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THE CINEMATIC FORMS OF BUTOH FILMS

Aaron Kerner

Introduction: cinema and butoh

Butoh performers have had a long productive interaction with the cinematic form – from documented butoh performances to the spasmodic butoh-inspired performances in E. Elias Merhige's 1990 film *Begotten*. This chapter will chart the terrain of various types of butoh films and survey the ways these two art forms – butoh and cinema – mutually seduced one another, how the cinematic medium has been used to record butoh performances, and what remains yet to be discovered.

The interactions between butoh and film predate even the advent of butoh proper. Before Hijikata Tatsumi's *Forbidden Colors* (*Kinjiki*, 1959), there are accounts of Hijikata adopting the persona of movie actors and characters (e.g., the gangster Matsunaga in Kurosawa's 1948 film *Drunken Angel*, and James Dean) (Holborn 1987, 11; Barber 2010, 19; Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 22), as well as making an appearance in *Birthday Girl Jazz* (Sunohara Masahisa, 1957) as a backup dancer in a large dance number. The ideas that stimulated Hijikata's imagination and fueled the development of butoh emerged from a fecund mélange of cultural sources including the cinema.

We might roughly place films that incorporate butoh into three categories: narrative fiction films that incorporate butoh elements into their story-world; documentary films that intend to record a butoh performance (I am grouping filmed documentation under this category as well); and dance-films where dance is as much a product of the editing as it is the performance (Rosenberg 2012, 2).

Documentary butoh films usually adhere to certain conventions: a preference for long takes, long shots where the camera is usually placed on a tripod and at a distance from the performance in an effort to capture most (if not all) the body/action; camera movement is typically limited to pans (moving along the horizontal axis) in an effort to keep the action centrally framed. The camera is situated outside the performance space, positioned as an "objective" observer of an event.

As an example of a documentary butoh film, consider Arai Misao's 2003 film *Natsu no arashi* (*Summer Storm*), which documents a 1973 Hijikata performance at Kyoto University. Arai's footage remained untouched for 30 years before he assembled it. Aside from contemporary footage cut into interstitial moments and as bookends, he largely restrains himself from interfering with,

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as Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura recount, "the integrity of the dance by editing it" (Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006, 89). There are, nonetheless, certain instances where Arai offers "forensic" close-ups, for instance, of hand gestures, to offer some specific details, but by and large the film conforms to the above conventions. There are also examples of expository documentaries that survey the history of butoh – for instance, *Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis* (Michael Blackwood, 1990), and *Butoh: Piercing the Mask* (Richard Moore, 1991) – and instructional films as well; all of which might be placed under the umbrella of documentary butoh films (for more on instructional films, see Morishita 2015b, 23).

Butoh has been incorporated into a number of narrative films, such as Ishii Teruo's 1969 film *Horrors of Malformed Men*. Ishii, interested in the ero-guro genre (which combined erotic and grotesque elements together) and frequently adapting material from Edogawa Rampo stories, likely cast Hijikata because of his screen-appeal without much regard for anything else. "I approached Tatsumi Hijikata for the role because without him, I could not have made the film the way I wanted," Ishii recounts. "Without him, it would have been just another normal film" (Ishii cited in Barber 2010, 64). Ishii was a B-film filmmaker and had no pretensions otherwise – he emphasized cinematic spectacles over narrative coherence (for more see Barber 2010, 61–64). In addition to working with Ishii, Hijikata also appears in Shinoda Masahiro's 1974 film *Himiko*. Like the narrative found in Hosoe Eikoh's experimental short film *Navel and A-Bomb* (1960, discussed further below), Shinoda's film revisits the Japanese creation narrative. Hijikata, and members of his troupe, play the role of mountain spirits. These filmmakers who incorporated butoh into their narrative films seemed drawn to butoh for how it could visually embellish the screen, capitalizing on Hijikata's charisma and striking images.

Where a documentary film records a performance, or offers some exposition, dance, however, is itself the subject in a dance-film. The dance-film as a form predates butoh; perhaps the

Figure 52.1 Screenshots from *Horrors of Malformed Men*.

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Figure 52.2 Screenshots from *Himiko*.

best-known dance-film is Maya Deren's 1946 film *A Study in Choreography for Camera.* What sets a dance-film apart from the other categories discussed here is that the editing of the dance-film and composition of shots serve the dance-film narrative beyond what any documented performance in itself typically can convey. For instance, the cinematic convention of shot/reverse shot might register what a performer is thinking, seeing, or reacting to. The use of match on action (or something approaching this convention) allows for fluid cuts between shots. Where documentary films fetishize the long take and its supposed fidelity to "objective reality," dance-films on the other hand rely less on "real time" and "real spaces" and instead imply temporal and spatial continuity from shot to shot through editing conventions – Gilles Deleuze commenting on Fred Astaire song-and-dance numbers notes that the cinematic "action dance" allows for a spatial slippage that might take "place in any-location-whatever" (Deleuze 2009, 7). Think, for instance, of Deren's film where movement carried from one shot to the next (in a near match on action cut) shifts from an exterior to an interior space. The movement carried across the cut entwines what in reality is incongruous, but the syntax of cinema invites us to understand this as "any-location-whatever."

It might come as something of a surprise, but an American made the first butoh dance-film– Donald Richie's 1959 film *Gisei* (*Sacrifice*). *Gisei*, insofar as its narrative is concerned, is fairly typical of the period: a story of non-conformity, and the social repercussions for falling out of line, which is effectively what one of the dancers does. The film opens with a procession, appearing to enact a folk festival dance such as matsuri – but the figures march and dance in an exaggerated fashion, and wear clownishly embellished summer festival clothing. The nonconforming member of the group is a topless male figure wearing flaring pants; he stands apart from those wearing cartoon versions of traditional festival attire. The carnivalesque band of revelers takes turns ridiculing the nonconformist – urinating, defecating, and vomiting on him before finally castrating him. Particularly in the early part of the film – composed largely of long, medium long, and medium shots – we see Hijikata and his group dance in a circular procession. This distant

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framing resembles the documentary aesthetic – the camera largely observing from the outside, recording events from afar. Richie, though, includes a number of close-up shots to detail the carnivalesque punishment meted out by Hijikata's merry band of sadistic participants and to register their emotions. Richie also uses tighter shots – close-ups and medium close-ups – to convincingly create the conceit of the sadistic acts visited upon the nonconformist.

Avant-garde poet, playwright, and filmmaker Terayama Shuji formed along with Tomatsu Shomei and Eikoh Hosoe the Jazz Film Laboratory (*Jazzu-eiga jikken shitsu*) – an artist collective interested in pairing jazz with other art forms. Hosoe's contribution to this project was *Heso to genbaku* (*Navel and A-Bomb*, 1960); Hijikata performs in the film and choreographed it. Broadly speaking Hosoe's film finds certain affinities with Richie's, though *Navel and A-Bomb* is less "cinematic" than Richie's. That is, *Navel and A-Bomb* relies less on the conventions of cinematic syntax and emphasizes instead photographic formalism; indeed some of the shots are exact replicas of photographs in Hosoe's photobook *Otoko to Onna* (*Man and Woman*, 1960).

The generally static nature of Hosoe's camera is made all that more palpable when set in contrast to Iimura Takahiko's dance-films – his 1963 film *Anma (The Masseurs)*, and *Rose-Colored Dance* (1965). To begin with there is no narrative as such in either of Iimura's films; that said, Iimura was ostensibly documenting performances that were absent of any coherent narrative to speak of. In fact, Iimura's small 8-mm wind-up camera only allowed for shots lasting 15 seconds, before having to wind the camera again. Such limitations would make it impossible to capture any significant continuous sequence of an on-going performance. Unburdened by the obligation to record the performance, Iimura used the limitation of the technology to his advantage: creating Dada-like cut ups, assembling a series of shots together based according to rhythmic choices, or perhaps simply chance (Iimura 2013, 717).

Obviously, these categories of butoh films overlap. Documentary and documentation films are laden with narrative – even an instructional film, for instance, is an exposition on choreography, and thus a narrative. Ishii's feature films might share certain affinities with avant-garde filmmaking practices – namely the dance-film. And clearly, dance-films such as *Gisei* and *Heso to genbaku* are also imbued with narratives. What finally sets these categories apart though are the ways in which butoh is contextualized. Ishii's use of butoh, for example, is set within a larger narrative feature film – the use of butoh merely embellishes the story with stunning spectacles. Dance-films, on the other hand, are stand-alone pieces where butoh is choreographed not only into the performance but also into the editing of the film. The ontology of butoh films is complex and entwined.

The "butoh film"

While butoh has been the subject of films, or used for cinematic storytelling, it may be possible to conceive of a further combination of butoh and film, a "butoh film." Iimura has perhaps come the closest to making such a hypothetical genre of film. The recent turn to affect, and the cinema of sensations in film theory offer a tantalizing sketch of what a "butoh film" might actually look like. While film theory historically has been concerned with narrative construction and character motivations, from the early to mid-1990s theorists such as Vivian Sobchack turned our attention to the experience of viewing film and the ways in which the cinema might elicit feelings from the viewing body (see, for example, Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*). Contemporary film theory tends to place a premium on affect, rather than emotion. The latter is invested in narrative outcomes (e.g., "happy endings") and meaning, and thus deeply concerned with character motivations and story structure; the former, on the other hand, relates to the visceral experience of the spectator. At stake in contemporary film theory are cinematic

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moments that elicit feeling; narrative meaning is less of a concern, perhaps even inconsequential. Many theorists, often drawing from Sobchack or Deleuze, emphasize the synesthetic possibilities of the cinema, where, for instance, the audio/visual experience might elicit the sensation of touch (see, for example, Laura Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* and Jennifer Barker's *The Tactile Eye*). Still others have drawn our attention to particular aesthetic cinematic strategies that might elicit sensations in the viewer (see, for example, Martine Beugenet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, and Aaron Kerner and Jonathan Knapp's *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*).

What might a "butoh film" be then? A "butoh film" would be less concerned with representing a butoh dancer or performance, and more concerned with eliciting sensations in the spectator. Hijikata demanded that his dancers repress their inclination to be expressive and to abandon "the images that the dancers held"; the founder of butoh wanted his dancers to arrive "at movements which worked on nerves and sensations" (*Hijikata Tatsumi Notational Butoh* 2015a). If then we are to have a "butoh film," then we must be prepared to relinquish all of our preconceptions of what a "butoh film" might look like, and begin to think about how it might work on (the viewing body's) nerves and sensations.

Presumably Hijikata intended the spectator not only to recognize the "representation" of these bodily conditions in his dancers, but also to "communicate" these feelings to the spectator. Butoh might be thought of as an effort to apprehend the pre-linguistic, to work outside of coded systems – a "language" of the body. In butoh the body is compelled to "express without expression" (Morishita 2015b, 7). A "butoh film" then should be less concerned with representing a performance, and more concerned with conveying the sensations that the performance purports to engage with.

Iimura refers to his work featuring Hijikata as "cine-dance," precisely because he was not concerned with documenting a butoh performance so much as he considered himself a part of the group – he is not recording a dance *per se*, *he is dancing* (Iimura 2013, 712). The cinema, even avant-garde practice to some extent, is supposedly obligated to adhere to "narrative exposition and tends to be constructed according to a strict optical organization; to watch a film is to distinguish objects and human forms (characters) at the level of representation, already distinct and encoded" (Beugnet 2007, 67). A "butoh film," however, would need not "represent," and Iimura achieves this to a certain degree – particularly when his embodied camera signifies movement, rather than documenting movement. The cinema of sensations, Beugnet insists, blurs or overloads "photographic precision, extreme close-ups, superimpositions, under-exposure or over-exposure, variations in sound pitch and intensities." She continues:

> When cinema becomes a cinema of the senses it starts to generate worlds of mutating sounds and images that often ebb and flow between the figurative and the abstract, and where the human form, at least as a unified entity, easily loses its function as the main point of reference. One way or another, the cinema of sensation is always drawn towards the formless ('l'informe' [drawn from Bataille]): where background and foreground merge and the subjective body appears to melt into matter.
>
> *Beugnet 2007, 65*

These are the instances that are pregnant with the potential for affect, which appeals to the body of the spectator. In sum, affect is typically located in (cinematic) form not content (Kerner and Knapp 2016, 4).

What I am proposing here – as to what might constitute a "butoh film" – could be set adjacent to Eckersall's appropriation of remediation: an embodied camera movement that kinetically

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expresses an event and invites the spectator to share in the experience (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 11). Eckersall rightly observes that, "cine dance was a breakthrough in film aesthetics in relation to the body, making the experience of film more corporeal" (2013, 42). He concludes that Iimura's kinetic camera and its radical fragmentation communicates "the sensory disorientation of putting the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed; he thus makes the point that the remediated body extends from framing the performer to also include the spectator in the making of the film" (2013, 50).

Some dance historians or archivists may recoil at the prospect of a "non-representational" "butoh film," especially if their concern is straightforward documentation of a live performance; indeed, some have voiced frustration with Iimura's films precisely because they do not conform to the conventions of documentary filmmaking, that the dance (ironically) is obscured by the filmmaking. In the end, what I have tried to do here is to press for the consideration that while film can be *about* butoh, it might also be possible that butoh can also be *in* cinematic form. A "butoh film" does not represent a butoh performance, or interact with one; rather it *is* butoh. Where Eckersall views butoh in the remediation "where the body is transformed into media" (2013, 35), I see it in the aesthetic strategies that the cinematic has at its disposal, and finally what it potentially elicits from the viewing body. Remediation in Eckersall's estimation, and Iimura's conception of cine dance, necessitates "the quality of liveness" (Eckersall 2013, 55) – performativity. Performativity as it is generally understood here enacts the thing that it is representing and thus remains servile to an exterior event.

Implicit in this conception is a reliance on an outside (performing) object even if that is only the kinetic motion of the camera-operator; however, performativity (or remediation) is not necessarily prone to eliciting an affective response in the spectator. "It is always 're,'" Eckersall notes of *re*mediation and cine dance, because the kinetic event is a *re*presentation, it is an "imprint of movement retrieved by the performer in a process of concentrated re-imagination" (Eckersall 2013, 59).

The objective, as Eckersall argues, is that remediation intends to break down the border between the spectator and butoh, to fuse the body and cinema (Eckersall 2013, 60); this is precisely what I envision for the "butoh film." What in the end sets a "butoh film" apart from a cine-dance film, or a remediated performance, is its emphasis on reception. Where narrative films, dance-films, and documentaries that include butoh are *about* the performance conducted in front of a camera, a "butoh film" is located elsewhere – in the viewing body.

So what is being argued here? Documentaries, narrative films that feature butoh performances, and dance-films all have their own individual functions and merits, but a "butoh film" should *be* "melting candy," as Hijikata might say.

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