

# CREATIVE ARTISTIC ACTIVITY AS SOCIAL SEMIOSIS IN NISHIDA KITARO'S *COLLECTION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS*

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I will try to give a broad picture of Nishida Kitarô's ideas concerning creative artistic activity in the period of his *Collection of Philosophical Essays* (1933-1945). For him creativity is a characteristic of reality in all its domains: the world is creative,<sup>(1)</sup> nature is creative,<sup>(2)</sup> and there is a creative evolution<sup>(3)</sup> from a primitive structure in constant metamorphosis.<sup>(4)</sup> Even though biological life is not yet creative,<sup>(5)</sup> the animal as a living being is creative.<sup>(6)</sup> In biological life the "fundamental creative principle" is the species and, as a historical species, the *ethnos* is creative.<sup>(7)</sup> The world of history is also creative. Man is a maker, he is creative in his social concrete life:<sup>(8)</sup> his vital process is creative.<sup>(9)</sup>

Man is a "creative",<sup>(10)</sup> "formative"<sup>(11)</sup> and "operative element of the creative world".<sup>(12)</sup> He is a "creative element of the historical world".<sup>(13)</sup> He is an operative<sup>(14)</sup> and formative element of the world of historical life.<sup>(15)</sup> Man is an active self,<sup>(16)</sup> a creative bodily historical self,<sup>(17)</sup> an active-intuitive self.<sup>(18)</sup> The bodily historical self changes, constructs and creates the world of reality and is, in turn, created: his relationship with the world is creative.<sup>(19)</sup> Our *poiesis* is a "historical creative activity" through which "we contribute a brick in the construction of the eternal world".<sup>(20)</sup>

Nishida in his later years studies "artistic creation — as a social historical formative activity — and the fundamental problems of aesthetics from the viewpoint of the philosophy of history".<sup>(21)</sup> He thinks that "man's artistic attitude towards the world must be clarified from the viewpoint of the historical formative activity".<sup>(22)</sup>

In order to consider artistic creation as historical formative activity, Nishida refers to the "development of art in primitive societies".<sup>(23)</sup> In doing this he falls back on the work *Ancient Art and Ritual*<sup>(24)</sup> of the historian of Greek religion, Jane Ellen Harrison. The central point of Harrison's discussion in this work lies in the meaning, the difference and the relationship between the Greek words *dromenon* and *drama*.<sup>(25)</sup> Harrison addresses a second fundamental point: "when and how the *dromenon*, the *done rite*, becomes *drama*?"<sup>(26)</sup>

Nishida reaches the conclusion that religion, art, science, the economy, and so on, not only originate in the *dromenon* but have, all and everyone of them, the character of *dromenon*. He carries his reflexion about the world of *dromenon* further, into the center of his thought, the *topos*, and writes: "Harrison says that the gods are born from the hotbed of the *dromenon*, but if

we think this world of the *dromenon* deeply [enough], it must be a world of what I call self-determination of the *topos*. As self-determination of historical space, different societies are constituted. Consequently, there is no [unique] way in the development of history".<sup>(27)</sup>

For Nishida "art is [an] expression of historical life"<sup>(28)</sup> and particularly, it is an expression of tradition<sup>(29)</sup> and of culture. But by being such an expression, "the artistic style [. . .] must differ according to the *ethnos* and its environment".<sup>(30)</sup>

But to state that a tradition and a culture are expressed in styles which differ depending on the *ethnos* and its environment, means, above all, to take expression as a *Mittel*. The better to understand this, in section 1) we will first of all see the structure of mediation; in section 2) we will see the manner in which Nishida conceives of expression; and in section 3) we will have a glimpse of expressive mediation. Creative artistic activity is then seen in section 4) as expressive mediation, and in section 5) as social semiosis in a wide sense.

## 1) Mediation

As Charles S. Peirce said in his last years: "All my notions are too narrow. Instead of 'Sign', ought I not to say *Medium*?"<sup>(31)</sup> The wider aspect of the sign is "mediation", which has been defined "either as the synthetic bringing together or the normative regulation of plural elements".<sup>(32)</sup> This "mediation" is "the common characteristic of many natural and intentional phenomena not usually conceived of as semiotic".<sup>(33)</sup>

As Richard J. Parmentier says, "the notion of mediation can be defined as any process in which two elements are brought into articulation by means of or through the intervention of some third element that serves as the vehicle or medium of communication".<sup>(34)</sup> For Nishida the elements to be articulated are the absolute contradictories, and the character of this articulation is dialectical self-identity. These contradictories are the three "domains" of historical reality: the absolute, the individual and the world. When Nishida thinks about mediation, he takes primarily the relationship between individual and individual (as elements) in historical reality.

We can think the true union of contradictories through the *Mittel* as self-negation of the true individual and self-negation and individualization of the true *Mittel*, "because we say that the individual is the *Mittel* and the *Mittel* is the individual, we can think the true union of contradictories".<sup>(35)</sup> But Nishida asks about the character of this *Mittel*.<sup>(36)</sup> His answer is that mutually independent things have mutual interactive relations in the *Mittel*. And the *Mittel*, as continuity of discontinuity of those mutual relations between independent things, determines itself and has the character of *topos*. And because the *topos* determines itself, the above-mentioned interaction can take place. In this manner, in the *Mittel* that has the character of *topos* there is a dialectical unity and self-identity between contradictories.<sup>(37)</sup> Furthermore, "without the mutual determination between thing and thing, there is no *Mittel*, [for] there is no such 'thing' as a mere *Mittel*".<sup>(38)</sup>

Mediation in late Nishida philosophy has several aspects: a) self-mediation;<sup>(39)</sup> b) internal

mediation; <sup>(40)</sup> c) external mediation; <sup>(41)</sup> d) negative mediation; <sup>(42)</sup> e) mutual mediation. <sup>(43)</sup>

f) Nishida says that in order for the “mutual mediation of mutually opposing ‘things’” <sup>(44)</sup> to be possible, there must be a *Mittel*. This *Mittel*, for Nishida, is Absolute Nothingness as self-identity of contradictories. <sup>(45)</sup> But this is only one of the aspects of true Nothingness. In a wider sense, Nothingness is the *Mittel* and that “*Mittel* of Nothingness is a *Mittel* of historical objective expression”. <sup>(46)</sup> Nishida calls that world which is constituted through the self-identity of contradictories, the “world of the *Mittel* of absolute cothingness”, and it is a “world [which is] mediated by absolute negation”. <sup>(47)</sup> But in Nishida’s logic of the *topos*, the *Mittel* is not only a function of the self-identity of absolute contradictories, it is also a function of reciprocal correspondence; it is not only the *Mittel* of absolute identity but also of absolute difference.

There are two further aspects of mediation: g) historical mediation, that is to say, all things — even conceptually mediated action — are mediated through the historical world, they are mediated in history. <sup>(48)</sup> All other aspects of reality are mediated through history in the historical world. The last aspect is h) social mediation, which means that all bodily historical praxis of man in the historical world goes through social mediation; and even all knowledge is mediated, for us, by social praxis. <sup>(49)</sup>

Basically, mediation lies in the *topos* of absolute Nothingness, in the *topos* of the ungrounded historical reality. Because of this, the concept of expression is even more important in late Nishida philosophy. The sign is only *one* of the modes of mediation, or, as Parmentier says: “the sign is the most perfect exemplar of ‘Mediation’ conceived as a generalized category”. <sup>(50)</sup> And we should consider that the linguistic sign is only *one* of the types of signs.

## 2) Expression

The subjectivism of the abstract conscious self which, according to Nishida is a characteristic of Western thought since Descartes, leads us to consider objects as mere vehicles of expression. <sup>(51)</sup> For Nishida, on the contrary, the object, the historical thing, is not a mere sensible form that can become a sign: the historical thing itself is expressive. This viewpoint implies a maximization of the expressive character of all historical things. Expression in late Nishida philosophy is a characteristic of historical reality.

In his later period, when Nishida interprets the infinite as historical reality, he refers to Royce’s self-representative system as a “self-expressive system”. <sup>(52)</sup> The world of historical reality is self-expressive within the process of its own self-perception.

In Nishida’s late period, the ungrounded historical reality becomes a self-perceptive world, a world which Nishida assimilates to a system that maps itself unto itself. The infinite process of self-perception includes different aspects: self-negation, self-determination, self-expression and self-formation. As one of the aspects of the self-perception of historical reality, this reality is self-expressive. Not only the historical world has an expressive character but it also includes within itself expressive relations; the expressive character of the historical world originates in the self-determination of the *topos*. <sup>(53)</sup>

The world forms itself through expression, its activity is creative expression, and all things in the historical world are expressive.<sup>(54)</sup> Historical things are expressive,<sup>(55)</sup> they are the Buddhist *jū*,<sup>(56)</sup> that is to say, they are the phenomenal aspect of absolute Nothingness and they are the *paradigm* or basic structure of the formation of the historical world.<sup>(57)</sup> Consequently, the historical thing is active, expressive and social,<sup>(58)</sup> but unlike the human individual, the historical thing does not occur only once and it lacks a proper name. The historical thing can become our body, it can be considered as absolute event, and through our history forming bodily activity it becomes *pragma*.<sup>(59)</sup> And so, our body is “an organ of the self-expression of historical life”<sup>(60)</sup> and our active intuition is “*Weltgeschehen*”:<sup>(61)</sup> in active intuition we bodily give birth to the world. This is made possible because the *Mittel* “must be corporeal. We are born as self-determination of the corporeal *Mittel*”.<sup>(62)</sup> As an active thing and as something that has been made, “each thing is absolute and, at the same time, this same thing embraces within itself its own self-negation and, negating itself, forms a system, it forms a world”<sup>(63)</sup> as self-expression of historical reality.

Nishida presents another aspect of the self-expression of the world of reality when he says that to *express* is to *represent*.<sup>(64)</sup> Expressive activity is a “mode of expressive self-formation of the world”.<sup>(65)</sup> When expression is representation, then “to make is to see”,<sup>(66)</sup> and there we have the world of active intuition. There we have the social historical formation of reality through the bodily historical apprehension of things. So, *exprimer* = *représenter* shows us another aspect of the self-expression and self-formation of historical reality and, at the same time, it shows us the expressive activity of the bodily historical poetic self. On the other hand, in the sense that mutually absolute contradictories *symbolize* each other, the identity of absolute contradictories is mutual transmutation.<sup>(67)</sup> This is the process of the historical world which has the character of identity of absolute contradictories: it is “*metamorphose*”.<sup>(68)</sup>

### 3) Expressive mediation

Between the afore-mentioned ‘domains’ of the *topos* of historical reality there must be an “expressive *Mittel*” that mediates between them. The mutual determination between the individuals which are at the same time in historical reality, is the form of the mutual expressiveness among everything that forms reality.<sup>(69)</sup>

In expressive activity a self-representative world is constituted, and we can speak about a self-representative process of the world.<sup>(70)</sup> In its deepest sense, in the formation and transformation of historical reality, the will and the representation of this world become one<sup>(71)</sup> through the human body. From this point of view, the expressive *Mittel* would mainly be the historical body of the active self: our body “is a body which has the character of expressive activity, it is an artist body”.<sup>(72)</sup>

There are two self-identities which Nishida finds in Leibniz: *exprimer* = *représenter*, and *symboliser* = *transmuer*. According to Nishida, pre-established harmony results from the interplay between these two self-identities and it makes possible the mutual transmutation

between absolute contradictories. This mutual transmutation constitutes their self-identity.<sup>(73)</sup> That which is symbolical expresses, and to express is to act with the character of expressive activity.<sup>(74)</sup> The world takes itself as a *Mittel* and expresses itself symbolically.<sup>(75)</sup> Art, in this sense, would be a symbolic formation<sup>(76)</sup> as a transmutation operated in the world of historical reality.

In an *ungründlich*, ungrounded reality, the *topos* of absolute Nothingness is the *Mittel*. That which is self-expressive, is such as self-determination of this expressive *topos*: "The *Mittel* of affirmation of absolute negation must be expressive".<sup>(77)</sup> Therefore, we can speak of *expressive mediation*. And the world is expressive "as self-determination of the expressive *Mittel*".<sup>(78)</sup> The same can be said about the individual [*ko*] as an element of the world.

Man's body, which according to Nishida must be thought of from the historical world, bears the mark of expression, it is "founded on the self-determination of the expressive world".<sup>(79)</sup> The historical body is such, not because of its temporality but because it carries upon itself the *responsibility* for the task of the historical world. It is a historical body because in it and through it is realized the self-determination of the expressive *Mittel*. In the action of the bodily historical active self, expressive mediation has a social character.

In short, even though things are expressive of themselves, they do not have an objectual substratum at their basis, that is to say, they are a-substantial. Consequently, their expressiveness is not inherent to a substance (which they lack), but is to be found in the self-determination of a *Mittel* which is itself expressive. Furthermore, Nishida tells us that the *Mittel* is the *topos* itself of historical reality, and in the relationship between this *topos* and our historical body a mode of historical production is apprehended in each epoch of universal history.

#### 4) Creative artistic activity as expressive mediation

a) Objective expression as *Mittel*. In the last instance, the contradictories are mediated "neither externally nor internally; they are not mediated either with the character of unity of subject and object"<sup>(80)</sup> because the *Mittel* is not Being but, rather, absolute Nothingness. The individuals in the historical world are mediated, in this sense, "by something which is absolutely transcendent", that is to say, they are "mediated by the creative expression of the social historical world".<sup>(81)</sup> That which is absolutely transcendent is something which "manifests itself creatively taking absolute Nothingness as its *Mittel*".<sup>(82)</sup> This is what Nishida calls the "concrete word" or "objective expression".<sup>(83)</sup> That which is made is expressive as objective expression of life.<sup>(84)</sup> Because historical *poiesis* has objective expression as its *Mittel*, expression is found in it: "from *poiesis* comes the *logos*".<sup>(85)</sup> Man's doing has as its basis the historical body: the historical body is expressive, and this historical body which forms and transforms historical reality is called by Nishida "*logos-ic* body".<sup>(86)</sup> "our *poiesis* is mediated by absolute negation, that is to say, it is mediated by objective expression".<sup>(87)</sup> The objective expression of the historical world is not only a "making" but also an "ought".<sup>(88)</sup> But art is

“sensuous” objective expression, in contradistinction to “volitive” religious expression.<sup>(89)</sup>

b) Expressive mediation in art. Nishida says that the *topos* of historical reality is an expressive *Mittel*, that is to say, “the space of the historical must be an expressive space”.<sup>(90)</sup> And so, “in the world of art all things express themselves”, poetically.<sup>(91)</sup> However, Nishida remarks that art is not a subjective *poiesis*:<sup>(92)</sup> “wherever there remains the least remainder of subjective *poiesis*, there is no art. Bergson says that not even the painter himself knows what kind of painting will result”.<sup>(93)</sup>

The central point as regards expressive mediation in art could be expressed in the following manner: “ordinary life itself is, on one aspect, artistic”<sup>(94)</sup> and insofar as art is expression and formation of social historical life, insofar as “art is the expression of historical life”,<sup>(95)</sup> there is already expressive mediation.

In September 1941 Nishida rejects the idea that symbolization is the most basic process in art: “Japanese aesthetics must not be called mystical or symbolical: its core is the apprehension of the world in the instant of absolute present”.<sup>(96)</sup> That is to say, it is to be found in the self-expression of our historical life<sup>(97)</sup> as self-determination of the *topos* of historical reality. Then we can properly say that the work of art is a historical formative activity. Because for Nishida the world of art is constituted in the view-point of the formation of the world, which is reached when our self transcends itself “in the direction of the immanent pole of the world which has the character of self-identity of contradictories”. It is the objectivation of subjective space and so, there is no symbolization but rather the presentation of the absolute character of expressive reality.<sup>(98)</sup>

In a later writing (February 1943) Nishida makes a precise distinction between the signic [*kigô-teki*] and the symbolic [*shôchô-teki*]. He considers that both are abstract aspects as poles of the world of praxis: “the self-formation of our self, as self-formation of the historical world, is always reflected in these two aspects. Through its reflecting itself in the expressive signic [*kigô-teki*] aspect, the world of knowledge is constituted. On the contrary, through its reflecting itself in the symbolic [*shôchô-teki*] aspect, the artistic world is constituted”.<sup>(99)</sup>

As an example I would like to quote a passage which refers to the architecture of the Ise Shrine. Nishida writes: “The Aegyptian people in its own environment formed the style of Aegyptian art. The Japanese people in its own environment formed the style of Japanese art. As [Bruno] Taut says, eternal beauty must be something [which results when] the work of art has fulfilled in the most pure and strong manner all the diverse requirements set by [the generality] of all things, which is its matrix. He says that the Partenon received the form of its proportion and contours in the transparent and clear Greek climate, and that the Ise Shrine looked for it in a climate which was warm and with abundant rains”.<sup>(100)</sup>

Nishida refers also to other arts in his *Collection of Philosophical Essays*: music<sup>(101)</sup>, painting<sup>(102)</sup>, poetry<sup>(103)</sup>. And we can understand his intense interest in the creative act of the artist, in artistic creative activity, because he himself practiced poetry (*tanka* and *haiku*) and calligraphy.

## 5) Creative artistic activity as social semiosis

In his late period we can see the fullness of Nishida's thinking about artistic creative activity. Artistic creative activity is, above all, an event in the historical social world, it is construction, formation and transformation of historical reality. We should not forget the force of art in social construction: <sup>(10)</sup> that which has been created transforms its creator. <sup>(10)</sup> This event of formation and transformation of historical reality expresses the content of the social process, because *poiesis* is not merely the subjective action of an individualistic self.

Artistic creative activity bears the mark of active intuition (for Nishida they are not equivalent) and, as such, it is a mode of that which Nishida expresses as "to become the thing [and] to see, to become the thing [and] to make" <sup>(10)</sup> which is only possible as a social event: we *socially* become the things <sup>(10)</sup> themselves. Just as in the case of knowledge, creative artistic activity is also a *social historical poiesis*.

Artistic creative activity is a system of social historical mediation: it expresses, symbolizes, represents and transmutes the social historical formation and transformation of reality. That is to say, it is not merely an exchange of abstract meanings or intellectual codes. It is not purely intellectual understanding but, rather, it is social historical *Erlebnis*: it is *poiesis*, it is the self-determination of the *Mittel* of absolute Nothingness, which is expressive. It is creation of historical reality, and it is one of the innumerable creative lines in the curvature of historical space.

Artistic creative activity is a social historical *Erlebnis* of the traditions and cultural forms of an *ethnos* and its environment. Each *ethnos*, following its epoch and its environment, creates works of art which differ from those of other *ethnia* which have different traditions and cultural forms.

Last of all, we have come to see that art is one of the many modes of mediation, and that each art is a form of expression of a different aspect of social historical reality. From what has been said up to here, we can also say that creative activity is social semiosis in a very wide sense.

### NOTES

NKZ = *Nishida Kitarô Zenshû*. Iwanami Shoten. Tôkyô. 1965-1966. 2nd. ed. The volume number is followed by page number.

- (1) NKZ, VIII, 39, 144, 239, 287, 316, 347; IX, 30, 78, 148; X, 162, 513, 530; XI, 12.
- (2) NKZ, VIII, 83, 200.
- (3) NKZ, VIII, 189, 190, 380; IX, 48; XI, 322.
- (4) NKZ, VIII, 190, VIII, 190.
- (5) NKZ, VIII, 344; IX, 177.
- (6) NKZ, VIII, 348.
- (7) NKZ, VIII, 326; IX, 66.
- (8) NKZ, VIII, 189, 587; IX, 313; IX, 212; VIII, 288.
- (9) NKZ, VIII, 18, 338.

- (10) NKZ, VIII, 314, 317, 331, 332, 335, 364; NKZ, IX, 9, 47, 53, 62, 83, 142, 144, 157, 205, 219, 250; NKZ, X, 75, 164, 378, 451, 465, 528, 529, 531, 563; NKZ, XI, 21, 145, 184, 234, 403.
- (11) NKZ, IX, 202.
- (12) NKZ, VIII, 341.
- (13) NKZ, VIII, 325, 339; XI, 112.
- (14) NKZ, VIII, 333, 338, 344.
- (15) NKZ, VIII, 318.
- (16) NKZ, VIII, 351.
- (17) NKZ, VIII, 332, 351; X, 538.
- (18) NKZ, VIII, 336.
- (19) NKZ, X, 288; IX, 330; X, 522; X, 26.
- (20) NKZ, X, 154, 326.
- (21) NKZ, X, 178.
- (22) NKZ, X, 179.
- (23) NKZ, X, 182.
- (24) Thornton Butterworth Ltd. London. 1927.
- (25) Harrison. *Op. cit.* p. 36.
- (26) *Op. cit.* p. 37.
- (27) NKZ, X, 210.
- (28) NKZ, X, 223.
- (29) Cf. NKZ, X, 224.
- (30) NKZ, X, 238, 239.
- (31) Mertz, Elizabeth and Parmentier, Richard J. *Semiotic Mediation: Sociocultural and Psychological Perspectives*. Academic Press, Inc. New York. 1985. p. 23.
- (32) *Op. cit.* p. 24.
- (33) *Ibid.*
- (34) Mertz-Parmentier. *Op. cit.* p. 25.
- (35) NKZ, VIII, 12.
- (36) NKZ, VIII, 13.
- (37) NKZ, VIII, 15.
- (38) NKZ, VIII, 16.
- (39) NKZ, VIII, 15, 85, 91, 434.
- (40) NKZ, VIII, 26.
- (41) NKZ, VIII, 26; IX, 30-31; VIII, 532; IX, 39, 46.
- (42) NKZ, IX, 41-42; VIII, 381, 313.
- (43) NKZ, VIII, 35; IX, 33-34.
- (44) NKZ, VIII, 497.
- (45) NKZ, X, 325, 480.
- (46) NKZ, VIII, 589.
- (47) NKZ, IX, 40.
- (48) NKZ, VIII, 544.
- (49) NKZ, X, 323.
- (50) Mertz-Parmentier. *Op. cit.* p. 26.
- (51) Nishida calls them signical [*kigô-teki*].
- (52) NKZ, XI, 111.
- (53) Cf. NKZ, X, 481.
- (54) NKZ, VIII, 581; NKZ, IX, 15; VIII, 562.
- (55) NKZ, VIII, 50, 51, 562, 581; IX, 108, etc.
- (56) NKZ, XI, 13.
- (57) NKZ, VIII, 209.



- (58) NKZ, VIII, 175.
- (59) NKZ, VIII, 305; XI, 13; VIII, 169.
- (60) NKZ, VIII, 336.
- (61) NKZ, XVI, 660.
- (62) NKZ, VIII, 162.
- (63) NKZ, XI, 13.
- (64) NKZ, IX, 155, 157, 169, 174; X, 24, 184.
- (65) NKZ, IX, 311.
- (66) NKZ, IX, 174.
- (67) NKZ, X, 463.
- (68) NKZ, X, 389.
- (69) Cf. NKZ, VIII, 390.
- (70) NKZ, VIII, 173; XI, 88.
- (71) NKZ, XI, 298.
- (72) NKZ, VIII, 164.
- (73) NKZ, X, 463.
- (74) NKZ, IX, 89.
- (75) NKZ, IX, 95.
- (76) NKZ, X, 139.
- (77) NKZ, VIII, 156.
- (78) NKZ, VIII, 151.
- (79) NKZ, VIII, 179.
- (80) NKZ, IX, 14-15.
- (81) NKZ, IX, 15.
- (82) *Ibid.*
- (83) NKZ, IX, 15.
- (84) NKZ, IX, 65.
- (85) NKZ, IX, 20.
- (86) NKZ, IX, 20.
- (87) NKZ, IX, 18.
- (88) NKZ, IX, 53.
- (89) NKZ, XI, 443.
- (90) NKZ, VIII, 150.
- (91) NKZ, VIII, 151; IX, 39.
- (92) NKZ, X, 109.
- (93) NKZ, X, 109; VIII, 379.
- (94) NKZ, VIII, 340.
- (95) NKZ, X, 223. Cf. X, 177.
- (96) NKZ, X, 264.
- (97) However, it is not directly the self-expression of reality. NKZ, X, 487.
- (98) NKZ, X, 434.
- (99) NKZ, X, 434.
- (100) NKZ, X, 239; Cf. XII, 350.
- (101) NKZ, VIII, 179, 333; X, 110, 112, 246, 348.
- (102) NKZ, VIII, 379; X, 109, 263.
- (103) NKZ, VIII, 69, 443; IX, 74; X, 58, 109, 125, 132, 138, 231, 236, 241, 246, 247, 433, 435; XI, 373.
- (104) NKZ, X, 433.
- (105) NKZ, VII, 246.
- (106) NKZ, X, 404.
- (107) NKZ, X, 323.