Silence That Reflects: Butoh, *Ma*, and a Crosscultural Gaze

JUDITH HAMERA

IN April, 1989, Highways, an interdisciplinary performance space, opened in the Los Angeles area. This is, in itself, not amazing. Contemporary performance spaces come and go with such startling frequency that jokes about attending their openings, then their closings, as the two primary preoccupations of Los Angeles (or New York, or Chicago) artists are second only to current Jesse Helms jokes. What makes the Highways opening worthy of discussion is the space’s theoretical mission. Founders Linda Frye Burnham and Tim Miller are committed to creating “... a new collaboration among cultures ... an international effort to articulate and work out the crisis of living in the last decade of the 20th century” [emphasis added] (Highways). What makes this statement of interest is, again, not its uniqueness, not the fact that it sets a radically new agenda, but rather that it reflects a larger multicultural turn in contemporary performance and dance. This movement is so pervasive, and now so much a part of the aesthetic mainstream, that it has virtually supplanted the rhetoric of “commitment to American [performance and dance] forms” of the past twenty to thirty years.

Peter Brooks’s staging of “The Mahabharata” can be seen as another reflection of this multicultural turn; so can the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch. Note that, in 1986, the label “too Germanic” was considered a valid critical description of Bausch’s work. One year later, Brooks’ “The Mahabharata” was criticized for, essentially, not being Indian enough (“What Critics Say ...”; Dasgupta). On the local level, the collective Taller (pronounced Ta’yer) is emblematic of the increasing visibility of multiethnic groups of performers presenting multicultural concerns (Sadownik). But while an enormous variety of groups, interests, and forms contribute to and reflect this multicultural turn, I find it most striking to observe the increasing visibility, on both coasts, of performance forms from the Pacific Rim.

Here again the range of artists and actions is enormous. New York-based Tibet House is sponsoring a national tour of three Tibetan monks performing their traditional “Black Hat Dance” to protest the destruction of their culture (Pasles). Another group of monks moves across the country creating, then destroying, ritual sand paintings to bless the environment (Dowsey). Ja Kyung Rhee and Hy Sook of Theatre 1981 coopt elements of traditional Korean theatre to serve their feminist and antiwar themes (Durland). Finally, and for me most dramatically, Asian and American artists and dancers have turned to butoh, the “dance of the dark soul,” to

Judith Hamera is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, Los Angeles.
present personal and sociocultural anguish and optimism. Even a group from the Soviet Union, Leningrad-based Derevo, has, after seeing butoh, abandoned its traditional ways of working and taken up the form.

Butoh, originally *ankoku butoh*, which translates “dance of utter blackness,” has virtually defined Japanese avant-garde dance since the 1950s (Garafola). Pioneers and founders Kazuo Ohno and the late Tatsumi Hijikata sought, in the early stages of their work, to assault traditional Japanese performance modalities and the
cultural conventions undergirding them (Stein 1986, 111). Though experiments toward the form were documented as early as 1948, Kazuko Kuniyoshi’s authoritative “Butoh Chronology” begins with a 1959 joint performance by Ohno and Hijikata (Kuniyoshi 128). The performance, and most especially its centerpiece, “Kinzetsu” (“forbidden colors”), performed by Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno, was

...a violent spasm of anti-dance: a young man [Y. Ohno] clutches a live chicken between his thighs in the midst of a brutalizing act of buggery. In the darkness the audience perceives the advancing footsteps of another man [Hijikata] ... There was no music, the effect was shattering. Several members of the [All-Japan Art Dance] Association [which sponsored the event] were so appalled that they threatened to resign. (Stein 1986, 115)

Interestingly, in this same year, artist Allan Kaprow presented his “18 Happenings in 6 Parts” in New York, while in San Francisco dancer-choreographer Ann Halprin began her experiments with “found movement” and choreography by chance (Haskell 32, 61). These American artists were motivated by a desire to extend the boundaries of their individual media; they saw themselves as heirs to pioneers like Cage and Graham. The work of the Japanese butoh masters, by contrast, was a much more definitive break from, a more complete rejection of, not only the aesthetics of the time, but the entire socio-cultural climate of then-contemporary Japan and its past. As historian Lizzie Slater observes, after 1945,

...the young generation of Japan, mauled by the War ... needed to shriek out. Okamoto Taro returned from Manchuria and urged his fellow visual artists to “destroy everything with monstrous energy ... in order to reconstruct the Japanese art world” and Okamoto went on to state that art must not be beautiful ... or “comfortable.” Instead, it should be “disagreeable,” disregarding easy beauty and known forms of art. (Slater qtd. in Stein 115)

In response, Kazuo Ohno and Hijikata, like their better known contemporary Yukio Mishima, abandoned the restraint inherent in traditional forms such as Noh, kabuki, and bugaku in favor of extreme images of deformity and insanity. In doing so, they ultimately created a revisionist view of technical competence, one based not on faithful reproduction of traditional forms, but instead on fidelity to the essence of their psycho-social experience of their culture at this time.

Yet despite these violent, spasmodic antecedents, the “look” of much of the butoh seen in this country is lyrical, emphasizing minute, attenuated gestures rather than flamboyant acting out. Consider as an example the work of the best known group of butoh performers in America, Sankai Juku. The ensemble consists of four or five men, heads shaved, naked except for loin-cloths, and covered in white body makeup, who present striking, often grotesque images. Their trademark performances, documented for PBS and the Alive from Off Center series, are “hanging events” in which the performers are suspended head down by ropes from roofs of various structures. Somewhat less dramatic but still representative of the style of butoh seen in this country is the work of Eiko and Koma. This couple’s work is far more intimate than that of Sankai Juku and emphasizes physical virtuosity on a less spectacular scale. Eiko’s and Koma’s work is both disturbingly grotesque and intensely erotic; the couple’s contortions are reminiscent of the deformities suffered by the victims of the mercury poisonings at Minimata. One reviewer observes that their movements, which unfold with aching deliberation over an almost uncomfortably long period, “dehumanize” the dancers, “... reducing their bodies to mysterious
synecdoches—headless torsos, severed limbs, as beautiful in their strangeness as they are troubling” (Garafola 67). Eiko and Koma and the members of the Sankai Juku ensemble are Japanese, but this same aesthetic, with elongated, often grotesque gestures extended over time, is also very much apparent in the work of Americans who utilize the vocabulary of butoh. Kiken Chen, Melinda Ring, and Roxanne Steinberg in Los Angeles, Kaja Overstreet in Chicago, and Cheryl Flaharty in New York are a few such artists.

After watching a butoh performance, or one strongly influenced by the form’s vocabulary, it becomes clear that the flow of events in this sort of work is very
different from that in most Western movement-based performance. It seems most useful to locate this difference in the relationship between action and meaning. In general, in Western movement-based performance, action/movement and meaning coincide; such a performance “means” through what it does. Movement is read as text to generate meaning. In butoh work, this relationship seems quite different. Instead of movement and meaning coinciding, the minuteness of many of the gestures and the length of time over which they are executed leads me to suggest that, in work of this type, “meaning” and “opportunities for reading” exist at least as much in the “spaces between” actions as in the actions themselves.

This notion of text/meaning as residing in the “space between” action is central to Japanese aesthetics. In fact, Richard Pilgrim, among others, views this concept as “the foundation for a religio-aesthetic paradigm” in Japan (Pilgrim). The term ma describes this way of seeing/reading. Kunio Komparu defines ma in relation to the traditional art of Japanese Noh drama:

Noh is sometimes called the art of ma. This word can be translated into English as space, spacing, interval, gap, blank, room, pause, rest, time, timing, or opening . . . Of course both understandings of ma, as time and as space, are correct . . . Because it includes three meanings, time, space, and space-time, the word ma at first seems vague, but it is the multiplicity of meanings and at the same time, the conciseness of the single word that makes ma a unique conceptual term, one without parallel in other languages. (Komparu 70)

Pilgrim goes on to suggest the context in which ma is experienced:

The collapse of space and time as two distinct and abstract objects can only take place in a particular mode of experience that “empties” the objective/subjective world(s); only in aesthetic, immediate, relational experience can space be “perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it.” Therefore, although ma may be objectively located as intervals in space and time, ultimately it transcends this and expresses a deeper level. (Pilgrim 256)

Pilgrim continues:

Ma seems to operate at, cross, and even deconstruct a number of boundaries. First, for some Japanese, ma is a deep and living word that cannot even be discussed, much less analyzed and interpreted across the boundaries of culture and tradition. Second, ma operates at and bridges the boundaries between the traditional and contemporary arts, between religion and art, between one religion and another, and between religion and culture [emphasis added]. (Pilgrim 25)

Thus, ma describes a meaning-full interval in space, time, or space-time, an interval with both objective and subjective aspects, inherently relational, most easily apprehended in a religio-aesthetic context. In some respects, ma is similar to Victor Turner’s concept of liminality in that both describe boundary situations replete with meaning; they differ in that, in the former, meaning is generated through gaps in action, whereas in the latter, meaning is generated largely through action. Ma is, perhaps, what Barthes was suggesting in his description of how a haiku means: as the flash of a photograph one takes very carefully, but having neglected to load the camera with film (Barthes 83). To say that butoh and butoh-based performance can be read through the lens of ma is to suggest that the movements and characterizations of the performer present overlapping “image worlds” which are, in turn, separated by gaps or pauses charged with emotional energy (Pilgrim 260). Note that this is
much the same process/reaction involved in reading non-narrative, imagistic performance art pieces, even if the pieces seem to have a textual rather than a movement base.

Yet the use of *ma* to characterize butoh and butoh-based performance is somewhat problematic. Though the term accurately describes the process/feeling of reading butoh, and though it parallels many of the accounts/descriptions given by both American and Japanese choreographers in discussions of their work, *ma* and butoh appear to come from opposite ends of a cultural political continuum. Recall that *ma* is central to a traditional religio-aesthetic paradigm in Japanese culture. It is a cornerstone of the traditional arts. Noh, for example, is called the expression of *ma* (Komparu 74). Butoh, on the other hand, was conceived as a reaction against this very aesthetic. This dissonance between history/mission and description cannot be explained by simple “evolution”—that is, that butoh simply changed from radicalism to lyricism by a sort of natural progression, though this may, to some limited degree, be accurate. Peter Bürger would characterize this discrepancy as an instance of slippage into the “post-avant-garde,” the term suggesting the failure of the larger surrealist project to which butoh, by both its history and its ostensible mission, is aligned (Bürger). Yet the multicultural overlay on this performance form problematizes even this reading. It is, it seems to me, most generative to view the fluid movement between adherence to a traditional aesthetic paradigm and the drive to deconstruct that paradigm in butoh and, perhaps, in multicultural contemporary performance generally, as a mercurial complex of elements. One of the elements is certainly the appropriation and subsequent dilution of the exotic or offensive that cuts across postindustrial cultures, whether these are the cultures of origin of the work or the cultures in which it is presented. But beyond this is a certain cultural opacity through which butoh or, I would argue, any crosscultural work is presented, viewed, and read—an opacity which, in turn, affects the way the work presents, views, and reads itself.

In the case of butoh two points are especially relevant. The first concerns Edward Said’s argument, in Orientalism, that “the Orient” is less an entity than an ideology of difference, a system/style for “dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient,” and that, moreover, orientalism exists as an omnipresent mist before the eyes of anyone attempting to study “the” Orient (Said 3). Barthes addresses this same issue in the opening of his *Empire of Signs*:

> If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country . . . . I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or analyze reality itself . . .—isolate somewhere in the world a certain number of features . . . , and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan. (Barthes 3)

According to Said, Orientalism inevitably leads the West to regard the Orient as a kind of “shadow self.” In a similar vein, Barthes describes the Orient as “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation” (Barthes 3).

Consider, too, that, up until relatively recently, few Japanese had seen butoh performed in their country. The form was, up until the late 1980s, an export, a result of what Bonnie Sue Stein describes as *gyaku-yunyu,* “go out and come back”; that is, approval at home is contingent upon prior acclaim abroad (Stein 1986, 114). Thus, the initial audiences and extracultural appropriators/imitators of the form were those who would inevitably see that form as “other.” Remember that butoh’s
contemporaries in the West were performance styles appearing equally anarhich, spasmodic, violent, random. These elements, in both text and movement, were part of the Western experimental performance zeitgeist. What would be read by this audience, through the lens of Orientalism, would not be the revolutionary nature of butoh against its own cultural history and politics, but, rather, any real or perceived stylistic differences from, or mutations of, a Western performance tradition. This process is implicit in Kuniyoshi’s description of Western reaction to butoh:

Western theatre and dance has not reached beyond technique and expression as a means of communication. The cosmic elements of butoh ... are welcomed by Western artists because they are forced to use their imaginations when confronted by mystery. Butoh acts as a kind of code to something deeper, something beyond themselves. (Kuniyoshi in Stein 1986, 114)

One might add, “something seen as ‘other’ than themselves,” notably the quality of ma discussed above. Borrowers/students of the form would, as both Kuniyoshi and Said suggest, be drawn to, and ultimately perform, its difference from Western tradition. This is, it seems to me, a meaningful way to view the attenuated lyricism of Western butoh artists. But what of that of its Japanese practitioners? They, in particular, present butoh styles very different from the meaning-in-movement mode of “Kinjiki.” Even Kazuo Ohno, one of the founders of the form, moves in the gente, prolonged ma style that seems the antithesis of the ostensible aim of butoh.

Feminist film theorists have done much to document and describe the “male gaze” of cinema, the gaze/perspective that renders and reads woman as “other.” They have described, too, the process by which that gaze is internalized so that an “external view” comes to be the way women view themselves. This view may be aided and abetted; it may be coopted in service of a self-authored, self-empowering work. The point here is that the gaze that renders one as “other” ultimately has consequences for that “other’s” self-presentation. Is not Orientalism a gaze that renders one as “other”? And is it not reasonable to imagine that, having been read in terms of difference from a Western movement model, butoh artists might appropriate and reappropriate shards of this reading into their performances, consciously or unconsciously, perhaps even to create the tension between adherence to and deconstruction of a traditional religio-aesthetic paradigm? And if this is true of butoh, is it not equally true of any cross- or multicultural work which elicits the gaze that renders “exotic” or “other”? I do not wish to suggest, in any way, that butoh or any other cross- or multicultural work is corrupted or diminished by performance in a crosscultural venue. My concerns are directed toward how such work is viewed. Foucault suggests that the codes of language and the chaos of experience are perceived only through the arranging, organizing, deepening grid of culture. I suggest that, in viewing cross- and multicultural performance and dance, this grid functions also as a series of funhouse mirrors which reflect the work, ourselves, and beyond both to work yet to be created.

WORKS CITED

The author wishes to thank her colleague Dr. Lesley Di Mare for introducing her to the work of Richard Pilgrim.


