Motion Pictures," *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, July 1912, 145. Compare advertisement in April 1912 under the name F.C. Taylor's Theatrical Enterprises, booking agent for vaudeville and Taylor's Moving Picture School for Operators.
[25] Taylor's was dissolved by the New York State Attorney General for failing to pay franchise taxes. New York (State) Department of Law, *Annual Report of the Attorney General*, 1916, 103.
[26] Chris O'Rourke, "'On the First Rung of the Ladder of Fame': Would-Be Cinema Stars in Silent-Era Britain," *Film History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 97, https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.26.3.84.
[27] O'Rourke, 100.

when clarifying her take on finding motivations for signifying gestures: "These are merely

principles for expressions which have no depth of sincerity unless impelled by intense feeling."[28]

To engage with such feelings through empathy, Agnew recommends that the novice actor

imagine scenarios and enact the role that corresponds best to their type before a mirror: "The

story is to be told by the expressions of the face and the attitudes of the body."[29] While she lists

madness among the emotions and sentiments to study, she does not specify how someone who is

mentally stable might "get in sympathy" with a subject who is in psychiatric distress, or has lost

the ability to distinguish what is in their mind from what is occurring around them. The emphasis

on physical type and observing outward expression in the mirror contradict a method for

expressing mania with sincerity.

Agnew recommends critical observation of actors onscreen as a second form of

photoplayer education, a method carried to an extreme in Jean Bernique's 1916 *Motion Picture*

Acting for Professionals and Amateurs, which features 499 stills from current films, identifying

the emotions. Bernique advises consulting the film synopses to better appreciate the images,

suggesting that: "A careful study of the pictured expressions of these screen stars will, with

diligent practice before a mirror, furnish the beginner in filmland an excellent ground work. Do

not pass over these hastily."[30] She explains that a film actor may be asked to assume an

expression on the spot by a director, so should study a broad range as preparation lest it lead to

disappointment: "He is pleased, or incited to blankety-blanks according to the manner in which

the emotions are simulated."[31] Daily mirror exercises are likewise recommended by British

authors in two 1921 booklets: Dangerfield and Howard*'s How to Become a Film Artiste: The Art*

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[28] Agnew, *Motion Picture Acting*, 40.
[29] Agnew, 41.
[30] Jean Bernique, *Motion Picture Acting for Professionals and Amateurs*, 24.
[31] Jean Bernique, 24.

of Photoplay Acting[32] and, in *Practical Hints on Acting for the Cinema*, Agnes Platt advises

covering the lower part of the face with a handkerchief so that the actor might practice eye

expressions before the glass, and even strengthen the muscles of the eyelids.[33]

In 1916, Hügo Munsterberg proselytized: "To picture emotions must be the central aim of

the photoplay."[34] This idea is echoed in the acting instruction booklets and articles that emerged

contemporaneously with Munsterberg's *The Photoplay*, and the acting texts also shared his belief

in unity. Jean Bernique argues that films must not be "abruptly interfered with by superfluous

stunts, idealistic beauties, stage stars and elaborate settings. The story must be told by consistent

action and subtle expression of simulated emotions."[35] Sam Schlappich dismisses the "'ranting,'

which is more burlesque than physical expression, and should always be avoided, as it is always

avoidable."[36] Harking back to Siddons' advice against disgusting imitations of madness a

century before her, Agnes Platt writes, "remember that anything exaggerated is likely to defeat

its purpose, and take the jump from the sublime to the ridiculous. Cultivate discretion in this as

in everything else."[37] How much of this anti-ridiculous or anti-burlesque position was influenced

by systemic racism or classism? While expressions of mental distress do find their way into early

screen acting literature in the menu of emotions to practice, the emphasis on making feelings

visible-yet-decorous served to perpetuate very old beliefs in what madness *looks like* without

addressing methods for how an actor might ethically or truthfully enact such distress.

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[32] Fred Dangerfield and Norman Howard, *How to Become a Film Artiste: The Art of Photo-Play Acting* (London : Odhams Press, 1921), 44, http://archive.org/details/howtobecomefilma00dang.

[33] Agnes Platt, *Practical Hints on Acting for the Cinema /* (London :, 1921), 39, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112000828183.

[34] Münsterberg, *The Photoplay; a Psychological Study*, 112. It must be noted that this psychological study does not address methods of performing or representing madness on screen.

[35] Jean Bernique, *Motion Picture Acting for Professionals and Amateurs*, 20.

[36] Schlappich, "Expressing Emotions on the Screen," 47.

[37] Platt, *Practical Hints on Acting for the Cinema /*, 40–41.