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| Delsarte, François (1811-1871) |
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| 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 for professional performance. The movement travelled back to Europe to establish trajectories in many fields of modernist aesthetics and education, all emphasising bodily expression, classical ideas of beauty and a unique, improvable selfhood. |
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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, songthe language of love and gestureas the expression of the soul). Delsarte divided the body into parts that could be positioned in eccentric, typical 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. 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.  Fig. 1 ‘Attitudes of the Eyeball’  Fig. 1 “Attitude of the Eyeball” in Ted Shawn, *Every Little Movement* (New York:  Dance Horizons, 1954). Copyright: the Princeton Book Company and the Library of Congress  [\*\*\* COPYRIGHT RELEASE IS REQUIRED BEFORE THIS IMAGE CAN BE USED.] 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 recognised 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 visualisation 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. |
| Further reading:  (Delaumosne)  (Odom)  (Preston)  (Shawn)  (Stebbins)  (Ruyter)  (Walker)  (Williams) |