

## TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA AND BODILY EXPRESSION: THE CROSS-CULTURAL FORMATION OF PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN THE SILENT FILM ERA (1905-1930)

**Dr. LIU PEI**

Sichuan Normal University

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### ABSTRACT

The silent film era from 1905 to 1930 marked a crucial phase in the evolution of film art from its nascent form to maturity. During this period, technological media, as the material foundation of film art, established a close interactive relationship with actors' bodily expressions. The photosensitive properties of film materials, the frame rate limitations of filming equipment, the development of editing techniques, and variations in projection conditions collectively shaped the unique mode of bodily performance in silent films. Meanwhile, with the increasing frequency of global film exchanges, there was extensive collision and integration of silent film performance aesthetics across diverse cultural contexts. This study focuses on this historical process by examining the mechanisms through which technological media shaped bodily expressions, analyzing differences in performance traditions across cultures, and exploring the generative logic of performance aesthetics in cross-cultural exchanges. It not only offers a fresh perspective for understanding the historical evolution of film performance art but also provides a historical reference for bodily expressions in contemporary cross-cultural film and television production.

**Keywords:** Silent Film Era; Technological Media; Bodily Expression; Performance Aesthetics; Cross-cultural Formation

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Research Background

In 1905, China's first independently produced film, *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, was released, marking the official commencement of silent film production in Asia. By that time, European and American cinema had already undergone over a decade of exploration and entered a phase of preliminary industrialization. Until the widespread adoption of sound films in the 1930s, silent films, as a global mass medium, achieved a qualitative leap from 'moving slides' to narrative art. From a technological perspective, the Lumière brothers' Cinématographe, invented in 1895, established the 35mm film standard; in 1908, the Edison Company successfully stabilized the filming frame rate at 16 frames per second; and in 1927, Technicolor technology began to be applied in silent film production. These technological breakthroughs continuously expanded the expressive scope of film art. From an industrial standpoint, the Hollywood studio system gradually took shape in the 1910s, driving the standardization of performance systems; in Europe, avant-garde film movements such as French Impressionism and German Expressionism emerged; in Asia, Shanghai, China, and Tokyo, Japan, became

regional film production hubs. Socio-culturally, the expansion of international air routes after World War I accelerated the cross-border circulation of film prints. In 1925, the Berlin premiere of the Soviet film *The Battleship Potemkin* triggered a global sensation; in 1927, Charlie Chaplin's films drew massive crowds when screened in Shanghai. These phenomena underscore the breadth and depth of silent films' cross-cultural dissemination.

### 1.2 Research Significance

Academically, this study transcends the binary opposition between 'technological determinism' and 'cultural essentialism' in traditional film history by analyzing the mutual constitution between technological media and bodily expression, offering a 'technology-culture' interdisciplinary perspective for performance aesthetics research. Additionally, by focusing on the relatively neglected period of 1905-1930, this study fills a gap in research on the evolution of non-Western silent film performance traditions within cross-cultural contexts. Practically, in the contemporary streaming era, film and television production faces challenges in bodily expression during cross-cultural communication. The cross-cultural generative patterns of performance aesthetics in the silent film era revealed by this study provide historical references for contemporary actors' physical training and performance design in cross-cultural co-productions.

### 1.3 Research Status at Home and Abroad

In the field of cross-cultural generation of performance aesthetics in the silent film era, from the perspective of the foundation of early film theory, Tom Gunning proposed the cinema of attractions theory in *The Cinema of Attractions*<sup>1</sup>, which subverted the traditional view of linear narrative. He pointed out that between 1895 and 1906, films constructed an aesthetic system centered on visual spectacles such as physical stunts and magic performances, drawing the audience's attention to the actors' bodily expressions. However, he inadequately explored the material impact of technological media and failed to thoroughly analyze how film characteristics and projection technologies altered the ways in which bodies were presented and perceived by the audience. André Bazin, in *What is a movie?*<sup>2</sup>, based on the 'photographic nature' theory, criticized montage for disrupting temporal and spatial continuity and advocated for deep-focus shots and long takes, believing they could preserve the depth of reality and allow the audience to interpret freely. Nevertheless, he overlooked the role of editing techniques in the silent film era, such as cross-cutting, which could enhance the rhythm and emotional tension of physical actions, and thus held a one-sided view of the positive role of technological media in the creation of performance aesthetics.

In terms of expanding non-Western perspectives, Leo Ou-fan Lee, in *Selected Works of Leo Ou-fan Lee*<sup>3</sup>, focused on the performance of Ruan Lingyu, a female star of Shanghai silent films, pioneering non-Western research. He discovered that Ruan Lingyu combined the Eastern aesthetic of 'subtlety' with Western realistic acting through her eye expressions and body language, forming a unique cross-cultural bodily grammar. However, his research lacked a systematic comparison with Western performance traditions, making it difficult to

<sup>1</sup> Tom Gunning. *The Cinema of Attractions* [M]. Wide Angle, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> André Bazin. *What is a movie?* [M]. Beijing: Culture and Art Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee. *Selected Works of Leo Ou-fan Lee* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2002.

comprehensively reveal the laws of variation and fusion of bodily expressions under cultural collisions.

From the perspective of comedy performance and body language research, Richard McCann, in *Silent Comedian: Body and Performance in the American Silent Film Era*, analyzed the four major stars of American silent film comedy as examples, demonstrating how they broke through language barriers through exaggerated physical movements and facial expressions, constructing a globally accessible comedy aesthetic. He emphasized that technological media, such as special effects photography and model effects, did not weaken bodily expressions but instead expanded their possible boundaries, providing a universal technical grammar for cross-cultural performances. Rudolf Arnheim, in *Film as Art: Visual Culture in the Silent Film Era*, starting from Gestalt psychology, argued that silent films conveyed meaning through purely visual means such as composition and action rhythm. He believed that actors needed to construct a visual center with 'dynamic balance' in their body language, making the body the core of meaning, which provided a theoretical framework for understanding the commonalities and differences in bodily expressions across different cultures and was of great significance for cross-cultural performance aesthetics research.

Domestic research on Chinese silent films has mostly been limited to the analysis of operatic performance characteristics and the sorting out of the evolution of technological history and equipment, with an obvious shortcoming in the systematic exploration of the triangular relationship among 'technology-body-culture.' From a technological perspective, Zhang Tingru and Wang Kuosuo's quantitative analysis of *Love's Labor* using Cinema DA software in *Formal Quantitative Analysis of Early Chinese Silent Films: Taking Love's Labor as an Example*<sup>4</sup> is of great value. This film shares similarities with Keystone comedies in terms of shot duration and editing rate but has unique characteristics in shot usage. Long takes focus on the plot rather than comedic actions, medium and full shots dominate, close-ups are scarce, and subtitles account for a high proportion with low narrative efficiency. This reflects the exploration of its own style by early Chinese films amid technological imitation, providing a quantitative basis for understanding the trajectory of its technological development and revealing the creative intentions and artistic pursuits behind technological choices.

In terms of the interaction between the body and culture, Wang Ke pointed out in *The Film Voice Outside the Screen: The Benshi*<sup>5</sup> that traditional theatrical appreciation habits gave rise to benshi (silent film narrators), whose development and decline, in turn, influenced creative concepts. The benshi replaced the absent film sound with their bodies and voices, constructing a unique 'voice attraction' in the silent era, and their functions were transformed into narrative means. This reflects the close connection between bodily practices and the cultural environment, as well as how technology of the times reshaped film cultural forms, highlighting the key role of the body in film cultural dissemination and creation.

The common limitation of existing research lies in the failure to regard technological media as dynamic variables and examine their participatory role in the cross-temporal and cross-spatial dialogues among different cultural performance aesthetics. Wu Qingqing pointed out in *Visual*

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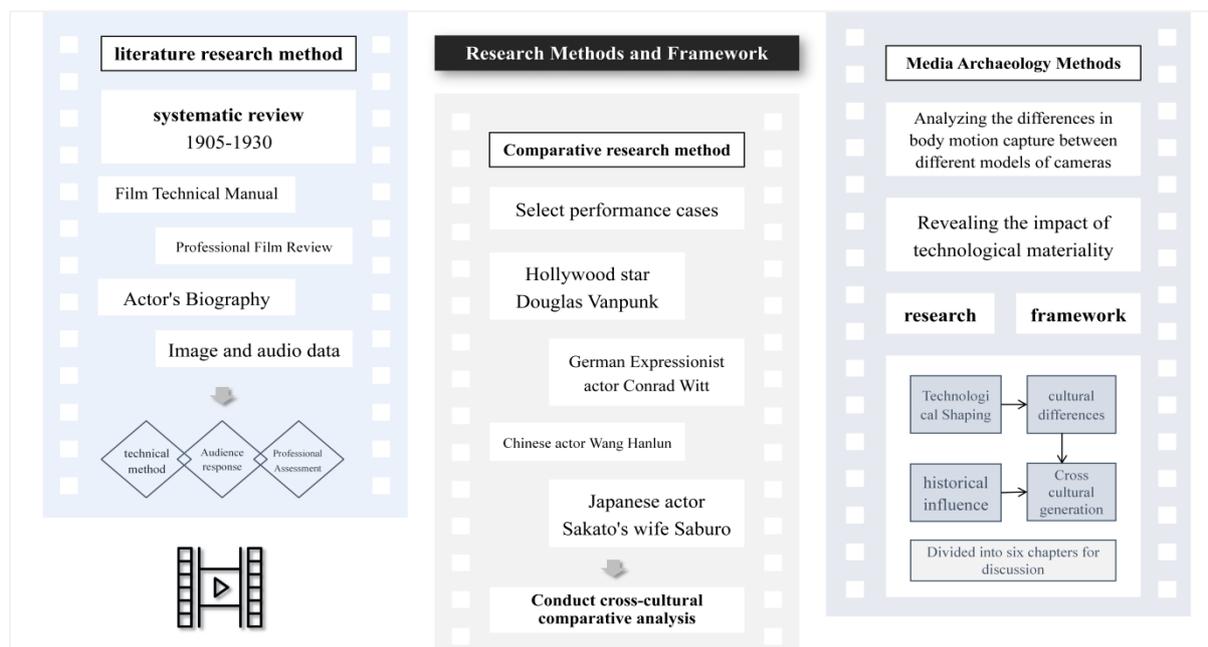
<sup>4</sup> Zhang Tingru, Wang Kuosuo. *Formal Quantitative Analysis of Early Chinese Silent Films: Taking Love's Labor as an Example* [J]. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2024, (10): 86-97.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Ke. *The Film Voice Outside the Screen: The Benshi* [J]. *Art Scope*, 2023, (02): 100-102.

Exploration of Extant Chinese Silent Films<sup>6</sup> that the unique visual explorations in early silent films can be summarized into the following three aspects: the freehand time-space constructed through shot language, visual creations that incorporate the aesthetics of artistic conception and qi-yun in theory and practice—interspersing, and the exploration of sound visualization driven by technological desires. Sun Shan provided a systematic understanding of the important value of Keaton's superb vaudeville films and offered references and insights for the creation of domestic comedy films in *Research on Keaton's Silent Film Comedies: Performance, Direction, and Modernity*<sup>7</sup>.

#### 1.4 Research Methodology and Framework (Figure 1)

This study employs a triple-methodological approach. Firstly, it utilizes the literature research method to systematically review film technical manuals, contemporary film reviews, and actor autobiographies from 1905 to 1930. Secondly, the comparative research method is adopted to conduct cross-cultural comparative analyses of performance cases featuring Hollywood star Douglas Fairbanks, German Expressionist actor Conrad Veidt, Chinese actor Wang Hanlun, and Japanese actor Bantō Tsumasaburō. Thirdly, the media archaeology method is employed to reveal the impact of technological materiality by analyzing the differences in body motion capture across various camera models. The thesis framework follows the logical sequence of 'technological shaping - cultural differences - cross-cultural generation - historical impact' and is elaborated in six chapters.



**Figure 1 Research Methods and Framework**

(Source: self-made by the author)

<sup>6</sup> Wu Qingqing. Visual Exploration of Extant Chinese Silent Films [D]. Sichuan University, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Sun Shan. Research on Keaton's Silent Film Comedies: Performance, Direction, and Modernity [D]. China Film Art Research Center, 2016.

## 2.0 THE SHAPING OF BODILY EXPRESSION IN SILENT FILMS BY TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA

### 2.1 Characteristics of Early Film Technology

Mechanisms of the limitations of film and shooting equipment on the presentation of bodily movements: Prior to the 1910s, the low sensitivity of nitrocellulose film necessitated strong lighting, which often resulted in overexposure and distortion of actors' facial expressions. Consequently, actors relied more heavily on exaggerated bodily gestures during performances. The unstable frame rate of hand-cranked cameras caused rapid movements to blur, giving rise to the 'slow-motion performance' technique, where actors performed actions in slow motion during filming to achieve a natural and fluid visual effect upon projection. This technique was particularly prevalent in action films of the 1920s. The prominence of bodily expression due to the absence of sound in silent technology: Under silent technology conditions, the lack of vocal cords rendered dialogue information reliant on 'intertitles' for transmission, while emotional and situational expressions depended entirely on bodily movements. In German Expressionist films, actors conveyed rage through contorted bodily gestures instead of shouting; in Chinese silent films, actors borrowed the 'crying posture' from traditional opera to express sorrow, thus forming an expressive mode where 'silence speaks louder than words.'

### 2.2 The Construction of Bodily Performance through Editing and Cinematic Language

The enhancing or weakening effects of different editing techniques on the expressiveness of bodily movements: In the 1910s, American director D.W. Griffith's invention of 'cross-cutting' heightened the tension of actions by alternately showing the bodily movements of pursuers and pursued. In contrast, the 'dissolve' editing technique employed by French Impressionist films weakened the impact of actions through the gradual fading in and out of bodily movements, creating a poetic atmosphere. The shaping functions of elements such as camera angles and shot scales on bodily expression: Low-angle shots can amplify the sense of oppression conveyed by the body, while high-angle shots can highlight the vulnerability of the body, as exemplified by the scene in *The Goddess* where Ruan Lingyu curls up in a corner (Figure 2). The use of close-up shots makes subtle facial expressions a crucial aspect of performance, driving a shift from 'body-dominated' to 'mind-body coordinated' acting. Charlie Chaplin's portrayal of the tramp character achieves complex character depiction through the coordination of eyebrow twitches and cane movements in close-ups.



**Figure 2 The scene of Ruan Lingyu curled up in the corner of the wall in Goddess**

(Source: <https://b23.tv/HHAHOXn>)

**2.3 The Impact of Projection Technology and Venues on the Reception of Bodily Expressio**

Before the 1920s, most projectors were hand-cranked, and projectionists often adjusted the projection speed according to the plot. For comedies, the speed would be increased to enhance the comedic effect of the actors' movements; for dramas, it would be slowed down to 16 frames per second to emphasize the solemnity of bodily actions. This flexible projection practice resulted in significantly different performance effects of the same film across different regions. The correlation between venue factors, such as cinema environments, and the reception of bodily expression: Luxury cinemas in Europe and the United States were equipped with large screens that magnified the details of bodily movements, demanding greater precision in actors' performances. In contrast, early Chinese film-theaters often shared venues with traditional opera performances, featuring smaller screens and live orchestral accompaniment, which prompted actors to retain exaggerated gestures reminiscent of opera to align with the characteristics of the venue.

**3.0 DIFFERENCES IN PHYSICAL EXPRESSION OF SILENT FILM PERFORMANCES UNDER DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS**

**3.1 Performance Aesthetics and Physical Expression in European and American Silent Films**

**3.1.1 The exaggerated physical performance style in Hollywood and its causes**

Hollywood's exaggerated physical performance style is not groundless but deeply rooted in the melodrama tradition of the 19th century. During the era when theater dominated mass entertainment, actors developed a habit of large-scale body movements to ensure that audiences in every corner of the theater could clearly perceive emotions and plot developments. When this performance tradition was transferred to silent film production, it naturally continued. The rise of Hollywood's star system further reinforced this exaggerated style. Take action film star Douglas Fairbanks as an example; in *The Mark of Zorro*, his leaping combat not only showcased the hero's vitality and boldness but also became his personal hallmark. This unique action design allowed audiences to quickly recognize him across numerous films, thereby building a strong star influence. Similarly, in *Poor Little Rich Girl* (Figure 3), Mary Pickford highlighted the character's vulnerability and helplessness through trembling running, and this highly recognizable body language established her as the 'American Sweetheart' in the hearts of audiences. From a commercial perspective, exaggerated physical movements are more easily captured and understood by audiences during the rapid editing of silent films, meeting the demands of mass entertainment for efficient information transmission. In the absence of sound assistance, only sufficiently exaggerated physical expressions can convey character emotions and key plot information to audiences in a short time, ensuring the film's entertainment value and commercial success.



**Figure 3 Mary Pickford's Performance in The Poor Little Rich Girl**

(From: <https://b23.tv/b2ivuIe>)

### **3.1.2 Experimental Physical Expression Forms in European Avant-Garde Cinema**

European avant-garde cinema, profoundly influenced by modern art movements of the time such as Expressionism and Surrealism, exhibits notable experimental characteristics in physical expression. German Expressionist cinema attempts to symbolize individual inner emotions and social alienation through distorted and deformed bodily forms. In the film *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, actors employ rigid joint movements to vividly convey the mechanical and inhuman qualities of the golem, a creature created from clay, thereby symbolizing the alienation experienced by humans in industrial society. French Surrealist cinema, on the other hand, completely breaks free from the logical framework of traditional physical expression, focusing instead on exploring the irrational potential of the body. In *Un Chien Andalou*, the juxtaposition of close-up shots of an eyeball being sliced and images of an arm crawling, this seemingly illogical combination of bodily imagery abandons narrative function altogether. Instead, it relies on intense visual impact to stimulate the audience's subconscious associations, thereby expressing a absurd and chaotic inner world. These experimental physical expression forms not only explore the boundaries of cinematic art but also offer profound reflections on the social realities and human nature of the time. They break free from the constraints of traditional performance modes, opening up entirely new possibilities for physical expression in cinema.

## **3.2 Performance Aesthetics and Physical Expression in Asian Silent Films**

### **3.2.1 Physical Performance Characteristics Integrating Opera Elements in Chinese Silent Films**

The development of Chinese silent films is closely intertwined with traditional Chinese opera. In the 1920s, actors at the Star Film Company in Shanghai mostly came from the opera stage, resulting in an inevitable strong opera influence on the performances in Chinese silent films.

In *A New Family*, a precursor to *Street Angel*, Zhou Xuan uses the ‘cloud hand’ movement from opera to portray a young girl's shyness. This movement, graceful and fluid, not only fits the character's identity but also evokes a strong sense of familiarity among audiences familiar with opera. However, the performances in Chinese silent films do not simply replicate opera conventions but undergo adaptive innovations. In *Sisters*, Hu Die employs the ‘kneeling step’ posture (Figure 4), derived from the performance of female roles in Peking Opera. However, in the film, she adjusts the amplitude and rhythm of the movement to better suit the capturing characteristics and narrative requirements of the film camera. This ‘semi-operatic’ performance style retains the charm of traditional Chinese culture while also taking into account the unique qualities of cinematic art. This integration is not accidental but a conscious choice made by Chinese filmmakers in their quest for a nationalized path of film development. Against the backdrop of a flood of Western films into the Chinese market, incorporating opera elements into silent film performances helps shape a unique style for Chinese cinema and enhances the sense of identity among local audiences.



**Figure 4: The ‘kneeling step’ posture used by Hu Die in *Sister Flowers***

(Source: <https://b23.tv/hT1ANiN>)

### **3.2.2 Physical Expression Styles in Japanese Silent Films Influenced by Traditional Theater**

The physical expressions in Japanese silent films are profoundly influenced by traditional theater forms such as Noh and Kabuki, with a particular emphasis on the use of ‘kata’ (i.e., stylized movements). In the film *The Journey of Chuji*, actor Bando Tsumasaburo borrowed the ‘squatting step’ from Noh theater, which is steady and solemn, effectively conveying the dignity and determination of the samurai. Actress Kawada Yoshiko, on the other hand, drew on the delicate hand gestures of the ‘onnagata’ (female impersonator) in Kabuki, using subtle finger movements to express the complex emotions of her character. In the 1920s, Japan's ‘Pure Film Movement’ advocated breaking free from the influence of theater and pursuing the unique characteristics of cinema itself. However, even then, actors retained the ‘static tension’ from traditional theater in their performances. In the silent confrontation scene in *Tokyo March*, actors conveyed the complex emotions of inner conflict and tension to the audience by maintaining a frozen physical state for an extended period. This expressive effect, where ‘silence speaks louder than words,’ is actually an inheritance and development of the essence of traditional theater performances. The absorption and transformation of traditional theater

elements in Japanese silent films not only reflect a commitment to local culture but also demonstrate a unique path in the exploration of cinematic art.

### **3.3 Unique Body Language in Silent Films from Other Regions**

The physical performances in Latin American silent films are heavily influenced by local folk dances. In the Brazilian film *Song of the Earth*, actors exhibit samba-style hip movements, exuding vitality and passion. This body language, rooted in folk dance, not only highlights Brazil's unique cultural landscape but is also flexibly transformed into narrative elements that drive the plot forward. Mexican star Jorge Negrete incorporates the matador's cape-waving movements into his character performances in the film *The Border Bandit*. This movement not only reflects the character's bravery and unrestrained nature but also embodies a strong Mexican regional identity, allowing the audience to deeply feel the local cultural atmosphere conveyed by the film. African silent films, in the colonial context, have developed resistant forms of physical expression. In the 1927 Egyptian film *Layla*, actors fuse the hand movements of Islamic dance with the collective body language of tribal rituals. Through repeated stamping movements, they not only showcase the rhythm of African culture but also metaphorically express their resilience and resistance in maintaining their cultural identity under colonial oppression. The body language in silent films from these regions is deeply rooted in local cultural soil, showcasing unique regional characteristics while reflecting their respective historical backgrounds and social realities.

## **4.0 COLLISION AND FUSION OF PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS IN SILENT FILMS AMID CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

### **4.1 Transnational Dissemination Paths of Silent Films**

#### **4.1.1 Cross-border Circulation of Film Screenings**

Since the 1910s, with the development of global transportation and communication, the transnational dissemination of silent films has become increasingly frequent. As an early leader in the film industry, France's Pathé company established a distribution site in Shanghai in 1907, regularly screening French comedy shorts. These shorts, with their witty plots and exaggerated performances, brought a fresh viewing experience to Chinese audiences and provided valuable learning and reference examples for early Chinese filmmakers. In 1923, the eight major Hollywood studios successively set up offices in Tokyo, with Charlie Chaplin's films being updated and screened every quarter. Chaplin's works, with their unique comedic style and profound social analysis, sparked a viewing craze in Japan and had a profound impact on the performance and creation of Japanese silent films. Meanwhile, outstanding Asian silent films began to make their way onto the international stage. In 1928, the Chinese film *The Goddess* was screened at the 'World Film Exhibition' in Paris, winning high praise from international audiences for its unique Oriental aesthetic qualities and Ruan Lingyu's superb acting skills. In 1930, the Japanese film *A Page from Life* was selected for the Venice Film Festival, allowing the world to appreciate the unique charm of Japanese silent films.

#### **4.1.2 Cases of Cross-border Collaboration and Exchange among Filmmakers**

In 1925, German director Fritz Lang visited Japan and engaged in in-depth exchanges with renowned Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi. Lang introduced Mizoguchi to the creative concepts and filming techniques of German Expressionist cinema, particularly its explorations in physical expression; Mizoguchi, in turn, showcased the essence of Noh theater performances. This exchange laid the foundation for mutual learning and the fusion of different performance aesthetics between filmmakers from the two countries. In 1928, Chinese actress Ruan Lingyu traveled to Hollywood for an inspection tour. During her visit, she closely observed the performances of Hollywood stars such as Mary Pickford and recorded her insights into the concept of 'emotional authenticity' in her performance notes. She believed that Hollywood actors' exploration of their characters' inner worlds and their natural presentation of emotions were worth learning by Chinese actors. This inspection experience had a significant impact on Ruan Lingyu's later performance style, making her pay more attention to emotional authenticity while retaining the charm of traditional Chinese performances. In 1930, during his filming in Mexico, Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein thoroughly studied the handling of body rhythm in local folk dances. In his theoretical work *Film Form*, he specifically analyzed the 'universal symbols' in cross-cultural performances. These research findings not only played an important role in the development of Soviet cinema but also provided valuable theoretical references for global filmmakers to understand cross-cultural performance aesthetics.

**Table 1 List of Major Silent Films Globally (1905-1930)**

(Source: Author's own creation)

Movie Title	country	year	Lead actors	Performance Style Remarks
<i>Dingjun Mountain</i>	China	1905	Xinpei Tan	Integrating Peking Opera martial arts performances with formulaic movements
<i>The birth of a country</i>	the United States	1915	Henry B. Voso	Exaggerated heroic body language
<i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i>	Germany	1920	Conrad Waite	Expressionist distortion of body movements
<i>Goddess</i>	China	1928	Lingyu Ruan	Combining semi operatic body movements with delicate facial expressions
<i>Battleship Potemkin</i>	Soviet Union	1925	Alexander Antonov	Collective body movement, emphasizing a sense of strength
<i>The predecessor of Street Angel was Newcomer's Family</i>	China	1927	Xuan Zhou	Using movements such as <i>Cloud Hand</i> in traditional Chinese opera

<i>Zhongci Travel Notes</i>	Japan	1927	Sakamoto Mitsuro's wife	Drawing inspiration from established movements such as the Noh drama 'squatting step'
<i>Border bandits</i>	Mexico	1929	Jorge Negret	Integrating bullfighter action elements

## 4.2 Mutual Inspiration among Performance Aesthetics from Different Cultures

### 4.2.1 Adoption of Asian Silent Film Performance Elements in Europe and the United States

During the 'Orientalism' craze in Hollywood in the 1920s, a significant number of Asian silent film performance elements were incorporated. In *The Thief of Bagdad*, Douglas Fairbanks borrowed expressive hand gestures from Indian dance to enrich the character's body language, making his portrayal of the Arab prince more vivid and three-dimensional. German Expressionist cinema drew important inspiration from the 'masked expressions' in Japanese Noh theater. In *Nosferatu*, Max Schreck used a stiff, expressionless facial performance to create a sinister and terrifying atmosphere for the vampire. This approach was clearly influenced by the Noh theater's method of conveying deep emotions through restrained facial expressions. French avant-garde director Jean Epstein cleverly employed the 'virtual movements' of Chinese opera in *Three Mirrors*, such as using hands to represent a boat to depict a character sailing on water. The use of these virtual movements not only enriched the film's expressive techniques but also endowed it with a unique poetic and imaginative quality.

### 4.2.2 Asian Countries' Borrowing of Performance Techniques from European and American Silent Films

In 1929, after China's Lianhua Film Company introduced the Hollywood 'acting system,' a systematic reform of actors' performances was carried out. In *Spring Dream in the Old Capital*, director Sun Yu guided actors to use subtle facial expressions in close-up shots instead of the exaggerated 'posing' movements in traditional Chinese opera, making the characters' emotional expressions more delicate and authentic. This shift marked the beginning of Chinese silent film performances moving towards a more cinematic direction. In 1926, Japan's Shochiku Films sent actors to Germany to study Expressionist acting techniques. In *Sisters of the Gion*, Kenji Mizoguchi had actors use contorted body movements to express the characters' inner pain and suppression, breaking through the limitations of traditional Japanese 'kata' and enriching the vocabulary of body expression in Japanese silent films. In the Indian silent film *Alam Ara* (1931), actors combined Hollywood chase scene movements with the spinning movements of the native Kathak dance to create a unique 'dance-style fight.' This fusion not only made the film's action scenes more exciting but also demonstrated the innovative spirit of Indian filmmakers in absorbing foreign cultures.

## 4.3 Characteristics of New Performance Aesthetics Generated through Cross-Cultural Interaction

In terms of body language, the performance aesthetics of silent films from different cultural backgrounds collided and blended, achieving a 'balance between stylization and naturalness.'

In *The Izu Dancer*, Japanese actress Kinuyo Tanaka perfectly integrated the stylized hand gestures of Kabuki with the natural movements of Hollywood. Her gestures not only retained the distinctiveness of Japanese traditional culture but also enhanced the authenticity of the character's emotions through a natural rhythm of movements, allowing the audience to both appreciate the unique charm of Japanese culture and resonate with the character's emotions. In the field of emotional expression, a 'visual metaphor system' was constructed. European and American actors borrowed the 'using objects to symbolize emotions' technique from Chinese opera, such as using a fan to cover the face to convey shyness. Asian actors, on the other hand, absorbed the 'environmental projection' technique of German Expressionism, using methods like shadows cutting across the body to show the character's inner fragmentation. The formation of this visual metaphor system enabled silent films to convey the characters' emotions and inner worlds more richly and precisely in a silent context. At the narrative level, the cross-cultural fusion of silent film performance aesthetics built a 'cross-cultural common symbol library.' The urgency of running movements could represent the character's emergency state, the frequency of hand trembling could reflect the character's nervousness, and the angle of body tilt could imply the character's stance and attitude. These common body symbols allowed audiences from different cultural backgrounds to understand the film's plot and the character's emotions, providing a key guarantee for the global dissemination of silent films. The formation of this 'body Esperanto' was an important achievement of the cross-cultural generation of performance aesthetics in the silent film era.

## **5.0 TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA TRANSFORMATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SILENT FILM PERFORMANCE AESTHETICS**

### **5.1 The Impact of the Emergence of Sound Films on the Technological Media of Silent Films**

In 1927, the release of *The Jazz Singer* marked the official beginning of the sound film era. Although this film only added synchronized sound in some segments, it was like a heavy bomb thrown into the film industry, fundamentally shaking the technological foundation of silent films. Early recording equipment was bulky and complex to operate, with heavy microphones needing to be fixed inside special soundproof enclosures, which severely restricted the actors' range of movement. Compared to the lightweight and flexible 'handheld' cameras of the 1920s in the silent film era, the shooting equipment for sound films was extremely rigid, and actors could no longer move freely around the set as before. The originally smooth and natural body choreography was fragmented. In 1929, the success of the all-sound film *The Lights of New York* pushed this technological transformation to its peak. Synchronized sound recording technology required actors to complete their dialogue lines at fixed positions, which created a sharp conflict with the performance logic of the silent film era, where spatial relationships were presented through body movements and positioning. In silent film shooting, actors could construct the spatial hierarchy of the scene through large-scale body movements, while on the set of sound films, to ensure sound quality, actors often had to move within a narrow area near the microphone, greatly suppressing their physical expressiveness. This sudden technological change led to a significant 'body stiffening' phenomenon in film performances during the 'transition period' from 1927 to 1930, and many excellent actors from the silent film era gradually withdrew from the screen due to their inability to adapt to this technological transformation. In addition, the emergence of sound films also changed the film production

process and industrial ecology. In the silent film era, actors' performances could be relatively independent of post-production processes such as music scoring and subtitle addition, while sound films required a high degree of synchronization among performance, recording, and editing, which undoubtedly increased the complexity and cost of production. Film studios had to invest a large amount of money in updating equipment and renovating studios to meet the shooting requirements of sound films, and these industrial-level changes further accelerated the elimination of silent film technological media.

## 5.2 Adjustment and Adaptation of Body Expression in the Face of Technological Changes

Faced with the technological impact of sound films, actors did not remain passive but actively explored new performance models and gradually developed the skill of 'sound-picture coordination.' While retaining the physical expressiveness of the silent film era, they strived to synchronize the rhythm of dialogue with body movements, enabling language and body to collaborate and complement each other. For example, when expressing anger, actors would clench their fists and lean forward while delivering intense lines to enhance the emotional impact; when expressing tenderness, they would slow down their speech and accompany it with gentle gestures and a mild body posture. Charlie Chaplin was a typical example in this performance transformation process. In *City Lights* (1931), although he still used the silent film format, he cleverly used the rhythm of the accompanying music to guide his body movements, creating a perfect polyphonic effect between body language and music. In the film, when the tramp Charlie meets the blind girl, the light music accompanies his slightly clumsy but well-intentioned body movements, retaining the comedic qualities of the silent film era while conveying rich emotional connotations through the coordination of music and body. This innovative move not only made silent films shine in the sound era but also provided a successful example of the adaptability of body expression in the face of technological changes. Chinese actor Jin Yan also demonstrated excellent adaptability in *Wild Flowers and Weeds* in 1930. He skillfully transformed the rhythm of the rhymed dialogue in traditional Chinese opera into the intonation of the sound dialogue and simplified his body movements to meet the sound recording requirements of the microphone. When expressing the character's excitement, he no longer relied excessively on exaggerated body movements as in the silent film era but used rhythmic lines and moderate gestures to both retain the charm of traditional Chinese performance and comply with the technical specifications of sound films. With the development of sound films, the extensive use of close-up shots also promoted the maturity of 'micro-expression performance.' Since sound films rely on dialogue to advance the plot, they frequently present actors' facial expressions to convey emotions, requiring actors to pay more attention to the refinement of subtle facial expressions. In the silent film era, actors mainly used body movements to express emotions, while in sound films, a change in the eyes or a slight movement of the corners of the mouth could become key carriers for conveying emotions. This change in performance style laid an important foundation for film performances in later generations, and its influence continues to this day.



**Figure 5 Charlie Chaplin's performance in 'City Lights'**

(Source: <https://b23.tv/ZFgjOeC> )

### **5.3 The Influence of Silent Film Performance Aesthetics on Subsequent Film Performances**

The advent of sound films did not entirely discard the performance legacy of the silent film era. On the contrary, many essential elements of silent film performance aesthetics have been carried forward and developed in subsequent film performances. Hollywood's 'Method Acting' is deeply influenced by the concept of 'physical narrative' in silent films. Marlon Brando, in *On the Waterfront*, conveys the inner conflicts and tensions of his character through silent physical confrontations, a performance style that clearly inherits the silent film era's characteristic of expressing complex emotions through physical actions rather than language. His body postures, eye contact, and subtle hand gestures all tell the character's story in silence, evoking a powerful emotional impact on the audience. In the realm of Chinese cinema, the influence of silent film performance aesthetics is also evident everywhere. In *Chen Kaige's Farewell My Concubine*, Leslie Cheung's portrayal of Cheng Dieyi achieves a perfect transition between Peking Opera movements and everyday actions, continuing the 'semi-operatic' balance concept from the silent film era. When presenting Cheng Dieyi's feminine traits, he draws on the movements of Peking Opera female roles, such as the 'lily-fingered hand gesture' and water-sleeve techniques, imbuing the character with a rich traditional flavor. Meanwhile, when depicting the character's inner pain and struggles, he employs everyday physical language, making the character more realistic and credible. This fusion of tradition and modernity, stylization and naturalness, is a vivid manifestation of silent film performance aesthetics in contemporary times.

Even in contemporary film and television productions dominated by digital technology, the 'body-first' principle established during the silent film era continues to exhibit strong vitality. The character body language design in the contemporary animated film *Coco* draws inspiration from the 'visual metaphor system' of silent films. Although the skeletal characters in the film lack flesh and blood, their bone movements retain the emotional expression logic of human limbs. For example, when expressing excitement, the skeletal character Miguel performs energetic actions such as jumping and waving; when sad, he lowers his head and curls up his

body. These physical languages enable the audience to quickly grasp the character's emotions, echoing the silent film era's concept of conveying emotions through physical actions. The influence of silent film performance aesthetics on subsequent film performances is not only reflected in specific performance techniques but also in the dialectical relationship it establishes between the body and emotions, technology and art. It demonstrates that, regardless of technological advancements, the body remains the core medium for conveying emotions and telling stories in film performances, and the exploration and innovation of bodily expression will always be a crucial driving force for the development of film art.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Research Summary

This study has conducted an in-depth exploration of the silent film era from 1905 to 1930, clearly elucidating the complex interactive relationships among technological media, bodily expression, and cross-cultural performance aesthetics. During this period, technological media were not passive tools but dynamic forces that profoundly shaped the possibilities and boundaries of bodily expression. Early on, due to limited film sensitivity, actors relied on exaggerated physical movements; with the development of editing techniques and camera language, the layers of physical performance were enriched; projection technologies and venue conditions also influenced the reception of bodily expression. Each transformation in technological media drove the evolution of bodily expression forms. Simultaneously, bodily expression was not entirely constrained by technological media but demonstrated active responses and innovations. Actors continuously explored new performance methods under technological constraints. For instance, the 'slow-motion performance' technique was developed during the silent film era to adapt to the unstable frame rates of hand-cranked cameras; in the early days of sound films, the 'sound-picture coordination' technique emerged to address the limitations of recording equipment. These examples reflect the active adaptation and transcendence of bodily expression over technological media. In a cross-cultural context, the formation of silent film performance aesthetics exhibited unique patterns. Performance traditions from different cultural backgrounds, such as the exaggerated performance style in Europe and America, the 'semi-operatic' performance blending Peking Opera elements in China, and the 'kata-based' performance influenced by traditional theater in Japan, did not exist in isolation. Instead, they achieved extensive collisions and fusions through the cross-border dissemination of silent films and the exchange and cooperation among filmmakers. This fusion was not a simple cultural 'superposition' but a 'negotiated creation' under the constraints of technological media, ultimately forming new performance aesthetic characteristics that combined cultural individuality with global comprehensibility, such as the balanced physical language of 'stylization and naturalness,' the emotional expression through the 'visual metaphor system,' and the narrative function of the 'cross-cultural common symbol library.' Furthermore, silent film performance aesthetics did not vanish with the emergence of sound films but subtly influenced subsequent film performances. From the inheritance of the silent film's 'physical narrative' concept by Hollywood's 'Method Acting' to the continuation of the 'semi-operatic' balance concept in Chinese cinema, and the adherence to the 'body-first' principle in contemporary digital film and television productions, all demonstrate the strong vitality and far-reaching influence of silent film performance aesthetics.

## 6.2 Research Limitations and Prospects

Although this study has systematically explored the technological media, bodily expression, and cross-cultural formation of performance aesthetics during the silent film era, it still has certain limitations. In terms of research scope, relatively less attention has been paid to silent film performances in Africa, Latin America, and other regions. Given the scarcity of original silent film materials in these areas, such as the loss of some film copies and the lack of relevant documentary records, the analysis of their bodily expression characteristics and their roles in cross-cultural exchanges is not in-depth enough. From the perspective of research viewpoints, the power relations behind technological media have not been thoroughly examined. For example, questions such as whether the dissemination of Western film technologies and performance aesthetics in colonial contexts suppressed or distorted silent film performances in colonial countries, and how filmmakers in colonial countries used bodily expression for cultural resistance, remain to be further studied.

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### Personal Profile

Pei Liu, female, holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Education and Technology. She is a full-time faculty member in the Calligraphy Department of the School of Fine Arts & Calligraphy, Sichuan Normal University. Her primary research areas are calligraphy education, digital aesthetic education, and AI applications. She has participated in advanced training at the Aesthetic Education Seminar of the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, served as a speaker at the National Academic Seminar on Painting Literature, and acted as a reviewer for the international journal Higher Education Research. She holds positions such as council member of the Basic Calligraphy Education Branch of the National Education Painting and Calligraphy Association, deputy secretary-general of the Calligraphy Education Professional Committee of the Sichuan Provincial Education Society, standing director of the Fine Arts Education Professional Committee of the Sichuan Provincial Education Society, director of the Film and Television Education Professional Committee of the Sichuan Provincial Education Society, member of the expert pool at the Sichuan Provincial Education Evaluation Institute, and secretary-general of the Chengdu Young Calligraphers Association. She has led key research projects on calligraphy education science from the Sichuan Higher Education Association and key projects from the Sichuan Federation of Social Sciences Associations' Research Institute of Chinese Culture (Traditional Crafts Research Institute). She has also been a principal researcher in the 'School Physical Education and Aesthetic Education' special project of the Ministry of Education's Department of Physical, Health, and Arts Education, a major project of the Sichuan Provincial Education Science Planning, and has participated in high-end think tank projects of the Ministry of Education. She has published over 20 English articles in international journals such as IJSSH, ELTLS, and IJEMH in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Dubai, and over 30 Chinese articles on education and art in national and provincial core journals. She is the author of the Chinese monograph Practical Analysis of Virtual Reality Technology in Art Appreciation from the Perspective of Science, Technology and Aesthetic Education (Guangming Daily Press), co-author of the Chinese book Artist's Manuscripts - Van Gogh (Posts & Telecom Press), and author of the English monograph Research and Practice of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture Education (Generis Publishing, Switzerland). She excels in calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, and photography, with her artworks exhibited and collected in galleries both domestically and abroad. Tel: 18080046797; Email: <mailto:592947743@qq.com>.