



Dialectical Subjectivity and the Way of Art

The Socio-Political Project of Nakai Masakazu

This paper provides a reading of the socio-political project of Nakai Masakazu. It focuses on Nakai's concept of dialectical subjectivity as a mediation of negation that co-creates with others the ethos or mood of coexistence, forming a shared, common existence with others, which we might call an authentic community. Dialectical subjectivity means that the self is at once a relational member of a group, engaged in a common project, and a radically unique individual. Nakai's socio-political theory cannot be separated from his treatment of art, beauty, aesthetics, technology, and history. Nakai was not a systematic thinker. As a result, most of the literature on Nakai focuses on a specific aspect of his thought. This paper attempts to explore the various dimensions of Nakai's thought as a whole, following a single thread that is woven throughout it: namely, Nakai's conception of the nature of dialectical subjectivity as the mediation of negation and the way of art.

KEYWORDS: dialectical subjectivity—the way of art—collective
beauty—socio-political theory—historicity—technology—mediation
of negation—mediation of action—genealogy of subjectivity

For Nakai, “Art is inherently human; and its being human means, at the same time, that it is historical.... This does not merely imply that artistic materials and works carry historical characteristics. It means that art itself possesses a human-historical shape.”¹ And because of this, the experience of beauty encountered in the historical works of art is itself historical. For Nakai, the historicity of art and beauty is grounded in the historicity of being human. In this way, “art history may be regarded as a record of the eternal quest for existence”²; it is, therefore, the endless self-overcoming, self-transcending, self-negation that forms the history of the creation of new historical forms of being human through the creation of new historical forms of beauty. Ultimately, Nakai’s aesthetics is a socio-political theory of the historicity of the art of collective living life as life, the historicity of the way (道) of art as the collective way of historical life. Art is the dialectical *mediation* (媒介, *Medium*) and dialogical *means* (媒介, *Mittel*) for the mediation (*Vermitteln*) of the relationality of the human world (*aida* 間) as an experience of co-living life as life; it is a creative mechanism of the self-transformation of life. Nakai roots the creativity of human art in the *poiēsis* (making) of *phusis* (nature), in what he calls, following Kant, “*die Technik der Natur*.” There is thus a beauty to be found in nature, human technology, and art. Art and beauty form the aesthetic appearance (姿) of the historical life that animates a historical world. Through the creation of a new beauty, “a new world is born.”³ For Nakai, it is aesthetic seeing that gives things their look and a people their outlook (worldview). Art is the aesthetic mediation (媒介), which is at once the mediating function between

1. NMZ 2: 11.

2. NMZ 2: 173; NAKAI 2025A, 99.

3. NMZ 3: 24.

the subjective and objective and the historical mediation of action that is creative of a historical event of worlding. The historical world opened up by art is a particular cultural world. Thus, each historical age is defined by a unique beauty. “Modern beauty,” for example, does not simply belong to the modern age; it defines the characteristic aesthetic appearance (姿) of that age as being uniquely “modern.” Likewise, each event of cultural worlding is conditioned by and expresses a unique historical beauty. There is thus a unique historical “Japanese beauty” that shapes and gives aesthetic appearance to the historical Japanese world. However, Nakai is careful not to essentialize “Japanese beauty.” “Japanese beauty” is historical: there is thus a continuity and discontinuity in the historical experience of Japanese beauty and the historical Japanese world that it opens.

Nakai not only thematizes the function of art in the opening of the historical event of worlding but also argues that avant-garde cinema is in the process of forming a new collective beauty that marks the appearance of a uniquely modernist world—and that this new beauty has parallels in the fundamental ground that gives rise to the historical event of Japanese beauty. Both the beauty of film and ancient aesthetics of the East, Nakai argues, begin from a standpoint that has “no precedent in Plato or Aristotle”⁴—and by extension, the Western tradition up to Kant. Nakai seeks to at once investigate ancient Japanese aesthetics and demonstrate that “no art form captures this point better than the beauty of film.”⁵ Nakai’s aesthetics is thus a hybrid theory of the function of art: he interprets traditional Japanese art forms through the lens of European aesthetic categories and interprets European art forms through the lens of Japanese aesthetic sensibility, in search of a new aesthetic form for a new modernist event of worlding.

At the heart of this is Nakai’s understanding of “dialectical subjectivity” as a creative process of self-transformation that defines itself and develops through the “the mediation of negation” (否定を媒介): it is a subjectivity that is always transforming itself in the moment of opposition, always to be in becoming and never to be. For Nakai, in the experience of “beauty I encounter a self that I did not yet know, a self that I did not anticipate, a self

4. NMZ 3: 194.

5. NMZ 3: 195.

that is deeper or more penetrating, like a wave breaking on the shore, a self that is newer than the self I thought I was before”⁶; it is “to see through to the bottom of existence. This way of understanding existence, this *negotiation* with oneself, this is our world of beauty, our world of art.”⁷

Now, be it the interdisciplinary journals *Beauty and Criticism* or *World Culture*, the weekly populist newspaper *Doyōbi*, the collective public protests, the *collective* activity of producing films, the café as a mobile site of *transformative* public discourse of resistance, the “Hope Concert,” his “summer university” project of collective “immanent self-critique,” the Hiroshima Culture Movement for Peace and Democracy as a *collective* movement seeking a new way of life, the establishment of the library as a *transformative functional mediation* (媒介) of democratic thinking,⁸ Nakai’s philosophical work sought to establish the logic of the objective mechanisms or organizations (機構) that create and mediate “a shared common existence with others (他者の共同存在),”⁹ a “mood of coexistence (共同存在の気分)”¹⁰ that forms “a common shared world”¹¹ (共同世界) and his social activism focused on the creation of new mechanisms or organizations of collective embodied subjectivity that would be cognisant of the mechanisms that conditioned their subjectivity while at the same time co-creating these very mechanisms or organizations in collaboration with others. For Nakai, the group is never a homogenous substance of the Romantic Blood and Soil but the interconnection of many creative individuals: “the many as an ordered cosmos” in which there is a “reciprocal control among elements,” “a bi-directionality of action.”¹² The modern culture of individualism established itself through the negation of the idea of a socio-political unity based on a single, substantial essence. The debates surrounding the concept of “social contract” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries centered on the problem of establishing the unity of the collective. Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* is also focused on this problem. Modernity had led to radical individualism, and with this

6. NMZ 3: 43.

7. NMZ 1: 285.

8. LOFTS 2025C.

9. NMZ 1: 398.

10. NMZ 1: 399.

11. NMZ 1: 399.

12. NMZ 3: 303.

to the problem of establishing a collective “shared” world. How we understand this term “shared” here depends on whether this sharing takes place on the level of society (*Gesellschaft*), where the taking part in an activity is a choice made by an individual, or whether it takes place on the level of community (*Gemeinschaft*), in which case it is not so much a choice we make or something we do, but who *we are*: in the one case, what is “shared” is external to our being, in the other it defines our being. Like Tanabe, Nishida, and Watsuji, Nakai seeks to reconcile the opposition between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, the individual and the whole.¹³

In the coexistence of others, we find a unique shared world that reveals the very nature of that coexistence, as well as the mood (気分) that creates it. The technology of the socio-cultural mechanism or organization transforms otherwise heterogeneous individuals into the members of a group without negating their individuality. It also mediates the opposition between the material nature of the body and the natural world, as well as the purposeful design of human action. For Nakai, the beauty of such a mechanism or organization is essentially what he understands by the beauty of technology, and one of “the purest forms of technological beauty is the world of sports.”¹⁴ As an avid rower himself, one of Nakai’s paradigmatic examples is taken from rowing. “The world of technology is born in a place where these two bearings, the flow of the external to the internal [that forms natural beauty as a state of throwness (*geworfen*)¹⁵] and the flow of the internal to the external [that forms artistic beauty as a state of projection (*entwerfen*)¹⁶], cannot be distinguished and are in perfect harmony.”¹⁷ The technological mediation of the “present” is the actual ontological coposition of the concrete moment of action that is always the harmony of the two directions of nature and purposiveness, of throwness and projection, of the individual and the whole.¹⁸ The essence of *aesthetic* “seeing” forms a *geworfener Entwurf* of light.¹⁹ The reason why beauty is generally divided

13. THZ 6: 451; NKZ 3: 263; WATSUJI 1996, 25; NKZ 12: 425.

14. NMZ 2: 293.

15. NMZ 2: 7.

16. NMZ 2: 7.

17. NMZ 2: 293.

18. NMZ 1: 401.

19. NMZ 2: 6.

into natural beauty and artistic beauty is due to the severing of the bidirectional nature of aesthetic seeing and sensation.

Nakai understands art and technology in terms of Cassirer's concept of "function" and the Japanese concept of "*kata*" (型). Of the beauty of the function or action of rowing, Nakai writes:

You cannot say you understand the "form" (*kata* 型) of rowing unless you understand the harmony and "liveliness" (*iki* いき) that all eight people feel at the same time, like the modern sliding machine of eight people, with their bodies blending into the structure of the boat.²⁰

In the beauty of the moment (瞬間), the momentum [機はずみ] of the movement of the technology of the boat is the existence of the great harmony: the harmony between nature (the water) and the purpose of action (the rowing); the harmony between the body and the oar; and the harmony between individual actors. "It is within the domain of this technical beauty that man truly loses himself in art."²¹ Each rower feels the proper functional adaptability within their own body and muscles.

In the sense that the body is a complex of infinite functions, in the evaluative judgment of the operation of those functions, or in other words, in the reflective judgment of their purpose, there is a standpoint that is purely conveyed by the senses within the body.²²

The adjustment of bodily functions is the discovery of the standard existence of the body as nature. There is found here an *esprit de corps* that comes with "forgetting one's individual self," an experience of beauty and joy that comes from the "mood (気分) of coexistence" that forms "a common shared existence with others," of being a member of "a common shared world." Each of the oarsmen immediately senses the existence of the others, adjusting their effort to reflect the motion of the others to maintain the perfect harmony of the rhythm.²³ The harmony of action requires that each individual self internally negate their individual will. The constraint on freedom here forms, however, an internal *telos* of practical action, not

20. NMZ 3: 9.

21. NMZ 2: 7.

22. NMZ 1: 195.

23. NMZ 1: 399.

an external limitation: it is the dialectical subjectivity as “the mediation or means of negation” (否定を媒介) as the “mediation of action” (行為の媒介). In this harmony of action is found the “mood (気分) of coexistence,” and with it the “aesthetic sense of beauty of organization (組織感の美感).”²⁴ In this mood (気分), one perceives a harmony in one’s actions (行為) with the “deep lawful order” of action.²⁵ “Accordingly, all movements are always related to the way (道).”²⁶

“Mood” (気分) here is the translation of Heidegger’s concept of *Stimmung*. Whereas for Heidegger, *Stimmung*, is a fundamental way in which Dasein is attuned to itself and its world, for Nakai, *Stimmung* is a fundamental way in which we are attuned to others and the world we share. In both, *Stimmung* opens up the world in a particular way. In the case of Heidegger, it is Dasein’s unique existence that is disclosed, whereas in the case of Nakai, it is the existence of the self as a member of a community. For Heidegger, anxiety is the *Grundstimmung* (the fundamental mood) that throws Dasein back onto itself and discloses its authentic existence as an isolated and lonely being-towards-death that is Dasein’s self-understanding; for Nakai, the *Grundstimmung* is the “mood (気分) of coexistence” that discloses our authentic being-with others, a “sense of camaraderie found at the limits of a life lived through to the fullest.”²⁷

It is only when we replace the words “anxiety and fear” used in this individual ontology with the idea of “using oneself as a mediation of negation” [否定の媒介] that we can make the leap from the individual to the group/collective/organization [集団].²⁸

For Nakai, the *Grundstimmung* is found in artistic seeing; “a mood [気分] that is often described as a theater mood [芝居気分]”²⁹ but forms “the sense of ‘seeing’ in all artistic fields.”³⁰ We insert art between ourselves and ourselves; it introduces a distance that separates (隔てる) us from ourselves,

24. NMZ 2: 56.

25. NMZ 1: 196.

26. NMZ 1: 195.

27. NMZ 2: 79.

28. NMZ 3: 215.

29. NMZ 3: 308; NAKAI 2025B, 375.

30. NMZ 3: 309; NAKAI 2025B, 376.

and it is to take up the position of seeing by which we discover our true self.³¹ In the drama of the theater, we seek the comedy and tragedy of the human social condition.³²

Nakai's philosophical account of the "mediation of art" forms the basis of his militant praxis of social transformation, which is realized in and through dialectical subjectivity as the mediation of action and negation. For Nakai, if we want to change politics, we must transform the institutions or organizations of culture; if we are to transform the institutions or organizations of culture, we must transform ourselves, and this requires "a revolution of consciousness" that comes about when we take a distance from our self and undergo a collective act of critique, what Nakai called the "salon of the soul."

To become aware of one's own contradictions, one must first step back from oneself and observe with a critical eye. To exercise this criticism, one needs the space of the salon of the soul. And this salon is what people call "thought."³³

Nakai does not believe that social change originates in an intelligentsia, in so-called experts in critical thinking; rather, it must originate in each individual and through collective debate. In dialectical subjectivity, as the mediation of negation, theory and practice inform each other.

Nakai distinguishes the "mediation of negation" that forms the basis of a "mediation of critique" and action from the "the unmediated spirit of negation" (無媒介の否定精神) that drove young Japanese men to commit brutal war crimes and sacrifice their lives in the name of a "sacrificial spirit (犠牲的精神)."³⁴ "When contradictory actions such as goodness and cruelty, cohesion and jealousy, self-confidence and servility, perseverance and resignation, and so on, exist without the mediation of thought, it is a frightening thing."³⁵ The action of negation without seeing is blind "unmediated negativity," seeing without action is empty speculation: only in the mediation of negation, in the dialectical subjectivity that acts through seeing and

31. NMZ 2: 169; NAKAI 2025A, 96.

32. NMZ 2: 292.

33. NMZ 4: 152.

34. NMZ 4: 152.

35. NMZ 4: 152.

sees through action do we become aware of our contradictions. It is perhaps worth noting that while the Japanese term “否定” is translated as “negation,” it also conveys the meaning of denial or disavowal.

Nakai’s entire socio-political project was to overcome the “capitalist ego”³⁶ of modernity, which views the world solely from the economy of its own perspective, and the “sacrificial spirit” of fascism, which demands “unmediated negativity.” It is a militant philosophy of self-critique and self-distancing through the creative freedom of art, as well as self-irony. It is also a reminder that despite everything, “the laughter of detachment of *Budai* is still alive in us today.”³⁷

Now, in his 1932 essay, “The Continuity of Spring,” Nakai provides a detailed analysis of the technique of the cut and montage in Mikhail Kaufman’s film *Spring* and writes:

The history of language, which has been *transformed* into spoken words, written words, printed words, and telegraphic words, has now entered the realm of the language of sight, which does not require translation into any *national language*. It can be said that we now have a language without grammar [that is, a connection without the ontological identity of the copula] and without endings [that is, without telos].³⁸

Here, we find the beginnings of the critical treatment of the *historical transition of logic* and logos that is the main focus of “The Logic of the Committee.” Each material medium of logos possesses its own logic that conditions the historical event of worlding opened up through it *and* the embodied subjectivity that inhabits this historical event of worlding. The Greek world was phono-centric; the medieval world was graphic-centric; the modern world was print and telegraphic-centric. With each change in the material medium of logos, a new logic of the socio-political world was created. In maintaining that avant-garde film is a “language of sight” that needs not be translated into any “national language,” Nakai is effectively arguing for the establishment of a world beyond the substantive identity of “nationalism.”

36. NMZ 2: 133.

37. NMZ 2: 135. *Budai* (*Hotei* in Japanese, or “laughing Buddha”) is a historical Chinese monk often identified with the Maitreya Buddha (the future Buddha) and thus associated with hope.

38. NMZ 3: 150.

Constant in this historical process is the function of art and aesthetic seeing that operates through a given medium, and how the change in medium conditions the historical nature of that seeing and thus the historicity of art, beauty, and the human world. “Whether *utsusu* takes place in water, gold or silver, steel, a lens, or a crystalline lens, the original prototype of art is inherent in the act of *utsusu*.”³⁹ We can add here: the body, the rowboat, voice, paper, the printing press, and the internet.

The essential structure of artistic phenomena and the nature of art is found in the mechanism Nakai calls *utsusu* (うつす). Nakai plays on the phonetic sound of the Yamato word *utsu*, always written in hiragana, and a series of ideograms used in Modern Japanese with the same phonetic pronunciation. In Yamato, *utsu* (うつ) had the sense of emptiness (*kū* 空) or void (*kyo* 虚) and invoked the “hollow” part of an old tree or a “cave” in the woods. In contemporary Japanese, one can still speak of empty words or a blank look with the term *utsuro* (うつろ, 虚ろ).

It is interesting to note that the original meaning of *utsusu* (うつす) suggested the appearance (うつつ, 現つ) of some aspect of reality that momentarily surfaces from out of the shadows. *Utsusemi* (空蟬) signifies the “empty cicada” found in *The Tale of Genji* as a symbol of the evanescence of life, evoking our *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), the pathos of ephemeral things. The word *utsu*, which invokes emptiness, is always understood in the sense of a mood of melancholy (うつ, 鬱).⁴⁰

In his 1932 essay, “*Utsusu*: To Transfer-Mirror,” Nakai argues that the German term *Stimmung* is etymologically linked to the idea of equivalent projection and connects *Stimmung* (mood, 気分) to his account of *utsusu*.⁴¹ Nakai repeats this in his 1937 essay, “The Meaning of ‘Seeing’”:

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].⁴²

39. NMZ 3: 303; NAKAI 2023, 126.

40. NMZ 2: 290.

41. NMZ 3: 302; NAKAI 2023, 125.

42. NMZ 3: 306; NAKAI 2025B, 373.

Nakai exploits the peculiarities of the Japanese language and plays on the differences between the phonetic sound of *utsusu* (うつす) written in hiragana and a series of written ideograms (*kanji*) through which the “mobile meaning”⁴³ of *utsusu* (うつす) is manifested by the simple fact that each of the ideograms 移す, 写す, 映す, 覆す has the same phonetic pronunciation, *utsusu*. The echoing of the phonetic sound *utsusu* throughout the text allows Nakai to connect a series of different, distinct ideas: 移す (*utsusu*, to transfer or to change), 写す (to copy, to transcribe, to duplicate, or to photograph), 映す (to reflect or to project), 覆す (to reverse or to overturn).

There is thus a difference between what can be read but not heard, heard but not read, a difference that produces the difference and movement between the phonetic sounds of hiragana and the meanings of the kanji that are read, the embodied encounter of speech and the general meanings of words.

As うつす [*utsusu*, to transfer-mirror] indicates, the structure of reflection [*utsusu* 映す, projection] signifies an “equivalent projection” [等値的射影] such as “transferring” [*utsusu* 移す], “reflecting” [*utsusu* 映す], and “reversing” [*utsusu* 覆す]. When something is moved [移動, transferred] from one place to another, and it has a “relational equivalence,” then people say it has been うつした [*utsushita*, transferred-mirrored].⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

Utsusu (うつす) itself, Nakai says, is not “something that exists”: what exists, what is present, is an A or a B (one person or another, one place (場所) or another), and they exist only in a dynamic relation to each other, reflecting and echoing each other in the “silent movement” of the “endless inexhaustibility of the in-between space of the mirror,”⁴⁶ and in this reflecting and echoing transforming each other into what “they” collectively “are.” What can be present and given is only an A here or a B there, but not the

43. NMZ 4: 303; NAKAI 2023, 126.

44. NMZ 4: 300; NAKAI 2023, 123.

45. NMZ 3: 305; NAKAI 2025B, 372.

46. NMZ 3: 306; NAKAI 2025B, 373.

cut that forms the infinite distance of the *ma* (間) that brings them into being as the two poles of a single relational reality, the *aida* (間). *Utsusu* (うつす) can thus only ever be present in the movement of this transferring-mirroring. What is more, *utsusu* (うつす) leads to the idea of equality or equivalence and thus to the bi-directional projection between A (a receiver) and B (a sender), between B (a receiver) and A (a sender). The equality or equivalence established here does not take the form of a substantial identity, which would be the case were the relation governed by the copula “A is B” or “B is A.” Rather, it marks the co-arising and co-dependence of the two positions in the relational nexus of the reality to which they each belong and open. Strictly speaking, then, like *ma*, *utsusu* (うつす) cannot be a word or concept that “exists,” or that can be “expressed” in any language. As such, it cannot be translated. Each “moment” or “image” of the “montage” exists according to the “cut” that separates and unites them. The “cut-space” is the distance or space as well as the interval of time “in-between” (*ma* 間) one distinct element/moment and another distinct element/moment in the dynamic appearance (*sugata* 姿, *sugata* すがた) of the montage.

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] of *utsusu*.⁴⁷

Seeing itself must be a continuity of discontinuity. In “The Problem of Mediation in Art,” Nakai appears to ground this idea of a continuity of discontinuity in *utsusu* (うつす) in Cassirer and Cohen, specifically in the “dynamic meaning of continuous disconnection”⁴⁸ (切断を連続する意味) that operates in the symbolic function. The symbolic function is the “medium” for the “dynamic continuity, that is, the disconnection of space-time, as an equivalent relation of time.”⁴⁹

Utsusu (うつす) is neither simply active nor passive, but both at once: as a middle voice, it moves in both directions, actively projecting and passively reflecting, as the movement from A to B, from B to A, from one cut to another, the movement of *utsusu* (うつす) stands beyond the dichotomy of

47. NMZ 3: 305; NAKAI 2025B, 372.

48. NMZ 2: 118.

49. NMZ 2: 119.

the polarity it mediates (*Vermitteln*); beyond the metaphysical duality of a subject that acts and an object that is acted upon: “the meaning of this shift between the two directions is, in essence, the meaning of montage. This convertibility in the direction from having been thrown (投げられる, *geworfen*) to throwing (投げる, *entwerfen*) is the secret of the mechanism (機構) of montage.”⁵⁰ The bi-directionality of *utsusu* (うつす) assures the equivalent projection or movement between the receiver and the sender.

In his work on avant-garde films, Nakai examines this new medium from the perspective of the new logic of the image “without a copula” as the new *Kino Satz* (the language of cinema) and the new technique of the cut and montage that defined, for Nakai, the emerging art form of avant-garde film as an inherently anti-fascist and anti-capitalist medium; and links this “cut” to the Japanese concept of *ma* (間).

Now, although we speak of art and technology as the historical medium (*Medium*) of the world, what is critical for Nakai is that the *medium* (メディアウム *Medium*) of the world becomes a dialectical *means* (ミッテル *Mittel*) of the mediation (*Vermitteln*) of *worlding*.⁵¹ For Nakai, the *medium* is an inherently closed system in which things exist, whereas *means* (*Mittel*) are the modes of creative expression by which a world worlds and, thus, as infinitely creative, form an inherently open-ended and non-complete system (and not *incomplete*). Whereas the medium (メディアウム *Medium*) is fixed and substance-like, the means (ミッテル *Mittel*) is active; in fact, it is the mediation of action itself. For Nakai, the medium (メディアウム) is the intermediary that connects things, in the same way that space connects all things that are spatial. While *Mittel* (ミッテル) is to mediate or communicate between things, it is the in-between that preserves the gap between things. As such, mediation is *nothing* in itself: it is a “mediation of action” that forms an “immediate mediation,” that is “‘an unmediated mediation’ [無媒介の媒介] that develops by cutting itself off and discarding itself.”⁵² This is Nakai’s idea of “the self as a medium of negation” that constitutes the dialectical unity of the whole.⁵³

50. NMZ 4: 304; NAKAI 2023, 126.

51. NMZ 3: 134.

52. NMZ 3: 134, 216.

53. NMZ 3: 134, 216.

For Cassirer, the symbolic forms of culture are “the modes of mediation” (*Mittel*) of worlding *and* the medium (*Medium*) of a historical world.⁵⁴ The logic of means (*Mittel*) inserts itself as a “separating medium (*Medium*)”⁵⁵ between the self and reality. Yes, we are in language; language is the *medium* of thought, but we think only by bringing language to language, by speaking, and in this way, we transform the *medium* (*Medium*) into the *means* (*Mittel*) of expression that creates the medium of language itself. We can use language only by working on it, and every speech act transforms the language it speaks of and with.

Nakai appears to share Tanabe’s 1937 critique of Nishida. He writes, quoting Tanabe:

... if absolute nothingness is posited directly as the basis of the system, as the so-called place [場所] of nothingness, it would be being (有) rather than nothingness (無).... There is no room for action in an ontology based on the interpretation of expression (表現解釈の存在論), for action is established in the negation of expressive being. This is why the nothingness of existential philosophy remains an interpreted nothingness and why action can only be seen as the potential for decision.... Logic becomes the formative principle of being through the mediation of action in which affirmation and negation are united.⁵⁶

Tanabe’s 1937 critique of Nishida, Nakai goes on to state, “served as an important stimulus for those young and energetic students who opposed fascism and threw themselves into political praxis.”⁵⁷ The debate between Tanabe and Nishida is framed by Nakai in terms of the question of the meaning of mediation (媒介): “whether ‘mediation’ (媒介) is to be seen as a *Medium* or as the *Mittel* of *Vermitteln*.”⁵⁸ Nakai equates the “medium” (*Medium*) with substance, and the *Mittel* with the mediation of negation or action, and articulates this distinction as the move from substance to function developed by Cassirer.

54. ECN 1: 132.

55. ECN 12: 250.

56. THZ 6: 461–2, 471, 456. Cited NAKAI 2022, 460.

57. NAKAI 2022, 460. Nakai was himself arrested only a few months after editing Tanabe’s 1937 article.

58. NAKAI 2022, 460.

Nakai's critique of Nishida is that his theory of *place* (場所) remains a theory of the *medium* but not a theory of the *means*. In other words, Nakai's functionalist theory of the organization as a transformative mechanism marks a transition *from* understanding actuality in terms of a "place" (場所) to understanding it in terms of "work" (*hataraki* 働き, *wirken*) or "function."⁵⁹ The players on the field, the rowers in the boat, the lens of the camera, the library, in short, the committee is not a place (場所) where things happen, but the "flow of work (function) as a living organization" (the collective rowing discussed above): "the very organizations or mechanisms (機構) that support the realities of life" cannot be based on a "place-like" (場所的) approach, they must shift to a "functional" (機能的) way of thinking, that is, to a work-based approach, in order for these organizations to be able to function.⁶⁰ Nakai is careful to remind us that these are not ivory tower issues: the deaths of Miki and Tosaka, "who took action and leapt into nothingness, can be said to constitute the sort of action (行為) needed to fill the blank space" and this should "teach us that action is not something to be spoken of lightly."⁶¹

Now, in his 1927 article, "On the Preface to Kant's *Third Critique*," Nakai compares the two versions of the Preface to the *Critique of Judgment*. In the first unpublished version, Kant situates "technology" as the medium between theory (the first critique, knowledge) and practice (the second critique, action). Technology is a dialectical moment, a reflective relation in the production of historical forms by the productive imagination that mediates theory and practice through a world-schema that forms a worldview of an epoch. In the move from one world-schema or worldview to the next, everything changes: the aesthetic appearance that defines the presence of the relationality between things is transformed. One need only think here of the shift from the muted or dark hues of the Medieval period to the vibrant colors of the Renaissance, to the intense chiaroscuro of the seventeenth century, and then to the pastel and neutral colors, often reflecting natural light, of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. And compare these to the history of colour in Chinese or Japanese art. The historicity of

59. NMZ 4: 276.

60. NMZ 4: 276.

61. NAKAI 2022, 460.

artistic vision also manifests itself in the way landscapes and nature undergo a complete transformation. Finally, light and its source appear to be completely different. “All medieval paintings were steeped in source colors, but in the sixteenth century, people began to notice for the first time the beauty of sunlight.”⁶² The historicity and cultural significance of aesthetic presence also determine the mood of an epoch or culture. And with this, a new sense of subjectivity is also born; one that has a role to play within the worldview of this new world-schema. The phrase “man is a wolf to man” is an outlook necessary to the arising worldview of “free trade.”

However, when people became conscious of this, they felt the joy of the pirates under the open sky, realizing there were no limits to how far they could freely expand their own power.... A worldview is not something that is seen as it is; rather, it is anticipated, imagined, and created as a structural framework of a certain stage. Even if the power of imagination [想像力], or the power of conceiving [構想力], may appear as wild or unrestrained, it is actually a single performative act.⁶³

With Miki, Nakai equates the power of imagination [想像力] and the power of conceiving [構想力]. They understand the imagination as a formative power, as a thinking that projects (*entwerft*) an image into the future that sets out a “plan,” a “vision” that “constructs,” “frames,” reality in “conceiving” it (構). A better translation of 構想力 would be “visionary conceiving” of possible reality. For Miki, “A true symbol is not a symbol of something [be it being or thought]. The essence of a symbol is to symbolize without something symbolized.”⁶⁴ And for Nakai, art is that by which “the impossible becomes possible.”⁶⁵ Cassirer would agree:

The symbol hastens ahead of reality, showing it the way and initially clearing its path.... It reaches forward into the *to come* [*Künftig*] and outward into *sheer possibility*, while placing both before itself in a purely symbolic act. Every phase of action now occurs in constant regard to an ideal *projection*

62. NMZ 2: 149.

63. NMZ 2: 149.

64. MKZ 8: 40.

65. NMZ 3: 23.

[*Entwurf*], which anticipates the action as a whole and which assures its unity, coherence, and continuity.⁶⁶

Thus, the power of the imagination (想像力) is a power of visionary thinking (構想力).

Now, what Nakai calls a *dialectical subjectivity* mediates the *epistemological subject* (*shukan* 主観) and the *embodied subject of action* (*shutai* 主体)⁶⁷—dialectical subjectivity is a creative process made possible by self-relational negativity, which grasps the creative act in the mode of creation itself. This creative formative will is not found *in* nature; it *is* nature as *physis*, it *is* the historical world, and the creative individual *is* a co-creative element of nature and the collective historical world. The world is a product of the reciprocal interconnection of individuals who must limit their individual will to be part of a single world—this disavowal, denial, or negation, however, is the internal limiting of freedom that forms the recognition of the other. It forms a telos for action, but an internal telos, not an external telos.

For Nakai, the coexistence of contradictions is the meaning of critique, and the systematic organization of Kant's three critiques expresses the cultural forms of such a contradiction. The development of the "logic of experience" in the *First Critique* and the preparation of the ground for the "logic of action" in the *Second Critique* are a reflection of the particular economic situation in Germany.⁶⁸ And the *Third Critique* stands as a dialectical mediation between the *contradiction* of these two moments.⁶⁹ Throughout his work, Nakai undertakes a genealogy of historical epochs and thought, rooting both in the historical transformation of the material, economic, and technological conditions that function as their mediums.

Nakai develops his understanding of "technology" as a philosophy of the mechanism that dialectically mediates nature and the human, the individual and the historical event of worlding. In "The Logic of the Committee," Nakai writes:

66. CASSIRER 2021, 208.

67. NMZ 1: 21.

68. NMZ 1: 61 NAKAI 2024, 315.

69. NMZ 1: 62 NAKAI 2024, 316.

This human purposeful action sways all nothingness into being, all being into nothingness, in order to combine them into the human sequential order in the schematic axis of this natural sequence. The mediating moment [媒介の契機] that sways nothingness into being, being into nothingness, is the structure of the *logic of technology*.⁷⁰

Through the dialectical creative mediation of technical *transformation*, the human separates (隔てる) itself from the animal world and forms the human world.

In this way, the human itself, as one of the powers of nature, confronts material nature. By means of the natural power in his body, as well as by means of the active force of intellectual work, the human works on nature and, in so doing, transforms nature, thereby simultaneously transforming his own nature at the same time.⁷¹

Nakai's philosophy seeks to establish the aesthetic mechanism of the presencing of nature (*phusis*) and the cosmos that mediates, transforms, and embodies the collective will to see in the originary phenomena of the creative activity of art as *poiēsis* and *techné*; that is, the creative activity at work in the artwork that opens the event of worlding; as in the case of rowing discussed above.

A comparison of Nakai's view of technology with those of Nishida and Miki is beyond the scope of this paper. Nishida and Miki developed their theories of technology as an embodied logic of mediation in the mid-to-late 1930s, and the similarities between their respective conceptions of mediation and technology have sparked a debate about which of them influenced the other. Like Nakai in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Nishida and Miki maintain that we cannot separate *poiēsis* (making) and *phusis* (nature), arguing that human creativity takes place through "a technology of nature" (*eine Technik der Natur*).

Nishida wrote in 1936: "Technology is an activity of nature. Nature is an ingenious technician. Accordingly, we cannot accomplish anything unless it is thoroughly through a technology of nature (*eine Technik der Natur*)."⁷²

70. NMZ 1: 62; NAKAI 2024, 316.

71. NMZ 1: 85; NAKAI 2024, 333.

72. NISHIDA 2011, 119.

And Miki wrote in 1936: “The *Einbildungskraft* in art corresponds to the technology of nature (*die Technik der Natur*).”⁷³

Now, the move from individual consciousness to an embodied collective consciousness, from the modern “culture of individualism” to the arising “culture of collectivism,” had thrown aesthetics, which had long been founded on the creative genius of an individual author, into crisis. For Nakai, creativity now arises from the interaction of individuals (the production of movies is a collective project, just as rugby players create a collective work of art⁷⁴). Whereas many bemoaned the end of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Nakai embraced the poetic force of technology and the beauty of the machine.

Nakai’s “Art and Its Tendencies in a Time of Intellectual Crisis” was published in 1932, and “The Logic of the Committee” and Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” were published in 1936. Despite their differences, both understood human experience to be formed, configured, and organized by different historical forms of material, technical, and discursive *mediation* that are transformed through history *as* history. And for both, the work of art was the essential transformative *medium* and *means* of the historical event of worlding. Unsurprisingly, Nakai has been called “the Walter Benjamin of Japan.”⁷⁵

Nakai’s theory of mediation includes a genealogy of the epistemes and technologies of the self, to speak with Foucault. For example, the rise of the technique of paper and printing, which was a response to the development of economic trade, gave rise to a modern subject that is free to interpret language according to their individual historical situatedness. This leads to a new understanding of the human as an autonomous individual and to the state of nature in which “the human being is a wolf to other human beings.”

People accustomed to subservience within the feudal system must have had to cleanse themselves of something absorbed in their blood to convince

73. MKZ 8: 395.

74. NMZ 1: 411. Nakai envisions “the touchlines as a canvas and spikes as a paintbrush” and the game as an aesthetic creation of sports.

75. Cf. LUCKEN 2016; STEINBERG and ZAHLTEN 2017, 22.

themselves they were one person, one individual person, and could interpret words as they pleased.⁷⁶

However, at the same time, there is a form of alienation here “because they were unable to recognize that the idea that ‘the human being is a wolf to other human beings’ is a mode of relation that arises from the terrifying structure of their own mechanism of industrial production, they had to tell themselves that human beings were this way by nature.”⁷⁷

Repeatedly, we see that the source of alienation stems from the fact, as Nakai writes, that we “are deeply involved in a mechanism [we create but] cannot understand.”⁷⁸ However, while we are *assujettis* in and through technology, we can also be the subjects of technology: by transforming the *medium* into the *means*, we move from the projected to the projecting, from the created to the creating.

Now, Nakai’s philosophy has its roots in the works of Kant, Hegel, Fukada, Cassirer, Heidegger, Marx, Lenin, Nishida, Tanabe, Miki, Tosaka, Itagaki, and Pure Land Buddhism. In “The Aesthetics of *Neue Sachlichkeit*” (1932), Nakai explicitly situates his entire philosophical project between Cassirer’s transcendental critique of symbolic forms and Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein*. Once substance concepts have been replaced with the function concepts as Cassirer does in his 1910 work *Substance and Function*, two paths open to resolving the “opposition” between subjectivity and objectivity: the one taken by Cassirer “in the direction of mathematization”; the other, taken by Heidegger, “in the direction of a vital concrete hermeneutic phenomenon.” Although Nakai recognizes the diametrical and even antithetical opposition between these two directions, he nevertheless argues that a “continuous curvature seems to flow between them” and suggests that Cassirer and Heidegger were aware of this and sought to move closer to the “extreme opposite” of their own position. Thus, Cassirer, “beginning from numerical rigor, descends to concrete life,” whereas Heidegger, “beginning from the self-illumination of concrete life itself, tried to ascend to the essential structure.” Nakai’s entire philosophical project can be understood, as he says, in finding the “Ariadne’s thread” that connects the functionality of the

76. NMZ 1: 54; NAKAI 2024, 310.

77. NMZ 1: 54; NAKAI 2024, 311.

78. NMZ 1: 101; NAKAI 2024, 345.

transcendental form (*kata*) with the facticity of existence, between “the *kata* (型) and the original existence (原存在)”: this, I would argue, is the ultimate significance of *utsusu* in that it provides the “deep correspondence (深い連絡)”⁷⁹ between “functionality and actual existence.” “Functionality” must constantly “recharge itself in life, in actual existence.”⁸⁰ “Once functionalism has transferred its equivalent projection onto life, the dyke has already been drawn. A torrent of life, like a brook, overflows and gushes forth into the dry, orderly moat.”⁸¹ The dynamic movement of life and form is a dynamic, open-ended, and dialectical process of formation and its product; the becoming of culture is a dialectical process of moving from the *forma formata* (formed form) to the *forma formans* (forming form), to speak with Cassirer, in which the creative energy of form is born again and again, moving from creative moment to creative moment⁸², from being projected to projecting, from the created to the creating.

Central to Nakai’s work is his reading of Cassirer’s 1910 *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (*Substance and Function*). With Cassirer, Nakai views the Aristotelian theory of substance and concept formation as leading to the inherent dualism and abstractionism of rational metaphysics and traditional empiricism. The substance concepts on which this theory of concept formation is based, in turn, led to the “logic of Blood and Soil” of German Romanticism and nationalistic fascism. Dialectical subjectivity is a mediation of negation and action that takes up the standpoint of the in-between (間) that mediates the individual and the collective.

Drawing from modern mathematics, Cassirer explains concept formation from the perspective of “function-concepts.” The concept is a function that provides the rule of progression, transforming elements into serial members of a unity. Cassirer generalizes Dedekind’s function relation $\phi(x)$ into the relational logic of the symbolic function as the different modes of world-forming. The form of a function is nothing more than a mapping

79. NMZ 2: 22.

80. NMZ 2: 22.

81. NMZ 2: 22.

82. “The *forma formans*, which becomes *forma formata*, which must become it for the sake of its own self-affirmation, but which nevertheless never completely dissolves in it, but nevertheless retains the strength to win itself back from it, to become *forma formans*, to be born again—this is what signifies the becoming of *Geist* and the becoming of culture.” CASSIRER 1995, 17.

(模写, *Abbildung*⁸³) relation in which one thing reflects another thing. The symbolic function is a “peculiar kind of ‘identity’ that is attributed to altogether heterogeneous figures in virtue of their being transformable into one another by means of certain operations defining a group.”⁸⁴ Cassirer calls this an “originary relationship (*Urverhältnis*) that can be expressed in different formulations as the relationship of ‘form’ to ‘content,’ as the relationship of ‘universal’ to ‘individual,’ as the relationship of ‘validity’ to ‘being.’” It is a “strictly unitary relation” of “opposing elements.”⁸⁵

As Nakai points out, an abstraction theory of concept formation can only provide us with a “set [集合] of individual representations” and not a group to which individuals belong as members. However, Nakai translates Cassirer’s *Funktionsbegriff* with the Japanese *kinō gainen* 機能概念 rather than *kansū gainen* 関数概念 and distinguishes *kinō* 機能 from *kansū* 函数. *Kansū* 関数 and *kansū* 函数 are used in mathematics to refer to “function equations,” whereas *kinō* 機能 refers to what something does or what it is for. The function (*kinō* 機能) of a window, what it does or what it is for, is to provide lighting, ventilation, and the view required in the house, whose function meets the needs of a purposeful activity of human dwelling. At this level, the function-concept of the window is a concrete universal. In the move to abstraction, the “concept of the window” becomes a “functional complex” (函数的複合体) of three elements, but this is an abstraction from the existential concrete function (*kinō* 機能) of actual windows.⁸⁶ In the first case, the concrete window function is “oriented” to the purposive action of the human; in the second case, it is an “unoriented functionalization (函数化)”⁸⁷ in which the window is transformed into an abstraction.⁸⁸ Through this sleight of hand, Nakai establishes the continuous disconnection of logic and life as the transformative mechanism of the historical event of worlding. Effectively, Nakai replaces Heidegger’s concept of *Bewandtnissganz* as

83. In Japanese, 模写 means copy. However, it is used to translate the German term *Abbild*. An *Abbild* is literally an “image of” and thus a “likeness” or “picture” of something, and not strictly speaking its copy (*Kopie*). In mathematics, an *Abbildung* is a process of mapping.

84. CASSIRER 1944, 25.

85. CASSIRER 1913, 152ff.

86. NMZ 1: 89; NAKAI 2024, 336. Cf. also NMZ 1: 17.

87. NMZ 1: 66; NAKAI 2024, 316.

88. NMZ 1: 83; NAKAI 2024, 332.

the being of the useful thing with the functionality of technical *poiēsis*: thus, grounding the historical world in the collective co-existence of a shared world of human praxis rather than the historicity of the finitude of Dasein.

Now, whereas Hegel understands life from the standpoint of logic, Nakai understands logic from the standpoint of life. In the historical movement from systems of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, *logic* plays a peculiar role in the crisis that ensues in the collapse of each system and the reorganization by something else:

... logic itself turns out to be a living ratio in the rupture, that is, it proves to be its own mediation. At each stage, rationality acquires new aspects that are unique to it, and at the same time, it retains all the rationalities it previously possessed by transforming them into something else.⁸⁹

The reason of History is not the history of a trans-historical Reason working itself out as it moves toward absolute knowledge, as in Hegel. Rather, reason itself is historically situated and conditioned; it is produced through purposeful creative action and the means for this purposeful creative action, but *a creative, purposeful action without teleological end*. And although actuality is an infinite actuality without teleological end (that is, without limits), its dialectical realization constitutes its unity as history. Again: “The mediating moment that sways nothingness into being, being into nothingness, is the structure of the *logic of technology*.”

How we are to understand this “nothingness” is beyond the scope of this paper. I would contend that “nothingness” here is not the nothingness of Nishida but the nothingness of Tanabe. For Nakai, nothingness possesses a transformative function in the dialectic of history. The non-actuality is transformed into an actuality. However, as the non-actuality is made actual, actuality harbors new non-actualities within it: the historical process is never complete, and the non-completeness of history is the product of a continuous repetition of negation. Nakai seeks to give logical expression to a non-completeness of endless progression of infinite actuality as a unified system (completeness). Quoting Lenin, he writes: “Human thought goes endlessly deeper from phenomenon to essence, from the essence of the first order, as

89. NMZ 1: 68; NAKAI 2024, 320–1.

it were, to the essence of the second order, and thus proceeds infinitely.”⁹⁰ Each moment is defined by its schematizing the interdependence and *wholeness* of the world processes as part of that infinite process. The logic of the committee is the transformative mechanism of history, “schematizing itself as a recursive process of infinite progress.”⁹¹ The historical world is a dialectical process that schematizes itself as a process of infinite development while being one of regression. As the basis for making reality inevitable and complete, the whole always involves the principle of self-negation. “The meaning of ‘negation’ at each stage of logic constitutes, in a structural way, the framework of the logical mechanism of the committee.”⁹²

The logic of the committee brings all these rationalities to bear; it is the collective unity of a creative group of individuals working together in a collective process of decision-making as the production of history *as* history. The logic of the committee is the logic by which a group makes collective judgments and collectively acts in co-creating a collective history. The production of the historical world, like the production of journals, newspapers, team sports, and films, is a collective process of historical individuals working within history *as* history, rather than the product of a single, transhistorical ground. For Nakai, the power of collective resolution rests on the power of individual determination.

This combination of the logic of technology with the logic of production and their connection to the logic of thought and the logic of debate culminates in the logic of praxis, which completes the basic model of the logic of the committee.⁹³

Let us return to the problem of the historicity of art and beauty. For Nakai, the consciousness of spatial and temporal distance within the world is “at its deepest level, the awareness of the distance that separates us from ourselves, the closest yet infinite distance between us and ourselves.”⁹⁴ The space of the world is but a shadow reflection of this existential space that separates us from ourselves. “When time and space are immersed in life

90. NMZ 1: 76; NAKAI 2024, 327.

91. NMZ 1: 106; NAKAI 2024, 348.

92. NMZ 1: 66; NAKAI 2024, 319.

93. NMZ 1: 90; NAKAI 2024, 337.

94. NMZ 2: 290.

itself, we call it living space in ontology. For example, in Japanese, *ma* [間] means the space between things.” The Japanese phrase *ma* (間) refers to the intervals of timing, distancing, and positioning between objects. In short, for Nakai, the relationality of the human world (*aida* 間) is the aesthetic expression of the *ma* 間, and “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].”⁹⁵

The space (空間) and time (時間) as the temporal moment (瞬間) of the “here and now” of the dynamic appearance (姿) of the transient world (*utsushiyo* うつしよ), are born through the *kata* of art. In Noh theater, the “mirror room” (*kagami no ma* 鏡の間) is a place where actors prepare, symbolizing the interval in-between (間) that mediates the transition from the mundane world to artistic truth. Nakai provides a detailed analysis of the presence of the *ma* (間) as a primordial structuring principle of relational reality: as the empty in-between of the space (空間) of the tea room (茶の間) where guest and host meet; as the blank space of the transom (欄間) that separates and unites inner from outer; as the relationality (*aida* 間) of the human being (人間); as the forms of human relations such as the group, friends, comrades (仲間). In short, the world (世間) of the relational in-between (間).⁹⁶

If we return to Nakai’s account of rowing, Nakai argues that to understand the form or *kata* of rowing, you need to understand the “harmony and ‘liveliness’” (*iki* いき) that all eight of the rowers feel at the same time. The dynamic and dialectical structure of the beauty of the moment is expressed by Nakai in the notion of *iki*. We have seen that for Nakai art and beauty are historical, always in the process of transformation. However, “Despite the constant flux, there seems to be something unchanging in the consistent ‘type of beauty’ of the Japanese people.”⁹⁷ The experience of *iki* is the experience of the breath (*iki* 息) of life, the experience of being alive, of existing (*ikiru* 生きる). In art, the self becomes a mediation of negation, and in the sharpest moment of negation, it breaks from what it has been, becoming filled with infinite possibility. It is the act of breaking out of the shell of the mannerisms of culture that gives birth to a sense of beauty,

95. NMZ 2: 170; NAKAI 2025A, 98.

96. NMZ 2: 32–3.

97. NMZ 3: 48.

a new way of being human, a new world. The samurai of Kuki lived and experienced this mediation of negation differently from the townspeople of Nakai. What was considered beautiful for the samurai was old-fashioned for the townspeople. But in both cases, the sense of beauty lies in discovering the new order. As we have seen, for Nakai, in the experience of “beauty I encounter a self that I did not yet know, a self that I did not anticipate, a self that is deeper or more penetrating, like a wave breaking on the shore, a self that is newer than the self I thought I was before.”⁹⁸ But this is always a collective experience disclosed in the “mood of co-existence” as the beauty of being alive and the collective Way (道) of Art.

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