



The Meaning of “Seeing”

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The Meaning of “Seeing”

Translated by Steve Loftis

[305] Everyone thinks that ‘to see’ is the combined effect of the physical action¹ of light and the perceptual action of the eye, and this is undoubtedly true. Simply put, it is the idea that seeing is the action of *copying-transferring* [うつしとる作用] objectivity into subjectivity.² However, when you think about it, this act of *utsusu*³ [うつす] is infinitely more complex. The word *utsusu* [うつす] generally means to project [*utsusu* 映す], to transfer [*utsusu* 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.

In the sense that it relates by an equivalent relation, it is continuous, but in the sense that it separates the two places, it is discontinuous. The profound problem of continuity and discontinuity is thus found at the root of the action of *utsusu*. Therefore, when considered in its essence, seeing is implicated in the problem of the meaning of the action [行為⁴] of *utsusu*.

1. [*Sayō* 作用 is translated throughout as “action.” It should be noted that 作用 is the Japanese translation of the German term *wirken*, which is rendered in translations of Hegel as “action” and in translations of Marx as “work.” However, in Japanese, 作用 also has the sense of “function.” In his use of 作用, Nakai intends all three senses of the term.]

2. [Both *shutai* (主体) and *shukan* (主観) can be translated as “subject.” However, 主体 refers to the concrete acting subject, whereas 主観 refers to the perceiving conscious subject. 主体 has been translated throughout as “embodied subject,” emphasizing the second character, 体 (body); and 主観 has been translated throughout as “epistemological subject,” emphasizing the second character 観 (observation, sight, outlook).]

3. [Nakai exploits the peculiarities of the Japanese language and plays on the difference between the phonetic sound of *utsusu* written in hiragana and a series of written ideograms (kanji) through which the meaning of *utsusu* is manifested by the simple fact that the kanji 移す and 映す have the same phonetic pronunciation, *utsusu*. According to the kanji specialist Shirakawa Shizuka, the original meaning of *utsusu* suggested the appearance of some aspect of reality that momentarily surfaces from out of the shadows. *Utsusu* is the transitive verb form of *utsushi*: it means “to transfer” (in the sense of “moving something from one place to another,” as happens when something invisible is moved out of the shadows into the light of presence) and “transmission” (as in “the direct transmission from heart to heart”) and “to transition” from one moment to the next, as in the transition of history. Cf. NAKAI 2023.]

4. [The Japanese *kōi* 行為 signifies “action” in the sense of “conduct” as distinguished from

“To see” [見る] would seem to be the simplest thing, but when you try to explain it logically, [306] it becomes extremely difficult to explain.

The meaning of the word “to see” [みる⁵] includes not only the physical act [行動] of projection, but also a sense of curiosity, a sense of trying something out, of experimenting, as if encountering something wondrous. Within this mood [気分], the thing itself that transfers [*utsuru* 移る] is already an active [行為], fluid, temporal movement toward the future, and the sensation [気持] of seeing, in relation to *utsusu* [うつす: projecting] and to *utsuru* [うつる: being projected], is the experience of the velocity of action [行為的な速度]. In this sense, Goethe’s claim that “The world we see is a mystery”⁶ is a realistic expression of the revealing of present reality [*utsutsu*, 現つつ]. Moment by moment, the self suddenly becomes a different self without realizing it. Rather than considering this silent movement as a mere physical movement, it is meaningful to view it as the mysterious [神秘], endless inexhaustibility of the in-between space of the mirror [鏡の間⁷] connecting “one’s unchanging self” [同一の自分] and “one’s changing self” [*utsuru-jibun* 移る自分].

However, seeing is too much of a routine, everyday action to be considered mysterious [神秘]. We try every day. We are experimenting.⁸ To put this roughly in realistic terms, this is “objectifying oneself through the mediation of negation [否定を媒介⁹].” It is something that relates to actuality with deep wonder. The continuation of seeing from moment to moment

actions (作用) of consciousness or work (働き).]

5. [Nakai uses the kanji *miru* 見る, which has been translated throughout as “seeing” or “to see.” Here, however, Nakai uses the hiragana, which suggests he is returning to the etymological meaning of the term *みる*. In the Yamato language, *miru* みる expressed a broader and more sacred sense than the contemporary word 見る. It suggested an active engagement with reality rather than just a passive vision. In Shinto, the root *mi*- marked a divine or ritual observation, as in *mikiki* (*mikiki*, “listening to oracles”), divine revelation (e.g., *kami* (神, 可美, かみ) “showing” their will through nature). Finally, 美 (*mi*, *mi*) originally meant “beauty.”]

6. [Nakai paraphrases Goethe’s conception of *Offenbares Geheimnis* (Open Secret). “The hardest thing to see is what lies before your eyes.” (“Das Schwerste zu sehen ist, was vor den Augen liegt.”)]

7. [In Noh stages, the “mirror room” (*kagami no ma* 鏡の間) is where actors prepare, symbolizing the interval or space (間) of transition from mundane to artistic truth.]

8. [*Kokoromiru* 試みる originally meant “to see with the heart.”]

9. [*Baikai* 媒介 has been translated throughout as “mediation” in the sense of an intermediary who acts as a go-between. The central question of Nakai is whether “mediation” (媒介) is to be seen as a *Medium* or as the *Mittel* of *Vermitteln*. See Nakai 2022, 461.]

connects the flowing actuality; that is, it is the connective-continuation of the cut of disconnection [切断].

In the former case [(i.e., in the physical act of projection)], *utsusu* means that it is an equivalent projection. Seeing [307] thus becomes an active reflecting-mirror [*utsusukagami* 映す鏡] of the world. In contrast, in the latter case [(i.e., in trying something out)], *utsuru* means objectifying oneself through the mediation of negation [否定を媒介], and seeing thus becomes an opportune momentum¹⁰ by which we actively face the world. The former is static, while the latter is dynamic. Furthermore, in the former, what is discontinuous is treated as a continuum, while in the latter, the continuum is treated discontinuously.

This difference in standpoint has deep historical roots and can be divided into two main categories, as Kurt Lewin has correctly distinguished between the Aristotelian and Galilean views in physics. The Aristotelian view of things is a view that opens up a perspective from something fundamental and immovable, whereas the Galilean view objectifies the act of seeing itself through the mediation of the negation of facts [事実の否定を媒介], thus leaving room for seeing the act of seeing itself, that is, the emergence of an epistemological subject [主観] or the emergence of an embodied subjective standpoint [主體的立場].

There are thus two standpoints: one that treats seeing as simply a static reflecting [*utsuru* 映る] of the world, and the other that treats seeing as a dynamic process of constantly connecting the transitions [*utsuri* 移り] from moment to moment through the cut of disconnection [切断].¹¹

This difference in the standpoint of seeing is not limited to the standpoint of art,¹² but rather a difference in the meaning of the stance of liv-

10. [Hazumi 機み, はずみ is translated throughout as “momentum.” The Latin word *momentum* means “movement, moving power” and is derived from *movere* (“to move”). For Nakai, *ki* 機 refers to “the passive self in relation to the Dharma” NAKAI 1982, 257.]

11. [切断によって常につないでいく: has the sense of being “always connected by disconnection.” The translation aims to preserve the important idea of “the cut” (切) in the “disconnection (切断).”]

12. [芸術 (the art of cultivated skill) used by Nakai in this text has been translated throughout as “art.” However, the term is more general than “fine art” (美術) (the art of beauty)—as in the title of the Journal in which this essay was published (“National Art,” 国民美術). 美術 is closer to the Western conception of “art”; whereas 芸術 includes such activities that are at once art and craft (e.g., calligraphy and tea ceremony).]

ing and the attitude of all human life, a difference in worldview. Therefore, the order constituted by this stance is manifested in differences [308] such as hierarchical status, functional [機能的] relational structures, dialectical developments, arrangement of elements, mediation of moments [契機の媒介], and methods of thinking. In the realm of art, this difference in perspective gives rise to style.

At the foundation of this style lies the difference in the attitude of seeing. In Greece, art was characterized as mimetic (*mimesis*), but in the modern theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*) proposed by Lipps, the former is merely projective and static, whereas the latter possesses a transitional equivalence and dynamism. Furthermore, this tendency is even stronger in the recent position of Cohen's "*Fühlung* [feeling/pathos]."¹³ However, in general, the principle of continuity of the discontinuous is the same. From a dialectical standpoint, this takes on a further level of dynamism as a mediation in transition [移行における媒介], that is, from the standpoint of subjectivity.

What are the characteristics of an artistic perspective?

There is a mood [気分] that is often described as a theater mood [芝居気分]. From the moment you decide to go to see a play [芝居] and change your clothes, you feel excited. A mother becomes a different human being [人間¹⁴], so much so that her daughter teases her. Having lost her air of composed dignity as a mother, the mother has become simply an individual human being [一箇の人間]. The doctor forgets he is a doctor, the soldier forgets his sword, the merchant [商人: business-person] forgets his abacus, and the monk forgets his religion; if something is funny, they laugh, and if something is sad, they cry. Everyone becomes a child and plays [遊ぶ].

In the theater [劇場], even the police officers sent to monitor the perfor-

13. ["Die Fühlung selbst ist das Problem, nicht die Einfühlung; die Entstehung der Fühlung.... Das reine Gefühl ist nicht Einfühlung, sondern gleichsam Erfühlung...."] ("The problem is not empathy, but the feeling itself; the emergence of the feeling.... Pure feeling is not empathy, but rather a kind of fulfillment...."). COHEN 1912, 185. *Fühlung* is the German translation of the Greek *empathia*—*em* (into) and *pathos* (feeling).]

14. [The term 人間 combines the kanji 人 (person) and 間 (space, between, world) and can be rendered literally as "the person in the world" with the emphasis being placed on humans as social, relational beings. In Chinese, 人間 (*rénjiān*) meant: "The human world" or "Among people." Like the German *Mensch*, 人間 can be translated as human being, person, humanity, depending on the context; and like Watsuji, Nakai exploits this ambiguity. 人間 and terms including 人 (person) have been provided in parentheses.]

mance forget their duties and weep; humanity as a whole [人間全体] returns to a single originary person [一箇の原始人], watching the performance with a raw, naked mood [なまの裸の気分].

[309] Human beings are acting as if they were what one might call “seeing existence” [見る存在]. They are on the verge of forgetting their *petty* occupations and even the distinctions between wealth and poverty. Even amid their watching,¹⁵ their social status seems to disappear. Even though a person who has lost all their social status is impossible, the stage has a nature that strongly forces our inclination toward this impossibility. And this, it seems, is also its essence. It is important to elevate the human being, even for a fleeting moment, to one who has no professional consciousness or social status, one who must reconsider everything and learn to live correctly again, one who is meant to rebuild humanity correctly. Here, the human being is no longer merely a natural human being [自然の人間] nor a technological human being [技術の人間] building day by day; rather, the human has become “seeing existence” [見る存在], human beings as they should be, peering quietly from the future through a keyhole at reality tainted with corruption. One can say that “seeing” here is manifested in the appearance of truth [真の姿] when human beings oppose the shackles of alienated human beings, such as social status and occupation.

What distinguishes the pleasure of art from other pleasures is nothing other than the stimulation of intimately sensing the faint whisper of absolute truth that lies behind culture. This mood is not only found in the theater but is also the sense of “seeing” in all artistic fields.

With the opportune momentum [機, はずみ] of “seeing,” one realizes that one has, without realizing it, become something else. With the opportune momentum of “seeing,” one escapes oneself and objectifies oneself; with “seeing” as an opportune momentum, one contradicts oneself, rebounding off oneself as a springboard to leap forward through time. This is an artistic mood [気分]. When a human being [人間] places themselves within “seeing existence” [見る存在], an echo reverberates within themselves and with other people [310], expanding as vitality [*utsubotsu* 鬱勃] within time.

In this sense, the canvas is to the world of painting what the fourth wall is for the world of theater, or the blank page is for the world of literature; an

15. [Literally “watching (見ている) in-between space or interval (間).”]

opportune momentum and springboard. The canvas is by no means a flat two-dimensional plane; it functions [はたらき] like a spring.

However, today it is very difficult for people to experience such an artistic mood. This is because, far from the merchants forgetting their abacuses and entering the “world that sees” [見る世界], the painter is holding an abacus while painting—or rather, he cannot help but paint it.

“Seeing existence” [見る存在] itself is being commercially commodified. And the masses’ function of seeing [見るはたらき¹⁶] has been quantified as an object of profit. They have been trained as profit-making objects, ultimately becoming commodities. With the tie-ups between department stores, movies, newspapers, and gramophone players, and the participation of those in power, it is becoming outrageous.

We are shown everywhere evidence that the seeing action [見る作用] of the masses, already a commodity, is being distorted by the expense of a larger mechanism [機構] than those that sell it. No one truly enjoys themselves within it; people are dragged along by something.

Continuing to safeguard the rightness of “seeing,”¹⁷ and to restore the masses within the rightness of “seeing”—this struggle, of objectifying itself through the mediation of negation [否定を媒介], becomes something in its own right; this is none other than the essence of “seeing” itself.

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2022 “A Decade in Retrospect As I Remember It,” trans. Nakai Keigo, *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 7: 455–62.

16. [はたらき (働き) can be translated as function, work, or activity.]

17. [While 正しさ may have been translated as “correctness,” it has been translated as “rightness” to mirror the Buddhist expression “Right View” (正見) to which Nakai is alluding.]

2023 “*Utsusu*: To Transfer-Mirror,” trans. Steve Lofts, *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 8: 109–127.