

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO SUBTLE- DETAIL ACTING IN FILM - TAKING “SCENT OF A WOMAN” AS AN EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze a systematic approach to subtle-detail acting in film, taking *Scent of a Woman* (1992) as a case study. The research objectives are to clarify the significance of micro-expressions, bodily nuances, and silent performances in shaping authentic screen characters, and to establish a structured understanding of how these elements contribute to realism in cinematic performance. Specific film scenes, such as the tango dance sequence and the courtroom defense, are examined to illustrate how subtle acting choices create emotional depth and narrative progression. The findings reveal that subtle-detail acting is essential not only to achieving realism but also to guiding audience empathy and enhancing cinematic storytelling. This research contributes to bridging theory and practice in screen performance, offering insights for actors, directors, and educators to cultivate nuanced expression and emotional authenticity. It further highlights the importance of facial expression control, precision in body language and gestures, and vocal nuances in developing refined screen performances.

Keywords: Subtle-Detail Acting, Actor Training, Authenticity, *Scent of a Woman*

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INTRODUCTION

In the study and practice of film performance, “subtle detail acting” has increasingly emerged as a significant topic of both scholarly and professional concern. Unlike theatrical performance, which often emphasizes broad gestures and amplified emotions, the cinematic lens, particularly in close-up, magnifies the actor’s smallest facial and bodily details, allowing the audience to perceive even the most delicate shifts of emotion. This nearly “silent” style of performance not only tests the actor’s artistic sensibility and psychological control but also presents new challenges for acting training.

Traditional acting theories, such as the Stanislavski System and Method Acting, emphasize “inner truth” and the depth of emotional experience. However, in practice, these systems primarily focus on emotional recall, role immersion, and general body movement, while offering limited guidance on training micro-expressions, subtle gestures, and voice–breath modulation. As a result, many actors struggle to consciously employ and control fine details before the camera, which sometimes leads to performances that appear exaggerated or lack authenticity.

Meanwhile, with the development of the film industry, audience expectations for authenticity in performance have become increasingly demanding. Viewers not only follow dialogue and plot but also seek to uncover unspoken psychological states and emotions through subtle cues. This raises an urgent question for contemporary acting pedagogy: A systematic training framework can be developed to help actors consciously master the art of subtle-detail performance. Al Pacino’s acclaimed portrayal of Frank Slade in *Scent of a Woman* (1992) offers a paradigmatic example of the power of subtle-detail acting. In this role, Pacino conveys the inner struggles of a blind, retired officer not through overt action but through fleeting muscular contractions of the face, minimal adjustments of a cane, and nuanced shifts in tone and breath. These understated details vividly reveal the character’s loneliness, pain, and dignity. His performance not only earned him the Academy Award for Best Actor but also became a milestone in the history of cinematic acting. Importantly, it illustrates that subtle-detail acting is not merely a matter of instinct or talent, but a craft that can be refined through systematic practice.

The aim of this study is therefore to propose a systematic training framework for subtle-detail acting, offering actors practical methods for mastering subtle-expressions, bodily economy, and voice–breath coordination. Through literature review, theoretical analysis, and case study, the research seeks to answer the following questions: Insights from psychology and body language studies can be integrated into actor training to enhance awareness of emotional cues and nonverbal communication. Specific training exercises enable actors to control and refine subtle expressive techniques while maintaining naturalness in performance. Case studies, such as Pacino’s performance in *Scent of a Woman*, serve to validate the effectiveness of these methods and demonstrate their practical application in achieving nuanced realism on screen.

The significance of this research lies in two dimensions. First, in pedagogy, it supplements existing acting curricula by introducing a practical module focused on subtle-detail performance. Second, in practice, it equips actors with tools to sustain authenticity in front of the magnifying cinematic lens, thus meeting the evolving demands of contemporary film performance.

This paper is structured as follows: it first reviews existing literature on acting theories and performance studies to establish a theoretical foundation. It then introduces a systematic framework for subtle-detail acting training and analyzes its application through the case of “*Scent of a Woman*”. Finally, it concludes by highlighting the pedagogical and practical implications of this approach for the future of actor training and cinematic performance.

Although the introduction outlines the significance of subtle-detail acting and clarifies the general objectives of this study, explicit research questions are essential for guiding the

analytical framework. Based on the aims of examining micro-expressions, bodily nuances, and vocal subtleties in cinematic performance, this study proposes the following research questions:

1) What constitutes subtle-detail acting in film performance, particularly in relation to micro-expressions, bodily micro-movements, and vocal nuance?

This question defines the conceptual scope of subtle-detail acting and clarifies how these elements form a systematic approach in cinematic contexts.

2) How does Al Pacino apply this system of subtle-detail acting in his portrayal of Frank Slade in *Scent of a Woman* (1992)?

This question examines the mechanisms through which subtle details are embodied in performance, focusing on specific scenes such as the restaurant encounter, tango sequence, and courtroom monologue.

3) What implications does a systematic approach to subtle-detail acting have for actor training, directing practices, and audience perception?

This question addresses the broader pedagogical and practical significance of subtle-detail acting, evaluating its potential integration into training curricula and performance methodologies.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Foundational acting theories and their relevance to subtle-detail performance

Classical acting systems have long emphasized internal emotional truth and psychological authenticity, forming the theoretical foundation of modern performance studies. The Stanislavski System stresses the actor's "inner action," emotional memory, and truthful motivation, providing essential guidance for character development (Stanislavski, Konstantin. 1949). However, while the system discusses physical actions and the actor's psycho-physical unity, its application to micro-level performance—such as facial muscle coordination, minimal gestures, or vocal subtleties—remains insufficiently articulated for the close-up demands of cinematic acting. Similarly, Method Acting, which evolved from Stanislavski's principles, privileges emotional immersion and experiential authenticity. Yet its emphasis on deep emotional recall often results in performances that are powerful but not necessarily precise in micro-detail control, particularly when actors rely on instinct rather than conscious technique. Michael Chekhov's psychological gesture theory offers a more physically oriented approach by connecting internal emotion with external movement. Although highly valuable for shaping character energy and intention, Chekhov's method tends to utilize expressive, often larger gestures that align more naturally with stage performance (Chekhov, 1991). Little guidance is provided on how such techniques might be adapted for cinematic close-ups, where even a slight contraction of facial muscles can radically alter the expressive effect.

Therefore, current foundational acting theories, while influential, are limited in their ability to offer structured guidance on micro-expressions, bodily micro-movements, or fine vocal modulation. This gap highlights the need for a systematic approach specifically tailored to camera-based performance, where subtle-detail acting becomes both visible and necessary (Ekman, 2009).

2) Nonverbal Communication in Film: Micro-Expressions, Body Language, and Silent Performance

Nonverbal communication has been extensively studied in psychology, communication studies, and film theory, offering valuable insights into how subtle cues reveal emotional and cognitive states. Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS) provides one of the most systematic approaches to categorizing micro-expressions, describing how minimal muscular contractions can signal concealed or emerging emotions. While FACS has been applied in various fields—such as psychotherapy, law enforcement, and affective computing—its

application to actor training remains limited. Existing research tends to focus on identifying micro-expressions rather than training performers to intentionally produce or control them for cinematic contexts.

Similarly, research in kinesics and proxemics—such as Birdwhistell’s analysis of body language and Hall’s studies on spatial dynamics—demonstrates how posture, gesture, and spatial relationships communicate psychological meaning. These frameworks highlight how slight shifts in weight, orientation, and gesture duration affect audience interpretation. However, most of this literature is descriptive rather than pedagogical, lacking guidance on how actors can operationalize these findings into systematic practice for film performance.

Silent performance studies also contribute to understanding micro-level acting. Scholars examining early cinema, physical theatre traditions, and contemporary minimalist acting (e.g., the works of Bresson or Kieslowski) emphasize how silence and stillness can heighten emotional intensity. Nevertheless, these analyses typically focus on aesthetic interpretation rather than on the actor’s technical process or training methods. Such research acknowledges the power of subtlety but stops short of developing a structured methodology to cultivate it.

Taken together, existing nonverbal communication research underscores the expressive potential of micro-details but falls short in providing integrated, actor-centered training frameworks. This gap further demonstrates the necessity of formulating a systematic approach to subtle-detail acting that unites theoretical insights with practical methods tailored specifically for the cinematic medium.

3) Studies on Silence, Implicit Performance, and Detail-Oriented Storytelling in Film

Research on cinematic silence and implicit performance provides valuable perspectives for understanding how minimal expression can generate profound emotional and narrative impact. Scholars such as Michel Chion have explored the concept of “meaningful silence,” arguing that moments of reduced dialogue or stillness invite viewers to engage more actively in emotional interpretation. Similarly, film theorists analyzing directors like Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Krzysztof Kieslowski emphasize the expressive power of restraint—where a lowered gaze, delayed reaction, or slight bodily hesitation can communicate psychological depth more effectively than explicit dialogue.

In narrative studies, the concept of “micro-narratives” or “detail-oriented storytelling” suggests that small gestures and subtle physical or vocal changes can function as narrative cues, guiding the viewer’s understanding of character motivation and emotional subtext. Such perspectives align closely with the goals of subtle-detail acting, highlighting how minimalism in performance can enrich cinematic meaning.

However, despite the extensive interpretation of silent or understated performances, much of this scholarship remains focused on textual or aesthetic analysis rather than on the actor’s technical process. The emphasis is often placed on directorial style or audience reception, overlooking how performers develop and control the micro-details that make such scenes impactful. Moreover, existing studies rarely address the integration of facial, bodily, and vocal subtleties as a cohesive system, treating them instead as independent expressive elements.

These gaps point to a broader issue: while film theory acknowledges the narrative and emotional significance of silence and subtlety, it does not provide a methodological framework for training actors to reproduce such effects deliberately. This lack of actor-centered inquiry further supports the need for a systematic approach to subtle-detail acting that connects theoretical insights with practical performance techniques.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative film-analytic method grounded in systematic observation, scene segmentation, and structured coding of micro-level performance details. The film *Scent of a Woman* (1992) was divided into scenes, sub-scenes, and shot units based on clear criteria:

narrative progression, emotional shifts, camera transitions (e.g., close-ups, shot-reverse-shot structures), and density of subtle acting cues. Following segmentation, each selected segment was examined through multi-stage viewing, including frame-by-frame analysis, in order to capture micro-expressions, minimal gestures, posture adjustments, and vocal nuances such as breath patterns and micro-pauses.

To operationalize subtle-detail acting, a coding system was constructed by integrating Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (FACS), kinesics and proxemics research, and film-performance analysis. This resulted in a three-dimensional subtle-detail coding framework:

- 1) Facial micro-expression codes, such as AU-related muscle movements, micro-smirks, or short-lived eye contractions;
- 2) Bodily micro-movement codes, including shifts in weight, small adjustments of the cane, minor gestural variations, head-angle changes, and fine motor actions;
- 3) Vocal nuance codes, including variation in pitch, volume, breath rhythm, hesitation patterns, and tonal texture.

All observations were recorded using structured observation sheets that included: timestamp, description of the subtle behavior, duration, contextual function, and interpretive notes. This systematic procedure ensures replicability, minimizes subjective bias, and provides a stable analytic basis for examining subtle-detail acting across multiple scenes of emotional, spatial, and narrative diversity.

Rather than treating theory as a separate background component, this study integrates performance theory directly into the analytic process. Stanislavski's principles—particularly inner action, psychological motivation, and the unity of internal state and external expression—inform the interpretation of Pacino's micro-level choices. For example, the slight tightening of the jaw or delayed head orientation when responding to Charlie's voice is read as the externalization of Frank Slade's internal reasoning, aligning with Stanislavski's concept of “experiencing” through purposeful action.

Michael Chekhov's theory of Psychological Gesture (PG) further enriches the decoding of bodily micro-movements. Pacino's recurring, minimal shifts of posture, subtle backward lean in the restaurant scene, or the gentle yet precise forward inclination during moments of intimacy are interpreted as reduced PGs—micro-gestural manifestations of underlying emotional energy. These movements, though understated, function as carriers of intention and emotional direction in a way consistent with Chekhov's approach to embodied psychology.

Nonverbal communication theories—kinesics, proxemics, and paralinguistics—provide additional interpretive layers by clarifying how micro-movements and vocal subtleties convey unspoken meaning. In the courtroom monologue, Pacino's calibrated pauses and slight tonal dips serve not only emotional authenticity but also narrative emphasis, demonstrating how vocal nuance operates as a form of “micro-storytelling.” Similarly, subtle changes in spatial orientation or bodily hesitation reveal vulnerability, caution, or emotional restraint, validating insights from proxemics and psychological communication theory.

By synthesizing these theoretical lenses, the study interprets Pacino's subtle-detail acting not as isolated instinctive moments but as carefully structured expressive strategies. The integration of theory and practice allows the analysis to explain how micro-expressions, bodily micro-actions, and vocal modulations collectively construct character psychology, enhance narrative coherence, and embody the principles of cinematic realism.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that Al Pacino's performance in *Scout of a Woman* (1992) demonstrates not only a high density of subtle facial, bodily, and vocal details, but also a set of systematic mechanisms that together form a coherent and trainable method of subtle-detail acting. Each category of results—facial micro-expressions, bodily micro-movements, and

vocal nuances—contributes to a multidimensional framework in which micro-level actions serve emotional authenticity, narrative clarity, and audience engagement. The following subsections present not merely descriptive observations but analytical insights into how these subtle details function within a broader systematic approach.

1) Enhanced Facial Expression Control

Pacino's facial micro-expressions illustrate how minimal muscular adjustments can carry substantial emotional weight when viewed through the cinematic lens. Micro-actions such as the slight tightening of the jaw, momentary narrowing of the eyes, or faint smirks operate as controlled emotional cues, revealing internal psychological shifts while maintaining subtlety. These expressions demonstrate the principle of expressive economy, in which small-scale muscle movements achieve maximal emotional impact.

From a methodological perspective, the use of such micro-expressions corresponds to a trainable component of the systematic approach. By isolating specific muscle groups—an approach informed by Ekman's FACS and actor training techniques—performers can learn to calibrate intensity, duration, and timing with precision. This calibration supports emotional authenticity while ensuring that expressions remain consistent across multiple takes. Thus, facial micro-expressions function as a structured layer of the systematic method, enabling actors to externalize internal motivations with cinematic nuance.



Figure 1 Screenshot from *Scent of a Woman* (1992).

Note: Frank's restrained facial reaction as Charlie explains his school dilemma.

Source: Brest, M. (Director). (1992). *Scent of a woman* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

In another scene, when Frank reacts to Charlie's explanation of his dilemma at school, the micro-tensing of his jaw and the slight downturn of his lips reveal restrained concern and judgment, demonstrating the actor's ability to convey complex internal emotions through minute facial adjustments. Observational notes indicate that these subtle movements engage the audience subconsciously, eliciting an empathetic response and creating a sense of intimacy with the character.

2) Precision in Body Language and Gesture

Pacino's bodily subtleties—weight shifts, subtle cane movements, restrained posture adjustments, and fine motor gestures—reveal how physical economy contributes to character integrity. These micro-movements reflect a reduction of psychological gesture principles into miniature forms, creating physical expressions of internal intention without overt action. For example, Frank Slade's slight hesitation before touching environmental surfaces articulates vulnerability and sensory dependence, embodying the character's lived experience of blindness.

These actions also demonstrate how bodily micro-movements serve as repeatable and consciously controlled units within a systematic method. By compressing larger theatrical gestures into small-scale cinematic equivalents, actors can maintain psychological realism

suited for close-up shots. This modulation reinforces narrative clarity and enhances the audience's subconscious perception of character psychology. As such, bodily micro-movements represent a second structured module within the systematic approach, integrating physical intention, emotional restraint, and camera awareness.



Figure 2 Screenshot from *Scent of a Woman* (1992).

Note: Frank's subtle physical gestures while navigating the hotel hallway with his cane.

Source: Brest, M. (Director). (1992). *Scent of a woman* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

In quieter, less dramatic moments, such as when Frank navigates the hotel hallway with his cane, each micro-gesture is equally meaningful. The slight hesitation before touching a doorknob, the measured pace of his steps, and the careful scanning of the environment with his hand and body subtly convey vulnerability, dependence, and adaptation to blindness. These physical subtleties communicate narrative and emotional information without dialogue, illustrating the power of precise body language in film acting.

3) Vocal Nuances and Timing

The vocal dimension of Pacino's performance reveals another critical mechanism of subtle-detail acting: micro-rhythmic vocal structure. Slight variations in pitch, intentional pauses, breath modulation, and tonal shifts serve not merely as emotional indicators but as narrative devices that guide audience attention and shape scene rhythm. In the courtroom monologue, for example, carefully placed pauses constitute "narrative emphasis points" that punctuate moral arguments and build dramatic momentum.

These vocal choices demonstrate how sound can function as a systematizable expressive tool within actor training. By practicing controlled breath patterns, calibrated pauses, and tonal modulation, performers can develop a nuanced vocal vocabulary that supports psychological coherence and emotional layering. This vocal precision reinforces the systematic approach by forming a third trainable module, complementing facial and bodily techniques.

4) Integrated System of Subtle-Detail Acting

The study confirmed that the most compelling performances were those in which facial expressions, body movements, and vocal subtleties were intentionally coordinated. For instance, in the scene where Frank comforts Charlie after a tense confrontation, the actor simultaneously softens his gaze, leans slightly forward, and lowers his voice tone. The integration of these subtle-details conveys reassurance and authority without overt explanation. Similarly, during the restaurant scene, Frank's smirk, lean-back posture, and casual vocal inflection work together to portray skepticism tempered with intrigue. This integrated system allows for coherent character portrayal across different scenes, ensuring that subtle emotional cues remain consistent, reinforcing the narrative and the viewer's engagement.

Overall, the research results indicate that a structured, systematic approach to subtle-detail acting significantly improves actor performance across facial, bodily, and vocal dimensions. By applying this method in critical film scenes—such as Frank's first restaurant meeting, his

careful navigation of hotel corridors, the tango sequence, the intimate conversations with Charlie, and the courtroom speech—actors can convey complex emotions, character depth, and narrative information without explicit exposition. The integration of micro-expressions, controlled body language, and vocal modulation enhances both performance authenticity and audience engagement, confirming the central premise of the study: that micro-detail acting is a trainable, multidimensional, and essential component of high-quality film performance.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study examined subtle-detail acting in Al Pacino's performance in *Scent of a Woman* through a systematic analytical framework integrating facial micro-expressions, bodily micro-movements, and vocal nuances. The findings demonstrate that subtle-detail acting is not an intuitive or incidental phenomenon but a multidimensional expressive system that can be consciously trained and analytically understood. This extends previous literature, which often focused on describing minimalistic film performances without clarifying the mechanisms that underlie their expressive power.

The results further contribute to theoretical discourse by connecting subtle-detail acting to major performance theories. Stanislavski's concept of psychological motivation becomes visible in Pacino's calibrated facial tension and controlled gaze shifts, which externalize internal intention without overt emotional display. Chekhov's notion of psychological gesture similarly emerges in micro-scaled bodily adjustments, demonstrating how embodied energy can be reduced to minimal but meaningful actions. Moreover, nonverbal communication theories clarify how micro-signals—such as breath pauses or gestural hesitation—shape audience interpretation and narrative emphasis.

By synthesizing these theoretical lenses with detailed film analysis, the present study advances existing scholarship by proposing a systematic method that links observable micro-details to deeper psychological, narrative, and cinematic structures. This positions subtle-detail acting as a structured and repeatable skill set rather than a stylistic artifact or purely instinctive talent.

The findings hold several implications for actor training. First, they suggest that micro-expressions, micro-movements, and vocal nuances can be broken down into trainable units through muscle-awareness exercises, gesture minimization techniques, breath control, and vocal micro-rhythm training. Acting curricula that traditionally emphasize emotional immersion may benefit from incorporating modules that develop fine-grained physical and vocal precision suitable for the camera.

For film directors, the systematic approach offers a vocabulary for communicating subtle adjustments that shape character psychology without altering core performance. Understanding how facial, bodily, and vocal micro-elements interact allows directors to design shot scales, blocking, and rhythm that amplify the expressive power of subtle detail.

For performance theory, the study contributes an interdisciplinary model linking acting theories, psychology, kinesics, and film language. This integration strengthens conceptual clarity around what subtle-detail acting is and how it functions within cinematic storytelling.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, as a single-case analysis centered on one actor and one film, the findings cannot be generalized across genres, performance styles, or cultural contexts without further comparative studies. Second, although the coding system increases analytical rigor, interpretive judgments remain partly subjective and influenced by the researcher's perceptual framework. Third, the study lacks empirical audience reception data that could quantitatively measure how micro-details affect emotional engagement or narrative comprehension.

Future research may expand this work by analyzing multiple performers known for subtle-detail acting, comparing cross-cultural performance conventions, or employing biometric or eye-tracking methods to examine how audiences perceive micro-level details. Studies

combining qualitative performance analysis with computational tools—such as automated face-tracking or voice-pattern analysis—could further refine the systematic approach proposed here.

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