Jenny Oyallon-Koloski
Transcript for "American Delsartism, gestural meaning, and crafting physical performance in early Biograph films"

Introduction:

Hello everyone; bonjour tout le monde. My name is Jenny Oyallon-Koloski, and in this presentation I'll be discussing American Delsartism, gestural meaning, and the crafting of physical performance in early Biograph films, specifically in the work of actor Florence Lawrence. Today, we may primarily associate Delsartism with a clichéd gestural vocabulary akin to pantomime, but François Delsarte's prescriptive system for movement expression had a broad, powerful influence on physical culture in the late 19th and early 20th century. Delsartism also shaped many early cinema performances, as Roberta Pearson, Lea Jacobs, Ben Brewster, David Mayer, and Carrie Preston have noted.

I intend to further investigate the effect American Delsartism had on performances in early cinema. Specifically, I want to see if an understanding of Delsartism's effect on American culture and the film industry can help us study actor Florence Lawrence's performance craft and understand what it was that made her films so enticing to contemporary audiences. So I'll start by providing some background on the pilot project that drives this research. I'll then take us through American Delsartism's core principles and its connection to cinema in the early 1900s. Finally, I'll dig into Lawrence's physicality in the films she made for Biograph in 1908 and 1909 to give us a closer look at how she moves and communicates emotional meaning on screen. With this approach, I hope to offer material insight into her training and a deeper understanding of her acting craft.

Project background:

My focus on Florence Lawrence's movement aesthetic results in part thanks to cinematic availability; the films I'll be discussing today all come from the Library of Congress' Paper Print Collection, which I have access to through the Media Ecology Project, or MEP. MEP is a digital platform co-run by Mark Williams and John Bell at Dartmouth College. In conjunction with tools from MediaThread (shown here), scholars can access and annotate a wide range of film and media objects, including many films that are digitized from the Library of Congress' Paper Print Collection. This presentation expands on an ongoing collaborative research project based on these films. Thanks to a new grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, this data will eventually be accessible through a Scalar-driven website, with the addition of more sophisticated frame-based mark-up options from a new Semantic Annotation Tool.

Broadly speaking, this MEP pilot projects seeks to better understand the craft of actors like Florence Lawrence, Mary Pickford, and others with the help of digital tools and collaborative scholarship. Existing collaborative analysis on this website comes from staging annotation guidelines that I have created, guided by my movement analysis training in Laban/Bartenieff Movement Studies. You can see some examples of this here. The analytical data provides one layer of information about how Florence Lawrence and other actors of the period move through cinematic space, laying the groundwork for a computerized, automated process to gather similar data about other performers. This initial layer of data comes from human labor, however: my own, as well as that of Mark Williams at Dartmouth, Eliza Uffreduzzi at The University of Rome, Danae Kleida at Utrecht University, and a number of Mark's students: Brittany Murphy, Nora Plant, Long Do, Anna Glasgow, and Ileana Sung. I'm acknowledging their work here because this is invaluable data, and very labor intensive to generate.

Florence Lawrence is also not a random choice of actor for this project. She is considered by some to be the first American film star, and audiences came to know her as the Biograph Girl before film actors were given named credit in films. Something about her roles and performances caught the public's attention. So why where they so enamored of her?

My analysis today looks at the films Lawrence made while working for Biograph, all directed by D. W. Griffith and filmed between the summers of 1908 and 1909. This is an ideal period to study film style in which figure movement drives narrative comprehension, as the films I've analyzed do not feature any editing within scenes, something that Lea Jacobs and Ben Brewster suggest becomes more dominant in 1913. As they note, "not only did editing *permit* the actor to do 'less' in terms of posing and gesture, but the pace of a highly edited film *required* it" (109). I've also looked at comedic and dramatic performances from Lawrence's corpus to get a fuller sense of her expressive range and to compare her physicality across genres. I'm particularly interested in her role as Mrs. Emma Jones in the Jones series of comedies, and as Maggie Hennefeld argues, "[women's performances in slapstick comedies of this period] represent historiographic blind spots in an otherwise hyper-visible film corpus" (24).

This presentation delves into the more expressive side of Lawrence's movement aesthetic. The existing annotations in MediaThread tell us about the range and expansiveness of Lawrence and others' physicality and provides a treasure trove of information about how these films were staged and blocked. However, they only begin to hint at how Lawrence used her acting craft to communicate the film's stories. Considering American Delsartism can help us with this.

American Delsartism:

Finding historical evidence of the Delsarte movement system in film is a slippery business. Frenchman François Delsarte began his work in the mid-eighteen hundreds from the discipline of oratory, but thanks to him and his students, the work expanded quickly into the domains of theater, dance, music, and general health and wellbeing; a training in Delsartism offered lessons in expression for either, as Nancy Ruyter writes, an "improvement of everyday life" or for "professional work in the arts" (xiii). Delsartism's popularity had died out by World War II,

however (Preston 11), so our ability to reconstruct its movement patterns and theories are possible based primarily on a few manuals published by Delsartean teachers around the turn of the century. For the purposes of this presentation, I want to draw attention to a few aspects of the American iterations of Delsartism, drawing from Nancy Ruyter's history of this practice.

Really, I should say practic*es*. As Ruyter and others emphasize, American Delsartism splintered rapidly based on the approaches of different teachers. Delsarte's name quickly became an umbrella term for physical practices offering lessons in "expression," both for training in professional trades of theater and dance and recreationally as a form of exercise that would promote cultural knowledge, health, and beauty. These approaches in the US were predominantly pitched at white, middle and upper-class women. As such, while Delsartism trained the whole body, its more codified American forms of expression tended to emphasize the upper body through gesture and drew attention away from the lower half of the body, especially the legs, which were often hidden under floor-length skirts (Ruyter 122). The gestural emphasis of Delsartean movement, therefore, was closely tied to American perceptions of moral decency.

The foundations of American Delsartism come to us from Steele Mackaye, who studied directly with Delsarte in France. Our knowledge of the Delsarte-Mackaye system persists thanks to Mackaye's student Genevieve Stebbins, who published extensively on the subject. American Delsartism teaches, in Ruyter's words, "expression of both character and emotion in each minute part of the face and body as well as an approach to training the 'agents' of expression: the voice, gesture, and speech" (75). These agents, per Delsartism, do not carry equal emotional weight; as Ruyter explains, "without effective gesture, vocal quality and language would count for nothing, could not carry meaning on their own" (79).

Given this work's emphasis on nonverbal communication, it's not surprising that we can observe traces of Delsartism in silent cinema. Delsarte's name was in common parlance in the early 1900s, as this trade press magazine search in Project Arclight demonstrates. Roberta Pearson sees aspects of Delsartean aesthetics in Biograph films, though she unfortunately does not include frame stills that demonstrate which precise moments she is referring to. We do know that Griffith had his Biograph actors study the movement patterns in the mid nineteen-teens with choreographer Ted Shawn (Mayer 187, Preston 87). No written historical evidence exists to prove that Florence Lawrence studied Delsartism, and she departed from Biograph several years before Griffith made it a part of his actors' training. However, there was a proliferation of Delsarte schools in Canada and the American East Coast around the turn of the century, in New York City especially. It would be more surprising to discover that she had no exposure to Delsartism while working in film and theater, given its saturation of physical culture during this period.

I should emphasize that I am not myself a trained Delsartean. My interpretation of this material comes from histories and primary documents from Genevieve Stebbins, Anna Morgan, and Florence Fowle Adams, and I am still untangling the various iterations of the system as it relates to actor training. That said, I want to draw attention to a few practical elements that have allowed me to search for glimmers of Delsarte in Lawrence's physicality.

First, Delsarte theory draws heavily on theological principles, specifically the Holy Trinity, dividing body parts and energies into threes. Opposition is also a key part of the movement system, as is an overall graceful attitude. As a result, asymmetry and off-center body shapes are common. We can see this in Morgan's illustration of the Delsartean natural poise, in which the weight is on the back foot. Rarely does there seem to be a focus on stability and centered postures, as Stebbins' "attitudes of an eyeball" drawings indicate. Here, too, we can see the level of specificity in which Delsarteans could train; each body part has a similar set of nine recommended shapes, each with its own expressive resonance.

Secondly, the codified meanings in American Delsartism come from gestures and poses, not from the sequencing of movements or the transitions between them. As Ruyter discusses at length, statue posing was a popular way of performing the Delsarte shapes. Therefore, actors would have needed to hold those gestures and poses long enough for comprehension. As these sketches from Morgan's Delsarte manual suggest, some of these poses indicate that Delsartian gestural semiotics were quite complex. As Carrie Preston argues, these complexities paired with the lack of complete primary documentation makes it difficult to fully comprehend the meanings of each Delsartian pose today (60). To my knowledge, no existing documents provide a full, illustrated "lexicon" of these gestures. This also reinforces that, despite Delsarte's claims of universality for his system, cultural context is essential in parsing the more implicit meanings of gesture and figure movement.

Lawrence's performance aesthetic:

Despite these constraints, we can still glean bits of Delsartism from Lawrence's Biograph films. This was my method for tracing Lawrence's performance aesthetic:

First, I looked for evidence of the Delsartean poses sketched in Adam's and Morgan's manuals and the off-balance, graceful impulses of the movement system. Secondly, using Adobe Premiere Pro, I compiled examples of similar emotional reactions from a range of Lawrence's films, specifically considering both comedies and dramas. My logic was that Delsartism offers a rigid codification of gestural meaning, so if Lawrence was consistently drawing on those principles, she would convey the same emotion in a repetitive manner. Here I worked on instinct, organizing the clearest emotional moments into categories like "shock and horror," "despair," "grief," "love-derived joy," "jealous anger," and so on. Finally, I asked my research assistant, Sarah Mininsohn, to write up her impressions of the emotional highpoints of a selection of films. This allowed me to see if we were interpreting similar emotions and meanings from Lawrence's movement, which we predominantly were.

Overall, there is little evidence of Lawrence consistently adopting the natural or "harmonic" poise proposed by the Delsarte system. More often, she balances her weight evenly on both feet while standing in place. We can see some exceptions to this in films like *Romeo and Juliet*, shown here, where she adopts more Delsartean postures in her graceful oppositional movements. The spiraling postures also share similarities with Morgan's sketches related to feelings of love.

Lawrence’s emotional performances also mostly do not align with existing examples of the Delsartean lexicon. Here is Adam’s sketch for grief (also equated with deep thought); we can compare this to Lawrence’s physicality in moments of grief and broader moments of despair. Lawrence’s acting choices for moments of grief are often similar, ending with her falling to floor with her head lowered into her arm. The posture deviates from this Delsartean example, however, which portrays grief with the head raised and the hand lowered. Remorse and shame are more likely to have the head held in the elbow or forearm, as Lawrence does.

Here are her moments of jealous anger. These examples have greater variation in her physical form, but ultimately all lead to the same general action: her bouncing in anger before hitting the object of her jealousy (here, John Cumpson as Mr. Jones). The rapidity and largely ungraceful nature of Lawrence’s movements are particularly un-Delsartean. The similarities in Mrs. Jones’ fits of violence against her husband here are also clearly an intentional choice, serving as an expected comical convention of the “Joneses” series.

In contrast, we can observe a number of moments in Lawrence’s films where she adopts more of the graceful, off-balance, oppositional qualities associated with Delsartism. The shape of her curved wrist in several of these moments stands out to me, particularly in relation to sketches of Delsartean poses in primary documents, like this one from Morgan. Notably, these examples come from both Lawrence’s comedic and dramatic roles. However, I also find these moments to convey less obvious emotional expression. They are more complex, graceful movements than some of the previous examples we have seen, but also more opaque to me. My research assistant Sarah posited this posture as a proud, “I won’t take this nonsense” moment, which I think nicely reflects the pose’s intricacy. Also, despite Lawrence’s complaint in her memoir “Growing up with the Movies” about D.W. Griffith’s desire for quicker pacing, these moments show that she *was* often able to include more leisurely paced, suspended poses at key emotional highpoints.

To conclude, we can see Lawrence moving through a range of expressive registers in these examples, which speaks to the versatility of her acting craft. That she repeats movements to express similar emotions is not surprising, given that she was often acting in two releases a week while at Biograph (Brown 27) and given that genres are predicated on formulaic repeatability. Lawrence demonstrates a nimble skillfulness in her ability to meld Delsartean gracefulness with conventional gestures and a rougher slapstick physicality, based on the varied needs of these early Biograph plots.