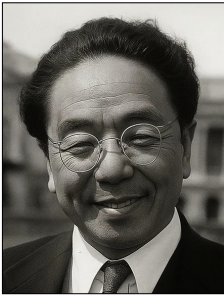




Focus on Nakai Masakazu



This section is dedicated to a presentation of the philosophy of Nakai Masakazu 中井正一 (1900–1952). It contains a brief intellectual biography of Nakai’s life and work, two short essays by Nakai, four articles on his philosophy that were presented at a workshop on “The Contemporary Significance of the Work of Nakai Masakazu” held at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, and a bibliography of Nakai’s work.

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KEYWORDS: Nakai Masakazu—mediation—Kyoto School—
aesthetics—Japanese beauty—art—technology—dialectical
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The Life and Work of Nakai Masakazu

Nakai Masakazu (1900–1952) was a philosopher of aesthetics and media technology *avant la lettre*, associated with the left wing of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy. A critic, public intellectual, social activist, avant-garde filmmaker, and librarian, Nakai studied Western aesthetics at Kyoto Imperial University (now Kyoto University) under Fukada Yasukazu 深田康算, who was one of the pioneers in the field of Aesthetics in modern Japan. Fukada's aesthetics, which emphasized the interplay between form and perception, played a significant role in shaping Nakai's philosophical and aesthetic thought. After Fukada's death, Nakai compiled his complete works. Nakai graduated from Kyoto University with his thesis titled *A Study on Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1925).

During the late 1920s, Nakai studied Neo-Kantian thought, particularly Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer. He also critically engaged Martin Heidegger. Both Cassirer and Heidegger would exert a significant influence on Nakai's theory of mediation. In "The Aesthetics of *Neue Sachlichkeit*" (1932), Nakai explicitly situates his entire philosophical project between Cassirer's critique of substance-concepts and his transcendental account of function-concepts in *Substance and Function* (1910) and Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein*. Nakai sought the "deep correspondence" between "functionality and actual existence"¹ in aesthetic vision, and understood technology and art as the mediation between "the *kata* (型) and originary existence (原存在)": Nakai roots the creativity of human art as *poiēsis* and *techné* (making) in *phusis* (nature), in what he calls, following Kant, "*die Technik der Natur*."

His first publication, "On the Preface to Kant's *Third Critique*," appeared in July 1927 and focused on the first unpublished Preface of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and the role of the "technique of nature (*die Technik der Natur*)"

1. NMZ 2: 22.

as a mediating category between theoretical and practical reason.”² Cohen and Cassirer insisted that the third critique forms the locus of Kant’s work, and not the first critique, which was the common view of most interpreters of Kant at that time. Nakai’s second publication was “The Structure of Mechanical Beauty” (1929). In this essay, Nakai sets out many of the central themes of his life work: the search for a new aesthetics of modernism, his critique of the modern conception of the individual genius, the nature of collective creativity, the historicity of art and beauty as world-forming, the importance of Kant’s conception of “technology of nature” as mediation, the nature of aesthetic vision, the role of material modes of mediation such as the printing press to the formation of human subjectivity, how the advent of the cinematographic “lens” establishes a new subjectivity through the new mode of seeing of the mechanical eye, the relation between the individual and the group or collective, the bi-directionality of projection between “*utsusu*” and “*utsuru*,” the functional understanding of technology and existential situatedness, and the functional structure of the body and socio-political organizations.

Fukada invited Nakai to be the associate editor of the *Journal of Philosophical Studies* (哲学研究) at Kyoto University, a position he held from 1926 to 1937. He co-founded two important interdisciplinary and even intercultural journals in the early 1930s: *Beauty and Criticism* 『美・批評』 (1930) and *World Culture* 『世界文化』 (1935). *Beauty and Criticism* was an interdisciplinary journal devoted to aesthetics and modernist art criticism, founded by Nakai, Shinichi Mashimo 真下信一, and Takeshi Shinmura 新村猛. In 1932, Nakai gave a paper at the Kyoto Philosophical Society titled “The Transformation of Beauty and Its Challenges” that contained the core of his functionalist theory of technological and aesthetic mediation, at which Nishida, Tanabe, Miki, Kuki, Watsuji, Tosaka, and Nishitani were present.

In the early 1930s, Nakai published a series of papers on cinema, sports, architecture, and the gramophone that distinguished him as a uniquely modernist thinker. In “The Structure of Rhythm” (1932), Nakai examines the Japanese concept of *ma* (間) as an aesthetic of negative space and time, as the functional mediation that forms the relationality (*aida*) between individuals within the collective whole without subsuming them into a homoge-

2. NMZ 1: 282.

neous, undifferentiated substantial identity. Lucken has argued that Nakai was “the first to use the word *ma* in the sense of a generic concept.”³ However, in April 1933, the Takigawa Incident occurred, and Nakai was one of the central figures in the student protest movement that defended Professor Takigawa. As a result, his advancement was postponed to 1935 when he became a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Kyoto University. As a result, “The Transformation of Beauty and Its Challenges” was not published at the time and would only appear in 1947 under the title “On the Problem of Mediation in Art.” This talk was normally an indication that someone was about to become a lecturer. Another consequence was that *Beauty and Criticism* was temporarily suspended. It was reestablished the following year. However, Nakai, Takeshi Shinmura, Kuno Osamu 久野収, and Wada Yōichi 和田陽一 established a more militant and overtly anti-fascist journal, *World Culture*, which published works by and on Horkheimer, Löwenthal, Marcuse, Benjamin, and Mandelbaum (Erich Baumann).⁴ In 1936, Nakai published “The Logic of the Committee.”⁵

In the same year, Nakai, Katsuo Nose 能勢勝雄, and Hayashi Kaname 林 要 co-founded the populist newspaper *Doyōbi* (『土曜日』, *Saturday*). *Doyōbi* was modeled after the magazine *Vendredi* of the *Front Populaire* in France. However, whereas *Vendredi* was written by an intelligentsia to liberate the masses, *Doyōbi* was a “newspaper written by its readers” and “edited by committee”; in other words, it was a grassroots product of collective thinking and action. The articles focused on a variety of issues, including commodity prices, the school system, discrimination against Koreans, corruption in local government, and reviews of European and American films.

By the mid-1930s, public protests were all but impossible. Nakai and Nose initiated the “Café movement”—a mobile site of popular resistance modeled after the European café scene. The original location of this movement was a coffee shop called François’ Tearoom (フランソア喫茶室), opened by Tateno Shōichi 立野正一 in 1934 as a gathering place for labor activists to meet and discuss politics. By 1936, it distributed the newspaper *Doyōbi* and served as a venue for Nakai and his friends to edit the articles for *Doyōbi*, screen their

3. LUCKEN 2021B, 50.

4. LUCKEN 2021A, 41.

5. NAKAI 2024.

experimental movies, play jazz, and dance. In 1932, Nakai, Naitō Kōjirō 内藤耕次郎, Tsujibe Masatarō 辻部政太郎, and Andō Haruzō 安藤春蔵 produced two avant-garde films: *Poem of the Sea* (海の詩) and *Ten-Minute-Meditation* (十分間の思索), which were the first colour films made in Japan, and *Poem of the Sea* was shown to Emperor Hirohito in 1932. By November 1937, *World Culture*, *Doyōbi*, and François' Tearoom had been closed down by the authorities, and Nakai and the others were arrested in October for engaging in anti-fascist political activities under the Peace Preservation Law. Nakai was forced to resign his teaching position at Kyoto University and his associate editorial position at the *Journal of Philosophical Studies*. He was sentenced to two years in prison, followed by two years of probation, after which he continued to be supervised by the Special High Police.

Having lost his position at Kyoto University, Nakai entered into "exil" from Kyoto. He relocated to Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, and assumed the role of director of the Onomichi City Library. After the war, Nakai was involved in grassroots cultural movements, particularly in Hiroshima Prefecture, where he promoted democratic ideals through public lectures and education. On October 7, 1945, 3 days after the security laws had been repealed, Nakai began to give talks on Kant's ethics to the general public. And on December 28th, barely four months after the defeat of Japan and only a few days before New Year's, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" echoed from the Onomichi City Library. This was the first of a series of concerts titled "The Hope Concert" (希望音楽会), which were held once a week after his lectures. After years of war, the words of the chorus must have taken on a special meaning: "O friends,... Let us sing more cheerful songs... Joy! Joy! ... that bright divine spark, that magical power that re-unites all that custom has divided," that "magical power" through which "All men become brothers." The last concert was held in the spring, marking the first Sakura viewing since the war ended.

Through the Labor Culture Association, Nakai organized what was called a "summer university"⁶ that traveled from village to village in which Nakai brought intellectuals (including Hirano Gitarō and Hani Gorō), farmers, laborers, and soldiers together to engage in what he called an "immanent self-critique"—it was an attempt to understand the tragic his-

6. NMZ 4: 166.

tory of Japan and their personal responsibility for that history, linking the everyday life of people to wider historical events during the period known as the Fifteen Years' War that had led to the horrors committed by Japanese soldiers and ultimately to the destruction of Japan.

Nakai co-founded the Hiroshima Culture Movement for Peace and Democracy in 1946. In 1947, Nakai was persuaded to run for Governor of Hiroshima Prefecture but lost the election. His campaign was part of broader efforts to influence post-war reconstruction and democratic reforms. With the support of Hani Gorō 羽仁五郎, Nakai became the first vice director of the National Diet Library in 1948, and the following year, its second director. Nakai published several important works in the post-war years. He was finally able to publish his 1932 lecture, "The Problem of Mediation in Art" (1947), as well as *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1951), *Japanese Beauty* (1952), and *The Library* (1950). In *Introduction to Aesthetics* and *Japanese Beauty*, Nakai provides a fuller elaboration of his theory of the historicity of art and beauty. Of particular interest is his engagement with Kuki's concept of *iki* (いき) in *Japanese Beauty*. Nakai challenges, or certainly qualifies, Kuki's claim that *iki* is the expression of samurai values. For Nakai, the meaning of *iki* is found in the "lightness" that runs through the very heart of Japanese beauty, and as such, is rediscovered and transformed throughout history, coming to express the values of "townspeople."⁷ It can also be found in group sports, in "the harmony and *iki* that all eight people feel" when rowing in unison.⁸ In *The Library*, Nakai outlines his functionalist theory of the library as a mechanism for the "democratization of Japan and world peace."⁹ He died in 1952.

In post-war Japan, Nakai greatly influenced a generation of young scholars, including Tsurumi Shunsuke 鶴見俊輔, Hariu Ichirō 針生一郎, Suzuki Tadashi 鈴木忠志, Tada Michitarō 多田道太郎, Imamura Taihei 今村太平, and Kurita Isamu 栗田勇, among others. Hasumi Shigehiko 蓮實重彦 maintains that Nakai was "the forerunner of all that is called in Japan contemporary thought."¹⁰ There are chapters on Nakai in many of the clas-

7. NMZ 2: 247.

8. NMZ 3: 9.

9. NMZ 4: 209.

10. HASUMI 1997, 256.

sis works on Japanese cinematography.¹¹ He has often been compared to Walter Benjamin¹² and has even been referred to as “the Walter Benjamin of Japan.”¹³ When Miki left Kyoto to go to Tokyo, Hani asked Miki who could replace him in Kyoto. Miki responded: “There aren’t many of them, but there is one, and that is Nakai Masakazu.”¹⁴ After reading Nakai’s “The Logic of the Committee,” Hani formed the opinion that “he was unparalleled in terms of his level of understanding of modern systems of collective deliberation.”¹⁵ This is one of the reasons why Hani supported Nakai’s application to the National Diet Library.

Despite all this, Nakai’s work remains in relative obscurity. His works are not included in any of the English-language anthologies of Japanese philosophy, and his name does not appear, even in a footnote, in the otherwise comprehensive *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*. In 1995, *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism* drew attention to the explicit or implicit involvement of certain members of the Kyoto School with ultra-nationalism during the war years. Given that Nakai was widely “regarded by many as one of the most respected wartime thinkers for his persistent resistance to Japanese fascism,”¹⁶ one wonders why Nakai is not mentioned at all in this work. However, in his “Revisiting *Rude Awakenings*,” John Maraldo (one of the editors of the original book) writes in a footnote: “One nearly forgotten example of early resistance is the case of the critic Nakai Masakazu.”¹⁷

One of the rare scholars in Japanese philosophy to mention Nakai is Michiko Yusa, in her seminal work, *Zen and Philosophy*, where she adopts Nakai’s insightful understanding of the Kyoto School, to which Nakai considered himself a member.¹⁸ In *Re-Politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, Nakai is briefly discussed in comparison with Tosaka:

11. NORNES 2003; YAMAMOTO 2020; BERNARDI and OGAWA 2021; ISHIHARA 2021.

12. Cf. TAKASHIMA 2000; NORNES 2003; KITADA 2017; YAMAMOTO 2020; LUCKEN 2016.

13. STEINBERG and ZAHLTEN 2017, 22.

14. HANI 1981, 19.

15. HANI 1981, 171.

16. YAMAMOTO 2020, 113.

17. MARALDO 2019, 9.

18. YUSA 2002, 232.

Nakai's non-Marxian socialism was probably closer to Tosaka's politics, but his insistent Neo-Kantianism too often clashed with his effort to read Marx's materialism through the same Neo-Kantian optic. Despite the arguments they had while on long walks in Kyoto, the two were not as far apart as it seemed. Both shared an earlier socialization in Neo-Kantian philosophy, which prompted Tosaka to move to considerations of science and its methods and Nakai to art and representation. What linked them together was a shared interest in the status of space and its structuring and enframing aptitudes.¹⁹

Several commentators have examined the similarities between Nakai and Miki. In most cases, Miki is said to have influenced Nakai; however, in some cases, Nakai is said to have influenced Miki. Kuno Osamu, the editor of both *The Complete Works of Nakai Masakazu* and *The Complete Works of Miki Kiyoshi*, has argued, for example, that Nakai's essay "Language" (1927, 1928) had influenced Miki to focus on rhetoric.²⁰

A comparison of Nakai and Nishitani also suggests itself. The terms "projection, reflection, transference" are found in *Religion and Nothingness* and are central to Nishitani's discussion of the logic of the *soku* as a "double projection (in the double sense of reflection and transference)."²¹ However, in the Japanese original, Nishitani does not employ these expressions. For example, where the English reads: "the self as subject is the self in itself projected (transferred and reflected) into the field of reason,"²² the Japanese only says: "the 'subject' is the self-'itself' projected—*utsusareta*, うつされた—onto the field of reason" (理性の場へうつされたものである).²³ The translators have added "projected (reflected and transferred)" throughout the translation—no doubt under the guidance of Nishitani himself, who oversaw the translation. The play on terms is evident in "Emptiness and *Soku*" (「空と即」), where the expression "projected (reflected and transferred)" (うつす: 映す、移す) appears three times at key points in Nishitani's argument, providing the essay with its internal structure.²⁴ The concept of *utsusu*

19. HAROOTUNIAN 2008, 99.

20. KUNO 1975, 116.

21. NISHITANI 1982, 178.

22. NISHITANI 1982, 275.

23. NKC 10: 303.

24. NKC 13: 123, 133, and 160.

(うつす) is thus central to Nishitani's concept of "elemental imagination" and the "imaging of emptiness" (空におけるイメージ化) that is manifested in the "Buddhist mood (気分) of emptiness" through art. Beginning in his 1930 essay "*Utsusu*: To Transfer-Mirror,"²⁵ and in "The Meaning of 'Seeing'" discussed below, Nakai defines aesthetic vision and "artistic mood" (気分) in terms of うつす (to reflect and to transfer).²⁶

Interest in Japanese philosophy is a relatively recent phenomenon. The main focus has been placed on central figures like Nishida, Tanabe, Miki, Kuki, Watsuji, and Nishitani. Despite the many translations and scholarly works on these figures, much remains to be done. Nakai is thus just one of the many philosophers of the Kyoto School who have not *yet* received the attention they deserve.

Although "The Anxiety of Painting" (1930) and "The Meaning of 'Seeing'" (1937) are relatively short, they are dense texts that offer a snapshot of Nakai's philosophy as it evolved in the 1930s. In them, we find many of the central themes of Nakai's philosophy.

In "The Anxiety of Painting," Nakai establishes the function of art through a critique of Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, art can only be defined as what "*das Man*" says about art. For Nakai, art plays an essential role in distancing ourselves from ourselves, required to overcome our alienation from our true self: "the aesthetic charm of the canvas arises from its ability [はたらき] to reflect [*utsushitoru* 写し取る] the shadowy-space [影なる空間] within the living-space [生ける空間]." Thus, "art history may be regarded as a record of the eternal quest for existence." The aesthetic beauty of its art defines each age. What, Nakai asks, is the modernist sense of beauty that will open a new world and define a new human self-understanding? A modernist aesthetic must rethink notions such as technology (*technē*) and mimesis (*mimēsis*), genius and creativity. The lens of the camera, the microscope, the telescope, and X-rays have extended the "function of seeing" (見る機能, *Funktion*) and provided it with a new depth and character, disclosing a new beauty found in the unseen interior depths of existence. In the

25. NAKAI 2023.

26. NMZ 4: 300; NAKAI 2023, 123; NMZ 3: 305; NAKAI 2025b, 372. Cf. LOFTS 2025, 76–78. For a full comparison of Nishitani's and Nakai's respective use of the term *utsusu*, see LOFTS, 2026.

lens of the camera, our existential quest for the homeground of existence is renewed and given new direction. In the white canvas of the screen, “the question mark (*Fragezeichen*) of our existence, is now hung before us, emitting a fresh fragrance.”

While “The Meaning of ‘Seeing’” was published in 1937, it summarizes many of the ideas Nakai had been working on since the late 1920s. First, the nature of “seeing” itself is defined in terms of what Nakai calls *utsusu*: “The word *utsusu* [うつす] generally means to project [映す], to transfer [移す]; and it refers to a transferring or projecting something from one place [場所] to another place, while maintaining an equivalent relation between the two.” Seeing is a bidirectional process of projection, at once an *utsusu* (うつす, projecting) and an *utsuru* (うつる, being projected). This bidirectionality of moving from having been projected (created) to projecting (creating) forms one of Nakai’s central ideas from the late 1920s. Seeing and presencing, moving from being projected to projecting, is the “silent movement” of the “endless inexhaustibility of the in-between space of the mirror [鏡の間]) connecting ‘one’s unchanging self’ [同一の自分] and ‘one’s changing self’ [移る自分].”

In *utsusu* of aesthetic vision, we encounter “the connective-continuation of the cut of disconnection” (切断) that separates ourselves from ourselves. This is the mediation in transition that forms the standpoint of subjectivity. Again, we see that in the “artistic mood” (気分) we encounter our true self: in the work of art, we encounter “the faint whisper of absolute truth that lies behind culture.” One might argue that for Nakai, the end of the way known as art is the beginning of the new way of religion:

When existence measures the depth of its own existence, its eye also possesses a distance that is in accordance with that depth; and therein lies the extension of humanity’s ancient “question,” or what might be called a religious sentiment [情感]. If the canvas slips into the emptiness of the gap [隙虚, すきま] that separates existence from existence, then it now sinks into an abyss-like depth.

While this encounter with one’s true self springs forth from the very depths of our hearts, it is only active when it acts as a real force within historical reality, “echoing and reverberating within ourselves and with others.” Finally, we find here one of Nakai’s concerns: namely, the *assujettissement*

of our seeing by the mechanism of consumer capitalism through the modification of art.

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