The Influence of American Structural Film Structural Film on Toshio Matsumoto and Katashi Ito

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Filmmakers in Europe and North America have been exploring the aesthetics of non-commercial cinema since the early 1920s, whereas Japanese filmmaker just started to make experimental films in the 1960s. Donald Richie provides a historical framework to explain why the development of Japanese experimental films is quite different from the history of Western experimental films in terms of poetic influence. It is known that Japanese commercial cinema was largely influenced by Western commercial cinema. Similarly, Japanese Avant-Garde cinema was influenced by Western Avant-Garde cinema as well. This paper will compare three films were made within the period of Structural Film, two Japanese experimental films, *Spacy* (1981) by Katashi Ito and *Atman* (1975) by Toshio Matsumoto, and one American experimental film, *Serene Velocity* (1970) by Ernie Gehr. After briefly explaining the history of Japanese experimental film, this paper will analyze and compare these three films in order to argue that American Structural Film had a strong influence on Japanese experimental filmmakers, Toshio Matsumoto and Katashi Ito, especially on their visual aspects. However, while the films of Matsumoto and Ito did possess many characteristics of Structural Film, they developed more sophisticated and utterly new styles. Ultimately, Ito and Matsumoto develop Structural Film with their poetic understandings of space and time, and they explore even more possibilities of camera and film.

Before providing context, it is essential to provide some basic knowledge about Structural Film first. Structural Film suddenly emerged after Lyrical Cinema in America, which is distinct from commercial cinema and previous avant-garde cinema. It is a cinema of structure, which does not concern itself with narrative but the shape of the film (Sitney 327). Referencing to the explanation of shape by Sitney, “the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film” (327). It is the filmmaking process that decides the form in Structural Film. In other words, the formal elements become the content of a film, such as rhythm and space. The content, in

turn, is the form. Yet, The choice of films in this paper should be clarified beforehand. Ernie Gehr had made *Serene Velocity* (1970) before *Spacy* (1981) and *Atman* (1975) were made. One of the reasons for using *Serene Velocity* (1970) to discuss the influence of Structural Film on Japanese filmmakers because *Serene Velocity* (1970) and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) are mostly widely mentioned "structural" film (MacDonald 11). It demonstrates some of the major characteristics of Structural Film. The most important reason is that there are some fundamental characteristics these films have in common in terms of form, technique, device, subject, and rhythm. Nevertheless, *Atman* (1975) and *Spacy* (1981) develop Structural Film more intricately and that development is indisputably related to the methodology of Matsumoto and Ito, or suggesting, even the preciseness of Japanese culture.

The overlapping interests of American and Japanese experimental filmmakers were the interest of Structural Film from the 1960s. For American avant-garde cinema, especially within the period of the Lyrical film, filmmakers like Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Kenneth Anger, maximized the pursuit for poetic form. Donald Richie argues that, while Japanese filmmakers had abandoned their poetic sensibility in cinema, American experimental filmmakers started to pursue it; ultimately, the poetic form that was pursued by American experimental films, in turn, influenced the Japanese young filmmakers in the early 1960s. The West sees the poetic influence in Japanese early commercial films as experimental, but the Japanese stigmatized it as old-fashioned (Richie). Donald Richie states that, "the poetic impulse was so well defined that many of the attributes of experimental films were subsumed in the Japanese commercial cinema before World War Ⅱ" (Richie). Richie summed up the reason why Japanese filmmakers took up experimental films late:

> All of this came from a poetic sensibility so prevalent that its use was regarded in no way as experimental. By the time it became known that there was something called experimental cinema in the West, the unselfconscious use of a purely Japanese poetic

> sensibility was largely obliterated. This was due to the massive influence of Western commercial cinema. (Richie)

In other words, Japan turned from the poetic tradition to Western practice, while the West were beginning to have the gravest doubts on their expressive methods. In the 1960s, American experimental filmmakers turned from their "surrealist heritage" and began to concern themselves with work illustrating the nature of filmed space and time and to interest themselves in the possibilities of the camera and of the film (Richie). Sitney later introduced the term "Structural Film" to describe this interest of American experimental filmmakers. Since they had well explored the poetic form, they started to investigate pure image and pure rhythm (Sitney 330). Finally, The new interest of American experimental filmmakers overlapped with the Japanese, because traditionally Japanese art had always had a similar concern with the problems of space and the resolution of time (Richie). Thus, Richie states that, "in a way, American films turned 'Japanese' just as the Japanese were turning toward experimental film" (Richie). Japanese experimental filmmakers were influenced by the new taste that formal considerations were the only consideration that they had already concerned with.

Japanese experimental film had not been globally noticed until it was recognized as a movement from the 1960s. At that time, these individual filmmakers did not know each other, but they all sent films to foreign short film festivals (DeBevoise). Through participating in European film festivals, Japanese experimental film became established as a movement in Japan, a movement of filmmakers working outside the film studios (DeBevoise). Young Japanese filmmakers first saw the films of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Michael Snow and other filmmakers which were so different from what they had seen before, and these films were the new models for Japanese experimental filmmakers (Richie). These filmmakers influenced the most famous experimental film pioneer in Japan,

Taka Iimura, and Iimura consequently most influenced other Japanese experimental filmmakers (DeBvoise). Taka Iumura, and Toshio Matsumoto, who is one of the pioneers of experimental and independent filmmaking in Japan, had attended a presentation in 1968 in Toronto organized by Joyce Wieland, a big showcase that mostly involved performative film projections (DeBevoise). In this event, Toshio Matsumoto presented his film, *For My Damaged Right Eyes*, which also involves triple-projection. With the growing connection between Japanese filmmakers and foreign filmmakers, Japanese experimental filmmakers started to keep pace with the development of American avant-garde cinema from the 1960s. Takashi Ito, who started to make experimental films from the 1970s, studied under Toshio Matsumoto during college years (Image Forum). The stream of Structural Film had such big impact on avant-garde cinema in America and Great Britain in the 1960s, ultimately on Japanese experimental filmmaking as well. One of Matsumoto's experimental films, *Atman* (1975), shows the influence by American Structural Film. Katashi Ito also demonstrated his interest on formal elements of films in his experimental films under the influence of Toshio Matsumoto. Ito's most well known experimental film, *Spacy* (1981), was influenced by America Structural Film as well. The following analysis about these three films, *Serene Velocity* (1970), *Atman* (1975), and *Spacy* (1981), will demonstrate that *Atman* (1975) and *Spacy* (1981) were influenced by American Structural Film and they developed Structural Film more intricately. These films will be compared and contrasted in terms of visual characteristics of Structural Film, form and device, reflexivity and rhythm.

Atman (1975) and *Spacy* (1981) did possess most of the visual characteristics of Structural Film. These three films will be examined through the four major characteristics of Structural Film that are concluded by Sitney: flicker effect, fixed camera position, loop printing, and re-photography off of a screen (Sitney 327). These characteristics are visual aspects of Structural Film from the perspective of the viewer. For these three films, flicker

effect is the common characteristic. In *Serene Velocity* (1970), the recessive hallway is made possible by adjusting the zoom lens four times per second, which creates flicker effect. The flicker effect in *Atman* (1975) is similar to that in *Serene Velocity* (1970). *Atman* (1975) produces flicker effect with the fast-paced continuous photographs incorporating with the zooming effect in lateral motion. However, there is a different type of flicker effect in this film. Photographs with the overexposed filter (almost a whiteout) switch alternately with the consequential photograph without that filter. *Spacy* (1981) only produces flicker effects on the beginning of the film and near the end of the film. For the former part, this film produces flicker effect with intercutting black frames between consequential photographs of the upper part of the interior; for the latter part, this film produces flicker effect with the alternation of the red filter and the blue filter on those consequential photographs. These two different flicker effects in *Spacy* (1981) have different functions: the former one reveals the space which is the empty school gymnasium; the latter one intensifies the rhythm of the film because the film almost closes to the end.

The fixed camera position can be seen in these three films as well, but they have differences. Fixed camera position means that the frame remains unchanged from the viewer's perspective (Sitney 327). Gehr only utilized fixed camera position and zoom lens to produce the movement of the hallway. In other words, the fixed frame is used throughout the whole film. Even though *Atman* (1975) reveals the whole space 360-degree using many different camera positions, the zoom-in effect within one position can be seen as the use of fixed camera position. Ito only used fixed camera positions for part of his film where he creates the *mise-en-abyme* effect in straight movement. Loop printing is also used in these three films. In *Serene Velocity* (1970), the shots within the same differential of zoom are repeated. In *Atman* (1975), some paths of circular motions are repeated. In *Spacy* (1981), the loop printing enhances the *mise-en-abyme* effect by multiple entrances to the same

photographs. Finally, only Ito used re-photography in *Spacy* (1981). He did not re-photograph off of a screen, but he re-photographed the space with the photo easels and the easels held the photograph that is the same as the re-photography. So far, *Spacy* (1981) demonstrates a more intricate visual effect than the other two films. Yet, these three films all utilize flicker effect, fixed camera position, and loop printing. Both *Spacy* (1981) and *Atman* (1975) demonstrate the influence of American Structural Film in terms of visual characteristics.

These three films take their forms from different structures that denote the concern of these filmmakers on different formal elements. Content and form is the most important factor to distinguish Structural Film from the dominant cinema. The content has not much difference from the form in Structural Film because the content of the film is the production process, which the film takes it as form. According to Peter Gidal, Structural Film should minimize the content of the film in order to bring forth the filmic event (2). The viewer should see "the film as film" (Gidal 2). In other words, the content is not narrative, but it should be the form of the film. *Serene Velocity* (1970) takes its form from the rapid juxtaposition between a further shot of the hallway and a closer shot of the hallway in a fixed camera position. This effect is enabled by the zoom lens. The subject in *Serene Velocity* (1970) is a bare, institutional hallway in a classroom building at the Sate University of New York at Binghamton, where Gehr taught for a time (MacDonald 12). The viewer ultimately sees a recessive hallway in which the shaded lines are formed by the walls joining the floor and ceiling finally etch a center "X" into the frame (Gunning 5). *Serene Velocity* (1970) does not show the hallway that the viewer generally perceives. The tour-de-force of interior rhythm flattens a three-dimensional space into two-dimensional images. Therefore, a Structural Film, such as *Serene Velocity* (1970), transforms a thing into a moving image that is different from the supposed reality through the tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed reality it represented (Gidal 1). The possibility of the camera helps the film

structuring itself within the frame.

The most remarkable quality that unifies these three films is the device, specifically, the zoom lens. Ernie Gehr made *Serene Velocity* (1970) with a relatively simple approach to work with the zoom lens. Matsumoto and Ito not only worked with the zoom lens but also used precise and complex calculations to arrange the camera positions. *Serene Velocity* (1970) is the earliest film among these three films that used the zoom lens, so it can be seen as the prototype of Structural Film. For those who first watch *Serene Velocity* (1970), they might actively guess the technique that Ernie Gehr made this film. One possible speculation is that Gehr photographed the hallway back and forth using the zoom lens, and he always repeatedly looped the same photos. However, this speculation is normally interrupted by two reasons. First, the fountain on the right and the doorway on the left appear when the film closes to the end. Second, the images do change slightly because of the change of the positions of the light stripes on the wall. In fact, Gehr increased the differential of zoom after a considerable period, and that creates increasing optical shock (Sitney 401). He increased the differential from 50 - 55mm to 45 - 60mm (Sitney 401). In fact, according to MacDonald:

> "Gehr filmed the space four frames per second, beginning midway along the focal range of his zoom lens and adjusting the zoom first in one direction, then in the opposite direction from the lens's midpoint, in equal and progressive alternating increments, until he had filmed the space from virtually every position between the midpoint and the two ends of the lens' focal range". (MacDonald 12)

Thus, this tour-de-force is created by the alternation between shots in different focal ranges.

Atman (1975) takes its form from the increasingly rapid circular motion, which is shot frame by frame. On the one hand, *Atman* (1975) has a quite different subject from *Serene Velocity* (1970) and *Spacy* (1981); on the other hand, the form of *Atman* (1975) is more similar to that of *Serene Velocity* (1970). The subject in *Atman* (1975) is a human being

disguised with the devil mask of Hangan from the Noh. Richie states that, “Atman is an early Buddhist deity often connected with destruction” (Richie). The figure is centered at the circular paths of camera positions. There are two motions happening at the same time in *Atman* (1975) where the circular motion is the main one and a lateral motion is added which is made possible by the zoom lens. Nonetheless, the circular motion is the movement outside the camera, but the lateral motion occurs within the camera. Compared to *Serene Velocity* (1970), this film is more complex because the change of camera positions and the zoom lens operate at the same time. However, the use of zoom lens in *Atman* (1975) is similar to *Serene Velocity* (1970), where the closer shot of the human figure is juxtaposed with a further shot of that. Richie mentions that, the director intercuts the circular motion with the lateral motion while he used lenses to transform the landscape (Richie). The 360-degree rotation of the view shows the surrounding landscape behind the human figure. However, the filter probably flattens the landscape in a way and so the landscape makes a strong contrast with the centered figure. The landscape does not look like that in reality. Like *Serene Velocity* (1970), the materialist flatness builds up tension with the supposed reality.

Atman (1975) utilizes the zoom lens for the first three-and-half-minute and then relies on the change of camera positions to create a zooming effect. Finally, it utilizes zoom lens again for the last two-minute. This change is hardly noticed unless the viewer watches this film for many times. The script of Matsumoto about the camera positions for *Atman* (1975) demonstrates how he carefully arranged the path of the camera positions (see in Figure 1). On his script, there are 10 circles and 48 visible radiuses with the subject at the center of a circle, where 480 camera positions are used (one dot represents one

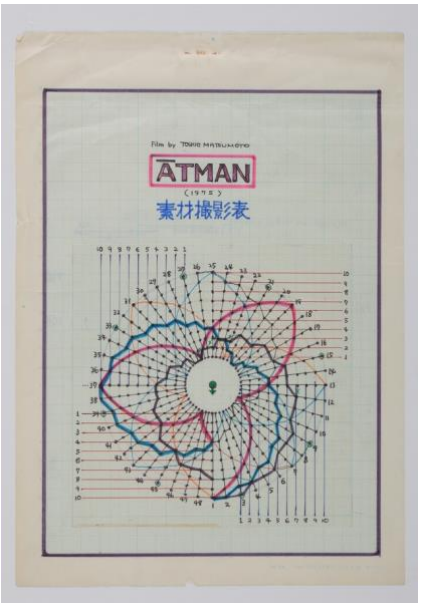

Figure 1. Storyboard for *Atman* (1975) by Toshio Matsumoto.

position). In addition, 6 six different paths in colors are the paths which create a zooming effect without the zoom lens. Starting from first three-and-half-minute of the film, the zooming effect is the change of camera positions. Therefore, this film creates an unpredictable effect with the alternation of zoom lens and camera positions. When the viewer gets used to the circular motion of the camera with zoom lens, the film suddenly changes to the other unrecognizable movement that involves zooming effects. Undoubtedly, this technique enhances the complexity of this film. Thus, there may be a difference between the American Structural Film and Japanese Structural Film that the technique of Japanese Structural Film seems to be simple, but the variations are so deeply embedded in the film that the viewer can hardly tell with the first impression. *Spacy* (1981) is a better example. On the contrary, the technique American Structural Film seems to be complicated, but the variation is little or none. At least *Serene Velocity* (1970) is a good example. The little variations are the change of differential of zoom and the fountain and doorway appear by chance that are no need for strict plan.

Spacy (1981) takes its form from a flipbook-style moving image consisting of 700 consequential photographs that transform the film into a roller-coaster display. The form of *Spacy* (1981) is different and more complicated from that of *Serene Velocity* (1970) and that of *Atman* (1975) because it involves an illusion called *mise-en-abyme*. In art, *mise-en-abyme* is a formal technique in which an image contains a smaller copy of itself, in a sequence appearing to recur infinitely. Hayward states that, “the film being made within the film refers through its mise-en-scène to the ‘real’ film being made” (253). Although Hayward talks about the *mise-en-abyme* effect in commercial cinema, but her interpretation is feasible to describe the effect in *Spacy* (1981). The photographs on the easels and the easels are the mise-en-scène elements. The camera zooms into the first photograph. As it fills out the frames, it reveals the same space the camera just zoomed into, thus throwing the spectator

back into the initial position (Schedelbauer). This film exactly shows an image within an image. Takashi Ito talked about his major intention to make such films: “is to change the ordinary everyday life scenes and draw the audience (myself) into a vortex of supernatural illusion by exercising the magic of films" (Nishiiima). Therefore, his intention to oppose the supposed reality is similar with the goal of Structural Film.

Although the technique of reconstructing sequential photographs was already seen in the earlier Japanese experimental films during the 70s such as *Atman* (1975), the technique that Takashi Ito utilized in *Spacy* (1981) is more mysterious and complex. *Spacy* (1981) not only needs the arrangement of the camera positions and the zoom lens, but also need the arrangement of the movement of the photo easels and the photos on the easels. To arrange these things altogether requires a large amount of time and precise calculation. According to Norio Nishiiima, “still photographs are re-photographed frame by frame according to a strict rule where movements go from rectilinear motion to circular and parabola motion, then from horizontal to vertical” (Nishiiima). This strict calculation of camera positions by Ito can be seen as a more complex extension of *Atman* (1975). Ito learned this strictness from his teacher, Matsumoto, and he has his own method. On May 2015, Ito flipped through the original photos from *Spacy* (1981) to present a moving image in International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. So, how Ito created this effect without a flaw? Before the camera starts to zoom into the first photograph, the photo on the center easel is unclear. So do the other photos on easels. In other words, the first photos on the easels are not necessarily the same as the space that the camera just zooms into. He must have a photo on the easel at the beginning of the zoom. What Ito had to do first was to take a photo for the space in exactly the same camera position as the first frame which would be zoomed into. Then he put that photo (the first one) on the easel and took a new photo (the second one) in the same camera position. The second one that Ito took is the one that the viewer sees in the first frame. The next step

should be the second one replacing the first one, so Ito could continue the rest of shooting. The film basically relies on this principle and then it can produce the *mise-en-abyme* effect. The most difficult arrangement in this film is the motion of the easels and that of camera positions. Several tall photo easels are arranged around the camera. There are four different types of lateral movements. First, the camera zooms into the photograph in a fixed camera position. Second, the camera pans from one easel to the next easel and zooms into the photograph while the easel keeps stable. Third, the camera pans along with the movement of the easel and it zooms into the photograph when the easel stops in front of the next easel. Fourth, the camera slowly zooms in as well as pans along with the movement of the easel, and the camera keeps zooming in until the easel stops in front of another easel. Moreover, there is a vertical camera movement. The camera zooms in straightforward and then tilts down, and it finally zooms into the photograph on the ground. In addition to the *mise-en-abyme* effect, Takashi Ito also used editing to create several visual effects. He created a zoom-out effect with playback. He also created an effect that inconsistent photographs are intercut between the consequential photographs, which looks like the motion is dragged. In short, neither *Serene Velocity* (1970) nor *Atman* (1975) could reach the complexity of techniques in *Spacy* (1981), so Ito's utterly new style deserved his reputation for his experimental films in Japan as well as other countries.

Reflexivity is argued as a crucial factor of Structural Film, and these three films all illustrate this quality. However, self-reflexivity and reflexivity are different. Gidal argues that Structural Film is reflexive. Reflexivity is associated with the mental activation of the viewer, and the self-reflexivity is associated to the reflexivity of the film. *Serene Velocity* (1970) is reflexive. In *Serene Velocity* (1970), there are many details in this dull hallway that keep the viewer very conscious about the process of watching, such as the stripes of light on the walls and the exit sign near the ceiling. These details force the viewer to identify the change of the

filmmaking process. Therefore, he states, “a film practice in which one watches oneself watching is reflexive: the act of self-perception, of consciousness per se, becomes one of the basic contexts of one’s confrontation with work” (10). In other words, the viewer is fully aware of the existence of the camera and keeps questioning how the filmmaker made that film. This film manifests the interest of American Structural Film in the pure image and pure rhythm, which has no interest in the supposed reality. Yet Matsumoto and Ito were not only interested in the transformation of the reality and mechanical rhythm, they were also obsessed respectively with the resolution of time and supernatural illusion.

Atman (1975) is reflexive as well as self-reflexive. There are two eleven-second shots showing the reality in actual duration after thirty-second and after one minute from the beginning of *Atman* (1975). In *Serene Velocity* (1970), it never uses real time and never shows the supposed reality. A possible reason for Matsumoto to makes this choice may be that his interest in the transformation from the reality to the structuring of the reality, and the transformation from actual duration to the “Einsteinian time” (Gidal 9). Einsteinian time refers to the relativistic time that is the absolute value of the interaction of film moment and viewer. This film is self-reflexive due to the exposure of the supposed reality. The contrast between the reconstructing photographs and the supposed reality confuses the viewer’s perception of the time through two strategies. First, he intercuts fast-paced continuous photographs with the first real-time shot. Second, the second real-time shot appears after the fast-paced continuous photographs and just before the photographs in one frame per second. This film is also reflexive because the change of rhythm keeps the viewer constantly anticipating, correcting, re-correcting – constantly intervening in the arena of confrontation with the given reality (Gidal 3). The mix of Noh music and electronic music connect rhythmically with the images, and it creates a horrific atmosphere which highlights the figure with a devil mask. As a result, the tour-de-force is enhanced not only by the visual

complexity but also by the ambiguous time and horrific soundtrack.

Spacy (1981) is self-reflexive partly because the subject of it is photograph itself. Nishiiima states that, the subject together with the last shot where the camera and the filmmaker's self-portrait come into the same frame indicates the self-reflexive characteristic of his work (Nishiiima). The self-portrait seems to blatantly speak that the film is made by photograph, which overturns the impression of the fascination. The spectator has no way to tell which is the film and which is the film within the film through the *mise-en-abyme* effect. The chaos renders the spectator gives up guessing and enjoys the complicated effect as if it was computerized. The music that Ito used is electronic music which is made by Takashi Inagaki. The music creates a futurism-like atmosphere as if the space is supernatural, and it enhances the visual rhythm as well. To sum up, the rhythm of *Serene Velocity* (1970), *Atman* (1975), and *Spacy* (1981), is fast-paced. Nevertheless, the rhythm of *Atman* (1975) and *Spacy* (1981) are more variable, because the films sometimes have unexpected slow-down.

In conclusion, American Structural Film did have a strong impact on Japanese Experimental filmmakers, especially on Toshio Matsumoto and Katashi Ito. Their films in this paper, *Atman* (1975) and *Spacy* (1981), possess common visual characteristics of Structural Film: flicker effect, fixed camera position, loop printing, re-photography. Compared *Atman* (1975) and *Spacy* (1981) with *Serene Velocity* (1970), *Serene Velocity* (1970) has an impact on these two Japanese experimental films in terms of the use of zoom lens, the transformation of reality, and rhythm. *Atman* (1975) develops Structural Film further because of its application of the different aspects of time. *Spacy* (1981) develops Structural Film further because it entirely deconstructs the space by the *mise-en-abyme* effect. Furthermore, Toshio Matsumoto and Takashi Ito present their efforts on the precise arrangement of the device and mise-en-scène, which could not be seen anywhere. Matsumoto presents his peculiar interest on resolution of time and Ito presents his interest in

deconstruction of space. Ultimately, they further develop the interest of Structural Film, space and time, with their peculiar understanding on space and time, which would be resulted from the poetic sensibility embedded in Japanese tradition.

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