

THE POWER OF THE UNSPOKEN: SILENCE AND SUBTLE PERFORMANCE IN FILM

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 7 November 2025 **Revised:** 21 November 2025 **Published:** 9 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This Article aims to analyze the power of the unspoken: silence and subtle performance in film ‘Scent of a Woman’ starring by Al Pacino as a case study, focusing on the silent performance of the role of Frank Slade. Through multi-level text analysis, lens language interpretation and performance theory. The study found that silence is not just a blank in dialogue, but also a space for emotional outburst. Al Pacino achieved a profound display of the character's inner world through micro-details such as eyes, breathing, and body movements, which enhanced the narrative tension of the film and the resonance of the audience. This paper enriches the understanding of non-verbal performance in film and television performance theory, and provides theoretical reference and practical guidance for future performance teaching and film and television creation.

Keywords: The Power of the Unspoken, emotional communication, Film; Silence and Subtle Performance

CITATION INFORMATION: Du, J., & Potiwetchakul, S. (2025). The Power of the Unspoken: Silence and Subtle Performance in Film. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(12), 39.

INTRODUCTION

Film performance, as a core component of audio-visual art, goes far beyond the scope of language communication. With the development of film media, the audience's demand for delicate performances is growing, especially in psychological dramas, biographies and realistic films, where silence has become a key means of conveying complex emotions and inner activities. Silence is not simply "silence", but a silent language system constructed by actors through delicate eyes, facial muscles, breathing rhythm and body posture.

Since its release in 1992, *"Scent of a Woman"* has been a film that deeply depicts the inner world of characters. Al Pacino perfectly interprets the charm of silence and detailed performance with the actor of Frank Slade, a blind retired officer. The large number of silent scenes in the film not only promotes the development of the plot, but also becomes a carrier of the psychological conflicts and personality of the characters. In particular, Pacino's performance, his restrained emotional outbursts and exquisite non-verbal communication have constructed a three-dimensional, real and tense character image, which resonates strongly with the audience. (Barsam, Monahan, 2020)

Although there have been many theories in the history of performing arts involving the inner experience and action expression of characters, such as Stanislavsky's "experiential" system and Michael Chekhov's "psycho-action" method, there is a relative lack of theoretical discussions on the details of silent performance. Silence is not only a pause in performance, but also a carrier of emotions. It places extremely high demands on the actor's body control, inner emotional mobilization and the audience's understanding.

This article will focus on Pacino's silent performance in *"Scent of a Woman"*, combine specific film clips for micro-interpretation, and analyze how silence becomes a powerful tool for non-verbal communication and its unique function in the film narrative structure from the dual perspectives of lens language and performance theory. It is hoped that this will deepen the understanding of the power of silence in film performance theory and provide a practical guidance path for film teaching and practice.

This study intends to comprehensively analyze the non-verbal performance skills of Frank Slade's character when silent through a detailed analysis of the silent performance in *"Scent of a Woman"*, and reveal the performance logic of its micro details. Explore how silence and detailed performance work together to shape the role and convey emotions, and promote the development of the plot. Analyze the auxiliary role of directors and photographers in lens design for silent performance, and clarify the interactive relationship between audio-visual language and performance. Enrich the understanding of silence and non-verbal performance in film and television performance theory, and put forward specific teaching and practical suggestions.

How does Al Pacino employ specific nonverbal techniques—such as micro-expressions, gaze patterns, breathing rhythms, bodily posture, and subtle gestures—to construct silence and subtle performance in *"Scent of a Woman"* (1992)?

In what ways do the director's cinematic choices (e.g., shot composition, use of close-ups, editing rhythm, and lighting design) interact with Pacino's silent performance to enhance narrative tension and character depth?

What theoretical implications does the analysis of Pacino's silent performance hold for acting theory, emotional communication, and cross-cultural performance aesthetics, particularly when examined through the combined lens of Western acting theory and Eastern concepts of "emptiness" and stillness?

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) Foundational Acting Theories: Stanislavski, Chekhov, and Beyond

The Stanislavskian system—emphasizing internal experience, psychological motivation, and the unity of inner emotion with external action—offers essential methodological tools for analyzing the expressive mechanisms underlying performance. (Stanislavski, 2008) Techniques such as affective memory and the “psychological gesture,” further developed by Michael Chekhov, provide insight into how actors translate inner states into observable physical forms (Chekhov, 2002). However, existing literature often focuses on dialogue-driven emotion or large-scale physical action, with comparatively limited attention to how actors maintain psychological coherence in extended moments of silence, relying solely on micro-level expressions such as minute ocular movements or shifts in breath. This study builds upon the classical foundations but shifts the analytical focus downward—to the subtle, micro-physiological manifestations of internal experience—thereby extending the applicability of established acting theory to silent-performance contexts.

2) Theories and Research on Nonverbal Communication in Film

The film medium tightly integrates actors' subtle facial expressions, eye contact, and body movements with imaging techniques (close-ups, depth of field, editing). Film studies and aesthetics literature points out that shot selection amplifies or compresses performance details, causing certain nonverbal signals to be “magnified into meaning” in the audience's perception (e.g., Barsam & Monahan's discussion of visual language) (Barsam & Monahan, 2020). However, existing discussions tend to focus on technical aspects (how to present these through cinematography and editing) or cognitive psychology (how the audience recognizes facial expressions), rather than forming a comprehensive framework that connects “actor's micro-expression—camera presentation—audience's emotional response.” This study attempts to present this connection through specific image text analysis, exploring how shot design works in conjunction with actors' subtle movements to create emotional tension (Liu, 2019).

3) Empirical and Theoretical Research on “Silence” or “Subtle Performance” in Film

While some studies have addressed the narrative function of silence (e.g., discussing how silence constructs suspense, intervals, or symbolic meaning), literature specifically examining silence from a performance technique perspective (especially focusing on actors' subtle performances) remains limited (wang, 2021). Existing articles on nonverbal symbols or performance details are mostly descriptive summaries or fragmented analyses, lacking coherent theoretical explanations and cross-scene comparisons. Furthermore, research on how actors influence audience emotions through “micro-movements” such as breathing and eye contact in dialogue-free situations often lacks juxtaposed analysis of visual techniques (camera work, editing). This study uses “*Scent of a Woman*” as a case study, employing multi-segment cross-scene comparisons to address these methodological and theoretical shortcomings (Li, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study adopts a qualitative, multi-layered analytical approach designed to examine how silence and subtle performance operate in *Scent of a Woman* (1992). To ensure transparency and replicability, each analytical tool is clearly operationalized, and the overall procedure is articulated with detailed criteria and systematic steps. The film is analyzed as a single-case study, chosen not only for its narrative prominence but also for the extraordinary density of silent moments in Al Pacino's performance as Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade. While a single-case design limits the breadth and generalizability of findings, it allows for the depth and precision necessary for micro-level performance analysis. This focus is justified because Pacino's performance is uniquely dependent on gaze patterns, breath control, and restrained physicality—elements that make *Scent of a Woman* an ideal case for studying silence as a performative technique.

To identify the material for close reading, the entire film was first viewed multiple times with the specific aim of detecting sequences in which silence is not merely the absence of dialogue but a site of expressive meaning. Scenes were selected when they contained extended or emotionally significant pauses—typically five seconds or longer—combined with clear instances of nonverbal behavior such as micro-expressions, shifts in posture, controlled breathing, hesitation in gesture, or deliberate stillness. Cinematic emphasis was also treated as a criterion: moments framed through close-ups, slow editing rhythms, or isolating lighting were prioritized because these stylistic choices highlight the expressive potential of silence. Applying these criteria resulted in the identification of twelve moments of significant silent performance across the film. From these twelve, four representative scenes were chosen for detailed examination, providing a balanced range of emotional contexts, narrative functions, and expressive modalities.

The analysis itself proceeded shot by shot. Each selected scene was segmented into individual shots, and each shot was examined repeatedly at slowed playback speed to observe fine-grained details such as micro-movements of the facial muscles, fluctuations in breath, muscular tension, or small gestures that might otherwise be imperceptible. Rather than relying on intuition, the analysis employed a set of operational definitions derived from acting theory and nonverbal communication research. Micro-expressions were interpreted as rapid facial movements that reveal involuntary emotional leakage; shifts in gaze were treated as indicators of attention, intention, or inner conflict; changes in breathing rhythm were understood as somatic reflections of psychological tension; and posture or stillness was examined for its role in signaling emotional withholding or vulnerability. These observations formed the empirical foundation for interpreting how Pacino constructs meaning through silence.

To understand how performance interacts with the cinematic apparatus, the study also examined specific elements of film form: shot scale, camera angle, shot duration, lighting, framing, and camera movement. These aspects were analyzed in terms of how they shape the visibility, legibility, and emotional force of silent performance. For example, close-ups were studied for their ability to magnify micro-expressions, while long takes were examined for how they allow emotional tension to accumulate without interruption. Camera movements such as slow push-ins were treated as collaborative gestures that align the audience's attention with the actor's inner transformation. Lighting was also scrutinized, particularly in scenes where directional light isolates Pacino's face, allowing subtle muscular tensions or changes in eye focus to become meaningful. This integration of film grammar ensures that the analysis does not treat performance and cinematography as separate phenomena, but as interdependent components that co-produce the expressive power of silence.

The theoretical framework guiding interpretation combines three complementary sources: the Stanislavskian tradition, the Chekhovian concept of psychological gesture, and Eastern aesthetics emphasizing stillness and "active emptiness." Stanislavski's principle of inner experience supports the interpretation of micro-signals—such as tightening around the eyes or a shift in breathing—as external manifestations of internal states. Chekhov's notion of psychological gesture provides a lens for understanding how even small bodily movements, like the subtle forward inclination of Pacino's torso during confrontation, express broader emotional or moral attitudes. Eastern aesthetic concepts such as *ma* (the meaningful interval) and *liubai* (expressive blankness) further frame silence as an active, rather than passive, artistic device. This theoretical triangulation enables the study to read Pacino's stillness not as absence, but as a dynamic space where tension, intention, and emotional resonance accumulate.

The workflow of the analysis followed a consistent structure: after selecting the scenes, each shot was examined for both performance detail and cinematic design; observations were recorded in continuous prose, focusing on how physical signals, visual framing, and temporal rhythm collaborate to produce meaning. Theoretical interpretation was then applied to these

observations to explain not only what is happening in each moment, but why these details matter and how they contribute to the film's broader emotional and aesthetic impact. Through this systematic approach, the methodology ensures that each research question can be answered with clarity, coherence, and analytical depth.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Scent of a Woman (1992), directed by Martin Brest and featuring Al Pacino in an Academy Award-winning performance, tells the story of a blind, retired Army colonel, Frank Slade, and a young prep school student, Charlie Simms, who is hired to care for him over Thanksgiving weekend. The narrative explores themes of dignity, despair, mentorship, and moral courage, culminating in transformative experiences for both characters. What distinguishes this film from conventional character dramas is not merely its dialogue or plot, but its powerful use of silence and nonverbal communication.

Throughout the film, silence is strategically employed to allow the actors—particularly Pacino—to convey nuanced emotional states without relying on spoken language. In moments of moral tension, emotional vulnerability, or internal struggle, the absence of dialogue often becomes more telling than words themselves. Pacino's portrayal of Colonel Slade is particularly rich in subtle detail: the pauses between sentences, the shift of his head when listening, the controlled breathing before a decision, or the way he holds his cane—all contribute to a performance layered with psychological depth.

These silent expressions serve multiple functions: they reveal inner conflict, maintain narrative tension, deepen character relationships, and invite audience empathy. The deliberate pacing of these moments draws viewers into the characters' psychological landscapes, prompting a more introspective and immersive viewing experience. Thus, the film offers an ideal case for studying how silence, paired with subtle-detail performance techniques, can significantly enhance storytelling in cinematic acting.

The power of the unspoken: silence and subtle performance in film “*Scent of a Woman*”.

A detailed analysis of the silent segments in *Scent of a Woman* shows that Al Pacino's performance deeply reflects the core function of silence as non-verbal communication. In many key plots, silence not only serves as a catharsis for the character's inner emotions, but also serves as a key node in the narrative rhythm, driving the continuous accumulation of plot tension.

For example, in the conversation between Frank Slade and his student Charlie at the beginning of the film, several pauses and moments of silence convey the character's resentment and helplessness. Pacino conveys deep emotions beyond words to the audience through slow blinking, slightly trembling lips, and pain in his eyes.



Figure1 Frank Slade (played by Al Pacino) in hotel.

Note: Frank Slade (played by Al Pacino) sitting silently in a hotel room. He is preparing to commit suicide, long silences

Source: Screenshot from “Scent of a Woman”, directed by Martin Brest, Universal Pictures, 1992.

In the hotel scene where he is preparing to commit suicide, long silences, cramped breathing, and slight body movements create a tense atmosphere of the character's mental breakdown, which makes the audience feel the same.



Figure 2 Frank Slade (played by Al Pacino) is holding gun.

Note: Close-up of Frank Slade's facial expression.

Source: Screenshot from “Scent of a Woman”, directed by Martin Brest, Universal Pictures, 1992.

The director cleverly uses close-ups and soft lighting to magnify Pacino's detailed performance, making even tiny changes in expression become a carrier of emotional flow. In the hearing at the end, Colonel Slade's silence reflects his inner firmness and awakening. By raising his head, adjusting his breathing, and slightly tensing his muscles, he conveys the character's dignity and sense of victory. At this time, silence is not only a pause in language, but also a concentrated manifestation of inner strength.



Figure 3 Frank Slade (played by Al Pacino)

Note: The actor's body movements and facial expressions can reflect his intense emotions, and his counterattack can be felt without the need for lines.

Source: Screenshot from "Scent of a Woman", directed by Martin Brest, Universal Pictures, 1992.

In addition, the silent space provides the audience with room for emotional resonance and psychological projection. Without clear language instructions, the audience participates in the emotional construction by interpreting the non-verbal signals of the actors, forming a richer and more personalized viewing experience. Silence is not only an artistic choice for actors and directors, but also an important medium for emotional interaction among the audience.

In summary, silence, as a high-density non-verbal expression method, combines the actor's subtle-detailed performance and the director's audio-visual language design, and becomes an indispensable artistic element in "Scent of a Woman" to shape three-dimensional characters and convey complex emotions.

Silence is a highly complex and expressive artistic method in film performances. Its effectiveness depends on the actor's precise control of his own body language and emotional rhythm. The reason why Al Pacino's silent acting skills in "Scent of a Woman" are so shocking is not only because he deeply understands the psychological activities of the character's heart, but also reflects his excellent physical expression ability. In a silent state, he can convey complex emotions through subtle changes in facial expressions, subtle changes in eyes, rhythmic adjustments of breathing, and tiny movements of limbs, which places extremely high demands on the actor's physical awareness and emotional mobilization ability.



Figure 4 Frank Slade (Al Pacino) dances the tango with Donna in a hotel restaurant.

Note: The actor uses facial expressions and eye control to show that he is a blind man dancing, and his body movements show his respect for women and his innate education.

Source: Screenshot from Scent of a Woman, directed by Martin Brest, Universal Pictures, 1992.

The performance of silence is by no means "inaction", but an "intentional" expression. Pacino accurately controls every detail and fully displays the character's inner anxiety, struggle, pride and helplessness in a silent space. His interpretation turns silence into a language full of tension, breaking the traditional narrative framework with language as the core. The director and photographer also played a key role in the design of silent scenes, using close-ups, light and shadow, tones and changes in editing rhythm to amplify the appeal of the actors' detailed performances, visualize the emotional fluctuations in silence, and enhance the audience's immersion.

In addition, silence provides the audience with space for participation in interpretation and emotional resonance. Different audiences can project diverse understandings and feelings in silent performances based on their own life experiences and emotional backgrounds. This openness gives silent performances a deeper artistic value and social significance. Silence has become a universal expression that transcends language and cultural boundaries, showing a unique universal emotional power.

From a cultural perspective, Western films usually emphasize the expressiveness of language and dialogue, while Eastern dramas have always focused on the aesthetics of "blank" and "stillness", emphasizing the expression of the inner world through the flow of emotions in stillness. Pacino's silent performance, which precisely combines the performance wisdom of the East and the West, shows a restrained and profound performance style, which is worthy of further discussion and reference in film and television performance theory.

Therefore, more attention should be paid to the training of silence and details in the teaching and practice of film and television performance. Cultivating the actor's physical sensitivity, inner emotional regulation ability and understanding of the lens language will help to enhance the expressiveness of his silent performance. At the same time, the director and the photography team should reasonably design the audio-visual elements of the silent scene, give the actors room to play, and make silence an organic part of the film's narrative and emotional expression.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that silence in *Scent of a Woman* is not merely the absence of speech but a deliberate and highly expressive mode of performance. Through the close examination of selected scenes, it becomes evident that Al Pacino communicates psychological depth through micro-level behaviors—minute shifts in gaze, fluctuations in breathing, subtle muscular tension, and controlled stillness. These physical cues, though minimal, carry significant emotional weight and shape the viewer's understanding of Frank Slade's internal struggles. The analysis confirms that silence functions as an active expressive strategy, enabling the actor to convey complexity that dialogue might oversimplify.

The relationship between performance and film form further underscores the expressive function of silence. Pacino's micro-behaviors gain interpretive force because the film's cinematography isolates, magnifies, and structures them. Close-ups capture fleeting tensions around the eyes or mouth; long takes allow emotion to accumulate gradually; slow push-ins guide the viewer toward the character's interiority. Rather than serving as a neutral recording device, the camera collaborates with the actor by framing and sustaining moments of stillness, turning minimal physical action into a site of intense meaning. The film thus illustrates how silent performance emerges through the interplay between acting technique and the cinematic apparatus.

These findings contribute to acting theory by extending classical concepts into the realm of minimalistic performance. Stanislavski's principle that inner experience must manifest outwardly is exemplified in Pacino's detailed physiological control: small breaths, restrained gestures, or slight shifts in focus reveal emotional intention without overt action. Chekhov's idea of psychological gesture also proves useful, as Pacino's subtle bodily inclinations operate

as condensed expressions of broader emotional impulses. The study shows that even reduced or miniature gestures can carry the same psychological truth as more pronounced actions when framed appropriately by the camera.

The integration of Eastern aesthetics further enriches the interpretation of silence. Concepts such as *ma* (the meaningful interval) and *liubai* (expressive blankness) emphasize the generative potential of stillness and restraint. Several of Pacino's silent moments align with these principles: emotion intensifies not through movement or vocalization, but through deliberate non-action. Silence becomes a space that invites the viewer to project, anticipate, and interpret. This cross-cultural framework highlights how the expressive power of silence resonates beyond Western performance conventions and demonstrates that stillness itself can function as an aesthetic resource in cinema.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the findings carry practical implications. For acting pedagogy, they underscore the importance of training performers to cultivate fine-grained control of gaze, breath, and muscular tension, particularly in close-up-driven screen acting. For direction and cinematography, the results highlight that silent performance requires intentional support from visual design: camera distance, lighting, and pacing must be aligned with the subtleties of the actor's work. These insights also extend to film analysis more broadly, suggesting that silence should be treated as a multi-layered expressive system rather than a simple pause in dialogue.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. As a single-case analysis, its findings cannot be generalized across films, genres, or acting traditions. In addition, the interpretive approach, while grounded in theory, remains subjective and may not capture the full range of viewer responses. Future research could expand this framework by comparing multiple films that rely heavily on silent or subtle performance, by analyzing actor-camera interaction across genres, or by incorporating empirical audience studies to measure how viewers perceive micro-level expressive cues.

In conclusion, this study has shown that silence in *Scent of a Woman* operates as a nuanced and powerful expressive force created through the collaboration of actor and camera. By integrating Western acting theory with Eastern aesthetics and close cinematic analysis, the research demonstrates how minimal physical signals can produce profound emotional meaning. The findings contribute to performance scholarship, enrich cross-cultural perspectives on acting, and offer practical insights for performers and filmmakers. Ultimately, silence emerges not as emptiness, but as a dynamic space where emotion, tension, and narrative significance converge.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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