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Screen decorum: Silent Hollywood and neoclassical concepts of acting

Doron Galili

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Abstract

This article revisits the debates around the notion of ‘classical Hollywood cinema’ in order to call attention to how various traits of neoclassical aesthetics characterised discourses on film acting in American cinema of the silent era. Drawing on a host of film acting manuals, how-to guidebooks, magazine advice columns, and interviews with actors from the 1910s and 1920s, the article demonstrates that besides film’s indebtedness to melodrama, pantomime, and other contemporary theatrical practices, variants of neoclassical aesthetic ideas came to play an important role in informing how silent-era Hollywood reflected on ideal forms of screen acting. By placing the early discussions on silent film acting in the context of the American renewed interest in the classics during the early twentieth century, the article makes a case for the importance of classical ideas in Hollywood cinema, alongside – and indeed often in conflict with – the prominent demand for realism.

Keywords: film acting, theater, neoclassicism, classical cinema performance

Very few concepts in cinema studies have drawn as intense and long-lasting debates as David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson’s formulation of the Classical Hollywood Cinema.[1] These debates have prominently revolved around historiographical questions of style and spectatorship and, more specifically, around the approaches to narrative and editing techniques.[2] In this article, I revisit the debates about the notion of classical cinema in order to call attention to its implications on studies of the history of film acting – a subject that has thus far remained in the margins of these debates. My focus here is on ideas about film acting that emerged in Hollywood cinema of the silent era, a period that saw the formulation of the principal traits of the so-called classical style.

As I shall demonstrate, whereas film historiography still lacks a robust conception of what classicism is in film performance, discourses on acting style during the silent era in America continuously alluded, implicitly or explicitly, to classical (or rather, given the period, neoclassical) aesthetic ideas. My exploration of these discourses on acting draws

upon a corpus of film-acting guidebooks and manuals that circulated widely among film fans and aspiring performers in the 1910s and 1920s. These publications partook in the popularisation of certain conceptions of the craft that the emergent Hollywood film industry had allegedly privileged at the time. This inquiry into discourses on acting, in turn, opens new perspectives on how the classical and the modern functioned in conjunction in shaping and communicating fundamental notions about Hollywood's aesthetics.

The classical cinema debates and film acting

The nature of the correlation between classical aesthetics and classical Hollywood cinema is complex and indirect, and not only in the eyes of the critics of the concept. For Bordwell & Staiger & Thompson, the notion of the classical relies primarily on the scholarly tradition of German art history and is associated, most succinctly, with aesthetic qualities of 'elegance, unity, [and] rule-governed craftsmanship'.^[3] As they acknowledge, 'We are not used to calling products of American mass culture classical in any sense.' Yet they find the term (previously used in French film criticism) appropriate for describing the dominant style of American filmmaking 'since the principles which Hollywood claims as its own rely on notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver's response – canons which critics in any medium usually call classical'.^[4]

The particular phrasing here is important: Bordwell & Staiger & Thompson do not claim that American film producers saw in the art of antiquity an aesthetic ideal to emulate in films, and they note that Hollywood's style is also indebted to 'nonclassical' sources such as romantic music or nineteenth-century melodrama. Yet, the authors explicitly point at formal principles typical of neoclassical aesthetics as fundamental to how Hollywood came to identify *its own* style. On a number of later occasions, Bordwell stressed that the idea of classical cinema did not intend to affiliate Hollywood's dominant style with neoclassicism. Indeed, Bordwell evokes neoclassical criteria only with respect to a few particular and nuanced arguments, namely with respect to the unities of space, time, and action that typify scene construction in Hollywood films.^[5] He noted that it is in fact unclear what classicism would mean in the context of film studies and, further, that for him the classical was a 'shorthand description' carrying 'no deep commitment to a worldview or an aesthetic' and it could just as well be called 'standard', 'mainstream', or simply 'X' style.^[6]

Nevertheless, over the past decades critics of the concept have put more weight on the aesthetic associations that the term 'classical' evokes, often defining the very notion of the classical (and the neoclassical) in disparate ways. Thus, several scholars who have emphasised American films' indebtedness to key formal and narrative principles of the melodrama pointed at how this aesthetic mode arguably opposes the core traits of the classical. Rick Altman, for example, considers the idea of the classical to be largely modelled after the work of neoclassical French literary theorists of the seventeenth century. This conception, in Altman's view, does not leave room to account for the melodramatic traits that are embedded in mainstream American cinema (namely spectacle, episodic presentation, or the narrative dependence on coincidence).^[7] Pushing this observation further, Linda Williams has challenged the very notion of classical cinema by arguing that the norms of melodrama are often mistaken for classical

and that it is melodrama that actually forms the dominant mode of Hollywood cinema. Wary of 'the French seventeenth-century baggage of the neoclassical' that the notion of classical Hollywood cinema carries, Williams argues that although the term classical designates a mature or ripe aesthetics, it is in fact an anachronism since the melodramatic mode came into being after the period that saw the dominance of the neoclassical theatre.[8]

From another perspective, rooted in studies of modernism, Miriam Hansen has claimed that the designation of the classical is fundamentally ahistorical since it risks occluding the fact that Hollywood filmmaking has been perceived as an emblematic form of modernity. For Hansen, 'asserting the priority of stylistic principles modelled on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neoclassicism' put an emphasis on 'tradition and continuity rather than newness as difference, disruption, and change'.[9] Instead of a reliance on classicism, Hansen proposes seeing Hollywood cinema as a 'vernacular modernism', a popular aesthetic form of engaging with phenomena of modernisation. In so doing, Hansen highlights precisely the discontinuities between Hollywood cinema and the aesthetic traditions of classicism.

By and large, studies of film acting have overlooked these debates about Hollywood cinema's relationship to the classical. Evocations of classical aesthetic concepts are more common in studies of performance in European films of the 1910s, namely with respect to the tableau tradition and to the legacy of pictorialism in the cinema – that is, precisely the film styles that were soon eclipsed by Hollywood's rise to dominance.[10] Likewise, whereas many important studies have been written on acting in what we came to call classical Hollywood, they have typically not paid particular critical attention to the aesthetic associations with classicism and modernism.[11] It is easy to speculate why these aspects remained in the margins of studies of American silent film acting: unlike various popular styles of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century stage performances (from the melodrama, vaudeville, and pantomime to Shakespearean theatre and the realistic drama) there are no direct continuities between practices of eighteenth century European neoclassical theatre and the cinema. Nevertheless, an examination of historical writings on acting from the late 1910s and 1920s reveal that classical aesthetic ideals played a significant role in shaping ideas about the goals and desired characteristics of acting in Hollywood cinema.

To be sure, by arguing for the influence of classical ideals on Hollywood I do not mean to suggest that acting in American silent films took after neoclassical theatrical practices. In and of themselves, performance styles in European neoclassical theatre are not easy to characterise, given their various formulations in different national settings and historical moments. In addition, theatrical practices varied between different performers, directors, institutions, and genres, and were not uncommonly combined with influences from other aesthetic traditions. Generally, however, theatre historians describe the neoclassical stage as dominated by conventionalised gestures modelled after existing vocabularies, often inspired by classical sculptures and paintings. Actors in the neoclassical theatre typically stood in the front of the stage, facing the audience with a slight angle, striking poses with an emphasis not on individuation of character or imitation of real-life behavior but on depicting ideal types with clarity and precision. They delivered their text in an oratorical fashion and in precise metric rhythm, and their

gestures were carefully controlled and orchestrated as part of the overall tableau of the stage.[12]

Consider, for example, one of most informative documents on acting in neoclassical theatre, Goethe's 'Rules for Actors' from 1803, which spells out in a long list of 91 clauses the German director's expectations from his performers in Weimar Court Theatre. Goethe wished the actors always to remain conscious of the fact they were being watched by an audience and carry their bodies with elegance, avoiding coarse gestures they would use in everyday life. He demanded the actors to always keep an erect body, keep their elbows close to the torso, have their upper arm move less than the lower arm, move their limbs gradually and not at once, never hold their hand before their faces and, in order to maintain proper posture, keep the two middle fingers together and the others slightly curved.[13] This is most certainly worlds apart from the style we see in Hollywood movies. In what way, then, can we consider neoclassical influences on screen acting?

In the broadest sense, neoclassicism is defined as aesthetics that look back at ancient culture as an authority on proper form and beauty. Neoclassicism has always been a relatively loose category that could be applied in different ways to a range of art forms from architecture and music to dramatic writing and painting. As Robert Rosenblum's canonical study has shown, neoclassical artworks always involve adapting tropes from antiquity to meet their time's cultural concerns, sometimes in contradictory manners.[14] It is possible, in this light, to conceive of modern screen acting methods that adapt classical principles in a markedly different fashion than the acting styles of eighteenth-century theatre. Therefore, for the purpose of my exploration of neoclassical aesthetic influences on conceptions of silent film acting, I shall trace references to antiquity and to certain formal principles – namely the above-mentioned qualities of elegance, unity, decorum, proportion, and harmony, as well as the rejection of the vulgar, exaggerated, and imbalanced – in critical and instructional discourses about film acting. In addition, I seek to demonstrate how the principal classical notion of the idealisation of nature has been central in the formation of ideas about screen acting.[15] Contrary to common notions of verisimilitude, the idealisation of nature sees only the finest forms and morals to be worthy of imitating. In this Aristotelian fashion, the role of art is not to imitate life but to present nature and humanity 'as they ought to be', with nobility and dignity. The adaptation of this quintessential neoclassical conception of mimesis to silent film acting styles is of particular interest, since it is commonly held that performances in Hollywood cinema rather developed towards greater realism. However, before turning to historical writings on acting in Hollywood cinema, some historical contextualisation of modern performance styles and adaptations of classical aesthetic principles is in order.

Classical aesthetics in turn-of-the-century American culture

While I fully agree with the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* that we are not used to thinking of American mass culture in terms of classical aesthetics, this was not necessarily the situation during the decades leading to the rise of Hollywood. As Mary Simonson has shown, 'Invocations of ancient Greece, like Salome dancers, were ubiquitous in early twentieth-century American culture and performance.[16] During that period, new versions and interpretations of classical works became visible far

beyond the circles of professional archaeology or the fine arts and played an important role in visual and theatrical cultures. Artists and audience members found renewed interest in an imagined ancient Greece that was manifested in performances inspired by classical dance and theatre, in Greek pageants held in American colleges, and in the Physical Culture movement, which often evoked ancient Greek imagery to visualise ideals of human form.[17] Performances of tableaux vivant (or 'living pictures'), wherein silent immobile actors posed imitations of pictures from famous artistic and theatrical work, were likewise popular in the United States. From the 1830s to the early twentieth century, repertoires of tableaux vivant were included in variety shows and burlesques. In sharp contrast to these popular settings, Tableaux vivant were often modelled after ancient statues and the iconography of neoclassicism.[18] In all these contexts, as Simonson argues, the renewed fascination with antiquity offered a form of escaping or imagining alternatives to urban modernity. In particular, the allusions to classical iconography and drama provided the early twentieth-century American culture with a model for natural, graceful, and healthy corporeality that exists in harmony with nature.

The American reception of François Delsarte's famed performance theory was particularly instrumental in introducing classical ideals to contemporary acting practices. Delsarte developed his system for codifying expressive gestures starting in the 1830s, drawing principally on observations of nature. By the end of the century, his theory profoundly impacted professional and amateur actors in Europe and North America, mostly through popular acting manuals that consisted of illustrations of poses in conjunction with the specific emotions they aimed to signify.[19] According to Carry Preston, Delsartism (the term that became associated with the various movements that he and his disciples inspired) was 'the first international performance theory of modernism', as it influenced modernist dancers and choreographers, reformers, and filmmakers.[20] However, Delsarte's version of modernism did not involve a wholesale rejection of traditional ideas but rather integrated classical aesthetics into the nineteenth-century scientific-based method of codified gestures. This way, Delsartism mediated between the traditions of classical poses and modernist performance styles. The influence of classicisms was all the more prominent in versions of Delsartism that gained popularity in the United States, even if their performers and instructors often had little understanding of classical aesthetics. Notably, for Genevieve Stebbins, whose writings and teachings played an important role in popularising Delsartism in America, Greek sculptures modelled the highest degree of what is beautiful and true in human nature.[21] In her book *Delsarte System of Dramatic Expression* (which is heavily illustrated with images of ancient statues) Stebbins claimed that 'strict fidelity to nature is nonsense', insisting on the neoclassicist view according to which 'art must always idealize nature, and when it fails to do this, it fails in its proper expression'.[22]

The presence of classical aesthetics in American popular culture in the early twentieth century eventually impacted approaches to film performances in a variety of ways, primarily as American actors with stage training started pursuing careers in the cinema.[23] In this respect, the ideas about classicism that have gained popularity on the stage may be considered among the numerous theatrical influences that informed silent film performance styles.[24] Simultaneously, the emerging film culture that surrounded Hollywood also participated in the fascination with neoclassical-inspired definitions of beautiful and ideal bodies. As Michael Williams has observed, Hollywood publicity and fan magazines of the silent era frequently appropriated classical imagery and portrayed

film stars as a modern variant of the idols of Greco-Roman antiquity. By associating the movies and their stars with universal, unchanging mythological ideals, in the silent era classicism became 'an instrumental device in the film industry's strategy of self-representation, and hoped-for cultural elevation'.[25] In turn, I argue that Hollywood's self-conscious attempts at connecting itself with neoclassical ideas also found expression in early discourses on screen acting methods.

Classical advice for modern aspiring stars

During the silent era, no professional schools offered formal training in film acting in the United States. With the exception of a short-lived enterprise by Paramount, studios did not operate training programs for actors, nor did they regularly employ acting coaches.[26] Likewise, it was only after the coming of sound that theatrical acting methods – namely with the influence of Stanislavski – came to dominate American filmmaking. In this context, one effective source for coming to terms with historical ideas on film acting may be found in the considerably large body of film acting manuals and guidebooks that appeared in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s and coincide with the emergence of institutions of film stardom and fandom.[27] Largely catering for young female 'screen hopefuls' who were seeking success in the movie industry, the film acting guidebooks did not address practitioners, and indeed were often not written by practitioners or experts. I therefore share Chris O'Rourke's view that these popular instructional acting guides are 'problematic as accurate depictions of historical film acting practice'.[28] But at the same time, although the ideas expressed in these books do not always represent approaches to acting that actually guided the work of Hollywood practitioners, the silent-era guidebooks are still useful in indicating what ideas about acting circulated among the public, the industry, and the critics. Alongside other film-industry paratexts, the film acting guidebooks articulated for the first time – even if in a popular format – the goals and qualities of good, effective, or beautiful screen performance. In other words, if Hollywood 'claimed as its own' a set of aesthetic principles, the popular texts on screen acting was one of the discursive settings in which it did so.

The various acting manuals and guidebooks of the 1910s and 1920s emphasised divergent aspects of performance and concerned a range of different acting methods. Yet across the majority of them we find frequent mentions of aesthetic principles inspired by classical ideals. The earliest American film acting guidebook I am aware of, the 1913 *Motion Picture Acting* by Frances Agnew, advised aspiring actors to attend physical culture classes or seek training in gymnastics, dance, or fencing in order to acquire the 'grace and refinement of movement which are characteristic of the finished artist'.[29] Similarly, a 1916 acting guidebook noted that 'To expression and gesture belongs the grace of movement, magnificence of bearing and carriage, simplicity and gentleness of youth...'[30] A sixty-lesson home-course in film acting issued in 1918 by the Film Information Bureau of Jackson, Michigan displayed a particularly remarkable commitment to Aristotelian principles when it dedicated lesson number two to the 'dramatic unities of place, time, and action'. Defining action most broadly as what the actors do and how they act, the manual emphasised

SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

There must always be these unities, although around a studio you would rarely hear them referred to. But in your own mind, these Unities must be clear... Bear in mind that these Dramatic Unities must always *harmonize*. [31]

The early literature on film acting is rich with such references, as is also the case with film criticism of the 1910s, which often praise qualities of simplicity and harmony in performance. After the mid-1910s, American filmmakers developed new approaches to acting, which emphasised the effective communication of emotions to the audience and the creation of lifelike impressions. In so doing, they turned to inspiration from the realist stage, where the portrayal of character was understood to involve a projection of an individual personality rather than a display of principal conventional gestures. [32] Yet even during that period, the above-mentioned classically-inspired principles continued to inform, at least in part, how instructional acting texts defined the key for proper film acting. Time and again authors stressed the need for grace, balance, and harmony in movement, as well as the importance of poise and conscious control over the body. An article about film action and the expression of emotion, published by *Motion Picture Story Magazine* in 1916, makes such an argument by pointing at the 'exquisite expression' seen in the works of 'the masters of sculpture in ages past'. The article specifically refers to the Roman statue *The Dying Gaul* as well as the famous *Laocoon*, which it deems 'far superior to anything in this lone being done in this day and age'. [33] As the article concludes, unless filmmakers master the means of effective emotional expression, cinema will fail to have a long life as an art form.

Frequent evocations of neoclassical sensitivities in popular instructional texts on acting indicate the extent to which these ideas had become commonplace by the 1920s. A particularly interesting example is the discussion of poise in *The Manual of the Cinema Schools Incorporated*, a short book published by a fraudulent acting school that operated in Hollywood under the direction of John E. Ince, brother of producer Thomas Ince, until its owners were put on trial for grand theft. In the manual, poise (in the sense of both mental and physical balance and self-control) is presented as one of the keys to good acting skills. When explaining what a perfection of poise is, the manual describes a statue of Roman goddess Diana tiptoeing on a globe, before it concludes its discussion of the subject by quoting 'the ancient Greek advice: "nothing in excess"'. [34]

The booklet *Lessons in Motion Picture Acting* by Frank R. Hader is unique among acting books from the 1920s in emulating the format of theatrical manuals and listing individual instructions for registering specific emotions. In line with neoclassical theatrical practices, Hader gives aspiring actors general instructions, *a priori* of any particular scene or situation to perform, and stresses that gestures

should be natural, wide, sweeping movements of the hand and arms from the shoulders. They should not be stingy little wrist or elbow movements. [35]

Some of the instructions he provides are virtually identical to those described in canonical eighteenth-century theatrical manuals that were influenced by neoclassical ideas. For example, Hader's instructions for registering astonishment call for 'raising the eyebrows, opening the eyelids wide, staring with the eyes, and opening the mouth wide ... so that the lips hide the teeth' – which results in a description strikingly similar to the illustration of astonishment in Charles Le Brun's influential *Methode pour apprendre a dessiner les passions* (Method for Learning to Delineate the Passions) from

1702.[36] Remarkably, in his description of the expression of grief, Hader's practical instruction for how to register the emotion (by moving the eyebrows inward towards the nose; drawing up the cheeks, half-closing the eyes, and wrinkling the forehead) are followed with a second set of recommendations that anticipate Stanislavski's diametrically opposed method of evoking emotional memories.

Try to remember how the face and eyes felt at some unhappy event in your life when you actually shed tears of real Sorrow and Grief. Think also of the unhappy event.[37]

Here, in the most explicit fashion, classical and modern acting methods are not opposites, but considered in alternation.

Many of the authors of 1920s texts on screen acting describe methods that aim at increasing a sense of realistic or natural performance, though not without a continuous care for qualities of grace, harmony, and decorum. For instance, Mae Marsh's 1921 book *Screen Acting* foregrounds the importance of appearing natural on camera, of overcoming self-consciousness, and of the emotional identification with the portrayed character. Describing her work process, Marsh echoes ideas familiar from naturalist theatrical methods. She claims that when receiving the screenplay of a new film, she reads it 'with an eye alert for business ... tricks, mannerisms, and the apparent unexpected or involuntary moves that help to sustain action'.[38] At the same time, however, in her view verisimilitude is not the be all and end all of good acting, as she also stresses the importance of poise and self-control in performing gestures. Warning her readers not to make exaggerated gestures and expressions on camera, she narrates an experience of performing alongside an actress who excessively rolled her eyes and dropped her jaw to register terror and astonishment. 'I cannot begin to describe the effect upon me of those horrible eyes and open mouth.' Marsh writes, 'At the end of six reels I felt like screaming.'[39]

Such conflicts between instructions that on the one hand aim at a realistic performance and on the other insist on the adherence to certain traditional formal requirements shed light on what we may see as Hollywood's version of idealised nature. This is not to say that authors of screen acting guides explicitly engage in an idealist philosophical discourse. But being mindful of neoclassical approaches to acting allows us to identify the extent to which many of the acting instructors believed that the aspiration to appear natural must be limited for the sake of beauty.

This tendency is exemplified well in Inez Wallace's instructions in the publication that accompanied her lecture course on screen acting. Wallace's text reads simultaneously as a guide for naturalist performance and as a reworking of neoclassical aesthetic concerns in the context of cinema. Wallace instructs the readers to 'live the part', to imagine themselves in the situations depicted in the film and forget themselves in order to purely express the emotions of the character.[40] 'Don't step out of your part for an instant – get into the spirit of your part and maintain it', writes Wallace.

The appearance of natural movement and expression is a prime essential. Maybe the appearance of naturalness may be studied in advance, but on screen your actions must be spontaneous and perfectly natural.[41]

SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

Nevertheless, Wallace also contends that 'harmony in detail, time and action' is crucial for the transmission of the erased effect to the viewers.

Photodramatic action must be sharply drawn – it mustn't be overdrawn – yet every detail must be correct. Every detail of costume, make up and action must be in perfect harmony all the time you are before the camera. There can be no let down for a single moment.[42]

In the section 'How to Portray Emotions Properly' Wallace likewise contends, 'every gesture should possess natural grace and perfection [and] be accompanied by the proper facial expression'. She acknowledges that these instructions might contradict the goal to act natural, noting that 'often in real life we are overwhelmed with grief or sympathy... the sudden realization of some unexpected happiness leaves us dumb', but goes on to caution that 'on screen such portrayals would be fatal ... in motion picture acting, each motion [and] facial expression must be synchronous with the dramatic action of the episode'.[43]

Other guidebooks also express such dualities, stressing on the one hand the imperative to appear natural and on the other the need to keep one's appearance in line with traditional conceptions of beauty. As a result, the instructions undermine the efforts towards verisimilitude and encourage modifications that assure a more classical kind of gesturing. In this vein, Inez and Helen Klumph's *Screen Acting: Its Requirements and Awards* instructs its readers to include small pauses between the different actions they perform. The authors include a quote they attribute to Lillian Gish, saying

the space between actions may be hardly noticeable, but it allows for a brief interval in which the audience gets the significance of that movement; in which it sees the action, and the thought of what it is and what it means travels to the mind. Action that is not properly spaced is merely confusing.[44]

Here, performance on camera does not aim at mimicking a natural behavior, but at the most elegant and clear way to display action.

The same book offers another interesting observation with respect to the expectation to maintain a strict decorum. As is the case with other acting books from the 1920s, it stresses several times the importance of grace, poise, and control in developing acting skills, noting that 'grace of body is a thing that you must cultivate if you are to work in pictures'. However, the authors add, 'Not that you will always be called on to be graceful in pictures; just as the face must assume expressions which are not beautiful, so must the body'.[45] As an example of a role that does not allow for a graceful performance, they mention John Barrymore's depiction of the monstrous Edward Hyde in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920). The reference to the celebrated dual-role is particularly valuable, as it provides a concrete example of what the authors considered to be a display of proper grace and poise, and what they considered as its opposite. When Barrymore plays Hyde, he stretches his lips wide, arches his eyebrows to extenuate the eyes, holds his hands in front of his body with the fingers spread, and his elbows point outwards as he moves; he curves his back so he is hunched down, and his walk is jittery, without a steady pace. The transformation back to the Dr. Jekyll figure draws attention to how in contrast Barrymore carries his body in this more conventional (and arguably more common) role, which Klumph associates with grace. As Jekyll, Barrymore assumes a stiffer posture; his body is erect and chin slightly elevated; his movement is more

measured, and unless holding or touching something, his arms remain close to the sides of his body. Even in the more intense dramatic scenes, he performs more restrained gestures. Overall, it is not necessarily a more natural posture, but certainly a more controlled and restrained one.

Tradition, excess, and Hollywood's aesthetic ambitions

What, then, are we to make of the frequent explicit references to neoclassical aesthetics in the discourse on film acting in silent era Hollywood? Given that since the late 1910s American filmmakers embraced more naturalist approaches to acting, and given the significant influence of melodrama on Hollywood cinema, the classical associations appear to be out of place, like an aesthetic relic from a bygone era which never really overlapped with film history. In the remaining section of this article, I consider a number of possible explanations for the remarkable persistence of classical tropes in discourses on Hollywood acting during the silent era.

First – and, admittedly, most obviously – we may understand early Hollywood's ongoing interest in neoclassical form to be partaking in the industry's efforts to portray itself as a locus of respectable artistic production. Hollywood, famously, aspired for a reputation of a film culture that is not only safe for women and children but is also active in educating the masses and conforming to the desired middle-class behaviors and norms. In this case, the neoclassical references in the discussion on film acting may be seen as something of a placeholder, an easily identifiable and irrefutable signifier of art that associates the emerging industry with aesthetic traditions. Therefore, while the silent-era instructional texts on film acting insisted on the specificity of the new medium's requirements from performers and emphasised the dissimilarities between stage and screen practices, their ultimate goal was not to conceive of a novel aesthetics of performance. Rather, they aimed at affiliating the cinema with the values of antiquity's fine arts – or, more precisely, with a particularly modern constructed notion of antiquity as a site of aesthetic value.

Clearly, the film magazines and acting guidebooks were neither the first nor the only texts to associate the cinema with neoclassical aesthetics as a rhetorical device. Long before the concept of 'classical Hollywood cinema' emerged, some of the earliest American texts in film theory pointed at parallels between alleged timeless and universal qualities of the classics and cinema's aesthetic prospects. Vachel Lindsay's canonical *Art of the Moving Picture* calls for bringing 'Doric restraint' to films as a way of introducing a 'noble challenge to the overstrained emotion, the overloaded splendor, [and] the mere repetition' that the theorist found in the cinema of the 1910s.[46] Neoclassical ideas played an even more central role in Victor Freeburg's theories of cinematic visual composition. As Freeburg maintains in his 1918 pioneering book *The Art of Photoplay Making*, 'any photoplay director who looks upon himself as an artist rather than a drill master ... must learn to compose his fluent forms, must learn to apply the principles of unity, emphasis, balance, and rhythm'.[47] In particular, as Kaveh Askari has shown, Freeburg 'welcomes the tableau in cinema because it is part of a tradition that routes neo-classicism through modern media practices'.[48] The very first page in Freeburg's book contains a photograph of the *Venus of Milo*. The classical sculpture does more than hint at the book's aesthetic ambitions, as it also plays a part in Freeburg's efforts to demonstrate that the traditional methods of compositional analysis

SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

are applicable to the study of motion pictures. In this respect, the discourse of the silent-era instructional texts on film acting may be read as something of a popular version of the earliest film theories, sharing the theorists' motivation to validate the artistic merit of cinema by associating it with classical aesthetics.

However, beyond partaking in the self-conscious attempt at affiliating Hollywood cinema with the respectable arts, the neoclassical allusions in the early writings on film acting may be seen as making an historical argument for a trajectory of stylistic improvement of American cinema. In such cases, the fact that classicism came to signify a mature, ripe, and stable artistic practice was used by Hollywood commentators to distinguish films of the late 1910s and 1920s from the early years of cinema – and thereby show that the medium had been following a path of linear progress. In 1915, Louella Parsons wrote in her newspaper column that 'The quiet, well-poised actress is in demand.' She thus advised her readers to 'be careful in registering emotions not to overdo [and] get in harmony with your part' because, as she claims, 'The days of arms and feet throwing are past.' [49] The same year, a *Picture Player Weekly* article titled 'Technique of Camera acting' sketched a more sophisticated historical trajectory, positing contemporary film in line with the classics and in distinction from the common styles of early cinema. Pantomime, the article proclaimed, is an old art form that was at the time being rediscovered due to the popularity of motion pictures. 'The ancients excelled in this art', it argued, adding

There is much to learn, however, something new and vital is forthcoming every day, and much improvement can be noticed. Five years ago, motion-picture acting was an exaggeration; to-day it is an art, a most dignified and impressive art.[50]

The book *Screen Acting* similarly provides a brief comparison between old and new acting styles:

It is not necessary to travel back very far along the road which the motion picture industry has traveled, to reach the days when exaggerated pantomime was what was meant by acting in pictures... when an actor wanted to tell someone that he was going away, he would point to himself, then to the door, then back to himself again. He made faces, gesticulated profusely, left nothing to the intelligence of the audience.[51]

The Klumphs specifically credit William S. Hart for being among the first to 'prove that screen acting should be natural, and not a series of exaggerated movements', thereby equating naturalness with restrained emotions as well as with a mature, refined style due to which 'screen acting has become an art in itself'. [52] Here, too, the qualities of poise, harmony, restraint, and fidelity to nature are noted as markers of a perfected aesthetics worthy of its place among the arts, and are simultaneously contrasted with a stereotypical (and historically incorrect) depiction of an exaggerated and unchecked melodramatic acting style. [53] This conception, as noted above, may be seen as an anachronism, since the era of neoclassicism predated the rise of melodrama. Yet evidently this anachronism has been ingrained in debates on cinema from as early as the 1910s.

Finally, I would argue that the evocation of aesthetic principles of simplicity, harmony, balance, and restraint also played an important role in the debates about whether the movie camera, as a technological apparatus, may be regarded as a proper tool for artistic

creation. The challenges of playing in front of the apparatus quickly became one of the major issues that commentators on silent film acting needed to address. In turn, early writings on screen acting often emphasised the aesthetic principles that are identified with classical approaches when they sought to make medium-specific arguments about the distinctions between playing on the stage and playing in film. In particular, early film acting guidebooks repeatedly described the movie camera as an all-seeing technological observer, whose cold gaze permanently registers anything that is played in front of it and is more sensitive than the eye of a human audience. Likewise, they argued that the powerful electric lights in the filming set further emphasise every little gesture and, in particular, that the close-up shot functions like a powerful magnifying glass. Under these conditions, screen acting was described as more demanding than traditional stage acting, since the technological reproduction itself allows for no room for mistakes and calls for a particular subtlety and graceful expressions and gestures.

Commentators on acting have made such claims already in the mid-1910s. Actor Edwin Arden is quoted in a 1915 interview for *Motion Picture World* saying that not only did the public come to expect more subtle acting in the cinema, but also that such a style was more appropriate for the medium. 'Violence of movement which results in jerky, disjointed reproduction on the screen is not always inartistic,' he noted, 'it is offensive.' [54] According to Arden, if the motion picture actor is not performing in a natural fashion, if he is over-violent, over-active, or over-drawing his facial expression, 'the screen makes of him a grotesque caricature, because the camera eye catches not the modifying effects of color, or make-up, or of voice which, blended, would modify the same if perpetrated on the speaking stage before the human eye'. [55] The following year, actor James Morrison similarly observed that although both stage and screen acting are fundamentally about revealing character and expressing ideas by physical gestures and expressions, the technical conditions of film production (and, we may also assume, the non-standardised speed of projection during most of the silent era) require a different acting method. Film actors have to be economical and careful in their gestures, according to Morrison, since quick actions result in a blur when reproduced by the camera and even slightly exaggerated expressions appear as grimaces on the big screen. Actors should thus avoid quick, spontaneous gestures 'for, tho [sic] they may be natural in life, on the screen they seem jerky, like the actions of puppets'. [56] Similar views also found expression in the early film acting guides. Mary Pickford's (or more likely her ghostwriter's) contribution to the collection *Practical Course in Cinema Acting* discusses the importance of synchronising the actors' actions with the emotions they seek to express. In order to achieve this synchronisation Pickford urges her readers to eliminate unnecessary detail and 'dwell on the simple rather than the elaborate', reminding that 'the camera records every action, however small, just as it occurs'. [57]

None of the above-quoted commentators and actors explicitly speaks of classical form. Importantly, however, they all interlink the technical specificities of the motion picture camera with the need for restraint, control, and proportion in film performance. Furthermore, their respective claims are uniformly consistent with classical aesthetic values as they admit that there are life-like gestures and expressions that are simply unsuited for the camera. Put differently, for Arden, Morrison, and Pickford the classical imperatives of beauty, harmony, and decorum in acting style override the goals of realism and verisimilitude due to the medium-specific requirements of the cinematic apparatus. In recent debates in film historiography, it is precisely the juxtaposition of

SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

the classical (which stands for stability, idealised nature, and adherence to tradition) and the modern (epitomised by the technologically reproducible aesthetic of film) that lies in the heart of the question of how to characterise Hollywood's style. But as I have aimed at showing in this article, in the early discourses on film acting not only are the two not contradictory, but indeed inevitably intertwined. The classical formal principles are valid for the art of film acting not despite its mechanical mediation but because of it.

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SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

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Notes

- [1] Bordwell & Staiger & Thompson 1985.
- [2] For early and recent examples of books that concern the idea of Classical Hollywood Cinema, see Gaines 1992 and Gates & Spring 2021.
- [3] Bordwell & Staiger & Thompson 1985, p. 4.
- [4] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
- [5] Bordwell 1985, p. 158.
- [6] Bordwell 2010; Hagener 2016.
- [7] Altman 1992.
- [8] Williams 2012a and Williams 2002. It should be noted that according to the above-mentioned German art historical tradition, namely in the writings of Heinrich Wölfflin's (who, through his influence on Ernst Gombrich, is arguably an important source of inspiration for The Classical Hollywood Cinema), the classical is not tied to a particular historical period, but is a recurring, cyclical pattern. In this sense, Williams' critique mobilises here, too, a different understanding of the classical. See Bordwell 2015.
- [9] Hansen 1999, p. 64.

- [10] See Brewster & Jacobs 1997, Askari 2014, and Bordwell 2015. Another notable study that draws connections between classicism and screen performance, though in a different context of early sound films, is Johannes Riis' discussion of naturalist and classical acting in Scandinavian cinema. Riis identifies classical acting with idealised expression that was modelled after gestures and poses of eighteenth-century theatre, though he also finds it roughly corresponding to the histrionic conventions associated with earlier film style, prior to the era of classical Hollywood. See Riis 2004.
- [11] See for example Baron 1999 and Hollinger 2006, pp. 3-25; 47-68.
- [12] On neoclassical theatre acting, see Barnett 1987; Vince 1988; William 1985, pp. 27-50; and Brown 2007, pp. 183-221.
- [13] Woehl 1927. See also Carlson 1978.
- [14] Rosenblum 1967, pp. 3-4; 10.
- [15] Barnett 1987, pp. 139-145.
- [16] Simonson 2013, p. 48.
- [17] Horak 2018. The trend of invoking ancient Greece was by no means not unique to the United States, and was also prominent across Europe. See, for example, Dorf 2019.
- [18] See Chapman 1996 and Wiegand 2018.
- [19] On Delsarte and cinema see Naremore 1988, pp. 52-67; Pearson 1992, pp. 22-25; and Hart 2005, pp. 184-199.
- [20] Presto 2011, p. 58.
- [21] Ruyter 1996, p. 79.
- [22] Stebbins 1902, p. 429.
- [23] Naremore 1988, p. 53.
- [24] On the variety of theatrical traditions that had simultaneously impacted screen acting, see Mayer 1999.
- [25] Williams 2012b, p. 2.
- [26] Kaufman 1990, pp. 131-151.
- [27] On the early history of film acting training see Galili, forthcoming. See also Stamp 2004.
- [28] O'Rourke 2017, p. 44.
- [29] Agnew 1913, p. 34.
- [30] Kelly & Muro 1916, p. 18.
- [31] Anon 1918, no pagination, emphasis in the original.
- [32] On difference between classical and realist stage performances see Holtcamp 2019, pp. 33-35. For different accounts of the changes in film acting during the 1910s, see Pearson 1992 and Brewster & Jacobs 1997.
- [33] Schlappich 1916, pp. 47-48.
- [34] Ince 1928, pp. 36-37.
- [35] Hader 1924, p. 7.
- [36] Ibid., p. 16.
- [37] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
- [38] Marsh 1921, pp. 52-53.
- [39] Marsh 1921, p. 82.
- [40] Wallace 1922, p. 72.
- [41] Ibid., pp. 51, 55.

SCREEN DECORUM: SILENT HOLLYWOOD AND NEOCLASSICAL CONCEPTS OF ACTING

- [42] Ibid., p. 51.
- [43] Ibid., p. 70.
- [44] Klumph & Klumph 1923, p. 115.
- [45] Ibid., pp. 120-121.
- [46] Lindsay 1922, p. 240.
- [47] Freeburg 1918, p. 68.
- [48] Askari 2005, p. 160 (see also Askari's 2015 book *Making Movies into Art* which revises and expands on several aspects of the earlier study).
- [49] Parsons not dated.
- [50] Anon 1915b, p. 26.
- [51] Klumph & Klumph 1923, p. 100.
- [52] Ibid., pp. 103-104.
- [53] For a discussion on the misconception of exaggerated melodramatic acting, see Day-Mayer & Mayer 2018, pp. 99-114. Ironically, the gesture-driven acting styles that are criticised in the texts I discuss here include the sort of pantomimic physical language advocated by Delsarte. In this respect, the early Hollywood acting guidebooks draw on a rhetoric associated with Delsarte's system, while simultaneously disavowing it.
- [54] Anon 1915a, p. 2164.
- [55] Ibid.
- [56] Pollock 1916, p. 54.
- [57] Pickford et al 1919, p. 21.