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Butoh and Its Image: A Statistical Approach

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I. Preliminaries

What is *Butoh*? This question has been repeated frequently for the last half century, and yet the definition of the word remains vague and indeterminate. There have been various perspectives as to what this word conveys, from time- and location-specific movement to universal form of art, from expressive spirituality to a sort of condition or state. We also confront the impossibility of definition when a *Butoh* spectator emphasizes that those who have not *experienced Butoh* cannot fully understand the scope of its realm. However, defining and attempting to capture the art and its surrounding concepts by word is necessary to obtain an objective perspective imminent for any academic consideration. How should we, then, pursue a definition, if not *the* definition, of *Butoh*? One approach is to collect what image each individual has toward the form of art and to superimpose them to create a sort of multiple-exposure film of the varying understandings.

This paper will be composed of two distinct sections, the first dealing with the historical and contextual background of the word “*Butoh*,” and the second with the results of a survey research. The survey aimed to extract the images that people have toward *Butoh* by determining the descriptive adjectives associated with it in people’s minds. We chose as our instrument an online survey platform, and asked the participants to associate certain adjectives with the image that they have of the word “*Butoh*.” The researchers provided 33 adjectives, with an additional open-answer field allowing the participants to add new words.

For this research, it was crucial that the participants have an “image,” be it subjective or objective, toward the word “*Butoh*,” requiring them to have a certain level of knowledge of the concept. To fulfill this criterion, we carried out the survey mainly at the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) annual conference held in Stockholm, Sweden, in the summer of 2016, targeting theater and performance scholars and practitioners who belonged to the IFTR. The use of an online form and the format of a self-administered questionnaire have further limited the respondents to those who have interest toward *Butoh* and related research and activities. The respondents were able to access and answer the questionnaire at will using the URL and its QR code that we distributed in paper and online format, accessible both from computers and

mobile devices. Although we must acknowledge that the extent of this research is limited, with 37 participants and 34 qualified responses, even with the limited number of subjects, we were able to extract certain patterns that will be examined in the second half of this paper.

II. “*Butoh*” as an artistic terminology

To achieve in-depth reflection on the individual perceptions of *Butoh*, we must first review the background of the term *Butoh*, which merely has the denotation of “dance.”

If we were to mark *Kinjiki* (May 1959) as the beginning of *Butoh*, the major founder of the art, Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986), used the expression *Anoku Buyō* as early as in July 1960, in a text printed in the pamphlet for *Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai* (Dai’ichi Seimei Hōru). This expression later became *Ankoku Butoh*, after which the word “*ankoku*” was dropped, leaving the familiar term “*Butoh*.” *Ankoku* signifies “dark” and “darkness,” whereas the words “*buyō*” and “*butō*” are almost synonyms. Shogakukan’s *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* gives the following definition for each term:

BUYŌ (舞踊): The action of expressing emotion and intent by rhythmical movement of the body accompanied by music. *Butō*.

BUTŌ (舞踏・舞蹈): From the passage “Not knowing where the hands dance and the feet steps” in *The Classic of Poetry* and *Book of Rites*.

(1) Dancing a dance. From the Meiji period and after, generally indicates European styled dance and ballets.

(2) A type of salutation. [...]

Both meaning “dance,” one of the differences between the two is that, as mentioned above, *buyō* is used slightly more often to signify Japanese traditional dances (i.e., *Nihon Buyō*), whereas *butō* is used for imported styles of dance (i.e., *Butōkai*). Another difference is in the meaning of the characters for each word, where *buyō* consists of two characters both meaning dance (舞踊) and *butō* having a second character that signifies the stepping action (舞踏).

Although the second parts of these compound expressions have nearly the same meaning, it is the first part, *ankoku*, that

was intended to differentiate the work of Hijikata and his followers from other pieces that fit into the authoritarian heritage of Japanese dance history. Many speculations have been made on the intention of the usage of the word *ankoku*, as Hijikata himself never offered a complete and sufficient answer, leaving different versions in different written and spoken accounts. In an interview with Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, eminent writer, French literature scholar, and Hijikata’s close friend, his tone is difficult to determine as serious or not when he claimed, “I think things eaten in the dark taste good. Even now I eat sweets in bed in the dark. I can’t see what they look like but I know they taste twice as good. Light, in general, sometimes seems indecent to me (KURIHARA [Translated by KURIHARA] 52).” Here he claims that darkness sharpens his sense of taste, making food taste better, whereas light is “indecent”, presumably for it may cause prejudice by showing what the food looks like.

In one account, Seisaku, who learned at Asbesuto Kan from 1984 to 1986 and worked with Hijikata in his later years, gave a version of Hijikata’s explanation of *ankoku* in an interview (Coker 2015), sharing his master’s interpretation and emphasizing the fertility of the dark in comparison to the light:

Regarding the light and the dark, *sensei* [Hijikata] used to say that “the light was born from the back of the mother dark,” that is, when it’s full of light, we cannot see the dark even if it appears, [and] we cannot even see the light. But if a spot of light glowed in the darkness, like firefly, we can see its appearance. Embraced in the dark, the light can make itself appear, clinging to, fading into, and hanging onto the dark. The light was born from the back of the mother dark, and yet some shady light chases the dark away, [and] such light must be driven away [...] Embrace the trembling dark, for the isolation of death, of birth and death, has made life pale and feeble. Today, light also means information. Today, there are more and more expectations toward information. Death and life, and light and dark should not be divided, but should be harmonized (COKER 76–77).^{*1}

Coker analyzed that such philosophy of the dark transcends

* 1 All Japanese passages have been translated by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

expression and creation, leading toward “birth,” and that the labeling of Hijikata’s work as *ankoku* was in itself the unconditional acceptance of the “dark,” that is, “the indecency of bodies that do not fulfill the requirements of the social attributes [and] natural elements of human beings often considered filthy, and those who cannot be approved as rightful members of society (COKER 77).”

Although it is difficult to discern the when and where as to the transition of the expression *Ankoku buyō* to *Ankoku butoh*, we can verify that Hijikata’s production *Barairo Dansu* in November 1965 was still called an *Ankoku Buyō* production. It was for *Seiai Onchōgaku Shinan Zu’e — Tomato*, presented in July 1966, that the expression “*Ankoku Butoh* Group Final Production” is used. Kasai Akira contested that the word *butō* was first introduced by him, when he used it in 1966 for the poster of *Kasai Akira Shōjo Risaitaru* to establish his style as distinct not only from conventional dance styles but also from Hijikata’s *Ankoku Buyō*, after which Hijikata also started to employ as “*Ankoku Butoh*” (KASAI 60).

It is even more difficult to identify how the next and final stage in the etymology of *Butoh*, the dropping of *ankoku*,

occurred, but it seems to have happened in relation to the expansion of its borders, which simultaneously caused the expansion of definition for the original common noun *butō*. As the art form, movement, spirituality, or state of *Butoh* became widely known worldwide, so did the word, becoming one that evokes diverse images for people worldwide.

In the following chapter, we will present the methodology and results of our survey research and explore the images conveyed by the term *Butoh*.

III. Survey Method and Results

The survey was conducted in June and July of 2016 using an online survey platform. We called out for participants among members of the IFTR and participants of the 2016 IFTR conference held at Stockholm University on site and online. There were 40 responses in total, with six incomplete ones, leaving 34 qualified answers that were consulted in the results presented in this chapter.

The survey consisted of nine questions, of which eight were closed questions and one an open-answer field. The actual survey questions are appended to this paper.

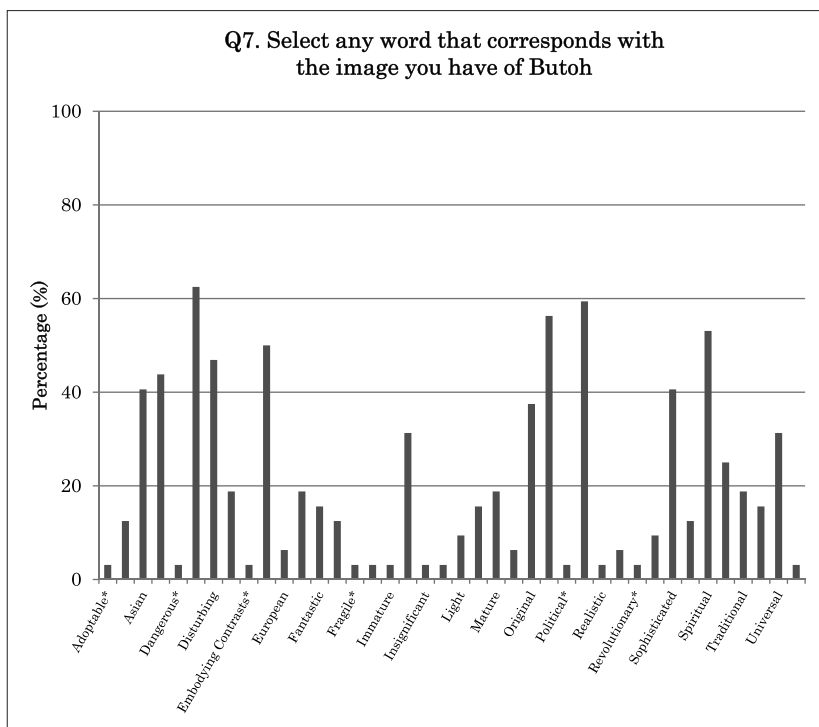


Figure 1. Question 7 and results.

Value	Percent	Responses
Dark	62.5%	20
Powerful	59.4%	19
Physical	56.3%	18
Spiritual	53.1%	17
Emotional	50.0%	16
Disturbing	46.9%	15
Beautiful	43.8%	14
Sophisticated	40.6%	13
Asian	40.6%	13
Original	37.5%	12
Universal	31.3%	10
Innovative	31.3%	10
Technical	25.0%	8
Traditional	18.8%	6
Mature	18.8%	6
Exotic	18.8%	6
Eastern	18.8%	6
Ugly	15.6%	5
Masculine	15.6%	5
Fantastic	15.6%	5
Spectacular	12.5%	4
Feminine	12.5%	4
Agreeable	12.5%	4
Soothing	9.4%	3
Light	9.4%	3
Regional	6.3%	2
Offensive	6.3%	2
European	6.3%	2
Immature	3.1%	1
Insignificant	3.1%	1
Realistic	3.1%	1
Western	3.1%	1
Adoptable*	3.1%	1
Dangerous*	3.1%	1
Embodying Contrasts*	3.1%	1
Fragile*	3.1%	1
Inwards*	3.1%	1
Political*	3.1%	1
Revolutionary*	3.1%	1

Figure 2. Question 7 results in percentage and count

The first two questions dealt with the participants' attributes, asking for their profession and their nationalities. Questions three to five asked about the respondents' experience and knowledge related to Japanese theater in general, and questions six to ten about *Butoh*. Question number seven was the central question, dealing with individual images of *Butoh*.

Of the 34 qualified participants, 16 (47.1%) were members of the IFTR; 25 (73.5%) were theater researchers, 18 (52.9%) were professors/teachers, and 11 (32.4%) were graduate students. There were also dance researcher, dancer/performer, and critic among the respondents.

The respondents were from all over the world, those from countries in the European Union being the most numerous (9 participants, 26.5%), followed closely by those from North America (8, 23.5%), Japan (6, 17.6%), East Asia excepting Japan (5, 14.7%), South America (2, 5.9%), and one (2.9%) each from Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

Question number seven ("Please select from below any word that corresponds with the image you have of *Butoh*") was a multiple-answer question from the following 33 words and an additional open answer field: Agreeable, Asian, Beautiful, Dark, Delicate, Disturbing, Eastern, Emotional, European, Exotic, Fantastic, Feminine, Immature, Innovative, Insignificant, Light, Masculine, Mature, Offensive, Original, Physical, Powerful, Realistic, Regional, Soothing, Sophisticated, Spectacular, Spiritual, Technical, Traditional, Ugly, Universal, and Western.

The most popular responses to this question were "Dark," "Powerful," "Physical," "Spiritual," and "Emotional," each being selected by 20, 19, 18, 17, and 16 respondents, respectively. Meanwhile, only one respondent chose as answers "Immature," "Insignificant," "Realistic," and "Western." Six participants filled in the open answer field and suggested the following seven words and expressions: "Dangerous," "Political (sometimes)," "Fragile," "Embodying contrasts," "Adoptable, in the sense that the form can [be] adopted by non-Japanese performers and used in cross-over performance that might or might not be considered intercultural," and "Inward." Thus, together with the 33 given adjectives, a total of 40 expressions were linked to the word *Butoh*.

As explored in the previous chapter, *Butoh* was originally called *Ankoku Buyō/Butoh*, signifying "Dance of Dark." In the survey, the most selected word was "Dark" (20 participants,

62.5% of all respondents). We can presume that there were respondents who had a certain level of knowledge as to the etymological background of the word explored in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, we may confirm from this result that the concept of “darkness” that was promoted in the development of *Butoh* has permeated into the word itself, consisting an important part of its connotation. If the concept of darkness is aroused within us at the mention of the term *Butoh*, then the word has broadened its horizon, encompassing the art and spirituality now shared by performers worldwide.

The four following words closely follow “Dark” and also reflect the fundamental shared image of *Butoh*: “Powerful” (chosen by 19, 59.4%) with as much “Spiritual” (chosen by 17, 53.6%) and “Emotional” (chosen by 16, 50.0%) force as the “Physical” (chosen by 18, 56.3%). The balance between these elements seems to indicate the importance of each in the actual composition of performances and spectators’ reception.

Among the other words, “Agreeable,” “Disturbing,” “Offensive,” and “Soothing” are significant in that they all reflect subjective and individual reactions. Of the four words, 15 participants chose “Disturbing” (46.9%), significantly outnumbering those who chose “Offensive” (two participants, 6.3%) or the two positive reactions (“Soothing,” chosen by three participants [9.4%] and “Agreeable,” by one [3.1%]). Here we should focus less on the fact that a negative adjective has been the most chosen term. With *Butoh*, as with many other avant-garde art and literature works, the values are often reversed, making the most valuable the least valuable, or the most pure the most impure. However, between the two negative expressions provided, “Disturbing” and “Offensive,” the latter clearly represents the stronger emotion of refusal. “Offensive” contains the sense of “offense,” that is, of attack, and of harming, in this case, the audience. As for “Disturbing,” the nuance is more to “arouse,” to “disquiet,” to stir up something within the subject. Therefore, we should focus here on the fact that among the respondents, *Butoh* is considered as a sort of stimulant, but not as an attack. Such reception may be reflective of the diversification of *Butoh*, considering how some of the first *Butoh* pieces were intended and known to convey strong feelings, such as shock, disgust, and quite often “offense”^{*2}.

Another angle of analysis can be found in the regional terms provided in the survey: Asian, Eastern, European, and Western.

“Eastern” and “Asian” are, in the context of humanities, often used interchangeably, but here we should note that only six people (18.2%) chose “Eastern,” whereas 14 people (42.4%) chose “Asian.” The geographical and regional specificity that people affiliate with *Butoh* is noteworthy. Fewer people chose “European” and “Western,” chosen respectively by one (3.0%) and two (6.1%) participants. With a survey of this size, discerning whether there is any difference in the selection of these two words remains difficult, with one and two responses being too small a value for accurate analysis.

Finally, among the objective adjectives selected, we should also contemplate and compare the words “Beautiful” (selected by 14 people, 43.8%) and “Ugly” (selected by five, 15.2%). Interestingly, four out of the five who chose “Ugly” also chose “Beautiful.” Again the reversibility of values is visualized, and the respondents who chose these antonyms are aware of the aesthetic ambivalence that *Butoh* incarnates. A similar profession of ambivalent conception can be seen between “Light” and “Dark” ; all three respondents (9.1%) who chose “Light” also chose “Dark,” underlining the duality of light and dark that presides in *Butoh*.

One participant, who suggested to add the word “Dangerous,” expressed a similar philosophy by choosing as many as 31 words out of the 33, all but “Agreeable” and “Soothing.” This participant clearly expressed, as much as is possible in a closed answer survey, a personal image of *Butoh* as being polyphonic, multifaceted, and multi-tiered.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has reported the survey results of a verbal imagery research on *Butoh*. The superposition of etymological and investigational analyses allowed us to reconfirm the dark and ambivalent conceptions that people associate with the word *Butoh* and the form of spectacle that it represents.

In the study of etymology, we followed stepwise the naissance and formation of the word *Butoh*, and then explored related

* 2 The reactions toward *Kinjiki* (1958) have become another episode in the Hijikata/*Butoh* legend. The reference to homosexuality and the violent act of choking the chicken with bare hands, both taboo at the time (and probably even today, to a certain extent), is said to have shocked, even infuriating, the audience, who left the theater one by one.

aspects, such as differences in the nuance of *buyō* and *butoh* and the image of *ankoku*.

In the chapter reporting the survey results, the images that the participants revealed in their responses seemed to correspond with the conventional conception and understanding of *Butoh*. Taking into account the size of the subject group and the nature of the research in a closed answer format, the researchers did not expect to discover new and unconventional perspectives through this research. However, we were able to reconfirm and reiterate the shared perception and impressions surrounding this word. The concept most strongly united with it is that of darkness, bringing forth the memories of *ankoku*.

Another aspect was the psychological geology within the participants. The lead of the word “Asian” showed that *Butoh* is, in people’s mind, specifically regional, even when *Butoh* has become extremely multi-nationalized and multi-ethnicized. Another viewpoint was the scale of value associated with *Butoh*. Many have displayed how, like “Beauty”/“Ugly” and “Light”/“Dark” in the survey, the opposing nature is often contrasted, juxtaposed, or simply superimposed in *Butoh*. This finding reconfirmed the interchangeability of values and the incorporative capacity of *Butoh*.

The result of this survey was limited by the number of respondents, but the research has opened up a new horizon as to the investigation of the actuality of *Butoh*’s iconic and historical value. The project aims to continue further research, with larger or more precisely filtered subject groups, open answered questionnaire, and interviews.

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Appendix: Survey Content

Terms & Conditions

Hayato KOSUGE

Professor of Foreign Languages and Liberal Arts
Director of Keio Research Centre for the Liberal Arts

Rina OTANI

Ph.D. student at Keio University
Graduate School of Letters: French Literature Major

Thank you for agreeing to take part in our survey! The object of this research is to reach a better understanding of the images and impressions that theatre researchers/ audiences have on the theatric creations taking place in Japan, especially in the domain of dance, on the genre which is called Butoh. This survey should take about 5 minutes of your time.

Disclaimer

Please acknowledge that we are using the results of this survey for the sole purpose of academic research. We are planning on presenting the results and its analysis in the form of a research paper that will appear in 2017.

The research is strictly anonymous and confidential. We do ask for your name and contact information, but this is only for the purpose of managing your responses and they will not be disclosed to anyone other than the originators of this survey (Kosuge & Otani). Your names would not be revealed in any form in our future papers/presentations.

Please move on if you agree to the above terms.

- Yes, I agree to the terms and conditions.
 No, I do not agree.

Questionnaires

1. Tell us who you are. Please check all that applies:

- Theatre researcher
- Professor/teacher
- Student (Undergraduate)
- Student (Graduate)
- Researcher of Japanese theatre/dance
- Researcher of Asian theatre/dance (other than Japanese)
- Performer/Actor/Dancer
- Member of IFTR
- Member of PSi
- Other: _____

2. Where are you from? Please check one, be it the place of your birth or of your education.

- Africa
- East Asia (Not including Japan)
- East Europe
- European Union
- Middle East
- North America
- South America
- Southeast Asia
- Japan

3. Do you have positive or negative impression towards "Japanese theatre"? My impression is...

- Very positive Fairly positive Neutral
- Fairly Negative Very Negative
- Have no impression/interest on the topic

4. Have you ever seen any type of Japanese performing arts performance, either LIVE or RECORDED? (Traditional, contemporary, created by Japanese staff & cast and performed abroad, etc.)

- Yes, I have seen many (more than 10) productions.
- Yes, I have seen a few (3-9) productions.
- Yes, I have seen one or two productions.
- No, I have never seen a production.

5. Butoh is a form of dance founded in the 1960s by a Japanese dancer Hijikata TATSUMI.

Have you heard of the word Butoh?

- Yes, I know very well what Butoh is.
- Yes, I have heard of the word, but I am not sure what it is.
- No, I have not heard of the word.

6. Do you have a positive or negative impression towards "Butoh"?

My impression is...

- Very positive Fairly positive Neutral
- Fairly Negative Very Negative
- Have no impression/interest on the topic

7. If you have answered Yes to question 4, please select from below any word that corresponds with the image you have of Butoh:

- Agreeable Asian Beautiful Dark
- Delicate Disturbing Eastern Emotional
- European Exotic Fantastic Feminine
- Immature Innovative Insignificant Light
- Masculine Mature Offensive Original
- Physical Powerful Realistic Regional
- Soothing Sophisticated Spectacular Spiritual
- Technical Traditional Ugly Universal
- Western You may add other: _____

8. Have you ever seen a Butoh performance?

- Yes, I have seen many (more than 10) productions.
- Yes, I have seen a few (3-9) productions.
- Yes, I have seen one or two productions.
- No, I have never seen a production.

9. Were there any productions particularly memorable?