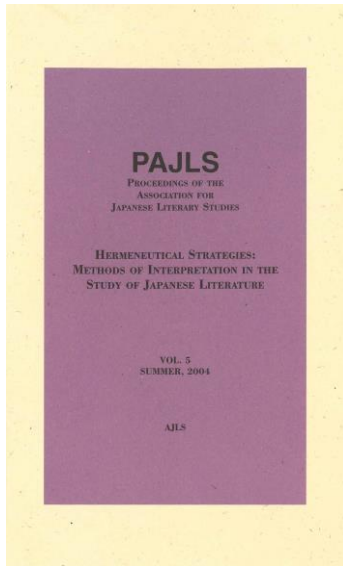


# “The Problem of Aesthetics in Nishida Kitarō”

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# THE PROBLEM OF AESTHETICS IN NISHIDA KITARŌ

Matteo Cestari

## 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In this paper I will deal with the problem of art in the thought of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), the most important modern Japanese philosopher. He dedicated only a few pages of his lengthy complete works<sup>1</sup> to this argument, since his interests mainly concentrated on ontology and epistemology. However, some essays on this matter are still available and here I will particularly consider four writings: *Geijutsu to dōtoku* (Art and Morality, 1923), *Sho no bi* (The Beauty of Calligraphy, 1930), *Gēte no haikai* (Goethe's Background, 1931) and finally *Rekishiteki keisei sayō toshite no geijutsuteki sōsaku* (The Artistic Work as the Formative Activity of History, 1941).<sup>2</sup> The last essay quoted here is by far the most representative of the entire Nishida *corpus*, given the provisional character of *GD* and the small size of the other writings. Looking at his philosophical career, we can detect a change from monism to pluralism, from spiritualism to a theory of complexity centered on the concept of "historical world," conceived as an interrelated network of relationships, in which the human being, interpreted as historical body (*rekishitekishintai*), lives and dies. In his aesthetics the theme of activity has always been important, but its meaning changes, together with his conception of art: from the early voluntarism to an anthropologic and formalist aesthetics. Some scholars tend to minimize these differences.<sup>3</sup> However, *GD* is not

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<sup>1</sup> *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Nishida Kitarō's Complete Works), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979, vols. 19, is abbreviated as *NKZ*, followed by the Roman number of the volume and the Arabic number of pages. Any reference to its English translation will be finally indicated with an italicized number.

<sup>2</sup> *Geijutsu to dōtoku* (*NKZ*, III: 239-524; engl. transl. *Art and Morality*, by D. Dilworth and V. H. Viglielmo, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1973, pp. 216) is abbreviated as *GD*; *Sho no bi* (*NKZ* XII: 150-151) as *SB*; *Gēte no haikai* (*NKZ* XII: 138-149; engl. transl. *Goethe's Metaphysical Background*, by A. Schinzinger, in Nishida Kitarō, *Intelligibility and Philosophy of Nothingness - Three Philosophical Essays*, Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966, pp. 143-159) as *GH*. Finally, *Rekishiteki keisei sayō toshite no geijutsuteki sōsaku* (*NKZ* X: 177-264) is abbreviated as *RS*.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this tendency is Heisig 2001: 56-61, who when speaking about Nishida's aesthetics does not mention *RS*. Yoshioka 1996 is the most complete analysis of Nishida's aesthetics published in Western languages.

Nishida's definitive statement on aesthetics and one of the aims of this paper is to show how this subsequent development occurs.<sup>4</sup> Given the particular importance of *RS*, I will concentrate my analysis on it, after a brief discussion about the others.

## 2. ART AND MORALITY

*GD* was written in 1923, during the transition from the voluntarism of *Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei* (Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness, 1917), to the intuitionist Logic of Place (*basho no ronri*), elaborated around 1925-27.<sup>5</sup> It is still dependent on the voluntarist viewpoint, but it is already moving in the direction of the subsequent intuitionism. Hence, a kind of tension between these two tendencies runs all along this writing. The pivotal idea of *GD* is represented by the concept of the True Self (*shin no jiko*), which cannot be reduced to either subject or object, and rather functions as an activity that unifies all the phenomena of consciousness. This transcendental, Kantian character of the True Self is however tainted with the idealism of Fichte and his conception of *Tathandlung*.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Nishida interprets this True Self as Absolute Free Will (*zettai jiyū ishi*), which cannot be objectified by intellect without losing its own pure, lively character. However, even while dependent on Romantic philosophy, Nishida aims at criticizing modern subjectivism from a Buddhist-oriented standpoint. Accordingly, the non-objectifiable activity at the basis of reality is used as a tool to empty subjectivism from within, stressing the universal content of Subjectivity. In *GD*, the fundamentally irrational, quasi-mystical unity of subject and object, typical of voluntarism, is shifting in the direction of a knowledge that, although not rational, is not irrational either. This is why Nishida is looking to harmonize the non-rational dimensions (sensations, the body)

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense, I agree with Dilworth (1973: x) who affirms that "Nishida's later writings were partly a self criticism of [...] *Art and Morality*..." against Heisig's statement that there is no stage of development in Nishida's intellectual history (Heisig 2001: 104).

<sup>5</sup> Now in *NKZ* IV. On the Logic of Place, see Cestari (in print). *Jikaku ni okeru...* (*NKZ* II) is translated as: *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, by V. H. Viglielmo, Takeuchi Yoshinori and J. S. O'Leary, (New York, SUNY Press, 1987), pp. 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Tathandlung* is the activity (*Handlung*) and the Thing (*Tat*), which comes from it. It is the core of the identity of the Self. It was especially its character of activity that attracted Nishida, who intended to use Fichte beyond Fichte: "[...] what drove me since the beginning was not anything like Fichte's consciousness. I would say that my standpoint overcomes the Fichtean I, and rather it is a position that precedes it" (*NKZ* IX: 3).

with rationality. The first result is however unsatisfactory, since he suggests a strained conception of the transcendental Self, that being at the basis of every human activity is the teleological point of union (*gōitsuten*) of the True, the Beautiful and the Good (*NKZ* III: 375; 94). Accordingly, nothing can be both false and beautiful, and true art is at the same time a non-objectivist, non-rational knowledge of the human being (*NKZ* III: 355-357; 81-82). Since true art is a manifestation of this True Self, it cannot be morally vicious. This does not mean subscribing to the “childish view” that art “is for the sake of encouraging virtue and reproving vice” (*NKZ* III: 310; 51). Rather, in art, vices are transfigured on a higher plane, becoming pure acts that attain universality (*NKZ* III: 255 ff.; 15-17). This universality is not only conceptual, but it springs from the encounter between the individuality of the object and the individuality of the artist, who expresses her/his individuality (*NKZ* III: 383; 99).

Despite this search for a universal meaning of the bodily dimension, which only in historicism will be relatively fulfilled, *GD* remains spiritualist and monist. It discusses art only in the sense of an interiority (art as expression of an artist's individuality) that reaches a trans-temporal dimension as represented by the values of the Beautiful and the Good, which find their unity in the True Self. Nishida tries to bring back all values to the metaphysical principle of the True Self. This could explain why in *GD* the artificial, historical and conditional aspects of art (such as, for example, artistic technique), although present, are not recognized as such, but absolutized: “In art, expression itself is truth. Technique itself must be truth” (*NKZ* III: 382; 99).

*GD*'s discourse lacks historical consciousness and it seems cut out from contemporary debates on art. For example, Nishida does not seem to have properly considered the cultural and historical phenomenon of what Hegel called “death of art”, i.e. the progressive separation of everyday life from the ideal of Beauty, as a typical Modern condition, in which art is judged as a useless embellishment, guilty of not being morally or socially engaged. Moreover, *GD* seems almost useless in understanding the importance of technology for art in modern society; what Walter Benjamin has indicated as the “technical reproducibility” of an artwork, i.e. the fact that an artistic work loses its ‘aura’ and is reproduced out of its original, quasi-sacral “here and now.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> W. Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

### 3. VARIOUS WRITINGS ON ART

*GD* represents for a long time the only treatise on art written by Nishida. The two following short essays about calligraphy and on Goethe, both written in 1930-31, can still be considered under its influence. In *Sho no bi* (*The Beauty of Calligraphy*, 1930) for example, the different types of art are classified according to their possibilities of expressing the human spirit, a character particularly important in *GD*. Even if Beauty can be found only where subject and object are united, arts can be subject- or object-oriented, i.e. they can imitate (*mo suru*) external objects (such as painting or sculpture), or express subjective feelings. The latter are said to be superior to the former. Music and somehow architecture are cases of such, since they both express a kind of internal rhythm. Calligraphy can be considered part of the second group because it does not imitate any external object, and on the contrary, expresses a rhythm: it is a kind of "condensed music" (*gyōketsu seru ongaku*) (*NKZ XII*: 151).

According to Nishida, art must be essentially free from all objective restrictions (*kyakkanteki seiyaku*) and the more independent art is from these limitations, the worthier it is (*ibid.*). Mimetic arts are inferior because they are "prisoners of the objects". On the contrary, calligraphy is relatively free from these restrictions and can fully express the lively movement of our self (*ibid.*). This ideal of artistic freedom reveals Nishida's dependence on the Romantic conception of art as a manifestation of the Free Self. Nishida's impatience with procedures, composing rules, and generally the entire bodily, passive or technical dimension of art presupposes an opposition between the active subject and the passive world, which will be thoroughly reconsidered during historicism, where activity is not a simple subjective (or even 'more-than-subjective') possibility, but it is comprised within a radically dialectical (complex) world.

The essay *Gēte no haikai* (*Goethe's Background*, 1931) mainly focuses on metaphysics and art, which is considered only in its theoretical implications. Nishida affirms that art is "formed by history on the background of eternity." This eternity does not imply "the negation of the individual;" on the contrary, it is its *Resonanzboden* (soundboard), thanks to which the Individual is shown in its true character (*NKZ XII*: 141; 147). This 'background' (*haikai*) is parallel to the concept of *zettai mu no basho* (Place of Absolute Nothingness), whose initial formulation appears around 1927 in the context of the epoch-making *Logic of Place* (*basho no romri*), that would be destined to remain as a reference point for Nishida, as well

as for the entire Kyōto School.<sup>8</sup> *GH* is very dependent on this type of logicism.

Here only Goethe's neoclassic poetry is considered, while the *stürmer* period is significantly absent. This choice is coherent with the philosopher's intention of emphasizing the harmony between individual and the world, eternity and time, totality and the particular. Goethe's humanistic pantheism, in which the individual is not annihilated by the Absolute, but harmoniously accords with it, fits particularly well with Nishida's intent of emphasizing human individual and activity.<sup>9</sup> It is not too difficult to recognize Nishida's Logic of Place behind this interpretation of Goethe:

“Contrary [to Spinoza], Goethe's pantheism thoroughly embraces the individual too. Goethe's nature does not negate the individual, but it forms it. It must be a kind of infinite space (*mugen no kūkan*) that, without having form, forms what has form.” (*NKZ XII*: 142; 149)

This “infinite space without form” is another way of calling the Place of Absolute Nothingness, the key concept of the Logic of Place. Nishida also uses it in order to discern between Oriental and Western art: while in the East the background (*haikai*) is an important part of an artwork, Western art is essentially focused on forms (*eidōs*) (*NKZ XII*: 139; 146).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Absolute Nothingness is the self-negation of the Universal (thinking), which in negating itself lets the individuals appear in their true nature. This conception has two aspects: the self-negation of thinking and the subsequent disclosure of the true face of things (which can be grasped only thanks to this self-negation). In my paper: (Cestari, in print), I tried to read Absolute Nothingness as the inner exhaustion of the metaphysical concept of Totality, that in order to be truly all-comprehensive, must be totally free from any determination, included that of “having no determination.”

<sup>9</sup> This also explains Nishida's insistence on the difference between Goethe and Spinoza, who nevertheless inspired the German poet. In *GH* we read that in Spinozism, the individual is monistically a *modus* of the eternal *substantia*. On the contrary, as far as the individual is concerned, Goethe's universalism “takes the opposite standpoint:” the philosopher radically negates the individual, which the poet entirely affirms (*NKZ XII*: 163; 157).

<sup>10</sup> This idea is very much in tune with the introduction to *Hataraku mono kara miru mono e* (From the Acting to the Seeing, 1927), the work that inaugurates the Logic of Place. Here Nishida affirms the urgent need to philosophically express the “thing that sees what has no forms and hears what has no voice,” even if

*GH* pays much more attention to the theoretical relationship between Absolute and Individual, Nature and human being, than to art, and it does not represent a real alternative to the aesthetics of the voluntarist period. Only with *RS* is this post-subjectivism really put into question, and do the many distinctions present in these two works almost disappear.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. ART IN THE HISTORICAL WORLD

##### a) *The Status of Art in the Historical World*

When Nishida wrote *RS* in 1941, he had already accomplished his philosophical turn to historicism.<sup>12</sup> The philosophy of this period can certainly be considered his most mature elaboration, centered as it is on the idea of the historical and dialectical world (*rekishiteki benshōhōteki sekai*), i.e. a complex network of interrelations, in which the standpoint of philosophy is involved in the observed system and the human being is conceived as historical body (*rekishitekishintai*) (See CESTARI 1998).

Nishida's aesthetic conception changes accordingly. Certainly, artistic *activity* and performance still remain at the center of Nishida's interest. However, during this period, he develops a philosophy of bodily practice deeply influenced by anthropology: he seems to interpret art as a kind of sensorial knowledge accomplished by the historical body. It is the way in which, given the position of the historical world's self-formation (*NKZ X: 178*), we know the world in a non-conceptual, bodily manner (*NKZ X: 213; 237-238*). All types of knowledge take origins from 'active intuition' (*kōiteki chokkan*), which is the fundamental dynamic relationship with and within the environment (*kankyō*). Being the pre-rational way in which the bodily subject (*shutai*) is immersed in the network of relationships with the world, active intuition means to know and act by becoming what one knows and acts (CESTARI 1998: 196-198).

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much must be learned from Western culture, "that identifies the form (*eidōs*) with Being" (*NKZ IV: 6*).

<sup>11</sup> However, it must be noted that some traits remain almost unchanged between periods. This is the case of Nishida's evaluation of poetry. In *GH*, lyrical poetry (*jojōshi*) is the formless voice of life, based on intuition (*chokkan*) (*NKZ XII: 143-144; 151*). Similarly, in historicism poetry is still the art form *par excellence*. It is defined as the freest of the arts, being the vision of the true reality of the world (*NKZ X: 246-247*). It is worth noting however that in *RS* Nishida criticizes Konrad Fiedler's idea that linguistic expression moves from an "interior world," since linguistic expressive activity too must be understood from the position of the historical body (*NKZ X: 231*). This criticism could also be applied to his early position. For a detailed analysis of Fiedler-Nishida relationship, see Takanashi 1996.

<sup>12</sup> About the historicist turn, see: Huh 1990.

The fundamental relationship with the world is practical: the human being creates things (*poësis*), while being created by them. In fact, more than a Subject, the human being *is* a bodily existence that *has* a body. That the human being is a body means that it is reducible to the world and can be explained on the basis of scientific laws. At the same time, however, it uses its body as a tool, producing art and conceptual knowledge. Nishida explains art as a movement of abstraction from active intuition, due to an 'active impulse to abstraction' (*chūshō sayōteki shōdō*), or 'artistic intuition' (*geijutsuteki chokkan*).<sup>13</sup> Through this activity, the world determines itself in individuals, concretizing in the manifold forms of art (*yōshiki* or *katachi*). These forms are the paradigms of our historical and social behavior: in them, the world reflects its own image (*sugata*), as well as the individuals who are points of self-projection of the world (*sekai no jiko shaeiten*) (*NKZ X*: 193-194). Art has no external aim, except its inner artistic will<sup>14</sup> that gives rise to a plurality of forms, according to peoples, ambient artistic trends, and individuals. Moreover, it is independent from philosophy or science. It is parallel to conceptual knowledge, and it is based on the production of historical self, which at the same time is a product of the historical world (*NKZ X*: 216-217). Artistic intuition is not simply instinctual or unconscious, less than ever irrational. On the contrary, since it is an expression of the world, it has at the same time a universal value, being "a form of the historical life" (*NKZ X*: 228). Its expression is activity; its inner logic is to be found in the practical acts of the artists and in their artworks. In representation, i.e. in artistic abstraction, our body becomes a tool. This idea is essential for dance, but also for figurative arts: in the act of painting or sculpturing, the artist becomes the brush or the chisel that he is using (*NKZ X*: 236-237). This conception of art particularly stresses the performing aspect of artistic expression, implying that there is an artistic knowledge, which, although abstracting, is essentially practical and physical. Or better, it implies that *art is an abstraction whose language is practical and bodily*.

<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, this idea is directly drawn from Wilhelm Worringer's (1881-1965) conception of *Abstraktionsdrang* (impulse to abstraction).

<sup>14</sup> This statement clearly indicates a certain influence of Alois Riegl's objective aesthetics. Riegl (1858-1905) developed the concept of *Kunstwollen* (Jpn. *geijutsuteki iyoku*) or 'artistic will,' i.e. a kind of inner orientation of artistic creation, which realizes itself fighting against three 'friction factors' (i.e. practical purpose, materials and techniques). Since art is not thought of as mimetic, but as impulsive, Riegl is able to explain geometric forms in ancient art. It must be noted that, rejecting artistic finalism, Nishida goes in the opposite direction of his early teleological conception of art, as with *NKZ III*: 375; 94.



### *b) Art and Subjectivity*

A pronounced anti-subjectivist and anti-romantic tendency is one of the most remarkable features of *RS*, in a way clearer than the other works examined here.<sup>15</sup> For the first time, Nishida overcomes the idea of art as the expression of the artist, which was central in his first works, adapting many aesthetic categories to a non-subjectivist orientation. The concepts of, for example, “expression” (*hyōgen*), “technology” (*gijutsu*), “artificiality” (*sakui*), which in Modern European philosophy are linked to subjectivity, are here considered in a complex way as the subjective movements through which the historical world forms itself (*NKZ X*: 181). This process of de-subjectivization has some important consequences, in that, even if originality and creativity are still highly evaluated, as with Romantic philosophy, they are considered as movements of self-transcendence of the world, becoming moments of self-projection of the world. In this way, art is not opposed to nature or the world. Even action/activity (*sagyō*), though apparently very similar to the voluntarist conceptual core of *GD*, is at the same time one aspect of the structure of the dialectical world (*NKZ X*: 193).

Accordingly, artistic intuition, deriving from the dimension of active intuition, is not only subjective, but it must be understood from the standpoint of the world’s self-formation. In fact, even when creating things, the Self is still immersed in the ocean of the historical relationships that makes it as such, an idea in which Buddhist echoes can be distinctly heard. This existential condition is conceived as a movement “from the created to the creating” (*tsukurareta mono kara tsukuru mono e*), since we create things, being *first* created by them (*NKZ VIII*: 546-547).

A key role in Nishida’s aesthetics is played by emotions (*jōsho*), often conceived of as irrational, and hence theoretically irrelevant. Nishida seems to recover their meaning for knowledge, by means of the concept of artistic consciousness. Emotions too are self-determinations of the world. Thus, since the individual cannot be explained merely as Subject,

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<sup>15</sup> The very influence on this work by many philosophers of aesthetics does not only indicate Nishida’s wide erudition (nowadays, we could point out that these authors are conceptually marginal), but also, and more essentially, his search for non-subjectivist and non-spiritualist aesthetic criteria. In addition to the already mentioned Riegl, Worringer and Konrad Fiedler (1841-1895), Nishida briefly discusses the ideas of the psychologists Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), Robert Vischer (1847-1933) and Theodor Fechner (1801-1887); the materialist position of Gottfried Semper (1803-1879); the ‘aesthetics of the Ugly’ by Karl Rosenkranz (1805-1879), etc. Moreover, particularly significant is the influence of the studies on art and ritual in ancient Greece (*Ancient Art and Ritual*, 1913) by the Oxford anthropologist Jane E. Harrison (1850-1928).

emotions can neither be reduced to Hegelian Reason/Spirit, nor, as with many Romantics, to human interiority, nor as with psychologism, to the sole individual consciousness. On the contrary, Nishida maintains that emotions must be thought from the interaction between the subject and the environment (*NKZ X*: 200-202). This meaning of emotions allows him to re-interpret the structure of rationality, raising decisive doubts about the Modern conception of Subjectivity. In fact, if emotions are historical factors, consciousness cannot be explained only from the point of view of the individual self (*ibid.*).

On one hand, Nishida criticizes Hegelian panlogism, for having considered Reason prior to Pathos, since they both are results of the formative activity of the historical world and not moments of the glorious history of the Absolute Spirit's self-realization. On the other, Nishida thinks that individual consciousness derives from a 'spontaneous movement' (*jihatsuteki undō*) of our historical body. Besides *rational* consciousness, there is also a *bodily* awareness, whose expression is art. In fact, aesthetics is not solely a way of understanding art, but also a way of considering the human being. In other words, the two historical meanings of the term 'aesthetics' are here inextricably bound together, indicating both a 'philosophical interpretation of art' and a 'general theory of sensation,' as with the original meaning of the word.

### *c) Artistic and Scientific Abstraction*

In *RS* Nishida is interested in the formalistic and anthropologic aspects of art that allow him to overcome his previous conception of art as a purely interior dimension. At the same time, he re-evaluates the concept of abstraction (*chūshō*), which helps in valuating the intellectual aspects of the artistic process, reducing the distance between art and science. The importance of this shift could be better appreciated in considering that, until historicism, Nishida was quite suspicious about the idea of abstraction because of his previous, marked anti-intellectualism. During historicism, this suspicion decreases and, like Hegel, he considers abstraction as one important moment of Totality, although, of course, the sense of this totality is completely different from that of the German thinker.

Particularly, this new positive meaning of intellect and abstraction becomes possible thanks to the conception of the dialectical world (*benshōhōteki sekai*), i.e. the complex structure in which subject and the world ground each other. While during the voluntaristic period, rationality was *the problem* to be solved within the dimensions of Absolute Free Will, which was all but rational, in *RS* the artistic process is said to start from an *abstraction from active intuition*. Both anthropology (Harrison) and

formalist aesthetics (Worringer and Fiedler) suggest to Nishida this perspective and he devotes many pages to a deep analysis of their ideas.

Even if he refrains from evaluating Harrison's scientific worth and its applicability to cultures other than Greece (NKZ X: 192-193), in Nishida's perspective, Harrison's approach has the advantage of interpreting representation (*hyōshō*) as a combination of both activity and abstracting reason. In fact, according to Harrison, art, religion and knowledge develop, through rite, from the same human impulse, called *drōmenon* (lit. 'thing done'), in which reality is represented (*mimesis*), in order to express feelings and wishes. Since prehistoric man, Harrison thinks, is a man of deed, his approach to the world, far from being aesthetic, is practical: he does not consider nature for its beauty, but only for its practical use. In the rite, primeval men transfigure scenes of hunt or war, giving them a sacred meaning. Through the re-production of these scenes, reality is pre-produced, i.e. magically transformed.<sup>16</sup> Thus, because of its utility, the rite must have existed before religion and art.

Worringer deepens in a more theoretical way what Harrison explains in historical and anthropologic terms. His work *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and Empathy, 1907) develops the idea that at the basis of art there is an 'impulse to abstraction' (*Abstraktionsdrang*), which goes in the opposite direction of the feeling of *Einfühlung* (empathy), or the sense of affinity between man and nature.<sup>17</sup> This impulse would explain the search for tranquility by prehistoric men, who make the transient forms eternal by abstracting geometric lines from the natural world. Therefore, prehistoric art would derive from the search for unchanging laws amid an uncertain world.<sup>18</sup> Except on the aspects of

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<sup>16</sup> Harrison thinks that, in order to obtain something, prehistoric man did not pray to the gods, for prayer would have implied a distance from the gods. He performed the *drōmenon*. This primeval deed is therefore at the origins of art (because it is the first kind of representation), of magic and science (since both magic and science aim to take control over natural forces, even if starting from different principles) and of religion (which however implies a distance from the gods). Art begins when public actors and artwork are clearly distinguished from the communality of the primeval deed, in which the entire community takes part (See NKZ X: 182-193; 197-200; 215-217).

<sup>17</sup> The idea of empathy is particularly developed by T. Lipps, who thought that we feel aesthetic pleasure when our perceptions accord with our inner empathic sense toward external things (cited in: NKZ X: 218).

<sup>18</sup> See NKZ X: 259. According to Worringer, art is engendered by artistic will (*Kunstwollen*), which condenses in forms (*yōshiki*) that are instruments of salvation, because they allow the human beings to overcome the anxiety of living. While empathy does not explain the forms of abstract art such as Egyptian pyramids, through *Abstraktionsdrang*, Worringer is able to clarify the alleged

interculturality and religion, Nishida roughly agrees with Worringer. He integrates the idea of 'impulse to abstraction' in his theory, considering art and science as two types of abstractions deriving from the fundamental dimension of active intuition.

In Nishida's pages, some echoes of Fiedler's theory of 'Pure Vision' can be distinctively heard. According to the German aesthetician, when an artist is totally immersed in the vision of objects, he spontaneously turns to creative action. Accordingly, vision is creation, i.e. it generates the creative act. Interrupting conceptual continuity, art combines with bodily action, thus completing perceptions and enabling their infinite development. Nishida praises Fiedler's idea, but at the same time he criticizes him for having considered expression "only from the point of view of consciousness. [...] On the contrary, I think that expressing activity must be considered from the standpoint of the historical world's self-formation" (*NKZ X*: 181). This however means that Nishida is criticizing his same earlier viewpoints, so long as in *GD*, he advocated a conception of art as expression of the artist's interiority. This interiority is definitely overcome in the bodily dimension of active intuition. He especially appreciates Fiedler's idea of art as a way of "grasping the world through the body," but this must be accomplished by overcoming the "conceptual world," in which both "art and science" are required (*NKZ X*: 213), since they have the same cognitive value. In Nishida's theory, there is a clear symmetric structure of polar opposition between these two disciplines, since they are both important kinds of abstraction. Art is subjective knowledge, whereas science is objective learning. Art grasps the world in the mode of historical body, i.e. through sensations and emotions. On the contrary, science uses reason and rationality. Art engenders artwork and a countless number of artistic forms, while scientific learning produces objective works and scientific laws.<sup>19</sup>

The logical scheme at work here is clearly the so called "contradictory self-identity" (*zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*), according to which the world can be interpreted at the same time as identical and

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sense of fright and anxiety toward nature, present in many primitive (and Oriental) civilizations (*NKZ X*: 218-223; 226-227; 238-240; 259-262). We should notice that this idea is not very far from Watsuji Tetsurō's conception of 'climate' (*fūdo*), according to which in the monsoon area (from India to Japan), nature is perceived as frightful, engendering a kind of submission to natural forces. See: Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fūdo* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1935); English translation by G. Bownas, *A Climate: A Philosophical Study* (Tokyo: Japanese Ministry of Education, 1961).

<sup>19</sup> *NKZ X*: 214-215. See table 1 at the end of this paper. This table schematizes *NKZ X*: 237-238.

contradictory, with no possibility to choose between the two, yet opposite, perspectives. Instead of a binary structure, this logic particularly emphasizes the practical coexistence of oppositions. Accordingly, the historical world is neither simply mechanistic, nor teleological (NKZ X: 195); these two opposite ways of looking at reality cannot claim to exhaust the entire reality. Hence, a 'third position' (*dai san no tachiba*) is needed. This is the historical world itself, which makes possible the very opposition between subject and object (NKZ X: 179). Similarly, in the genesis of art and science from active intuition, these two abstractions cannot claim to cover the entire reality. After all, active intuition too is *only the subjective* side of the relationship with the world. This orientation is in contrast with the early Nishida's conception, in which the interior factors were considered as the sole reality (CESTARI 1998: 200; NKZ VIII: 550). I find particularly interesting this tendency of Nishida to move toward a more and more complex reality that seems to reject any all too easy ideological or metaphysical shortcut in explaining the world. However, in his last thought, I think that the risk of logicism, i.e. of adopting a too linear logical scheme to interpret reality, is still somehow present. This is also the case of the way in which Nishida thinks of the relationship between art and cultures.

#### *d) Art and Culture*

Nishida thinks that while scientific laws are few and tend toward unity, artistic forms are virtually infinite and are subject to geographic, cultural and individual factors. These determinations are essential to understanding the differences between Greek, Egyptian or Japanese arts. It must not be left unsaid that, by introducing the individual and historical variables in his perspective, Nishida inaugurates a radically pluralistic idea of aesthetics that could be considered incompatible with any culturalist affirmation of a trans-temporal essence of Japan. In fact, the cultural factor is only one of the many elements to be taken into account.<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of this pluralism, Nishida criticizes Worringer's orientalist idea of a clear-cut distinction between Western and Eastern arts. According to the German philosopher, Occidental art is humanistic,

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<sup>20</sup> Nishida affirms that certainly Ise temple has been built in that way because of the moisture and heavy rain that characterize Japanese climate. In this, there is almost a "mathematic correlation" with climate (NKZ X: 239). However, he almost equalizes this particularity to individual difference. In fact, he quotes an anecdote by A. L. Richter, according to which three friends decide to paint the same landscape as realistically as possible, but they create three completely different paintings (*ibid.*). This passage could be read as a criticism against Watsuji Tetsurō's crypto-determinist and culturalist conception of *fūdo*.

rational, logical and transcendent, since it develops from a rational and empathetic position, whereas Oriental art is instinctual (beyond knowledge), mysterious and immanent (NKZ X: 259-260). Against this view, Nishida thinks that the process of artistic formation must be the same everywhere and only 'artistic will' diverges. Hence, there must be a common ground, a third position (*dai san no tachiba*), which should be neither immanent nor transcendent, neither logical nor instinctual, all of these aspects being aspects of a particular artistic will. Nishida negates that his 'Third Position' be equal with Worringer's conception of Gothic,<sup>21</sup> clearly affirming that it *is not a definite artistic style*, bound to a specific culture. On the contrary, it is a kind of transcendental condition from which all styles, included Gothic, derive (NKZ X: 262-263).

As a consequence, Oriental art too is a *particular* artistic will, which grasps the space of mind (*kokoro no kūkan*), unlike Western art that expresses the "space of things" (*mono no kūkan*). Eastern art depicts a "depth without depth."

Its space is not opposed, but internal to the Self and the artist reveals the things as they are in the mind (NKZ X: 240-241). While in Gothic art matter is transformed in the expression of the idea, in Oriental art Nishida thinks that matter *is* the idea. This does not absolutely mean that Oriental art is symbolic or mysterious. On the contrary, "it grasps the world in the instant of the Absolute Present" (NKZ X: 262-264). However, is Nishida's position able to radically discard Worringer's orientalist standpoint? Indeed, he neither accepts it, nor does he adapt its scale of values, and ends up with creating a kind of "reverse orientalism" as did Suzuki Daisetsu.<sup>22</sup> However, his main limitation resides in maintaining to a certain extent a *logical* opposition between West and East, even though this opposition must be grounded on a third position. His philosophy therefore does not

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<sup>21</sup> NKZ X: 260. In *Formprobleme der Gotik*, the German scholar claims that Gothic could be considered as a third position between the geometrical form of primitive and Oriental art and the organic form of classical art (cited in NKZ X: 261).

<sup>22</sup> See R. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen*, 42, 1995, pp. 228-283; R. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," in D. Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 107-160; B. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights. An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 52-87. B. Faure, "The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism," in C. W. Fu & S. Heine (eds.), *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 245-282.

completely reallocate the discourse, but it paradoxically overcomes the two partial positions in a supposedly wider, more complete dimension.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

RS's theory of art can be considered as a critical transformation of the Romantic conception of artistic creativity, even if it rejects the subjectivism of Idealist aesthetics. Because of an interest in the *means* through which a piece of art is developed, this Nishida's late formulation could probably be usefully integrated with contemporary semiotics or hermeneutics. However, some problems still remain unsolved.

As far as this approach depends on Fiedler's theory of Pure Vision, it is certainly useful to explain, for example, impressionism and abstractism, but it proves to be less effective in understanding more anti-conformist trends, such as Dadaism. This problem is coherent with the way of conceiving the negative inside Nishida's philosophy: emphasizing the positive aspects of reality, the idea of a self-expressing world tends to reduce the conflicts between oppositions. This implies a strong unifying horizon that from the aesthetic point of view could minimize the provocative meaning of the forms of art that rebel against the *status quo*. In this sense, the problem of Modern art seems improperly addressed also in Nishida's final writings, despite the considerable transformations that occurred along the lines of his philosophical development.

The suspicion that the question of Modernity represents Nishida's *bête noir* also for his late aesthetics, can be further strengthened, considering the extremely artificial distinction between art and science, which, as indicated before, ends with a polar opposition between the two elements, within a rigid logical scheme. Actually, as indicated by Walter Benjamin, technical and scientific improvements have often been decisive for art, allowing new forms of artistic expressions, as with for example printing, photography or cinema. Moreover, a lot of artistic forms nowadays are increasingly based on a kind of hybridization between technical-scientific knowledge and art, so that it is often difficult to distinguish among them. As it happens with the artificial and a-problematic opposition between East and West, I think that this is another point that betrays Nishida's logicist tendency, a tendency that he never completely overcame.

However, Nishida's attempt to overcome his own early ambiguous stance toward the Idealist conception of art is instructive not only in understanding the general orientation of his philosophy, but also to suggest new possible insights on the relationship between bodily subject and environment in artistic performance.

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Table 1. Polar opposition of art and science  
(Schematization of NKZ X: 237-238)\*

<b>Artistic abstraction</b> 芸術的抽象	<b>Scientific abstraction</b> 科学的抽象
Affirmation of the present Negation of the past/future 過去未来否定的なる現在面	(Affirmation of past/future) Negation of the present 現在が否定せられる立場
Death of the environment in the subject 環境が主体に没する Adaptation to the subject 環境が主体に即した	Death of bodily subject in the environment 主体が環境に没する Adaptation to the environment 主体が環境に即した
Immanent direction 内在的方向 Immanent polarity 内在極 Subjective direction 主体的方向	Transcendental direction 超越的方向 Transcendental polarity 超越極 Environmental direction 環境的方向
Artistic forms/categories 芸術的様式・範疇	Scientific laws/categories 科学的法則・範疇
Plurality 無数	(Unity)
Self-expression of life 生命の自己表現	Self-expression of the historical world 歴史的世界の自己表現
Infinite intuition 無限の直観 “Art changes according to history” 芸術というのは、時代的に 移って行く	Infinite thinking 無限の思惟 Infinite progress 絶えざる進歩
Subjective abstraction 主体的抽象	Objective abstraction 客観的抽象

\*The words in brackets are my integrations.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

- benshōhōteki sekai* 弁証法的世界  
*chokkan* 直観  
*chūshō sayōteki shōdō* 抽象作用的衝動  
*dai san no tachiba* 第三の立場  
*Geijutsu to dōtoku* 『芸術と道徳』  
*geijutsuteki chokkan* 芸術的直観  
*geijutsuteki iyoku* 芸術的意欲  
*Gēte no haikai* 『ゲーテの背景』  
*gijutsu* 技術  
*gōitsuten* 合一点  
*gyōketsu seru ongaku* 凝結せる音楽  
*haikai* 背景  
*Hataraku mono kara miru mono e* 『働くものから見るものへ』  
*hyōshō* 表象  
*jihatsuteki undō* 自発的運動  
*jojōshi* 抒情詩  
*jōsho* 情緒  
*kankyō* 環境  
*katachi* 形  
*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所  
*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観  
*kyakkanteki seiyaku* 客観的制約  
*mujunteki jikodōitsu* 矛盾的自己同一  
 Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎  
*rekishitekishintai* 歴史的な身体  
*Rekishiteki keisei sayō toshite no geijutsuteki sōsaku* 『歴史的な形成作用としての芸術的創作』  
*sayō* 作用  
*sekai no jiko shaeiten* 世界の自己射影点  
*shin no jiko* 真の自己  
*Sho no bi* 『書之美』  
*shutai* 主体  
*sugata* 姿  
*tsukurareta mono kara tsukuru mono e* 作られたものから作るものへ  
*mo suru* 摸する  
*yōshiki* 様式  
*zettai jiyū ishi* 絶対自由意志