

## The Theatrical Heritage

"Despite the stylized pantomimic gestures employed by Linda [Arvidson] and Arthur Johnson, . . . some small transcendence of types and situations was achieved."<sup>[1]</sup> Richard Schickel, the author of one of the more recent additions to the rapidly growing Griffith bibliography, thus assesses Griffith's first film, *The Adventures of Dollie*. Schickel might find *Dollie* laudable in all other respects, but to him the acting is on an equal—that is to say equally bad—footing with that of any other 1908 one-reeler. A few pages later, Schickel discusses the results of the Biograph Company's 1909-1910 sojourn in Los Angeles: "There was still, even in Griffith's films, plenty of posturing, exaggeration, excessive movement, . . . but in fact he was managing to tone this down and sometimes . . . to almost totally eliminate it."<sup>[2]</sup> Schickel seems to see the transformation in acting style as a simple, linear progression from the bad "posturing, exaggeration, excessive movement" to the good "deliberation and repose" that was being praised in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the past, many writers on the early silent film committed similar errors of historical solipsism, devaluing not just the acting but also other signifying practices, such as editing. The films and signifying practices of the pre-Hollywood era were often depicted as necessary but faltering steps along the yellow brick road to the Emerald City of the classical Hollywood cinema. More recently, an intensive reevaluation of the pre-Hollywood period has done much to correct this teleological perspective.<sup>[4]</sup> Instead of dismissing the early silent films as primitive or preliminary, scholars now appreciate that their signifying practices constitute the road not taken and strive to understand the ideological determinants of their abandonment.

---

— 19 —



*The Adventures of Dollie*: "Stylized pantomimic gestures."

Yet surprisingly, even a scholar who has contributed a great deal to the reevaluation of the early silent cinema takes a somewhat teleological perspective on silent-film performance style. Janet Staiger, in "The Eyes are Really the Focus: Photoplay Acting and Film Form and Style," draws on evidence from the film-trade press and theatrical history to discuss performance style between 1908 and 1913, producing a creditable essay. In the first paragraph, however, Staiger contrasts the "graceful, intense, restrained and illusionistic" style of the "great actresses of the teens" with the "older film acting style of broad gestures, grotesque facial grimaces and contorted body movements."<sup>[5]</sup> Though Staiger never explicitly denounces the old style, the opposition between "graceful" and "intense," on the one hand,

and "grotesque" and "contorted," on the other, unavoidably valorizes the new style. This valorization, inadvertent though it may be, blurs the possible ideological implications of shifts in performance style.

Recourse to intertextuality can help deal with the problem of a teleological perspective insensitive to the aesthetic standards of a bygone age. As the paradigms of auteurism and psychoanalysis, previously so influential in cinema studies, have given way during the past few years to new paradigms derived from British cultural studies and reader response/reception theory, the primacy of the text has simultaneously given way to a concern with intertextual and contextual matters. Film scholars increasingly supplement textual analysis with knowledge of how a particular text both relates to other texts and functions in the larger culture. Indeed, many theorists, including Tony Bennett and Janet Woolcott in *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, argue that the text by itself has no independent existence, is "an inconceivable object":

The case of Bond throws into high relief the radical insufficiency of those forms of cultural analysis which, in purporting to study texts 'in themselves', do radical vi-

---

— 20 —

olence to the real nature of the social existence and functioning of texts in pretending that 'the text itself' can be granted an existence, as a hypostatized entity, separated out from the always variable systems of inter-textual relations which supply the real conditions of its signifying functioning.<sup>[6]</sup>

A text, then, can only exist within and because of an intertextual framework. Intertextuality should not be conceived in the narrow art-historical sense of direct influence. Rather, intertextuality refers to those texts, both "traditional" ones such as books, paintings, and plays, and less tangible ones such as broadly diffused cultural conceptions, which form a framework for the reception of a particular text. As Jonathan Culler observes:

Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture. The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived.<sup>[7]</sup>

Because intertextuality conditions both production and reception, one cannot describe and account for the transformation of acting style in the Griffith Biographs without reference to the intertextual frames within which these films may have been produced and received. What was the shared frame of reference between producers and audiences, derived from culturally prevalent conceptions of "correct" performance style, that conditioned the production and reception of acting in the Griffith Biographs?<sup>[8]</sup> I shall refer to this shared intertextual framework as a code, by which, if you will, the producers encoded their messages and the audience decoded them.<sup>[9]</sup>

Intertextuality, then, can help to temper a teleological perspective. But how might we deal with the problem of value-laden terminology, which I raised in the previous chapter, and avoid the use of such terms as "melodramatic," "realistic," and "naturalistic"? Rejecting these

terms, and following Humpty Dumpty's advice that Alice become the master of her words, I shall invent my own terms for the old and new performance styles.

Between 1908 and 1913 the intertextual frame about performance style shared by the Biograph producers and their audience gradually shifted. In 1908 the producers and audience derived the frame of reference primarily from their knowledge of theatrical conventions, which were by that time associated with the melodrama. Performance style was "histrionically" coded. By 1913 the shared intertextual frame derived primarily from knowledge of culturally specific notions about the mimesis of everyday life. Performance was "verisimilarly" coded. I shall henceforth refer to the old style as the *histrionic code* and the new style as the *verisimilar code*.

## The Histrionic Code

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *histrionic* as "theatrical in character or style, stagey." The histrionic code is, in a sense, reflexive, referring always to the theatrical event rather than to the outside world. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, most English and American actors in most theatres performed in a self-consciously theatrical fashion, ostentatiously playing a role rather than pretending to be another person. Disdaining to mask technique in the modern fashion, actors proudly displayed their skills, always striving to create a particular effect. Performers, audiences, and critics all knew that a theatrical presentation was an artificial construct meant to bear little resemblance to any off-stage reality. Audiences and critics condemned as inadequate those who did not demonstrably act: the pleasure derived not from participating in an illusion but from witnessing a virtuoso performance.

The actors remained always aware of the spectators, "playing to the gallery." The stars stood at center stage, facing front, as close to the footlights as possible. At their climactic speeches, they would "make points," striding across the stage in deliberate fashion to call for applause. The audience entered into the spirit of the occasion, applauding more frequently than is the current custom, and even encoring favorite speeches. At times the audience would demand the reenactment of entire scenes, displaying a particular fondness for the repetition of heartrending, pitiful deaths.

The actors moved in stylized fashion, selecting their gestures from a conventional, standardized repertoire passed on not only through an "oral" tradition and stock-company training but through descriptions and illustrations in acting manuals and handbooks.<sup>[10]</sup> As early as the eighteenth century, "various attempts had been made to select and classify the gestures that were appropriate for use on the stage."<sup>[11]</sup> These manuals instructed actors on the facial expressions and arrangement of limbs and head necessary to portray a vast gamut of emotions. For example:

Rage or Anger expresses itself with rapidity, interruption, rant, harshness and trepidation. The neck is stretched out, the head forward, often nodding and shaking in a menacing manner against the object of the passion . . . the feet often stamping; the right arm frequently thrown out menacingly, with the clenched fist shaken, and a general and violent agitation of the whole body.<sup>[12]</sup>

Just as many schools of acting flourished throughout the century, the instruction manuals proliferated. We may question how accurately the manuals reflect actual theatrical practice, because many of them were directed at either would-be thespians or amateurs. Nonetheless, the manuals provide the best available data about the histrionic code, recording gesture and movement in much more detail than do contemporary reviews or memoirs. My explication

---

— 22 —

of the histrionic code depends mainly on instruction manuals and other books propounding the Delsarte system, one of the most popular and influential of the various schools of acting.

François Delsarte was a Frenchman who headed a theatrical academy in Paris and died shortly after the Franco-Prussian War. Founding his system upon the observation of human behavior, he assumed that posture mirrors emotions, a different posture corresponding to every shade of feeling. Delsarte devised exercises that taught his students to reproduce these postures, making a connection between "real life" and the stage, which the histrionic code denied. As one of his American disciples, Geneviève Stebbins, put it, "The actor's art is to express in well known symbols what an individual man may be supposed to feel. . . . But unless the actor follows nature sufficiently close to select symbols recognized as natural, he fails to touch us."<sup>[13]</sup> But Stebbins goes on to warn against a thoughtless and slavish reproduction of everyday behavior: "Strict fidelity to nature is nonsense. Art must always idealize nature, and when it fails to do this, it fails in its proper expression."<sup>[14]</sup>

Why equate Delsartism with the histrionic code? Delsartism thrived at the end of the nineteenth century, by which time histrionically coded performance had all but vanished from most stages. Moreover, Delsarte and some of his more faithful disciples professed to follow nature, a practice that was anathema to many of those championing histrionically coded performance. Delsarte, it would seem, desired to challenge the hegemony of the histrionic code, but the wholesale acceptance of Delsartism perverted its founder's intentions. His system, in its debased form, became emblematic of histrionically coded performances. His followers forgot about following "nature sufficiently close" in their enthusiastic determination to "idealize nature."

The Delsarte system enjoyed an American vogue, largely due to the proselytizing of Steele MacKaye, one of the important actor managers of the late nineteenth century, who also lectured widely and established the first dramatic school in New York City. Delsarte's enthusiastic American proponents applied the master's precepts to everything from dance to oratory, in the process rendering the system mechanical and artificial, a mere cookbook of theatrical emotion. They jettisoned theory, observation, and any notion of following nature, devising "correct" poses for each emotion and state of mind. Delsarte instruction books illustrating these poses resemble others of the period, and many of the pictures would today strike even the nonspecialist as immediately familiar. As any five-year-old child familiar with Saturday-morning cartoons could tell you, the right hand raised to the forehead, left arm extended backward, means "mine woes afflict this spirit sore."<sup>[15]</sup>

Delsartism's vast popularity and the great wealth of available information make it the obvious primary source for evidence about the histrionic code. One can also argue that the Delsarte postures reflect actual practice. After reading the manuals and examining the pictures, one discovers striking simi-

larities among Delsarte postures, descriptions of melodramatic acting, and performances in the early Biographs. By the end of the nineteenth century, melodrama's appeal had waned and it was presented mainly at the cheaper or "popular"-priced theatres, such as those clustered along New York's Bowery. On these stages the histrionic code, banished from the boards of the higher-priced theatres, still flourished. And when the popular-priced theatres and the melodrama faltered circa 1907–1908, histrionically coded performances survived, though now in the nickelodeon rather than the cheap theatre.

If one were so inclined, it would be possible to present numerous instances, complete with frame enlargements and plate reproductions, of poses found in both Delsarte manuals and the early Biographs. Two factors invalidate this tactic. First, though strong similarities existed, one must not overstate the case: Biograph performance style, as will be seen, did not exactly duplicate either Delsartism or any other school. Second, the interesting parallels between Biograph and Delsarte style lie not in specific poses but in the overall principles of histrionically coded acting shared by the two.

Rather than present massive amounts of data sans interpretation, offering a fruitless plethora of examples, I shall instead seek to explicate these common underlying principles through reference to the semiotics of gesture and language. A linguistic model, while generally applicable to neither cinema nor gesture, does further our understanding of certain highly structured forms of gestural communication. The highly structured histrionic code shares several characteristics with natural language, a fact that greatly facilitates verbal description both of the workings of the code and of individual gestures.

### **Limited Lexicon**

A gesture is not a word or a syllable but a whole phrase which cannot be further broken down. There seem to be no gestural equivalents to what linguists call phonemes and morphemes. Umberto Eco labels this phenomenon a "super sign," defining it as a sign "whose content is not a content-unit but an entire proposition; this phenomenon does not occur in verbal language but it does in many other semiotic systems."<sup>[16]</sup>

The resemblance of gestures to phrases or even whole sentences rather than words normally precludes a gestural dictionary, since there are an infinite number of possible gestures. This distinguishes both cinema and gesture from natural language systems. As Metz says of cinema, "One of the great differences between this language system [cinema] and natural language is due to the fact that, within the former, the diverse minimal signifying units . . . do not have a stable and universal signified. In a natural language each morpheme (moneme) has a fixed signified."<sup>[17]</sup>

Though the Delsarte system encompasses a multitude of possible postures/emotions, it does not encompass an infinity of possibilities and hence may be

said to have a limited lexicon. Each emotion/state of mind must be represented by a particular, precise arrangement of the torso, limbs, and head. In actual practice, it is unlikely that any two actors could have faultlessly reproduced one another's exact poses, so that an infinity of possible poses did, in this sense, exist. But this is akin to individual pronunciation of a standard vocabulary, which some semioticians have referred to as an idiolect.<sup>[18]</sup> The Delsarte system did theoretically sanction a platonically ideal pose for each emotion. In a lecture delivered in the early 1870s Steele MacKaye stated, "The actor who is a follower of Delsarte is taught to express an emotion according to the laws of the emotion—the use of the appropriate and most powerful physical presentation of the impassioned thought."<sup>[19]</sup>

Though MacKaye's interpretation of Delsarte was more subtle and complex than that of the next generation of "Delsartians," this statement could be seen to countenance the publication of gestural lexicons giving students the "Delsarte" vocabulary.<sup>[20]</sup> The vocabulary, however, consisted not of words but of phrases. Eco's concept of the "super sign" corresponds to the way the "Delsartians" themselves thought of gesture: "But one gesture is needed for the expression of an entire thought, since it is not the word but the thought that the gesture must announce."<sup>[21]</sup>

Although it is not my intention to become the Dr. Johnson of the Biographs, a few entries from the Biograph gestural dictionary may help to illustrate the concept of the limited lexicon:

*"resolution or conviction"*: fist clenched in air, brought down sharply to side of body.

*"despair, shame"*: hands covering face or head buried in arms.

*"fear"*: arm extended, palm out toward fearful object, other hand perhaps clutching throat.

*"Help me, Lord"*: arms fully extended above head, sometimes hands clasped.

*"feminine distress"*: hand to cheek or hands on both sides of face.

*"Honey, you and I are going to have a great future together"*: gesture performed by a man, when he and his lady have finally transcended all obstacles to togetherness, in which one hand is raised as in the fascist salute, palm down and fingers spread, and waved slowly from side to side.

## **Analogical Versus Digital Communication**

Digital communications, such as formal language systems, involve "discrete, discontinuous elements and gaps."<sup>[22]</sup> Barthes claims that this discontin-

uous character has in the past been considered necessary for signification to occur at all.<sup>[23]</sup> Gesture is, however, an analog communication, involving "continuous quantities with no significant gaps."<sup>[24]</sup> This continuous flow of signifiers, along with the lack of a minimal unit, makes it extremely difficult for the analyst to segment gestural signification. Indeed, Patrice Pavis asserts that the analyst should not even attempt segmentation: "We define gesture as

that which cannot be limited or isolated, as that which cannot be isolated from the flow of communication without damage resulting."<sup>[25]</sup>

Because gesture cannot be segmented, the one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified of verbal communication does not exist. A. J. Greimas states that the semiosis of the gesture will consist "in the relation between a sequence of gestural figures, taken as the signifier, and the gestural project, considered as the signified."<sup>[26]</sup> The recipient understands this gestural project only by translating it into another sign system, that of verbal language.<sup>[27]</sup> Barthes points out that this sort of translation is common in the case of analogical systems. "These systems are almost always duplicated by articulated speech . . . which endows them with the discontinuous aspect which they do not have."<sup>[28]</sup>

Though most gestural communication systems are unsegmented and analogic, the histrionic code, with its emphasis on the isolation of gesture, does resemble segmented, digital communications such as speech.<sup>[29]</sup> Actors deliberately struck attitudes, holding each gesture and abstracting it from the flow of motion until the audience had "read it." An author of one of the Delsarte instruction manuals advises: "But one gesture is needed to express an entire thought. Consequently, the gesture must be held until the impression which caused it melts away, and gives place to another impression."<sup>[30]</sup> One need only look at the early Biographs to observe the holding of gestures, but a 1907 *Atlantic Monthly* article confirms that this attitude-striking was also integral to melodramatic acting. The writer describes the heroine's gestures as she declares her innocence: "For gesture, one hand may be slightly extended and upraised, the other pressed timidly upon the breast; and at the close of the word [*innocent* ] the eyes should fall, the head drop forward with sweet submission. This position may be maintained for several seconds. Then the gallery will clap."<sup>[31]</sup>

Not only were aspiring actors told to "rest long enough in a gesture,"<sup>[32]</sup> they were urged to avoid excessive movement, which might detract from attitude-striking. Dion Boucicault, one of the premiere names in theatrical melodrama, warned against superfluous gesture: "Let the gesture be exactly such as pertains to what you say . . . and no more. Do not use *gesticules*—little gestures—that is fidgety."<sup>[33]</sup> The elimination of the small gestures brings about the physical equivalent of silence between the grand, posed gestures, resulting in the "discrete, discontinuous elements and gaps" of digital communication.

## Opposition

Another hallmark of natural language not shared by most gestural communication is opposition.<sup>[34]</sup> Indeed, Ferdinand de Saussure often insisted that language is nothing but a diacritical system of differences, that the meaning of a language system derives solely from paradigmatic oppositions. The presence or absence of phonemes in morphemes or of morphemes in sentences can entirely change the meaning of a word or sentence. Natural language exhibits a perfect binary opposition: the distinction between *cat* and *pat*, for example, stems solely from the opposition between *c* and *p*.

Opposition in histrionically coded acting is more a matter of degree. Actors had to decide: (1) the length of time of the gesture; (2) the stress and speed of the gesture; and (3) the direction of the gesture, each of which involves not two but a whole range of choices.

1. *Length of time.* Though actors might be told to "rest upon a gesture," the histrionic code did not demand that each gesture be held for precisely the same number of seconds. Instead, actors varied the time of gestures for dramatic effect. Both the emotional intensity of a particular scene and the scene's place within the narrative determined the time that a particular pose might be held. At the climax of each act, always an emotional high point, melodramatic casts often froze in place, forming a motionless tableau that might last for several seconds before the curtain fell.

2. *Stress and speed.* The weight and speed of gestures also constituted significant oppositions. Generally, slow, languid movements connoted resigned despair, pensiveness, calm content, quiet love, and similar states of mind. Fast, forceful movements connoted anger, fear, unbearable misery, grief, and other more active, and often negative, emotions. *The Actor's Art*, from 1882 (not a Delsarte book) tells us "a calm thought will prompt a quiet action. The arm will move slowly without abruptness." However, should "the sentiment be strong, the thought will prompt the arm to rise rapidly."<sup>[35]</sup> Once again, actors suited the stress and speed of the gesture to the progress of the narrative: early Biographs often begin with slow, languid gestures, climax with fast forceful gestures, and resolve with slow, languid gestures.

3. *Movement.* The final significant opposition concerns the direction of movement with regard to the actors' bodies: toward the feet or the head, toward or away from the body, parallel or perpendicular to the body. Move-

ments directed upward may indicate acceptance, pleading, or an appeal to heaven, while movements downward indicate conviction, resolution, or the act of rejection. Boucicault was quite insistent on these distinctions: "Why in the attitude of appeal do you put your hands up *so*? You cannot appeal *that* way [with the palms downward]. Why in depreciation do you put your hands downward? You cannot do it *that* way [the palms upward]."<sup>[36]</sup> Movements close to the body may indicate pleading, acceptance or shame, whereas movements away indicate rejection, fear, repulsion. Generally, the closer the movements to the center of the body, the calmer the emotion, while stronger emotions result in movements upward, downward, or outward. The greater the extension of the arm in these directions the more intense the emotion. The author of *The Actor's Art* states, "So long as in their movement the hands do not rise above the waist, they express sentiments of a quiet nature, . . . but so soon as the hands are raised above the waist, and therefore reach the chest . . . their expression assumes much greater force, more intensity."<sup>[37]</sup>

To summarize, the histrionic code is always marked by a resemblance to digital communication and a limited lexicon, but performers had to choose the time, stress and speed, and direction of their gestures. And since the performance of gesture could vary, an actor could use various combinations of oppositions to suit the movements to the nature and intensity of the character's state of mind. By looking at the quality of the gestures in the early Biographs we can conceive of a range of options between what I shall term the checked and unchecked histrionic codes, the latter more closely resembling conventional, stereotyped notions of melodramatic acting. In the unchecked histrionic code, gestures are quickly performed, heavily stressed, and fully extended, the arms being held upward, downward, or outward from the body. Often these gestures are repeated, either immediately or a little later



in a series. Slower, less stressed, and less extended gestures, the arms remaining closer to the body, characterize the checked histrionic code.

## The Verisimilar Code

By the penultimate decade of the last century, those connected with the theatre realized that the old style of histrionically coded performance had given way to a new style, to verisimilarly coded performance. "The stage may be said to have undergone . . . a revolution."<sup>[38]</sup> Or, as Gus the Theatre Cat put it more eloquently, "The theatre's certainly not what it was."<sup>[39]</sup>

The concept of mimesis goes back to Aristotle and *The Poetics*, while the terms "verisimilar" and "vraisemblance" appear frequently in structuralist literary theory. My use of *verisimilar* derives specifically from the work of Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov says that "we speak of the work's verisimilitude

---

— 28 —

insofar as the work tries to convince us it conforms to reality and not its own laws. In other words, verisimilitude is the mask which is assumed by the laws of the text and which we are meant to take for a relation with reality."<sup>[40]</sup> Verisimilitude should not be equated with reality; it refers, rather, to a particular culture's coded expectations about the artistic representation of reality. Reality in this sense is a cultural construct, a matter of commonly held opinion rather than that which is presumed to have some objective existence outside the text: "verisimilitude is never anything more than the result of opinion; it is entirely dependent on opinion, public opinion."<sup>[41]</sup>

Verisimilitude, predicated as it is upon intertextuality rather than personal experience, frees the historian from having to make claims about some extratextual historical "reality." As Fredric Jameson tells us, "history is *not* a text" but "is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, . . . it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization."<sup>[42]</sup> There is no need to replicate Erving Goffman's work in a 1913 context in a futile attempt to determine how closely the Biograph actors' gestures approximated the gestures of their "real life" counterparts. Instead we can try to discover, through reference to other texts, the 1913 audience's coded expectations about the representation of everyday behavior. That the coded expectations may have had little relation to the way people actually behaved matters not at all: "For a particular society . . . the work that is realistic is that which repeats the received form of 'Reality.' It is a question of reiterating the society's system of intelligibility."<sup>[43]</sup>

Let me illustrate the point anecdotally. During a film studies conference in New Orleans, a group of my colleagues and I took an after-dinner stroll along the banks of the Mississippi. Inspired by the setting, we began to storyboard a murder for the first scene of a projected film noir, *The Third Beignet*. We agreed that the principals would be followed to the riverbank in a long tracking shot. We agreed that the murder itself would be presented in quick-cut montage. But we disagreed over the background music. Two street musicians competed for our attention: a cornet player along the riverbank rendered a mournful version of "All of Me," and a bagpiper in Jackson Square played whatever bagpipers play. I argued that we should use the bagpipe for its sheer unconventionality. With the piping clearly audible to all, one of my colleagues countered, "There are no bagpipes in New Orleans." And he was right. As far as