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NOGUCHI(10) **Pub. No.: US 2014/0163373 A1**(43) **Pub. Date: Jun. 12, 2014**(54) **ULTRASONIC OBSERVATION APPARATUS,
OPERATION METHOD OF THE SAME, AND
COMPUTER READABLE RECORDING
MEDIUM**(30) **Foreign Application Priority Data**

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CPC **A61B 8/12** (2013.01)
USPC **600/443**(73) Assignee: **OLYMPUS MEDICAL SYSTEMS
CORP.**, Tokyo (JP)(57) **ABSTRACT**

An ultrasonic observation includes a frequency analyzer that analyzes a frequency of an echo signal received from an ultrasonic probe for transmitting an ultrasonic wave to a subject and receiving the ultrasonic wave reflected from the subject, to calculate a frequency spectrum, a feature data calculator that calculates feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material, and an artificial material-highlighted image data generator that generates, based on the feature data, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted.

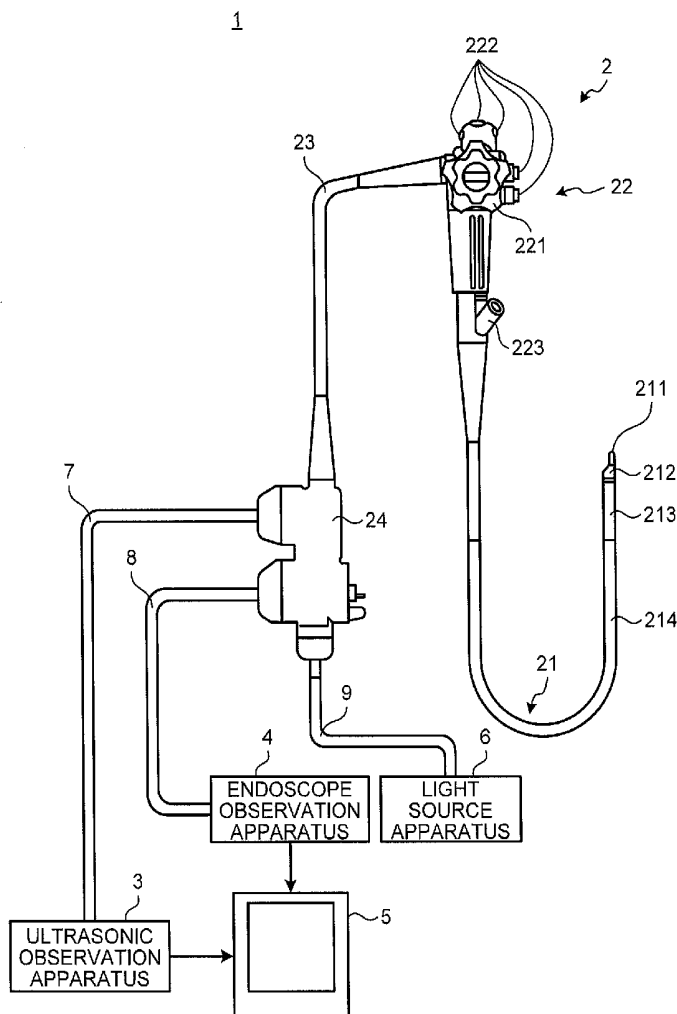
(21) Appl. No.: **14/097,321**(22) Filed: **Dec. 5, 2013****Related U.S. Application Data**(63) Continuation of application No. PCT/JP2013/067911,
filed on Jun. 28, 2013.

FIG.1

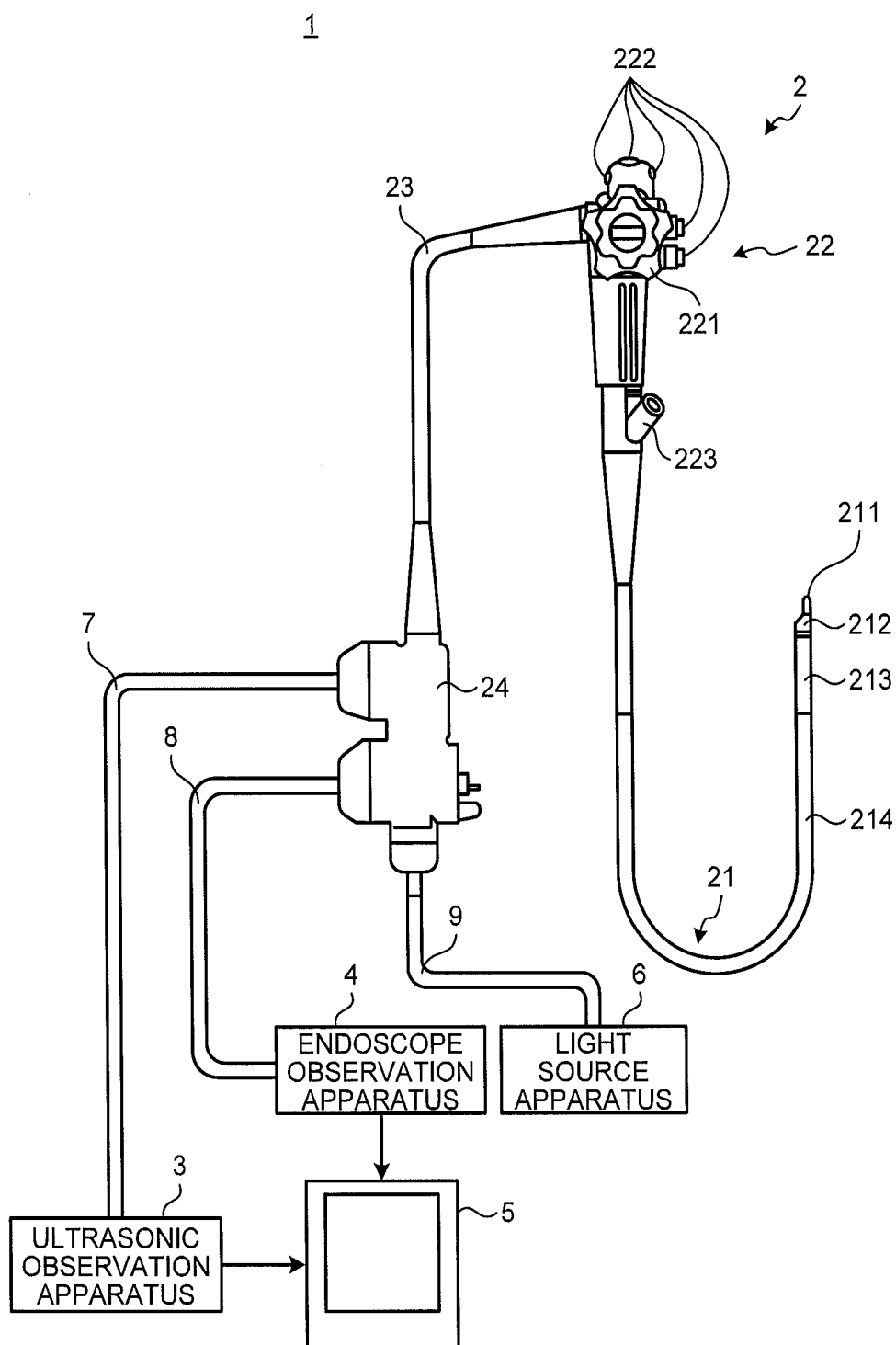


FIG.2

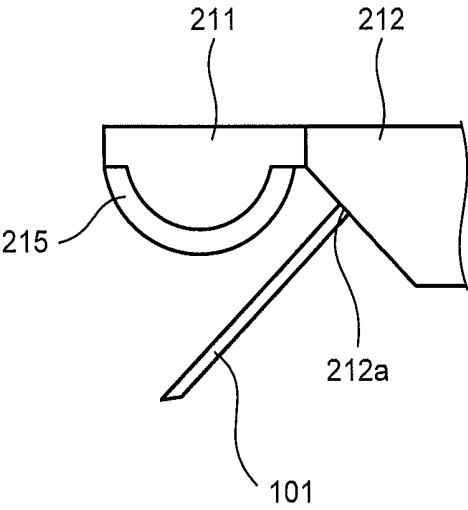


FIG.3

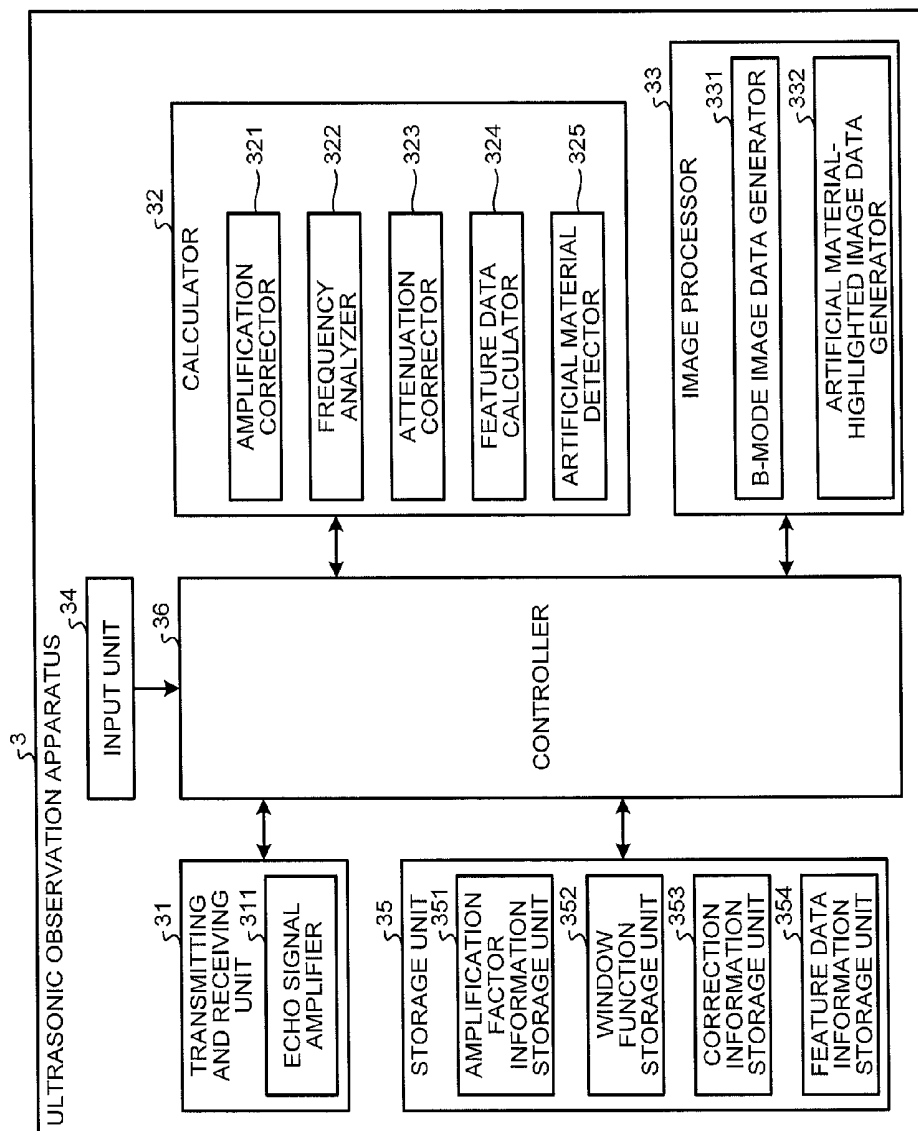


FIG.4

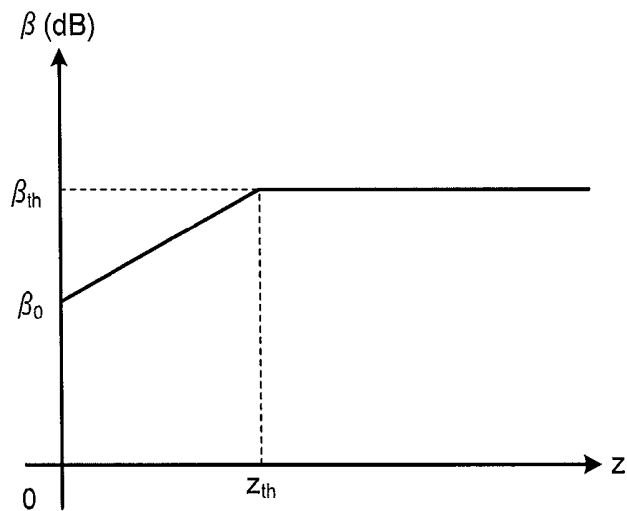


FIG.5

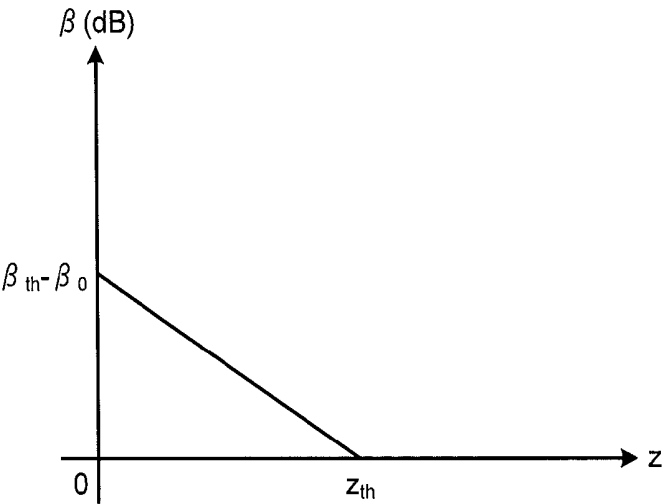


FIG.6

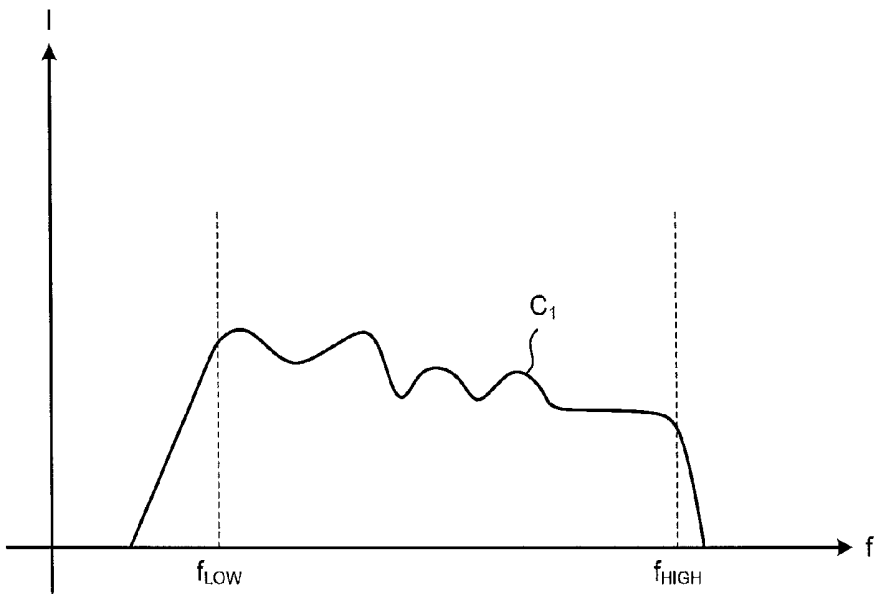


FIG.7

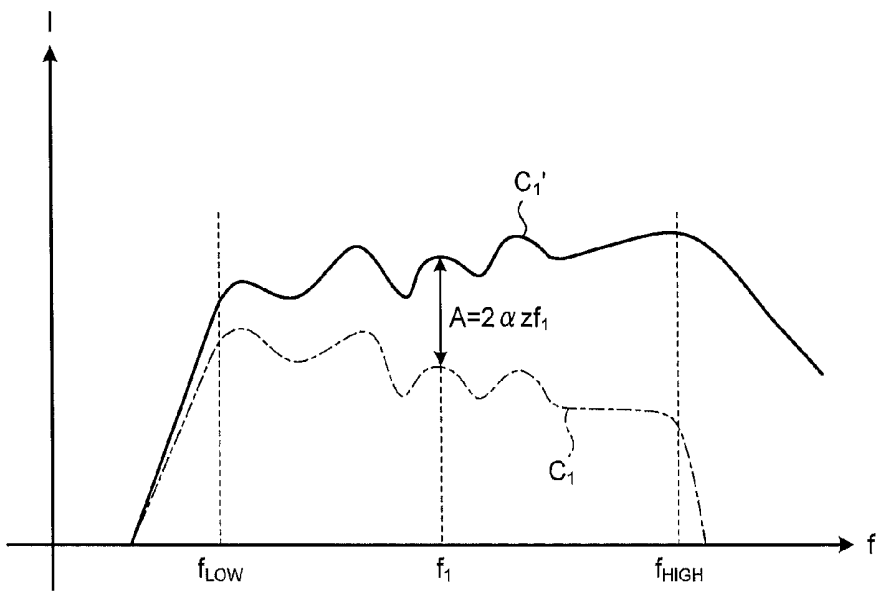


FIG.8

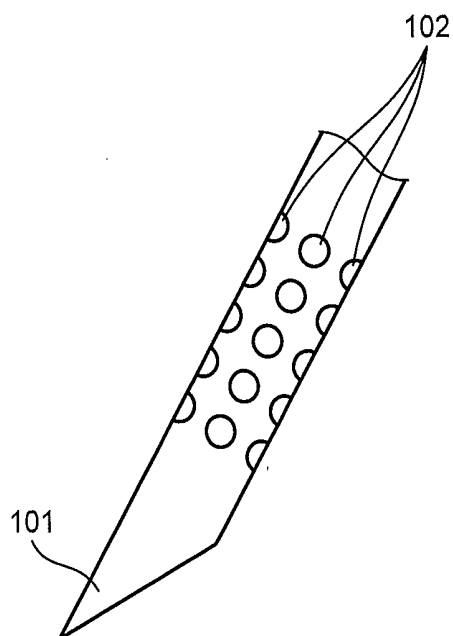


FIG.9

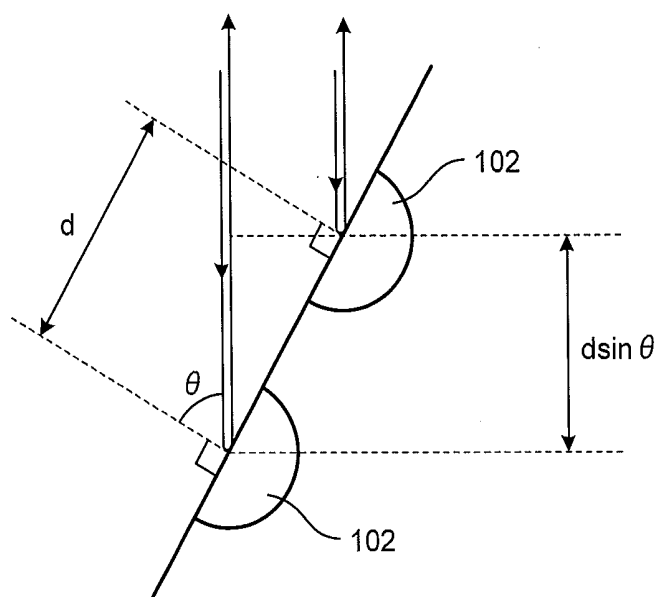


FIG.10

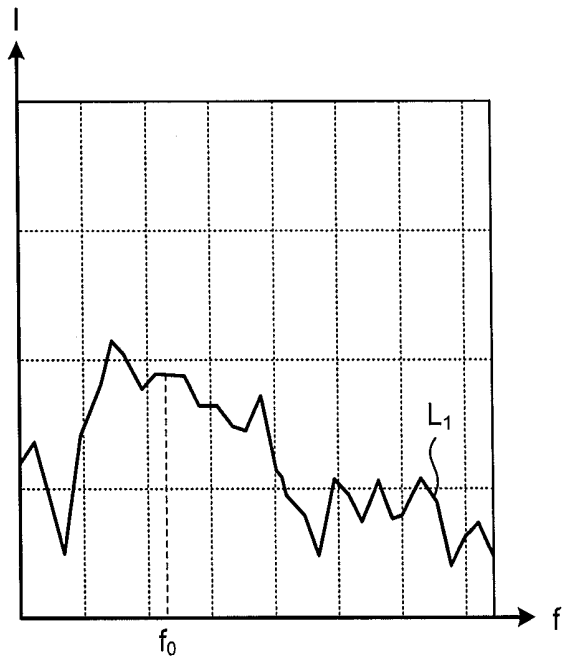


FIG.11

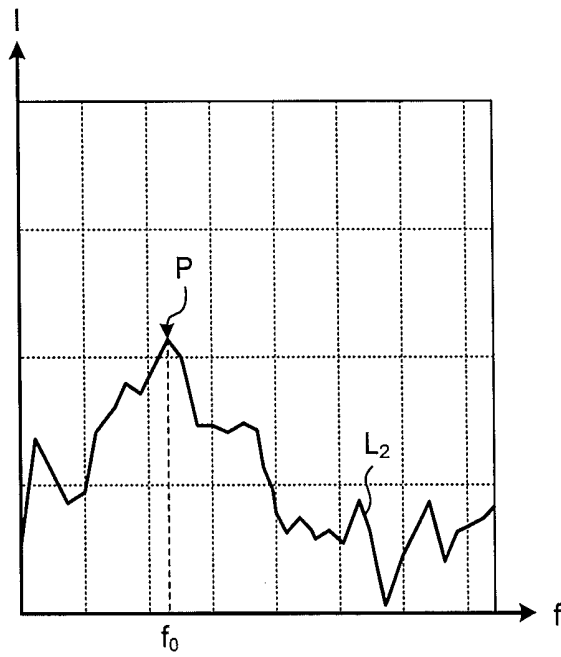


FIG.12

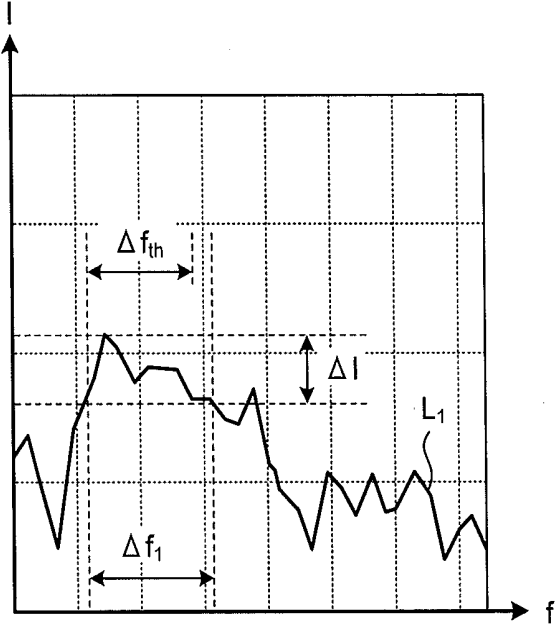


FIG.13

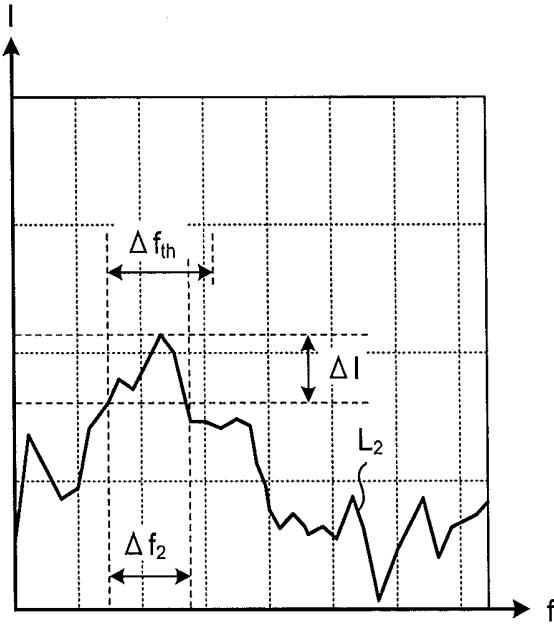


FIG.14

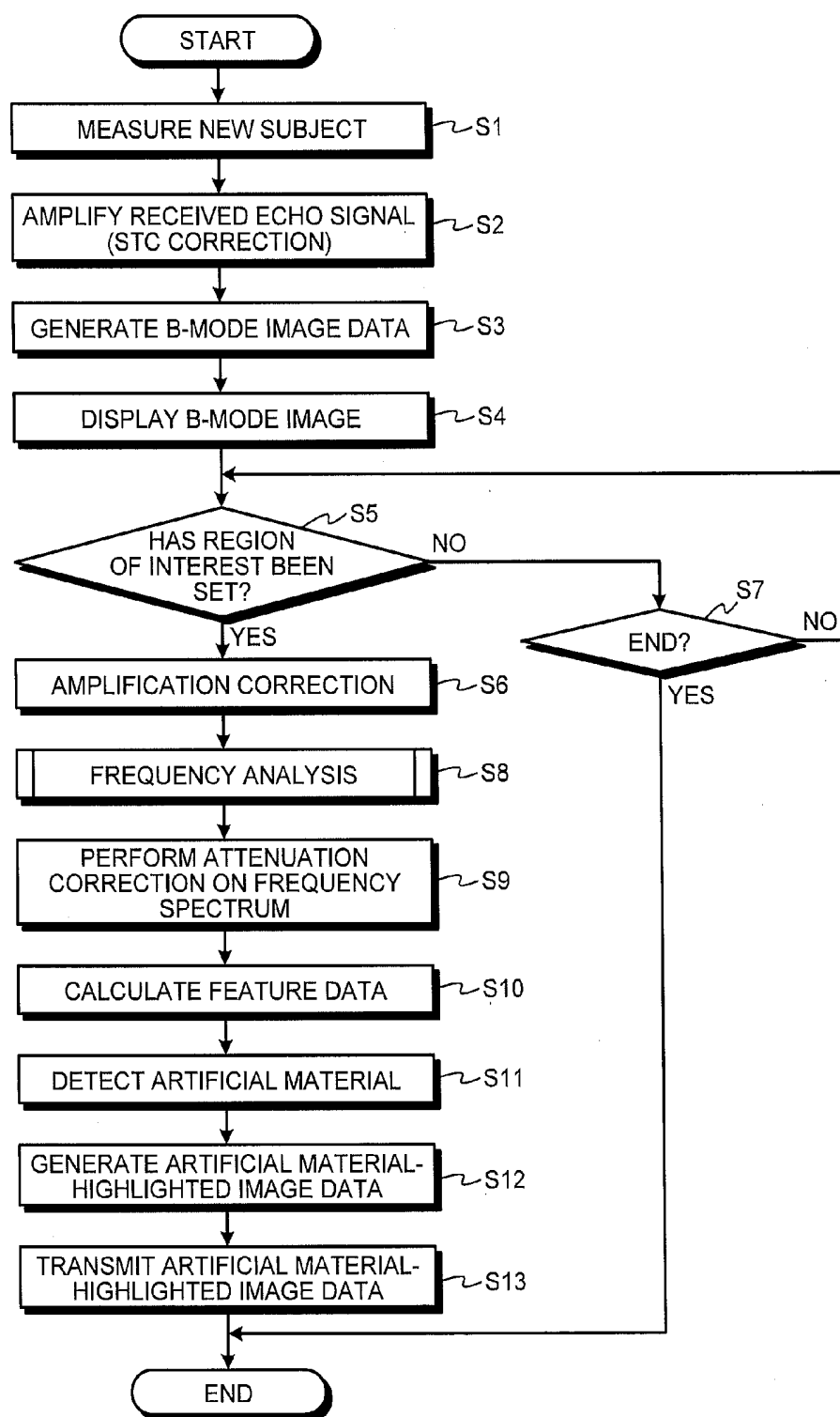


FIG.15

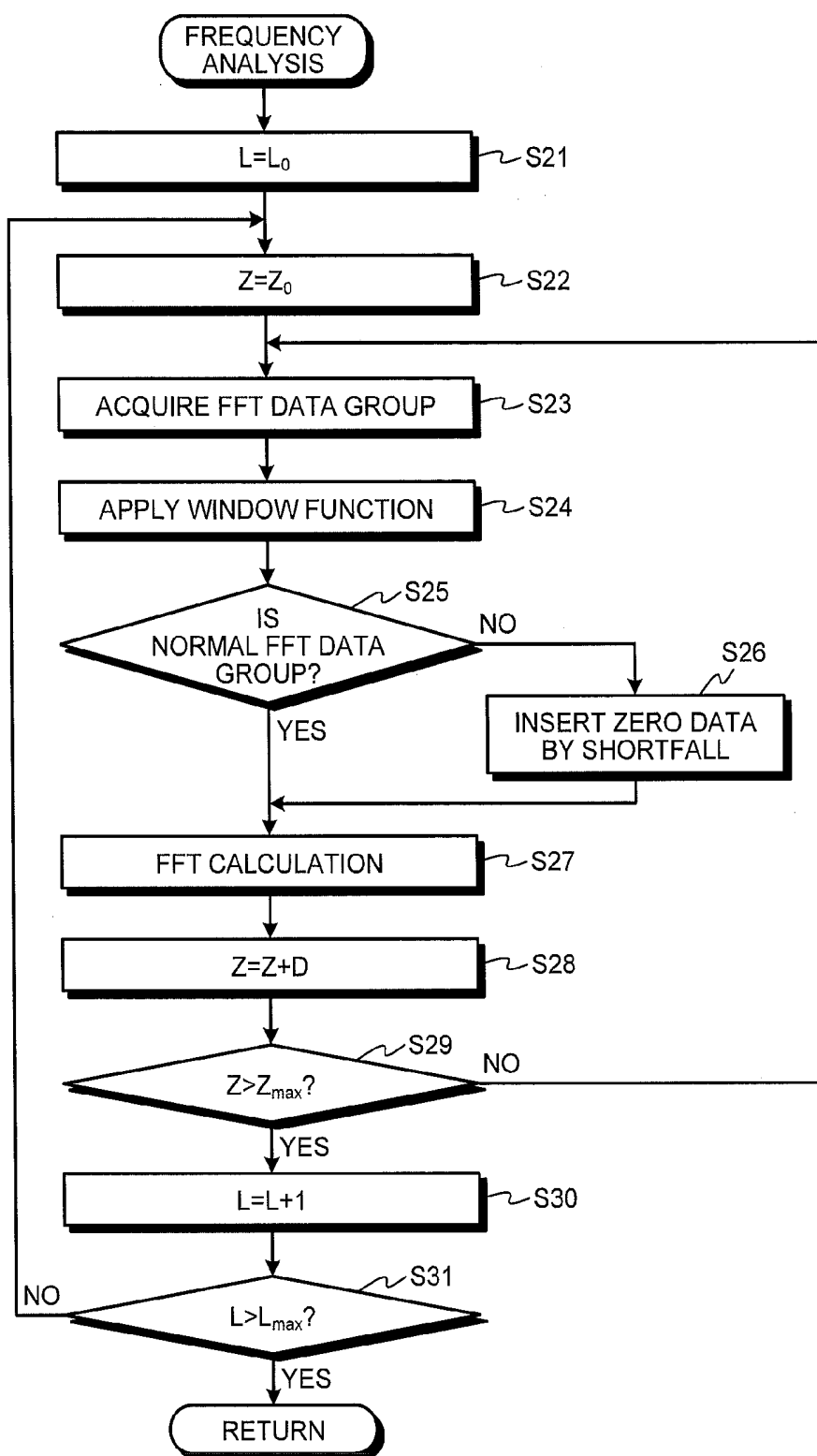


FIG.16

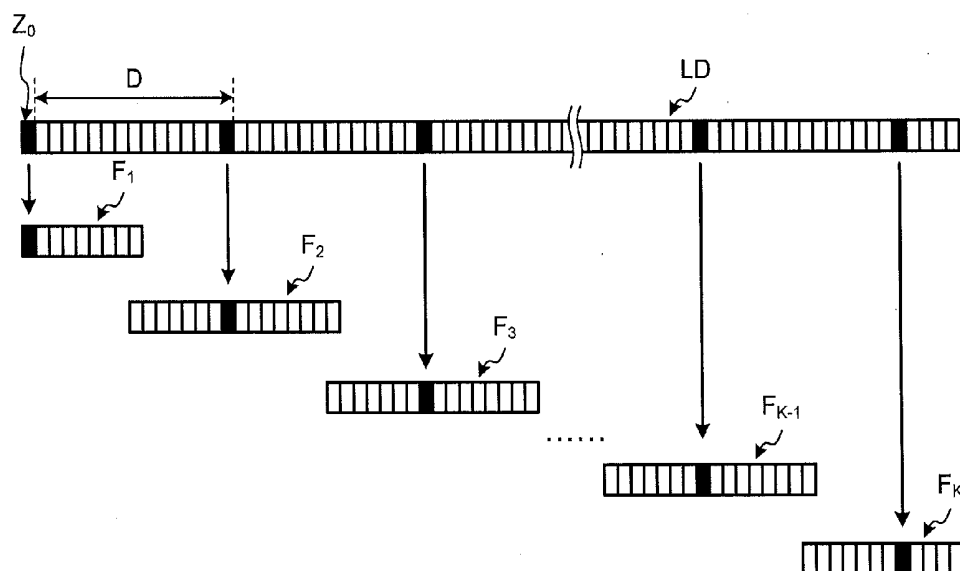


FIG.17

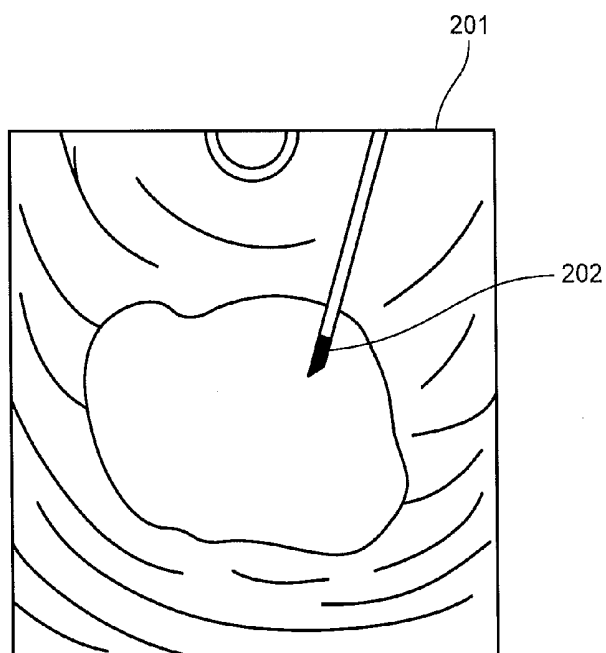


FIG.18

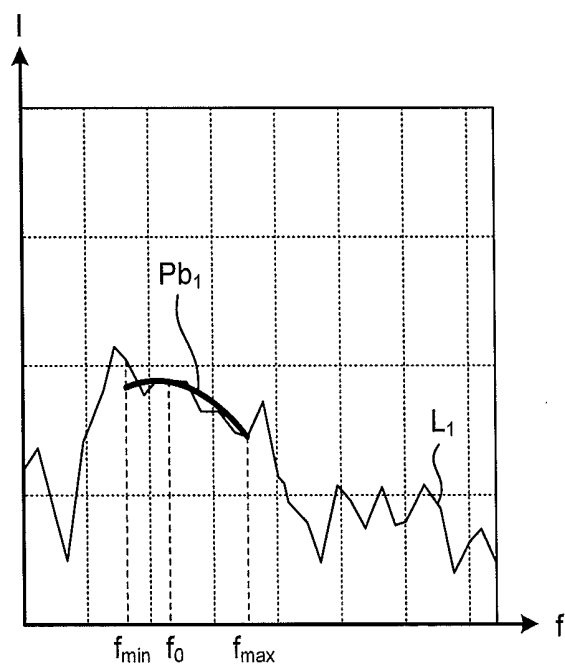


FIG.19

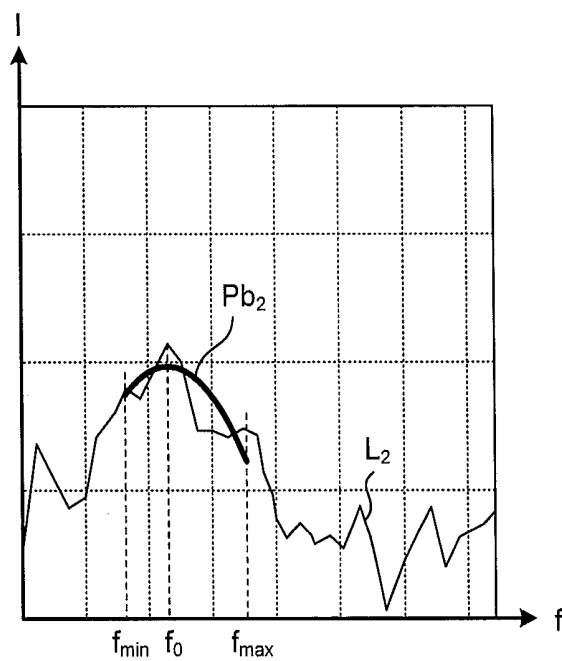


FIG.20

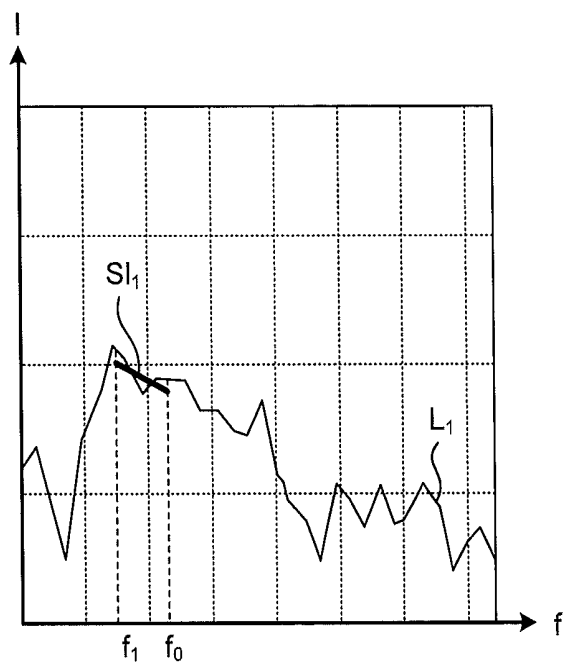


FIG.21

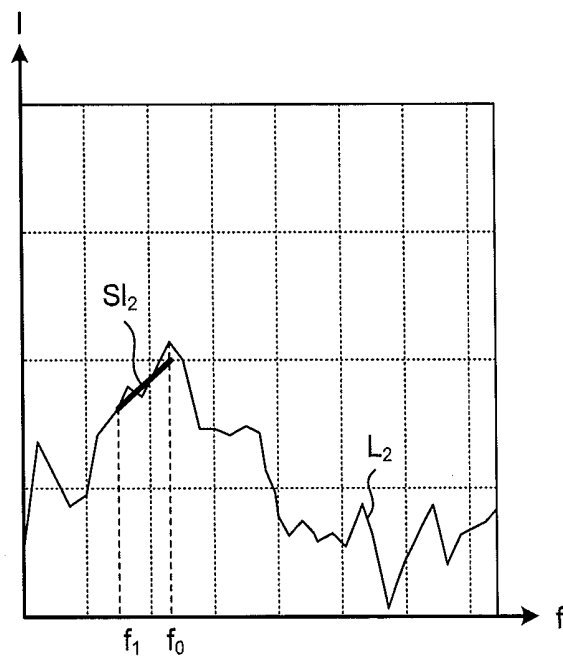


FIG.22

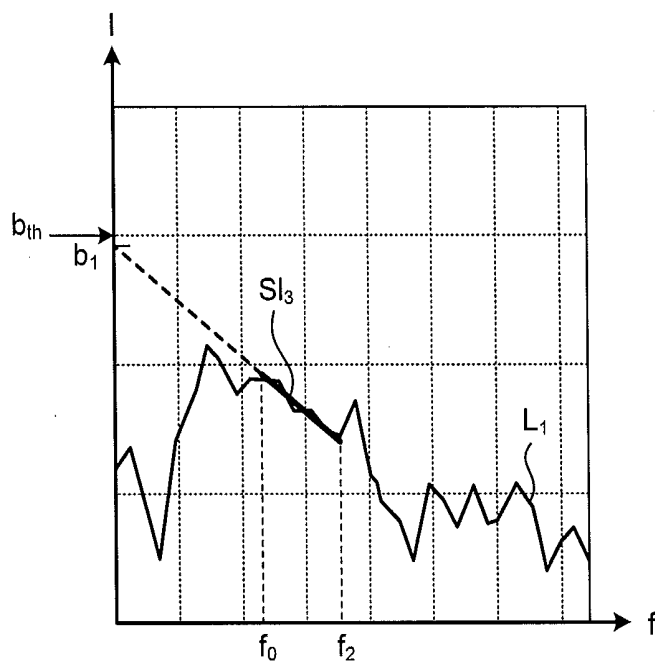


FIG.23

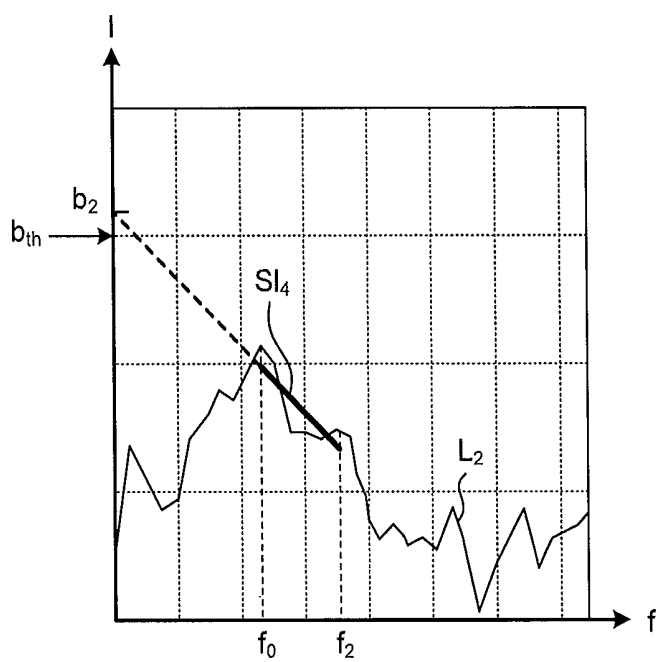


FIG.24

	SCOPE I	SCOPE II	...
PUNCTURE NEEDLE A	$(\Delta I_1, \Delta f_{th1})$	$(\Delta I_2, \Delta f_{th2})$	...
PUNCTURE NEEDLE B	$(\Delta I_3, \Delta f_{th1})$	$(\Delta I_3, \Delta f_{th3})$	...
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮

FIG.25

	SCOPE I	SCOPE II	...
PUNCTURE NEEDLE A	$\{f_a, f_b\}, p_{th1} $	$\{f_a, f_c\}, p_{th2} $	...
PUNCTURE NEEDLE B	$\{f_c, f_e\}, p_{th3} $	$\{f_d, f_e\}, p_{th4} $	...
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮

**ULTRASONIC OBSERVATION APPARATUS,
OPERATION METHOD OF THE SAME, AND
COMPUTER READABLE RECORDING
MEDIUM**

**CROSS REFERENCES TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS**

[0001] This application is a continuation of PCT international application Ser. No. PCT/JP2013/067911 filed on Jun. 28, 2013 which designates the United States, incorporated herein by reference, and which claims the benefit of priority from Japanese Patent Applications No. 2012-167636, filed on Jul. 27, 2012, incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to an ultrasonic observation apparatus for observing tissue of a subject by using an ultrasonic wave, an operation method of the ultrasonic observation apparatus, and a computer readable recording medium.

[0004] 2. Description of the Related Art

[0005] An ultrasonic observation system that observes tissue of a subject by using ultrasonic waves sometime uses a puncture needle which is a treatment tool for making a puncture in a region of interest of the subject. When using the puncture needle, it is very important to make a puncture in the region of interest accurately while checking, in real time, a position of a needle tip of the puncture needle and thus, good visibility of the needle tip in an ultrasonic image is required.

[0006] Conventionally, a technology for accurately grasping the position of the needle tip of the puncture needle, a technique for intensifying an artificial material by performing correlation operation between a reception signal and a reference signal obtained by capturing an image of the artificial material is disclosed (see, for example, Japanese Laid-open Patent Publication No. 2006-175006). Further, a technique for determining the position of the puncture needle using a position sensor is disclosed (see, for example, Japanese Laid-open Patent Publication No. 2005-323669).

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] An ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the invention receives an echo signal of an ultrasonic wave from an ultrasonic probe for transmitting an ultrasonic wave to a subject and receiving the ultrasonic wave reflected from the subject and performs signal processing on the echo signal. The ultrasonic observation apparatus includes a frequency analyzer that analyzes a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a frequency spectrum, a feature data calculator that calculates feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material having a spatially regular structure, and an artificial material-highlighted image data generator that generates, based on the feature data, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted.

[0008] An operation method of an ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the invention is an operation method of an ultrasonic observation apparatus that receives an echo signal from an ultrasonic probe for transmitting an ultrasonic wave to a subject and receiving the ultrasonic wave reflected from the subject and performs signal processing on the echo signal. The operation method includes analyzing, by a frequency analyzer, a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a

frequency spectrum, calculating, by a feature data calculator, feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material having a spatially regular structure, and generating, by an artificial material-highlighted image data generator, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted, based on the feature data.

[0009] A non-transitory computer-readable recording medium according to the invention is a recording medium with an executable program stored thereon. The program instructs a processor to perform analyzing, by a frequency analyzer, a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a frequency spectrum, calculating, by a feature data calculator, feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material having a spatially regular structure, and generating, by an artificial material-highlighted image data generator, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted, based on the feature data.

[0010] The above and other features, advantages and technical and industrial significance of this invention will be better understood by reading the following detailed description of presently preferred embodiments of the invention, when considered in connection with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] FIG. 1 is an exemplary view illustrating a configuration of an ultrasonic observation system including an ultrasonic observation apparatus according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0012] FIG. 2 is an exemplary view illustrating a configuration of a distal end of an insertion unit of an ultrasonic endoscope;

[0013] FIG. 3 is a block diagram illustrating a configuration of the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention;

[0014] FIG. 4 is a view illustrating a relationship between a reception depth and an amplification factor of an echo signal;

[0015] FIG. 5 is a view illustrating a relationship between the reception depth and amplification factor in amplification processing performed by an amplification corrector that the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention includes;

[0016] FIG. 6 is a view illustrating an example of a frequency spectrum calculated by a frequency analyzer that the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention includes;

[0017] FIG. 7 is an exemplary view illustrating a brief overview of attenuation correction processing performed by an attenuation corrector that the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention includes;

[0018] FIG. 8 is a partially enlarged view illustrating a distal end of a puncture needle;

[0019] FIG. 9 is an exemplary view illustrating a state where a scattered light at the distal end of the puncture needle is enhanced;

[0020] FIG. 10 is a view illustrating a frequency spectrum (first example) of an echo signal at a point-like region in a B-mode image;

[0021] FIG. 11 is a view illustrating a frequency spectrum (second example) of an echo signal at a point-like region in a B-mode image;

[0022] FIG. 12 is a view explaining a brief overview (first example) of feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the embodiment of the present invention;

[0023] FIG. 13 is a view explaining a brief overview (second example) of feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the embodiment of the present invention;

[0024] FIG. 14 is a flowchart illustrating a brief overview of processing to be performed in the ultrasonic endoscope system;

[0025] FIG. 15 is a flowchart illustrating a brief overview of processing to be performed by the frequency analyzer;

[0026] FIG. 16 is an exemplary view illustrating data arrangement of one acoustic ray;

[0027] FIG. 17 is a view illustrating a display example of an artificial material-highlighted image displayed on a display unit;

[0028] FIG. 18 is a view explaining a brief overview (first example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a first modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0029] FIG. 19 is a view explaining a brief overview (second example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the first modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0030] FIG. 20 is a view explaining a brief overview (first example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a second modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0031] FIG. 21 is a view explaining a brief overview (second example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the second modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0032] FIG. 22 is a view explaining a brief overview (first example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a third modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0033] FIG. 23 is a view explaining a brief overview (second example) of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the third modification of the embodiment of the present invention;

[0034] FIG. 24 is a view illustrating feature data information (first example) stored in a feature data information storage unit of the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to a fourth modification of the embodiment of the present invention; and

[0035] FIG. 25 is a view illustrating feature data information (second example) stored in the feature data information storage unit of the ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the fourth modification of the embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0036] Modes for carrying out the present invention (hereinafter referred to as “embodiments”) will be described below with reference to the accompanying drawings.

[0037] FIG. 1 is an exemplary view illustrating a configuration of an ultrasonic endoscope system as an example of an ultrasonic observation system including an ultrasonic observation apparatus according to the embodiment of the present invention. An ultrasonic endoscope system 1 of FIG. 1 includes an ultrasonic endoscope 2 capable of being inserted

into a subject and provided with functions of transmitting a pulse-like ultrasonic wave and receiving an externally reflected ultrasonic wave (echo) as well as a function of capturing the subject to generate an image signal, an ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 configured to perform specified processing to an electrical echo signal received from the ultrasonic endoscope 2 to generate an ultrasonic image, an endoscope observation apparatus 4 configured to generate an endoscope image based on the image signal generated by the ultrasonic endoscope 2, a display apparatus 5 realized by using a display panel formed of liquid crystal or organic EL and capable of displaying the image generated by the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 and the endoscope observation apparatus 4, a light source apparatus 6 configured to supply illumination light to be emitted outside from a distal end of the ultrasonic endoscope 2, an ultrasonic cable 7 configured to electrically connect the ultrasonic endoscope 2 and ultrasonic observation apparatus 3, a video cable 8 configured to electrically connect the ultrasonic endoscope 2 and the endoscope observation apparatus 4, and an optical fiber cable 9 provided with an optical fiber that connects the ultrasonic endoscope 2 and the light source apparatus 6 to supply the illumination light generated by the light source apparatus 6 to the ultrasonic endoscope 2.

[0038] The ultrasonic endoscope 2 includes an insertion unit 21 to be inserted into a body, an operation unit 22 coupled to a base end side of the insertion unit 21, a universal cable 23 extending from the operation unit 22, and a connector 24 provided at a distal end of the universal cable 23.

[0039] The insertion unit 21 includes an ultrasonic probe 211 provided at a distal end thereof, a hard portion 212 formed of a hard member and connected to the ultrasonic probe 211, a bending portion 213 bendably connected to a base end side of the hard portion 212, and a flexible tube portion 214 having flexibility and provided at a base end side of the bending portion 213. Although not illustrated, there are provided, inside the insertion unit 21, a light guide that transmits the illumination guide, a plurality of signal lines that transmits various electrical signals, and a treatment tool passage for insertion of a treatment tool.

[0040] FIG. 2 is an exemplary view illustrating a configuration of the distal end of the insertion unit 21. The ultrasonic probe 211 is a convex type ultrasonic probe and has a transducer unit 215 in which a plurality of ultrasonic transducers are regularly arranged. The ultrasonic transducer includes an acoustic lens, a piezoelectric element, and a matching layer and is configured to acquire an ultrasonic signal contributing more to an ultrasonic tomographic image of an inside of a subject's body than to a body wall of the subject. The plurality of ultrasonic transducers are arranged so as to form a convex circular arc.

[0041] A treatment tool channel 212a allowing various treatment tool to extend is formed at a distal end of the hard portion 212. FIG. 2 illustrates an example in which a puncture needle 101 which is a treatment tool extends from the treatment tool channel 212a. An extending angle of the puncture needle 101 from the treatment tool channel 212a is defined depending on a type of the insertion unit 21. A mechanism for adjusting the extending angle of the puncture needle 101 can be provided in the insertion unit 21.

[0042] The ultrasonic probe 211 has functions of converting an electric pulse signal received from the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 into an ultrasonic pulse (acoustic pulse signal) and converting an ultrasonic echo externally reflected

by the subject into an electrical echo signal. The echo signal obtained as a result of the conversion performed by the ultrasonic probe **211** is transmitted to the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3** through the ultrasonic cable **7**. A method of scanning the ultrasonic transducer employed by the ultrasonic probe **211** may be an electronic scanning method or a mechanical scanning method.

[0043] An imaging element (not illustrated) that captures an object positioned in a specified visual field to generate an image signal for an endoscope image is provided at the distal end of the hard portion **212**. The image signal generated by the imaging element is transmitted to the endoscope observation apparatus **4** through the video cable **8**.

[0044] The illumination light supplied from the light source apparatus **6** can be emitted from the distal end of the hard portion **212**. Specifically, an illumination window (not illustrated) for emitting, therethrough, the illumination light transmitted from the light source apparatus **6** is provided at the distal end of the hard portion **212**.

[0045] The operation unit **22** includes a bending knob **221** for operating the bending portion **213** in a bending manner in a vertical (up-down) or horizontal (left-right) direction, a plurality of operation members **222** for performing various operations, and a treatment tool insertion port **223** configured to communicate with the treatment tool passage formed in the insertion unit **21** so as to allow insertion of the treatment tool into the treatment tool passage.

[0046] Through the universal cable **23**, a plurality of signal lines for transmitting an electric signal, an optical fiber for transmitting the illumination light, and the like are inserted, although not illustrated.

[0047] The connector **24** is configured to transmit and receive a signal to and from the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3**, the endoscope observation apparatus **4**, and the light source apparatus **6** through the ultrasonic cable **7**, the video cable **8**, and the optical fiber cable **9**, respectively.

[0048] Next, reference will be made to a configuration of the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3**. FIG. **3** is a block diagram illustrating a configuration of the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3**. The ultrasonic observation apparatus **3** is an apparatus that receives an echo signal from the ultrasonic probe **211** and performs signal processing on the echo signal. The ultrasonic observation apparatus **3** includes a transmitting and receiving unit **31** configured to transmit and receive an electrical signal to and from the ultrasonic endoscope **2** and the display apparatus **5**, a calculator **32** configured to perform specified calculation for the echo signal received from the ultrasonic endoscope **2**, an image processor **33** configured to generate image data corresponding to the echo signal, an input unit **34** realized by using interfaces such as a keyboard, a mouse, and a touch panel and configured to receive various information as an input, a storage unit **35** for storing various information for observing the subject based on the ultrasonic wave, and a controller **36** configured to perform operation control of the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3**.

[0049] The transmitting and receiving unit **31** is electrically connected to the ultrasonic probe **211** and configured to transmit a pulse signal to the ultrasonic probe **211** and receive an echo signal therefrom. Specifically, the transmitting and receiving unit **31** generates a pulse signal based on a previously set waveform and transmission timing and transmits the generated pulse signal to the ultrasonic probe **211**.

[0050] The transmitting and receiving unit **31** has an echo signal amplifier **311** that amplifies the echo signal. Specifi-

cally, the echo signal amplifier **311** performs STC (Sensitivity Time Control) correction in which an echo signal with a larger reception depth is amplified with a higher amplification factor. FIG. **4** is a view illustrating a relationship between the reception depth and amplification factor of the echo signal. A reception depth z illustrated in FIG. **4** is an amount calculated based on a time elapsed from a reception start time point of an ultrasonic wave. As illustrated in FIG. **4**, an amplification factor β (dB) is linearly increased from β_0 to β_{th} ($>\beta_0$) with an increase in the reception depth z when the reception depth z is smaller than a threshold z_{th} . When the reception depth z is equal to or larger than a threshold z_{th} , the amplification factor β assumes a certain value β_{th} . A value of the threshold z_{th} is a value at which the ultrasonic signal received from the subject is almost attenuated and noise is thus dominant. More generally, the amplification factor β may monotonically increase with an increase in the reception depth z when the reception depth z is smaller than the threshold z_{th} .

[0051] The transmitting and receiving unit **31** performs processing, such as filtering, on the echo signal amplified by the echo signal amplifier **311** and then A/D converts the resultant signal to generate and output a digital RF signal. In a case where the ultrasonic probe **211** electronically scans the plurality of ultrasonic transducers, the transmitting and receiving unit **31** has a multichannel circuit for beam synthesis corresponding to the plurality of ultrasonic transducers.

[0052] The calculator **32** includes an amplification corrector **321** configured to perform amplification correction to make the amplification factor constant with respect to the digital RF signal output from the transmitting and receiving unit **31** regardless of the reception depth, a frequency analyzer **322** configured to perform fast Fourier transform (FFT) to the digital RF signal that has been subjected to the amplification correction to analyze the frequency to thereby calculate a frequency spectrum, an attenuation corrector **323** configured to perform attenuation correction processing to the frequency spectrum calculated by the frequency analyzer **322** to reduce contribution of attenuation of the ultrasonic wave depending on the reception depth and frequency of the ultrasonic wave, a feature data calculator **324** configured to calculate feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material having a spatially regular structure as feature data reflecting the frequency spectrum that has been subjected to the attenuation correction by the attenuation corrector **323**, and an artificial material detector **325** configured to detect, based on the feature data calculated by the feature data calculator **324**, a reflection signal from the artificial material having a spatially regular structure as information of the artificial material.

[0053] FIG. **5** is a view illustrating a relationship between the reception depth and amplification factor in the amplification processing performed by the amplification corrector **321**. As illustrated in FIG. **5**, the amplification factor β (dB) of the amplification processing performed by the amplification corrector **321** assumes a maximum value $\beta_{th}-\beta_0$ at a reception depth z of zero, is linearly reduced at a reception depth z of up to a threshold z_{th} , and is zero when the reception depth is equal to or larger than a threshold z_{th} . When the amplification corrector **321** performs amplification correction for a digital RF signal with such an amplification factor, the influence of the STC correction in the echo signal amplifier **311** can be offset, and a signal of the certain amplification factor β_{th} can be output. Of course, the relationship between the reception depth z and the amplification factor β achieved in the ampli-

fication corrector **321** varies in accordance with the relationship between the reception depth and amplification factor in the echo signal amplifier **311**.

[0054] For each acoustic ray (line data), the frequency analyzer **322** applies fast Fourier transform to an FFT data group formed of a specified data amount to calculate a frequency spectrum at a plurality of positions (data positions) on an acoustic ray. The frequency spectrum tends to vary depending on tissue characteristics of a subject. The reason for this is that the frequency spectrum is correlated with a size, a density, an acoustic impedance, and the like of a subject as a scatterer scattering an ultrasonic wave. In the present embodiment, the “tissue characteristic” indicates, any of cancer, endocrine tumor, mucinous tumor, normal tissue, vascular channel, and the like.

[0055] FIG. 6 is a view illustrating an example of the frequency spectrum calculated by the frequency analyzer **322**. In FIG. 6, a horizontal axis f represents a frequency, and a vertical axis I represents an intensity. Here, the “intensity” is any of parameters such as voltage, electric power, sound pressure, acoustic energy, and the like. In a frequency spectrum curve C_1 illustrated in FIG. 6, a lower limit frequency f_{LOW} and an upper limit frequency f_{HIGH} of the frequency spectrum are parameters determined based on a frequency band of the ultrasonic probe **211**, a frequency band of the pulse signal transmitted from the transmitting and receiving unit **31**, and the like. For example, f_{LOW} is set to 3 MHz, and f_{HIGH} is set to 10 MHz. In the present embodiment, the curve and the straight lines are formed of a set of discrete points.

[0056] FIG. 7 is an exemplary view illustrating a brief overview of the attenuation correction processing performed by the attenuation corrector **323**. As illustrated in FIG. 7, the attenuation corrector **323** corrects the frequency spectrum curve C_1 by adding an attenuation amount A defined by the following expression (1) to an intensity I at all of frequencies f ($f_{LOW} < f < f_{HIGH}$) within a frequency band.

$$A = 2\alpha z f \quad (1)$$

[0057] where α is an attenuation rate, z is the reception depth of an ultrasonic wave, and f is a frequency. The attenuation rate α is determined according to a type of an object to be observed. For example, when the object to be observed is a living body, the attenuation rate α is in a range of from 0.0 to 1.0 (dB/cm/MHz) and, preferably, in a range of from 0.3 to 0.7 (dB/cm/MHz). When the object to be observed is a pancreas, $\alpha = 0.6$ (dB/cm/MHz) is determined. In the present embodiment, a configuration can also be employed in which the value of the attenuation rate α can be changed by an input from the input unit **34**.

[0058] The application of the attenuation correction by the attenuation corrector **323** allows a new frequency spectrum curve C_1' in which the contribution of attenuation caused due to propagation of the ultrasonic wave is reduced to be obtained. As a result, it is possible to prevent a problem in which the image becomes dark which results from a reduction in the signal intensity due to the influence of the attenuation on a region having the large reception depth and to obtain an image having uniform brightness over a screen.

[0059] The feature data calculator **324** calculates, as feature data, a bandwidth of a frequency corresponding to a specified range (hereinafter, referred to as intensity width) in which a peak intensity of the frequency spectrum that has been subjected to the attenuation correction by the attenuation corrector **323** is set as an upper limit value.

[0060] The artificial material detector **325** detects, based on the feature data calculated by the feature data calculator **324**, a reflection signal from the artificial material having a spatially regular structure as information of the artificial material. As the artificial material having a spatially regular structure, there can be exemplified the puncture needle **101** and an ultrasonic marker which are to be described later.

[0061] The image processor **33** includes a B-mode image data generator **331** configured to generate B-mode image data from the echo signal and an artificial material-highlighted image data generator **332** configured to generate artificial material-highlighted image data in which a position of the artificial material is highlighted when the artificial material detector **325** detects a reflection signal from the artificial material. The echo signal received from the ultrasonic endoscope **2** is data based on polar coordinates. Thus, the image processor **33** converts the polar coordinates into orthogonal coordinates so as to generate image data to be added to each pixel.

[0062] The B-mode image data generator **331** performs, for the digital signal, signal processing using a known technique such as a bandpass filter, a logarithmic conversion, gain processing or contrast processing and generates the B-mode image data by decimating the data according to a data step width determined by a display range of the image on the display apparatus **5**. The B-mode image is a grayscale image in which values of R (red), G (green), and B (blue), which are variables when an RGB color system is employed as a color space, are matched to one another. A region of interest in the B-mode image can be arbitrarily set by a user through the input unit **34**.

[0063] The artificial material-highlighted image data generator **332** generates the artificial material-highlighted image data by adding, to the artificial material, a color easily distinguished from its surrounding portion or by increasing brightness of the artificial material as compared to the surrounding portion.

[0064] The input unit **34** is realized by using interfaces such as a keyboard, a mouse, and a touch panel. The input unit **34** is configured to receive an input of information designating a region of interest from a user of the ultrasonic observation apparatus **3** who views the image generated by the image processor **33**.

[0065] The storage unit **35** includes an amplification factor information storage unit **351** for storing information of the amplification factor to be referred to when the echo signal amplifier **311** and the amplification corrector **321** perform the amplification processing, a window function storage unit **352** for storing a window function to be used in the frequency analysis processing performed by the frequency analyzer **322**, a correction information storage unit **353** for storing correction information (including the above equation (1)) to be referred to when the attenuation corrector **323** performs processing, and a feature data information storage unit **354** for storing information on the feature data to be referred to when the artificial material detector **325** detects the artificial material.

[0066] The amplification factor information storage unit **351** stores the relationships between the amplification factor and reception depth, which are illustrated in FIGS. 4 and 5. The window function storage unit **352** stores at least one of the window functions such as Hamming, Hanning, and Blackman.

[0067] The storage unit 35 is realized using a ROM storing an operating program of the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3, a program for operating a specified OS, and the like in advance, a RAM storing calculation parameters and data for each processing, or the like.

[0068] The controller 36 is realized using a CPU having a calculation function and a control function. The controller 36 reads out the information stored in the storage unit 35 and various programs including the operating program of the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 from the storage unit 35 to execute various calculation processing related to a method of operating the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 to thereby perform overall control for the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3.

[0069] The operating program of the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 can also be stored on a computer readable recording medium such as a hard disk, a flash memory, a CD-ROM, a DVD-ROM, or a flexible disk to be widely distributed.

[0070] Next, reference will be made to a configuration of a distal end of the puncture needle 101 which is a treatment tool applied to the ultrasonic endoscope system 1. FIG. 8 is a partially enlarged view illustrating the distal end of the puncture needle 101. A plurality of minute concave portions 102 each having substantially a concave spherical surface are arranged in the distal end of the puncture needle 101 to form a spatially regular pattern. The plurality of concave portions 102 are provided for the purpose of effectively scattering the ultrasonic wave transmitted from the ultrasonic probe 211 so as to easily visualize the ultrasonic wave in the B-mode image. In the example of FIG. 8, the plurality of concave portions 102 are arranged in such a manner that they are equally spaced apart from the adjacent ones.

[0071] When the ultrasonic wave is transmitted to the puncture needle 101, each of the concave portions 102 scatters an acoustic wave to function as a point sound source. Assuming that a wavelength of the ultrasonic wave (transmission wave) transmitted from the ultrasonic probe 211 is λ , an interval between adjacent concave portions 102 is d , and an incident angle (angle between an incident direction of the transmission wave and a normal direction of a surface of the puncture needle 101) of the transmission wave incident on a surface of the puncture needle 101 is θ , only a wavelength of the scattered wave at the distal end of the puncture needle 101 that satisfies the following conditional expression (2) is enhanced (see FIG. 9).

$$2d \sin \theta = n\lambda \quad (2)$$

[0072] where n of the right-hand side is an integer. The ultrasonic probe 211 can effectively receive the scattered wave that satisfies the expression (2).

[0073] In general, the transmission wave includes waves of various frequencies; however, the number of integers n that satisfy the expression (2) is very few. Therefore, the ultrasonic wave scattered at a portion having the spatially regular structure like the distal end of the puncture needle 101, has a narrow band frequency spectrum. Thus, the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 can distinguish an echo signal from the artificial material like the distal end of the puncture needle 101 from an echo signal from a living tissue by performing signal processing using the frequency spectrum.

[0074] Although the artificial material having a spatially regular structure is assumed to be the puncture needle 101 in the following descriptions, it goes without saying that this is merely one example.

[0075] Next, reference will be made to a feature of processing to be performed by the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3. FIGS. 10 and 11 are views each illustrating a frequency spectrum of an echo signal at a point-like region in the B-mode image. Specifically, FIG. 10 illustrates a frequency spectrum when the point-like region corresponds to a living tissue, and FIG. 11 illustrates a frequency spectrum when the point-like region corresponds to the distal end of the puncture needle 101. The two frequency spectrums are acquired at the same depth and have the same level of influence such as attenuation due to propagation or energy migration to a harmonic sound. Thus, it can be said that a difference in the frequency spectrum is mainly caused by a difference in characteristics of a reflector. The "point-like region" mentioned here means an extremely minute region having a certain degree of breadth including the surrounding area. Thus, even when the point-like region corresponds to a region where the distal end of the puncture needle 101 is positioned, it may include small amount of information of the living tissue around the distal end of the puncture needle 101.

[0076] As can be seen from a comparison between a spectrum curve L_1 of FIG. 10 and a spectrum curve L_2 of FIG. 11, the spectrum curve L_2 assumes a shape having a peak at a position P corresponding to a frequency f_0 , while the spectrum curve L_1 assumes a downward sloping linear shape around the frequency f_0 . It can be considered that the shape of the spectrum curve L_2 occurs in a reflection signal from a portion forming the spatially regular pattern and results from enhancement of the scattered wave caused due to existence of the plurality of concave portions 102 of the puncture needle 101. On the other hand, the spectrum curve L_1 does not have a peak in as a narrow band as in the spectrum curve L_2 . This is because the living tissue is not spatially regularly structured as much as the distal end of the puncture needle 101.

[0077] FIGS. 12 and 13 are views each explaining a brief overview of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in the present embodiment. The feature data calculator 324 calculates, as feature data, a bandwidth Δf of a frequency f corresponding to an intensity width ΔI in which a peak value of the frequency spectrum is set as an upper limit. The artificial material detector 325 compares the bandwidth Δf calculated as the feature data by the feature data calculator 324 with a threshold value Δf_{th} to determine whether or not the frequency spectrum is a frequency spectrum of the distal end of the puncture needle 101. Specifically, when the bandwidth Δf is smaller than Δf_{th} , the artificial material detector 325 determines that the frequency spectrum is a frequency spectrum of the distal end of the puncture needle 101.

[0078] A bandwidth Δf_1 of the spectrum curve L_1 illustrated in FIG. 12 is larger than Δf_{th} ($\Delta f_1 > \Delta f_{th}$). On the other hand, a bandwidth Δf_2 of the spectrum curve L_2 illustrated in FIG. 13 is smaller than Δf_{th} ($\Delta f_2 < \Delta f_{th}$). In this case, the artificial material detector 325 detects that a substance corresponding to the spectrum curve L_2 is the distal end of the puncture needle 101.

[0079] As described above, by using the frequency spectrum, the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 can accurately detect the artificial material having a spatially regular structure like the distal end of the puncture needle 101 in the B-mode image.

[0080] FIG. 14 is a flowchart illustrating a brief overview of processing to be performed in the ultrasonic endoscope system 1 having the configuration described above. First, the

ultrasonic endoscope 2 measures a new subject using the ultrasonic probe 211 (step S1).

[0081] Subsequently, the echo signal amplifier 311 receiving an echo signal from the ultrasonic probe 211 amplifies the echo signal (step S2). Here, the echo signal amplifier 311 performs the amplification based on the relationship between the amplification factor β and reception depth z illustrated in FIG. 4.

[0082] Then, the B-mode image data generator 331 generates B-mode image data using an echo signal for a B-mode image output from the transmitting and receiving unit 31 (step S3).

[0083] Next, the controller 36 controls the display apparatus 5 to display a B-mode image corresponding to the B-mode image data generated by the B-mode image data generator 331 (step S4).

[0084] Thereafter, when a region of interest is set through the input unit 34 (Yes in step S5), the amplification corrector 321 performs correction to make the amplification factor constant with respect to the signal output from the transmitting and receiving unit 31 regardless of the reception depth (step S6). Here, the amplification corrector 321 performs amplification processing based on the relationship between the amplification factor β and reception depth z illustrated in FIG. 5. The region of interest may be set as a region corresponding to the entire B-mode image.

[0085] On the other hand, when no area of interest is set (No in step S5), the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 terminates the processing when an instruction for terminating the processing is input through the input unit 34 (Yes in step S7). On the contrary, when no area of interest is set (No in step S5), the ultrasonic observation apparatus 3 returns to step S5 when an instruction for terminating the processing is not input through the input unit 34 (No in step S7).

[0086] After step S6, the frequency analyzer 322 calculates a frequency spectrum by analyzing the frequency through FFT calculation (step S8). In step S8, the entire image area can also be set as a region of interest.

[0087] Here, the processing performed by the frequency analyzer 322 (step S8) will be described in detail with reference to a flowchart illustrated in FIG. 15. First, the frequency analyzer 322 sets an acoustic ray number L of an acoustic ray which is a first analysis target as an initial value L_0 (step S21). The initial value L_0 may be imparted to, for example, an acoustic ray initially received by the transmitting and receiving unit 31, or an acoustic ray corresponding to a boundary position on one of right and left sides of the region of interest set through the input unit 34.

[0088] Next, the frequency analyzer 322 calculates frequency spectrums of all of a plurality of data positions set on one acoustic ray. First, the frequency analyzer 322 sets an initial value Z_0 of a data position Z (corresponding to the reception depth) representing a series of data groups (FFT data groups) acquired for FFT calculation (step S22). FIG. 16 is an exemplary view illustrating data arrangement of one acoustic ray. In an acoustic ray LD illustrated in FIG. 16, a white or black rectangle means one data. The acoustic ray LD is made discrete at time intervals corresponding to a sampling frequency (for example, 50 MHz) in A/D conversion performed by the transmitting and receiving unit 31. FIG. 16 illustrates a case where first data of the acoustic ray LD is set as the initial value Z_0 of the data position Z . FIG. 16 is a just an example, and the position of the initial value Z_0 can be

arbitrarily set. For example, a data position Z corresponding to an upper end position of the region of interest may be set as the initial value Z_0 .

[0089] Then, the frequency analyzer 322 acquires an FFT data group at the data position Z (step S23) and allows a window function stored in the window function storage unit 352 to act on the acquired FFT data group (step S24). When the window function acts on the FFT data group in this manner, discontinuity of the FFT data groups at the boundary can be avoided, and an artifact can be prevented from occurring.

[0090] Next, the frequency analyzer 322 determines whether or not the FFT data group at the data position Z is a normal data group (step S25). Here, it is necessary for the FFT data group to have the number of pieces of data being a power of two. Hereinafter, the FFT data group has 2^n (n is a positive integer) pieces of data. The normal FFT data group means that the data position Z is a 2^{n-1} -th position from the front in the FFT data group. In other words, the normal FFT data group means that there are $2^{n-1}-1$ ($=N$) pieces of data before the data position Z , and there are 2^{n-1} ($=M$) pieces of data after the data position Z . In FIG. 16, $n=4$ is set ($N=7$, $M=8$), and the FFT data groups F_2 , F_3 , and F_{K-1} are normal, while the FFT data groups F_1 and F_K are abnormal.

[0091] As a result of the determination in step S25, when the FFT data group at the data position Z is normal (Yes in step S25), the frequency analyzer 322 proceeds to step S27 to be described later.

[0092] As a result of the determination in step S25, when the FFT data group at the data position Z is not normal (No in step S25), the frequency analyzer 322 generates a normal FFT data group by inserting zero data by a shortfall (step S26). For the FFT data group which has been determined to be abnormal in step S25, a window function acts before the addition of zero data. Therefore, data discontinuity does not occur even when zero data is inserted into the FFT data group. After step S26, the frequency analyzer 322 proceeds to step S27 to be described later.

[0093] In Step S27, the frequency analyzer 322 obtains a frequency spectrum by performing FFT calculation using the FFT data group (step S27). As an example of such a frequency spectrum, there can be exemplified the frequency spectrum curve C_1 illustrated in FIG. 6.

[0094] Next, the frequency analyzer 322 adds a specified data step width D to the data position Z to calculate a data position Z of a FFT data group which is a next analysis target (step S28). Here, it is desirable that the data step width D is made equal to a data step width used when the B-mode image data generator 331 generates the B-mode image data. However, when a calculation amount in the frequency analyzer 322 needs to be reduced, the data step width D may be set to be greater than the data step width which is used by the B-mode image data generator 331. FIG. 16 illustrates a case where D is 15.

[0095] Then, the frequency analyzer 322 determines whether or not the data position Z is greater than a final data position Z_{max} (step S29). Here, the final data position Z_{max} may be a data length of the acoustic ray LD, or may be a data position corresponding to a lower end of the region of interest. As a result of the determination, when the data position Z is greater than the final data position Z_{max} (Yes in step S29), the frequency analyzer 322 increases an acoustic ray number L by 1 (step S30). On the other hand, when the data position Z is equal to or less than the final data position Z_{max} (No in step S29), the frequency analyzer 322 returns to step S23. In this

manner, regarding one acoustic ray LD, the frequency analyzer 322 performs FFT calculation on $\{[(Z_{max}-Z_0)/D]+1\}$ ($=K$) FFT data groups. Here, $[X]$ represents a maximum integer not exceeding X .

[0096] When the acoustic ray number L increased in step S30 is greater than a final acoustic ray number L_{max} (Yes in step S31), the frequency analyzer 322 returns to the main routine illustrated in FIG. 14. On the other hand, when the acoustic ray number L increased in step S30 is equal to or less than the final acoustic ray number L_{max} (No in step S31), the frequency analyzer 322 returns to step S22.

[0097] In this manner, the frequency analyzer 322 performs the FFT calculation K times for each of $(L_{max}-L_0+1)$ acoustic rays. The final acoustic ray number L_{max} may be imparted to, for example, an acoustic ray which is finally received by the transmitting and receiving unit 31, or an acoustic ray corresponding to a boundary on one of the right and left sides of the region of interest.

[0098] Subsequent to the above-described frequency analysis processing in step S8, the attenuation corrector 323 performs attenuation correction on the frequency spectrum calculated by the frequency analyzer 322 using the FFT calculation (step S9). The attenuation corrector 323 calculates the data position z based on the sampling frequency of the data and assigns the data position z to the reception depth z of the above expression (1) to thereby calculate an attenuation amount A of the ultrasonic wave. Then, the attenuation corrector 323 uses the attenuation amount A calculated for each frequency to apply attenuation correction to the frequency spectrum. As a concrete example representing a result of the attenuation correction performed by the attenuation corrector 323, the frequency spectrum curve C_1' illustrated in FIG. 7 can be exemplified.

[0099] Here, a concrete example of the calculation that the attenuation corrector 323 calculates the data position Z will be described. When a sampling frequency of the data is 50 MHz, a time interval of data sampling is $1/50$ (MHz)=20 (nsec). Here, assuming that a speed of sound is 1,530 (m/sec), a distance interval of data sampling is $1,530$ (m/sec) $\times$ 20 (nsec)/2=0.0153 (mm). Assuming that the data step width D from the first data of the acoustic ray LD to a data position of the FFT data group of the processing target is k , the data position Z is $0.0153 k$ (mm).

[0100] Then, the feature data calculator 324 calculates feature data based on the frequency spectrum obtained in step S9 (step S10). Specifically, the feature data calculator 324 calculates, as the feature data, the bandwidth Δf corresponding to the intensity width ΔI in which a maximum value of the frequency spectrum is set as an upper limit.

[0101] Thereafter, the artificial material detector 325 detects an artificial material using the bandwidth Δf calculated by the feature data calculator 324 (step S11). Specifically, the artificial material detector 325 compares a magnitude between the bandwidth Δf calculated by the feature data calculator 324 and threshold Δf_{th} to detect a frequency spectrum in which $\Delta f < \Delta f_{th}$ is satisfied as a frequency spectrum of a reflection signal from the artificial material.

[0102] Then, the artificial material-highlighted image data generator 332 uses the B-mode image data generated by the B-mode image data generator 331 and a result of the detection from the artificial material detector 325 to generate an artificial material-highlighted image data (step S12).

[0103] Then, the controller 36 transmits the artificial material-highlighted image data generated by the artificial material-highlighted image data generator 332 to the display apparatus 5 (step S13).

FIG. 17 is a view illustrating a display example of an artificial material-highlighted image displayed on the display apparatus 5. An artificial material-highlighted image 201 of FIG. 17 includes a highlighted portion 202 at which a position corresponding to the distal end of the puncture needle 101 is highlighted. A detected artificial material is thus highlighted in the artificial material-highlighted image 201, thereby allowing a user using the puncture needle 101 inside the body of the subject to grasp a position of the distal end of the puncture needle 101 easily and accurately.

[0104] The ultrasonic endoscope system 1 may periodically repeat the processing steps S1 to S13 described above.

[0105] According to the embodiment of the present invention described above, feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material having a specially regular structure is calculated, and then an image (artificial material-highlighted image) in which the artificial material is highlighted is generated based on the calculated feature data. With this configuration, it is possible to provide an ultrasonic observation apparatus capable of accurately detecting the position of an artificial material inserted into the body of the subject with a simple structure and having a display parameter capable of improving visibility of the artificial material in an ultrasonic image, an operation method therefor, and an operation program therefor.

[0106] Further, according to the embodiment, the artificial material-highlighted image data in which a detection result concerning the artificial material is highlighted is generated, whereby the visibility of the artificial material in the ultrasonic image can be improved.

[0107] Further, according to the embodiment, for detecting the artificial material, it is only necessary to perform signal processing in the apparatus and it is not necessary to use other external devices or a medical agent. This does not force a user to perform complicated operation. First Modification

[0108] FIGS. 18 and 19 are views each explaining a brief overview of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a first modification of the present embodiment. In the first modification, the feature data calculator 324 approximates a specified frequency band $FB_1 = \{f | f_{min} \leq f \leq f_{max}\}$ with a quadratic (parabola) through frequency spectrum regression analysis and calculates a coefficient of a squared term in the approximate parabola as feature data. Here, the frequency band FB_1 is set so as to include, as an element, a peak frequency P_0 that imparts an intensity peak in the frequency spectrum of the distal end of the puncture needle 101. The peak frequency f_0 and frequency band FB_1 are assumed to be previously stored in the feature data information storage unit 354.

[0109] The approximate parabola in the frequency band FB_1 is represented by the following expression (3):

$$I = p(f - f_0)^2 + q \quad (3)$$

[0110] where f is frequency. Further, the larger an absolute value $|p|$ of the coefficient p of the squared term, the more the parabola spreads. For example, when an approximate parabola Pb_1 of the living tissue illustrated in FIG. 18 and an approximate parabola Pb_2 of the distal end of the puncture needle 101 illustrated in FIG. 19 are compared, the approximate parabola Pb_1 has a larger $|p|$ value.

[0111] In the first modification, the artificial material detector 325 compares a threshold $|p_{th}|$ and absolute value $|p|$ of the coefficient p of the squared term and detects a frequency

spectrum of an approximate parabola satisfying $|p| < |p_{th}|$ as a frequency spectrum from the artificial material.

Second Modification

[0112] FIGS. 20 and 21 are views each explaining a brief overview of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a second modification of the present embodiment. In the second modification, the feature data calculator 324 approximates a frequency band $FB_2 = \{f_1 \leq f \leq f_0\}$ in which the peak frequency f_0 is set as the maximum value, by a straight line through regression analysis, and calculates a slope (coefficient of linear expression) of an approximate straight line as feature data. The peak frequency f_0 and frequency band FB_2 are assumed to be previously stored in the feature data information storage unit 354.

[0113] The approximate straight line in the frequency band FB_2 is represented by the following expression (4).

$$I = af + b \quad (4)$$

[0114] Here, when an approximate straight line SL_1 of the living tissue illustrated in FIG. 20 and an approximate straight line SL_2 of the distal end of the puncture needle 101 illustrated in FIG. 21 are compared, the approximate straight line SL_2 has a positive slope ($a > 0$), while the approximate straight line SL_1 has a negative slope ($a < 0$).

[0115] In the second modification, the artificial material detector 325 compares a threshold a_{th} (> 0) and the slope a of the approximate straight line and detects a frequency spectrum of an approximate straight line satisfying $a > a_{th}$ as a frequency spectrum from the artificial material.

Third Modification

[0116] FIGS. 22 and 23 are views each explaining a brief overview of the feature data calculation processing and artificial material detection processing in a third modification of the present embodiment. In the third modification, the feature data calculator 324 approximates a frequency band $FB_3 = \{f_0 \leq f \leq f_2\}$ in which the peak frequency f_0 is set as the minimum value with a straight line through regression analysis (see expression (4)) and calculates an intercept b of an approximate straight line as feature data. The peak frequency f_0 and frequency band FB_3 are assumed to be previously stored in the feature data information storage unit 354.

[0117] When an approximate straight line SL_3 of the living tissue illustrated in FIG. 22 and an approximate straight line SL_4 of the distal end of the puncture needle 101 illustrated in FIG. 23 are compared, an absolute value of a negative slope from the peak is larger in the approximate straight line SL_4 , so that an intercept b_2 of the approximate straight line SL_4 is larger than an intercept b_1 of the approximate straight line SL_3 .

[0118] In the third modification, the artificial material detector 325 compares a threshold b_{th} (> 0) and the intercept b of the approximate straight line and detects a frequency spectrum of an approximate straight line satisfying $b > b_{th}$ as a frequency spectrum from the artificial material.

[0119] In the third modification, the frequency band for which the approximate straight line is calculated may be set to the same frequency band FB_2 used in the second modification. Further, in the third modification, the slope a may be used as the feature data.

Fourth Modification

[0120] FIG. 24 is a view illustrating feature data information stored in the feature data information storage unit 354 in a fourth modification of the present embodiment. In the fourth embodiment, the feature data information storage unit 354 stores a combination of the intensity width and threshold for the band width in accordance with a combination of the ultrasonic endoscope 2 (scope) and the puncture needle 101. For example, a combination of the intensity width and threshold for the band width for detecting a puncture needle A inserted into a scope I is $(\Delta I_1, \Delta f_{th1})$. Further, a combination of the intensity width and threshold for the band width for detecting a puncture needle B inserted into a scope II is $(\Delta I_3, \Delta f_{th3})$.

[0121] In this manner, the feature data information storage unit 354 stores the feature data in accordance with a combination of types of the ultrasonic endoscope 2 and the puncture needle 101, thereby allowing the artificial material to be detected with higher accuracy in accordance with the combination of types of the ultrasonic endoscope 2 and the puncture needle 101.

[0122] FIG. 25 is a view illustrating another example of the feature data information stored in the feature data information storage unit 354 in the fourth modification of the present embodiment. In the example of FIG. 25, the feature data information storage unit 354 sets the frequency band and a threshold for spread of the parabola (coefficient of a squared term) in accordance with a combination of the ultrasonic endoscope 2 (scope) and the puncture needle 101. For example, a frequency band and a threshold for the coefficient of a squared term in the approximate parabola for detecting a puncture needle A inserted into a scope I is $\{f_a, f_b\}$ and respectively. Further, a frequency band and a $|p_{th}|$, threshold for spread of the parabola for detecting a puncture needle B inserted into the scope I is $\{f_c, f_e\}$ and $|p_{th3}|$, respectively. Here, $\{A, B\}$ means that the frequency band satisfies $\{f_a \leq f \leq f_b\}$.

[0123] The feature data information storage unit 354 may store the frequency band and a threshold for the slope or intercept of the approximate parabola as the feature data information.

[0124] Further, the feature data information storage unit 354 may store all the combinations described in the fourth modification 4 as the feature data information. In this case, a configuration may be employed in which a user can select arbitrary one of the feature data for detection of the artificial material through the input unit 34 or in which the artificial material detector 325 performs processing for all the feature data and detects the artificial material based on results of the processing. In the latter case, the artificial material detector 325 may detect, as the artificial material, an object that has been determined by a specified number of the plurality of feature data.

[0125] Since the extending angle of the puncture needle 101 is constant depending on the type of the ultrasonic endoscope 2, the extending angle itself may be stored as the feature data information. In this case, a neighboring region in the extending direction of the puncture needle 101 may be defined as a target region of the feature data calculation to be performed by the feature data calculator 324 or as a target region of the artificial material-highlighted image data generation to be performed by the artificial material-highlighted image data generator 332.

Other Embodiments

[0126] Although the embodiment of the invention has been described as above, the invention is not limited only to the above-described embodiment. For example, in the present invention, the artificial material may be detected using a peak value of the intensity of the frequency spectrum.

[0127] Further, in the present invention, the concave portion is not formed at the distal end of the puncture needle, the artificial material-highlighted image data may be generated including a distance between a concave portion closest to a distal end position and the distal end position.

[0128] Further, in the present invention, the ultrasonic observation system may be of a type that performs observation by bringing the ultrasonic probe into contact with the body surface of the subject. As an artificial material to be detected by the ultrasonic observation apparatus, there can be exemplified a puncture needle to be inserted from the body surface of the subject into inside thereof.

[0129] The present invention may be applied as highlighting technology for a full range of objects having a spatially regular structure. Thus, even the living tissue can be highlighted, if it has a spatially regular structure.

[0130] As described above, the present invention can be implemented in various forms without departing from the technical idea described in the claims.

[0131] Additional advantages and modifications will readily occur to those skilled in the art. Therefore, the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to the specific details and representative embodiments shown and described herein. Accordingly, various modifications may be made without departing from the spirit or scope of the general inventive concept as defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.

What is claimed is:

1. An ultrasonic observation apparatus that receives an echo signal of an ultrasonic wave from an ultrasonic probe for transmitting an ultrasonic wave to a subject and receiving the ultrasonic wave reflected from the subject and performs signal processing on the echo signal, the ultrasonic observation apparatus comprising:

a frequency analyzer that analyzes a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a frequency spectrum;

a feature data calculator that calculates feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material; and

an artificial material-highlighted image data generator that generates, based on the feature data, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted.

2. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising an artificial material detector that detects, based on the feature data calculated by the feature data calculator, information on the artificial material, wherein the artificial material-highlighted image data generator generates, based on the feature data and a detection result by the artificial material detector, the image in which the artificial material is highlighted.

3. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the artificial material is a puncture needle on a surface of a distal end of which a plurality of concave portions are arranged to form a spatially regular pattern.

4. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 3, wherein

the ultrasonic probe can receive an ultrasonic wave satisfying

$$2d \sin \theta = n\lambda \quad (n \text{ is an integer})$$

where an interval between the concave portions adjacently disposed is d , a wavelength of the ultrasonic wave is λ , and, an incident angle of the ultrasonic wave incident on a surface of the puncture needle is θ .

5. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

the feature data calculator calculates, as the feature data, a frequency band that imparts an intensity within a specified range from a maximum value of the intensity of the frequency spectrum.

6. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

the feature data calculator approximates a frequency band in the frequency spectrum that includes a frequency characterizing the artificial material, by a quadratic curve through regression analysis, and calculates, as the feature data, a coefficient of a squared term in the quadratic curve.

7. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

the feature data calculator approximates a frequency band in the frequency spectrum that includes a frequency characterizing the artificial material, by a straight line through regression analysis, and calculates, as the feature data, a slope of the straight line.

8. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

the feature data calculator approximates a frequency band in the frequency spectrum that includes a frequency characterizing the artificial material, by a straight line through regression analysis, and calculates, as the feature data, an intercept of the straight line.

9. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising a feature data information storage unit that stores feature data information which is information required for the feature data calculator to calculate the feature data, wherein

the feature data calculator calculates, based on the feature data information stored in the feature data information storage unit, the feature data.

10. The ultrasonic observation apparatus according to claim 2, further comprising a feature data information storage unit that stores feature data information which is information required for the artificial material detector to detect information on the artificial material, wherein

the artificial material detector detects, based on the feature data information stored in the feature data information storage unit, the information on the artificial material.

11. An operation method of an ultrasonic observation apparatus that receives an echo signal from an ultrasonic probe for transmitting an ultrasonic wave to a subject and receiving the ultrasonic wave reflected from the subject and performs signal processing on the echo signal, the operation method comprising:

analyzing, by a frequency analyzer, a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a frequency spectrum;

calculating, by a feature data calculator, feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material; and

generating, by an artificial material-highlighted image data generator, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted, based on the feature data.

12. A non-transitory computer-readable recording medium with an executable program stored thereon, wherein the program instructs a processor to perform:

analyzing, by a frequency analyzer, a frequency of the echo signal to calculate a frequency spectrum;

calculating, by a feature data calculator, feature data reflecting a frequency spectrum shape specific to an artificial material; and

generating, by an artificial material-highlighted image data generator, an image in which the artificial material is highlighted, based on the feature data.

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专利名称(译)	超声波观察装置，其操作方法以及计算机可读记录介质		
公开(公告)号	US20140163373A1	公开(公告)日	2014-06-12
申请号	US14/097321	申请日	2013-12-05
[标]申请(专利权)人(译)	奥林巴斯医疗株式会社		
申请(专利权)人(译)	奥林巴斯医疗系统股份有限公司.		
当前申请(专利权)人(译)	OLYMPUS CORPORATION		
[标]发明人	NOGUCHI HIROMASA		
发明人	NOGUCHI, HIROMASA		
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优先权	2012167636 2012-07-27 JP		
外部链接	Espacenet USPTO		

摘要(译)

超声波观察包括频率分析器，其分析从超声波探头接收的回波信号的频率，用于将超声波发送到对象并接收从对象反射的超声波，以计算频谱，计算特征数据计算器反映人造材料特有的频谱形状的特征数据，以及基于特征数据生成人工材料突出显示的图像的人造材料突出显示图像数据生成器。

