

Multimodality and the poetics of weeping from Homer to Arvo Pärt

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The poster presents the results of a cognitive analysis of multimodality emerging from a sample of ancient literary texts designed to performance, and from a sample of songs. The texts and lyrics under consideration differ in language, genre, and date, yet they share the same topic: all of them describe entities weeping about something. The literary texts include lines from the Homeric epic poem *The Iliad* (8th to 6th cent. BCE), and lines from a tragedy by Aeschylus (5th cent. BCE). The analysis in these cases has to rely on the linguistic and the metrical components—besides indirect and general information about the supposed performative context. For the songs, conversely, we can count on multiple recordings and live performances: they include a piece for voice and lute by John Dowland titled “Flow my tears” (1600), the Beatles’ song “While my guitar gently weeps” (1968), and the start of Arvo Pärt’s *Stabat Mater* (1985), based on a 13th century Latin hymn. I consider the figurative language, recognizable linguistic patterns, and, most of all, the nonlinguistic aspects of the performances—for example, how the medium “intrudes” into the semantic content in all these pieces. The analysis points to remarkably recurrent features in spite of chronological, cultural, and genre diversity: the iconic level of communication—e.g. the prominence of downward melodic contours—, the connection between weeping and narrating (tears trigger tales, and tales trigger tears), the aesthetics of fluidity (against rigidity), and the embodiment of the sense of perdurability/unstoppability. All of this can be organized into multimodal mappings of the conceptual metaphor PERFORMING IS WEEPING and some variations thereof. Further thoughts regard the metaphorical extensions provided by labels such as the (contemporary) plant name “Niobe weeping willow.”

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