

The theory of Affect attunements

First applications in my current practice

To begin with, I would like to focus on the perspective of Daniel Stern's prominent work in psychoanalysis *"The Interpersonal World of the Infant"* (1985), in which he describes the development of four interrelated senses of self, especially the first two years of life.

In Chapter 7, *"The Sense of a Subjective Self"*, Stern (1985) explains and analyzes the meaning and modes of affect attunement in human relations and (on a broader perspective) in art.

It is true that it is the first time that I have studied about the phenomenon of affect attunement and it caught my attention as it gives answers to my inner need of understanding behaviors and sharing inner feeling states.

"Affect attunement is the performance of behaviors that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state without imitating the exact behavioral expression of the inner state." (Stern, 1985, p. 142) Stern's definition results from a wide research on actions-reactions between mothers and their infants, within childhood's development, which reveal that attunement behaviors shift the focus of attention to what is behind the behavior and that means, actually, the quality of feeling that is being shared.

The question that Stern poses is *"How can you get inside of other people's subjective experience and then let them know that you have arrived there, without using words?"* (Stern, 1985, p. 138) and actually, it applies to my question of discovering the mechanisms and general features in developing human relations in creative practices.

In general, *"the embedding of attunements is most often so subtle that unless one is looking for it, or asking why any behavior is performed exactly the way it is, the attunements will pass unnoticed"*. (Stern, 1985, p.141). Nevertheless, they have three characteristics which make them ideal for accomplishing the *intersubjective* sharing of affect:

1. They give the impression that a kind of imitation has occurred.
2. The matching is largely cross-modal (f. e. the intensity level and duration of a girl's voice is matched by the mother's body movements).

3. What is being matched is not the other's person behavior, but rather some aspect of the behavior that reflects the person's feeling state. Thus, the match appears to occur between the expressions of inner state. *"We appear to be dealing with behavior, as expression...and the vehicles of transfer are metaphor and analogue."* (Stern, 1985, p.142)

Little below, Stern asks that if the referent is the feeling state, *"how do we conceptualize its representation so that it can act as a blueprint?"* (Stern, 1985, p.143). As an answer to this question, he introduces the terms *"affect matching"* or *"affect contagion"* and he supports that *"these processes refer to the automatic induction of an affect in one person from seeing or hearing someone else's affect display"* (Stern, 1985, p.143). They cannot alone explain affect attunement but they prove that they are underlying mechanisms on which this phenomenon is founded.

According to Stern, two more processes *"represent the clinical terms and concepts that come closest to affect attunements"* which are: *"mirroring"* and *"echoing"*, because they are appropriately concerned with the subjective state rather than the manifest behavior (Stern, 1985, p.144). An important notice is that, especially mirroring *"involves changing the other by providing something the other did not have before or, if it was present, by consolidating it"* (Stern, 1985, p.144).

The evidence for the phenomenon of attunement is based on three dimensions or (in other words) three general features that can be matched without rendering an imitation, as Stern (1985) supports and they are: *intensity, timing and shape* (p.146), which can be broken down into *"six more specific types of match" which are "absolute intensity, intensity contour, temporal beat, rhythm, duration and shape."* (p. 146)

It is challenging for me, the fact that these mentioned features above were observed (more or less) in my artistic practice in the studio, but I have not realized it and utilize them consciously until now, as far as it concerns the investigation in establishing and developing relationships between the performers and the creation of movement material.

Stern (1985) explains that attunement is embedded in any relationship mostly through *sensory modes* and most attunements are *cross modal* (e.g. one's vocal expression is the response to the other's gestural or facial expression), an

assumption which can give other aspects to methodologies of improvisation in my practice research in order to enrich my toolbox.

Stern (1985) points out that, in these experiments which were held between mothers and infants, the main reason that mothers gave for performing an attunement was *“to be with”* their infants *“to share”, “to participate”, “to join in”* (p. 148). These functions are called *interpersonal communion* and *“communion means to share in another’s experience with no attempt to change what the person is doing or believing”* (Stern, 1985, p. 148). Linking this assumption with my artistic universe, I am interested in pathways that our internal feeling states, as forms of human experience, can be shareable with other humans, utilizing cross modal attunements.

Mechanisms for attunement to happen, are *properties and qualities “that are held in common by most or all of the modalities of perception”* (Stern, 1985, p. 152) and they allow different behavioral expressions to be transferred from one modality or form to another. It is important for me that he notices that these properties include *intensity, shape, time, motion and number*. (Stern, 1985, p.152) and he assumes that *“such qualities of perception can be abstracted by any sensory mode and then translated into other modalities of perception”* (Stern, 1985, p.152).

Stern concludes that *“the existence of these abstract representations of amodal properties permits us to experience a perceptually unified world”* (Stern, 1985, p.152).

Thus, my prototype question in the first Theory Essay, about sensing and moving with the world, as far as it concerns the phenomenon of synaesthesia, brings forward again the unity of the senses, in which Stern also refers (1985). He supports (1985) that different senses can inform us about the same features of the external world due to their capacity of sensory correspondence, due to their *primary qualities* that could be extracted from any modality and translated among all sense modes. Again, *“Intensity, form and time are usually included”* (Stern, 1985, p. 154), as philosophers have argued about basic attributes of perception that encounter the requirements of primary qualities.

In art, especially in poetry, the unity of the senses is taken for granted. A typical example of poetry in which Stern (1985) refers to, is an extract of Baudelaire’s poem, *Correspondences* (1857):

There are odors fresh as the skin of an infant,

Sweet as flutes, green as any grass

And others, corrupt, rich and triumphant.

As Stern mentions, *“Baudelaire asks us to relate smells to experiences in the domains of touch, sound, color, sensuality, finance and power”* (Stern, 1985, p.155).

Going a bit further, Stern (1985) distinguishes the *discrete categorical affects*, such as sadness or joy, from the *vitality affects*, such as explosions and fading, which are attuned to (p. 156). Vitality affects are *“those dynamic, kinetic qualities of feeling...that correspond to the momentary changes in feeling states involved in the organic process of being alive”* (p. 156) and their essentiality to an understanding of attunement. They can inform us about how a behavior is performed. *“Attuning with vitality affects permit one human to be with another in the sense of sharing likely inner experiences on an almost continuous basis”* (p. 157) and, due to the fact that they are composed of amodal qualities such as time and intensity, they inform us *how* a behavior, any behavior is performed (p.157) and probably what kind of scores I can create to experiment in my current practice.

Last but not least, both in art and behavior, there is a specific problem that relies on *“how we get from perceptions of others to feelings in ourselves”* (p. 157), as far as it concerns the communication of vitality affects, such as a gesture, in contrast with *categorical affects*, such as sadness or joy, which are directly felt by the viewer.

For example, we are going to experience a gesture directly as “forceful”, in terms of vitality affect but *“how, then, do we get from intensity, timing and shape to ‘forcefulness’?”* (p. 158). A route from getting from perception to feeling was proposed by the philosopher Suzanne Langer (1967, as cited in Stern, 1985, p.158) who suggests that in works of art *“the feeling that is presented is in fact an apparition, an illusion, a virtual feeling”* (Stern, 1985, p. 158).

The viewer is related to a performer’s behavior because the elements that the second one uses seem to present *“an aspect of felt life, felt experience”* (Stern, 1985, p. 158). He supports (1985) that *“in both art and behavior, there is also the rendering of the conventional forms”* (Stern, 1985, p. 159) and more specifically *“this is where the exact performance of the behavior, in terms of timing, intensity and shape can render multiple ‘stylistic’ versions or vitality affects of the same sign, signal or action”* (p. 159).

In my opinion, Stern's (1985) important conclusion is that "This analogous non-verbal translation from perception of another's behavior to feelings *"involves the transmutation from the perception of timing, intensity, and shape via cross-modal fluency into felt vitality affects in ourselves"* (p. 159) and it is one of the elements that I am interested in further investigation during the process, in my artistic practices. It is actually Stern's assumption that *"Attunement recasts behaviors by way of non-verbal metaphor and analogue"* (Stern, 1985, p. 161).

Reference Source

Stern, D. (1985). *The Interpersonal World Of The Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*. New York: Basic Books

First applications/ try-outs in my current practice

Based on the theory of the phenomenon of affect attunements, I thought that I could approach it in my practice and experiment with a duet of performers.

I wanted to check in reality, as far as it concerns the development of a relationship, the embedding of attunements according to the evidence and the mechanisms in which Stern (1985) refers to.

Thus, I kept in mind and my notes, the meaning of some important key-words or phrases from the theory which are:

- Imitation
- Cross-modal match
- Affect contagion
- Mirroring
- Sensory modes
- Intensity, timing and shape
- The unity of the senses
- Vitality affects
- Non-verbal Metaphor+ Analogue

I decided to create some 'open' scores for the performers in the studio, but (on purpose) I didn't include these meanings, because I wanted to observe spontaneously the performers' behavior/actions and questioning the theory into practice.

The 'open' scores that I created were simple, giving freedom to the performers and focusing on the activation and utilization of the unity of the senses, before they create a non-verbal dialogue (we worked in silence):

Score 1: Each performer has 10 min (solo) to observe the space and activate the senses of vision, hearing and touch literally walls, wood, objects and every material which exists in the space of the studio. Explore and move through space with the embodied awareness to the effect that every material has to your body/mind state.

Score 2: Utilizing this embodied knowledge to improvise together as a duet, develop a non-verbal dialogue and create a relationship based on the experience that you gained through your previous exploration.

Due to the fact that I noticed that everything that happened unexpectedly in the studio had a strong impact to the performers' inner feeling state and consequently to the way they moved, I thought about working in outdoor spaces with natural environment in order to create vulnerable conditions that could provoke mechanisms for an attunement to happen. (f. e. I noticed the impact that the sun light had to the energy and the way that performers moved or one's breathe was too intense and affected the other's movement or the sound of a motorcycle or a voice from outside intervened in the silence)

This is one of the reasons that I transferred my practice research in outdoor places, with the hope that the sensory modes in their bodies could be activated and the senses could 'open' more to the influence from the environment.

In the beginning, I kept working with the same 'open' scores but I developed them according to: a) my observation of the space where we were (being aware of the architectural elements of the space that I chose to practice) b) according to my intention to check the evidence for defining attunements (the qualities of experience that lend themselves to intermodal fluency and as I mentioned above are intensity, timing and shape) and c) looking for vitality affects to reveal.

So the next 'open' scores that I developed were:

Score 3: Improvise together as a duet and play consciously with the dimensions through space. Observe the architectural elements and create shapes within your body, explore sharper and linear forms or curves and if you come close to each other, try to 'fulfill' the empty spaces between your body parts. The physical touch is forbidden (a limitation in the post-COVID period).

Score 4: Keeping the score 3 as a basis, try to sense when something happens at the moment and changes your inner feeling state. It can be the sun light which embraces your body or a loud scream that you hear or you see something that attracts your attention. Utilize these moments as interventions which can change the qualities and dynamics in the way you move. Respond to them naturally.

The outcomes were interesting and I will reflect on them in the next step of my exhibition in RC.