**Delsarte, François (b. 11 November 1811, Solesmes, France; d. 20 July 1871, Paris, France)**

**Summary**

A performer and teacher of voice and movement, François Delsarte developed a theory of expression that influenced modern dance, actor-training, poetic recitation, silent film, and physical culture in the early twentieth century. His ideas and methods were brought to the United States in 1871 by his student, Steele Mackaye (1842-1894), and then adapted by performers, physical culturists, and reformers into a diverse set of movements known as Delsartism. Extremely popular from the 1880s through the 1920s, Delsartism promoted physical exercises and poetic recitation for health and personal development as well as professional performance. The movement travelled back to Europe to establish trajectories in many fields of modernist aesthetics and education, all emphasizing bodily expression, classical ideas of beauty, and a unique, improvable selfhood.

**Training**

François Delsarte studied music at the Paris Conservatory and performed with Opéra Comique from 1829 to 1834. He retired when his voice, which had been strained by poor training at the Conservatory, could no longer meet the demands of the stage. He began conducting research in morgues, playgrounds, hospitals, and museums for the patterns of movement and gesture that he believed would reveal human impulse and feeling. He based his theory of expression on these observations, anatomical studies, and religious ideas derived primarily from Catholicism and Swedenborgian correspondence.

Delsarte’s theory of expression was based on a series of trinities: He identified three human ‘states’ (mind, life, and soul), three ‘organic apparatuses’ (thinking, loving, and feeling), and three languages (speechas the language of mind, songfor love, and gestureas the expression of the soul). Delsarte divided the body into parts that could be positioned in excentric, normal, and concentric poses or attitudes. These central poses combined with lateral orientations give nine positions, each of which Delsarte associated with an emotion. He stated the link between pose and feeling in his law of correspondence: ‘To each spiritual function responds a function of the body. To each grand function of the body corresponds a spiritual act’.

Delsarte’s American enthusiasts produced charts connecting poses and emotions for each body part, from legs to eyes. [Fig. 1 ‘Attitudes of the Eyeball’] While detractors claimed the poses were oversimplified and formulaic, proponents quoted Delsarte’s law of correspondence to promise that the practice of bodily posing would improve one’s emotional state, spiritual life, and personality. Delsarteans interested in self-cultivation, like Henrietta Hovey (1849-1918), applied Delsarte’s ideas to fashion, home decorating, and dinner tables. Others, including Steele Mackaye, complained that such applications degraded Delsarte’s theories, which were designed for aesthetic expression. The two trajectories were never entirely distinct; Hovey, for instance, taught Delsarte’s ideas in fashionable salons and avant-garde dance studios.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Delsartism was tremendously influential during the rise of modernism, but has not, until the first decade of the twenty-first century, figured prominently in critical discussions. American Delsartism promoted literary recitation along with bodily posing and fostered a short-lived academic discipline called ‘Expression’. Teaching literary interpretation through preparation for performance, ‘Expression’ soon merged with the first university English departments, which continued to include recitation exercises well into the twentieth century.

Dance historians have long recognized Delsarte’s influence on the foundational figures in modern dance, especially Ted Shawn (1891-1972), a student of Hovey and author of a book about Delsarte. The Denishawn School he founded in Los Angeles with his partner Ruth St. Denis in 1915 used Delsartean methods to train many members of the first generation of American modern dancers as well as numerous silent film stars. Director D. W. Griffith, for example, asked his actors, including Dorothy Gish, Mary Alden, and Blanche Sweet, to take classes at Denishawn.

Lev Kuleshov (1899-1970) and other innovators in Russian film adapted Delsarte’s theories for their actor-training methods, and the divided, posed Delsartean body contributed to Kuleshov’s innovations in cinematic montage. Swiss composer and theorist, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), incorporated Delsarte’s ideas into his system of Eurhythmics, which encouraged music visualization through bodily movement. Bess Mensendieck (1864-1957) opened training centers in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Czechoslovakia after studying with another Mackaye student and influential American Delsartean, Genevieve Stebbins (1857-c.1915). These trajectories have varying relationships to Delsarte’s original theories, but given Delsartism’s influence on poetic recitation, dance, film, theatre, and music, we might consider it the first international performance theory of modernism.

**References and Further Reading**

Delaumosne, A. (1893) *Delsarte System of Oratory*, New York: Werner. (Delsarte never published his long-planned book, but Delaumosne prints his literary papers along with a discussion of Delsarte’s ideas about speech and elocution.)

Odom, S. (2004/2005) ‘Delsartean Traces in Dalcroze Eurhythmics’, *Essays on François Delsarte*, a special issue of *Mime Journal* 23, ed. N. L. Chalfa Ruyter: 137–152. (Odom traces Delsarte’s legacy in Dalcroze’s theories of eurhythmics.)

Preston, C. (2011) *Modernism’s Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance*, New York: Oxford University Press. (Preston examines Delsartism’s promotion of posing in modern dance, silent film, and poetic recitation as well as how these genres influenced modernist aesthetics and ideas of embodied selfhood.)

Shawn, T. (1954) *Every Little Movement*, New York: Dance Horizons. (Shawn describes his studies of Delsartism with Hovey and others and argues that Delsarte’s laws of gesture were the foundations of modern dance.)

Stebbins, G. (1885) *Delsarte System of Expression*, New York: Werner. (Accessible online as a digital resource, Stebbins’ description of Delsarte’s theories is the most comprehensive and influential of many American manuals. The book also prints Delsarte’s 1865 ‘Address before the Philotechnic Society of Paris’.)

Ruyter, N. (1999) *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism,* Westport, CT: Greenwood. (Ruyter’s foundational research describes Delsarte’s influence on dance and how followers in America linked his theories to progressive movements, including suffrage and dress reform. See also the special issue of *Mime Journal* 23, edited by Ruyter.)

Walker, J. (2005) *Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theatre*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (In an important corrective to studies of American modern drama, Walker argues that expressionist playwrights cynically appropriated the expressive culture movement derived from Delsartism.)

**Websites**

Williams, J. http://www.delsarteproject.com/ (Based in New York, Williams teaches master classes and seminars on the Delsarte System of Expression, derived primarily from his study of Genevieve Stebbins’ adaptations. His website offers historical information and promotes Delsarte’s relevance to contemporary performance.)

**Paratextual Material**

“Attitude of the Eyeball” in Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1954). Courtesy of the Princeton Book Company and the Library of Congress.

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