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A multimodal analysis of vitality forms in the play Krapp's Last Tape

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze a theatre fragment utilizing the concept of forms of vitality as proposed by developmental psychologist Daniel Stern. The selected fragment belongs to the play Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett. Three performances of it, each by a renowned actor, were subjected to an ELAN program. A comparative analysis was made using an ad-hoc observational code containing four categories: forms of vitality in the actor's movements, voice, scene sounds other than voice, and lighting. Subcategories were created based on attributes described by Stern (i.e. sudden, gentle, effortful), and were assigned along a temporal line. Prevalent forms of vitality per category were identified in each case, plus a comparison between categories. Finally, a description of the effect of these different display and combination of forms of vitality on the experience of spectators is discussed.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett's play Krapp's Last Tape, written and performed for the first time in 1958, features one character, an old man obsessed with the tapes he has been recording for many years, reflecting the changes in his life. The play therefore deals strongly with the issue of time. Three performances of this play were selected for this paper: Robert Wilson (under his own direction); John Hurt (directed by Atom Egoyan in a film version) and the Argentinian actor Héctor Bidonde (directed by Augusto Pérez). One section from the play – as Krapp first speaks, while looking for a particular tape – was chosen. The three versions of this short excerpt were analyzed and compared utilizing the concept of *forms of vitality* proposed by developmental psychologist Daniel Stern (1985, 2010). Forms of vitality are perceptual Gestalts created by the integration of movement, force, space, time and direction/intentionality. They belong to not just one sensory modality but to several: vision, hearing, touch. Regardless of content, forms of vitality concern the specific way in which dynamic events unfold in space and time, being crucial both to interpersonal encounters and the performing arts.

Background

The notion of forms of vitality was proposed by Daniel Stern originally under the name "vitality affects" in the context of studying mother-infant interactions (Stern 1985). Later he further specified the concept and broadened its scope to psychotherapy and the arts (Stern 2010).

There are few empirical studies of forms of vitality; they have been conducted in the area of tango music and dance (Shifres, Pereira Ghiena, Herrera and Bordoni 2012), neuroscience (Di Cesare, Di Dio, Rochat, Sinigaglia,

Bruschweiler-Stern, Stern, and Rizzolatti, 2013), theater (Stern, 2010), autism (Rochat, Veroni, Bruschweiler-Stern, Pieraccini, Bonnet-Brilhault, Barthélémy, Malvy, Sinigaglia, Stern and Rizzolatti 2013), and developmental psychology (Español, Martínez, Bordoni, Camarasa and Carretero 2014; Español, Bordoni, Martínez, Camarasa and Carretero 2015; Español and Shifres 2015; Martínez, Español and Pérez 2018). A direct antecedent to this paper is Weeks (2013) who also studied Krapp's Last Tape performed by Wilson and Hurt, utilizing the concept of forms of vitality.

Method

The three performances were subjected to the ELAN, a computer program with a tier-based data model for multi-level, multi-participant annotation of time-based media.

An ad-hoc observational code containing four categories was created: forms of vitality in the actor's movements, voice, sound scenes other than voice, and lighting. Voice was analyzed as a separate category from other scene sounds because of its obvious importance as carrier of linguistic meaning.

Each excerpt was analyzed in detail using the program. With repeated observations by all four authors, subcategories based on attributes described by Stern were created for each category and assigned along a temporal line, as shown in Fig. 1.

Prevalent forms of vitality per category were identified in each version. Also, a comparison to understand the relation between categories was made.

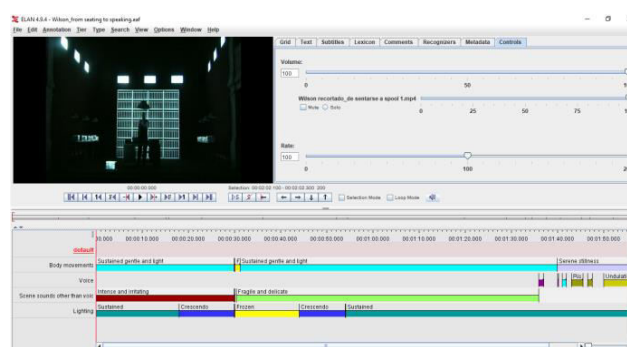


Figure. 1. A view of the tiers in the ELAN program analyzing Wilson's version of the excerpt. In the upper part of the graphic with colours the timeline can be seen. The four categories are shown on the left, in black font: body's movements, voice, sound scenes other than voice, lighting. Subcategories assigned to each moment are shown in different colors: sustained, gentle, frozen, etc.

Results

Wilson's version is particularly refined in all four categories. His movements are sustained, gentle and light most of the time, with only one abrupt and one frozen moment. His voice has clear profiles which are either effortful, directed, sustained or undulating. The rest of sound scenes can be divided in two long moments: intense and irritating first, very fragile and delicate later. These two moments are clearly separated by one clear cut abrupt sound, and then a long moment of silence which in perceptual experience feels frozen and intense as if it were a sound itself. His use of lighting displays crescendo, sustained and frozen forms of vitality with only one moment of abruptness. Regarding the relation among the four categories, sometimes forms of vitality coincide in light, body movement and sound, this coincidence being clearly emphasized. One of these moments is created by an abruptness in movement, sound and lighting, followed by a coincidence in the frozen quality of the three. At some specific moments the four categories are in contrast with one another, and these contrasts are also deliberately emphasized. One of these instances happens at the beginning of the excerpt (in the whole performance it starts at the beginning of the play, to which the moment being analyzed is contiguous), when body movements are sustained, gentle and light along with a sustained lighting, but, in contrast, the sound is intense and irritating.

Bidonde's body movements are mainly energetic and directed, with some moments of sustained, release, gentle and stillness. His voice is also mainly energetic and directed, effortful, sustained and releasing in short moments. The rest of scene sounds, scarce, are clear cut and intense irritating. Lighting does not play a specific role but, closer to everyday lighting, is sustained.

In Hurt's version, one long moment of frozen movement and two other moments of almost frozen are underlined. There are also several moments of effortful movements, abrupt and energetic release. His voice is, in convergence with movements, also effortful, releasing, with just one moment of sequential suspension and one of sustained quality. The rest of the sounds are, like in Bidonde's case, everyday sounds, but in Hurt's version the sound of a gentle rain is present, so there is a sustained and light sound quality all through the fragment, only interrupted by the sudden noises of some of the character's actions.

As can be seen in fig. 2, in Wilson's time line there are long phrases in movement, sounds and lighting. Contrasts and coincidences are carefully elaborated in multimodal compositions. In the first phrase, the intensity of sound opposes the gentleness of movement. In the second phrase, the fragile and delicate sound goes along with the sustained, gentle and light movement and the crescendo and sustained qualities of lighting. The frozen moments are carefully simultaneous.



Figure 2. Wilson's time line analysis.

In Bidonde's version, the lighting is constant. There are subsequent sequences of energy and release which are not elaborate in multimodal compositions with lighting like in Wilson's but sometimes are combined with sounds.



Figure 3. Bidonde's time line analysis.

In Hurt's case, the frozen quality of his movements is prevalent, surrounded by some energetic ones. The multimodal compositions are scarce. Several of the phrases in the first two categories are short.

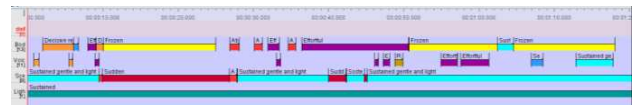


Figure 4. Hurt's time line analysis.

These differences between versions create quite diverse effects in perceptual experiences, described below in the discussion.

Discussion

Wilson's version of this play provokes an intense aesthetic experience, while also generating a sense of distance between the spectator and the inner world of the character. Bidonde's version draws the spectator much closer to the psychology of the character: it portrays a grumpy but also energetic, impulsive and somewhat clumsy Krapp who brings forth a feeling of sympathy in the audience. Hurt's performance, instead, embodies a depressive, nostalgic, reflecting Krapp, eliciting feelings closer to hopelessness and despair.

Among other differences between the productions, it is to be noted that the rain effect, present in both Hurt's and Wilson's versions, is used differently in each case. In the first, the rain causes a very gentle and light sound, rendering a nostalgic atmosphere, in tone with the character's personality portrayed here and, also, as a reference to constant rain in Beckett's homeland, Ireland. In Wilson's case, instead, the rain is present from the very start of the play, as a heavy, all encompassing constant strong sound that becomes intense and irritating. This rain in the actual performance lasts for a long time (approximately 23 minutes) and stops with a startling sound followed by prolonged silence. This rain, a storm here, creates a different experience in the spectator from that in Hurt's version: by being encompassing, overwhelming, it generates a silencing effect in the actor's movements which stresses the distance with him, creating at the same time a powerful aesthetic experience. This strong prolonged sound is also an interesting prelude to the upcoming silence, which then becomes intense too.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the previous results. The first stresses the importance and effect of forms of vitality already stated by Stern. All three versions of the play analyzed here are loyal to Beckett's written theater piece. However, the different styles with which actions and movements are done and staged generate markedly different

experiences in the spectator, conveying diverging psychological traits of the character. In other words, forms of vitality, in their different modalities and in their combination, generate different meanings and sensorial experiences, even though the basic narrative and the words being spoken are the same.

The other conclusion is related to the theatrical traditions to which these versions belong. Bidonde's and Hurt's versions subscribe to a naturalistic canon, which accounts for several of the differences with Wilson's version. In the latter case, the performance may be related to certain aspects of contemporary visual art, performance art, and choreography (Goldberg 2004:65), and the whole excerpt appears as a composition of forms of vitality in which the coincidence of two or three sensorial modalities frames and highlights specific moments of contrast. In the other two performances, forms of vitality are not subject to a special refinement and work: they appear closer to the ways in which forms of vitality display in everyday life.

Stern states that forms of vitality are shown in a purified form by the arts because dynamic features are usually amplified, refined and repeated in performances (Stern 2012: 75). However, he limits his study of these forms to the time-based arts, which for him are music, dance, cinema and "certain theater". He thinks that these arts take place in real time, while language based-based art, like traditional theater, fiction and poetry are usually driven by the narrative process and take place in both real time and narrative time, thus complicating the situation.

We can see in the results of this paper that, in line with Stern's statements, in the more "time-based" performance by Wilson, forms of vitality are clearly refined and elaborated as multimodal compositions, while in the more "traditional" theatrical performances by both Bidonde and Hurt, forms of vitality are present, but their occurrence is similar to everyday life: there does not seem to be a specific or clear elaboration of them.

This paper is meant to contribute to the systematic study of the sensorial non-verbal experiences elicited by theater. It also aims at developing a method for the empirical study of forms of vitality as dynamic events, of which time and movement are key aspects. Finally, it intends to deepen our comprehension about how multimodality and the relation between the different senses work.

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