

## *The Limits of ma: Retracing the Emergence of a “Japanese” Concept*

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*Since the end of the 1970s, the Japanese concept of ma has often been used in the west to signify an aesthetics of distance. This paper is a reverse exploration whose aim is to understand how this term appeared in the critical discourse in Europe (Nitschke, Barthes, Berque), but also in Japan with philosopher Nakai Masakazu. It shows that this concept is a recent elaboration of Japanese thought, which emerged from a dialogue with German phenomenology and Heidegger in particular.*

**Key words:** concept translation; *ma*; Japanese philosophy; Roland Barthes; Augustin Berque; Günter Nitschke; Nakai Masakazu; phenomenology

In 1978, a Japanese exhibition that was to become a landmark opened in Paris as part of the recently created Festival d'Automne (Autumn Festival). Entitled “Ma: Espace-Temps du Japon” (Ma: Space-Time in Japan), it was conceived by the architect Isozaki Arata with the active support of the festival’s founder, Michel Guy. From that point on, the tiny Japanese word *ma* enjoyed a sudden surge in popularity, and notwithstanding the vicissitudes of fashion, it has never completely disappeared from France’s intellectual landscape. The same phenomenon can be observed in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, where the exhibition was subsequently presented. The concept of *ma* is referred to in different artistic and intellectual circles, among architects, urban planners, musicians, musicologists, filmmakers and film critics, and photographers, not to mention in the world of contemporary dance.

The dictionary of ancient Japanese terms that Isozaki cites in the exhibition catalogue defines *ma* as follows: the “natural distance between two or more things that exist in a continuity”; the “space or vacancy between things”; the “natural pause or interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously.”<sup>1</sup> This short definition suggests that the word in Japanese corresponds to the notions of *distance* (French: *distance*) or *interval* (French: *intervalle*), which are used in both spatial and temporal contexts in French, as in English.<sup>2</sup> We thus speak of the “distance between Paris and Tokyo” as well as the “distance between two notes.” But if we want to understand why the Japanese word gained currency nonetheless, we have to assume that it contains a difference. In order to determine that difference, I propose that we examine the use of the word *ma* in Europe since it first appeared and then compare this to the meaning it was given in critical and aesthetic discourse in Japan. It is only after such a comparison that we can determine the nature of the disparity between *ma* in Japanese and *distance* (French: *distance*) or *interval* (French: *intervalle*) in both these languages. Is the difference due to a particular conception of space and time in Japan? Or are we dealing with a phenomenon that must be understood in the context of a history of intellectual and artistic exchanges between two regions of the world that are profoundly interconnected?

To develop this analysis, I have opted to move backwards in time, so as to avoid proposing an origin for the notion of *ma* or giving the impression that it has a “pure” definition. Its origin will thus remain our vanishing point. Addressing the history of ideas outside of our western horizon calls for

prudence, and it is therefore important to find strategies for overcoming the various obstacles that arise. It is true that the study of the formation and mutations of concepts is a well-traveled field of knowledge, where currents like historical semantics (Reinhard Koselleck), historical sociolinguistics (Jacques Guillaumau, Régine Robin), the history of representations (Roger Chartier), and contextual history (J.G.A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner) confront and complement each other.<sup>3</sup> But the field is not as well-defined when we leave the western domain and approach notions expressed in Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic. Fundamental doubts arise: Can we speak of Japanese “philosophy”? Are there “concepts” within eastern thought? All kinds of pitfalls emerge, ranging from identity claims, fear of western ethnocentrism and exotic fascination, to outright lack of knowledge. For these reasons, we have chosen to begin with the most contemporary discourse as a way of initially breaking down the distance, with the possibility of coming back to it later on.

The Japanese word *ma* resists quantitative analyses: in Latin transliteration, because of the French possessive pronoun for “my” (*ma*), and in Japanese, because of the polyphony of the Chinese character used to note it (this character, 間, can be read as *ma* but also as *kan*, *ken*, or *aida*). I will therefore focus on several authors (Nakai, Kurita, Barthes, Berque) whose interpretations have developed the meaning of this word.

When we retrace the evolution of the concept, four phases can be identified:

- 1978 ff.: the avant-garde *ma*;
- 1966 ff.: *ma* as an overcoming of modernity;
- 1951 ff.: the national *ma*;
- 1929 ff.: the Heideggerian *ma*.

While the beginning of each phase can be determined with precision through some founding texts, it is difficult to establish an endpoint because the impact of the documents in question continues to the present day. The first two phases cited here can be studied through texts in French or English. On the other hand, the last two, which are in fact the oldest and begin with the first attempt at a conceptual generalization of the word, require an exploration of documents in Japanese that have never been translated. More broadly, this study is therefore intended to integrate Asian realities into a general history of modern aesthetics by demonstrating that the relationship to the west is not solely one of contrasts.

This study should thus be seen as the fruit of a reflection on the globalized history of ideas in the contemporary era. The aim is not to reach, like ethnophilosophy would be inclined to, an un-concept of *ma*, as such an approach doesn’t only condemn cultures to know each other only through the filter of otherness, but also implies that philosophy is about defining pure ideas. Nor is it of course to delineate a creditor/debtor, master/student relationship between European and Japanese intellectuals, a trend very common until recently that is more the mirror of geopolitical interests than a real epistemological stance. Our research is rather about extracting concepts from force-fields that are always immanent and moving: like when you play Mikado, a pick-up sticks game, it is all about looking for pivotal points and possible zones of friction within a complex framework.

## 1 The Avant-Garde *ma*

The word *ma* contains something that speaks directly to the mind. Like Om (or Aum) in Sanskrit, but in reverse order, its very pronunciation conveys what it refers to: beginning with a nasal tone, it abruptly opens onto a clear vowel that immediately gives way to silence. And it is probably in order to

emphasize the symbolic force of the two phonemes associated in the Latin transcription that Isozaki insists on writing the word in capitals—MA—although we will not follow that rule here.

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, Roland Barthes did not directly participate in the “Ma” exhibition. The only role he played—after the opening—was that of a kind of middleman, writing a series of short notes for the public that were added in the exhibition rooms at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. His voice should not be confused with that of the project’s Japanese sponsors.<sup>4</sup> It was rather in his article “L’intervalle” (The Interval), published in the weekly *Nouvel Observateur* at the time of the exhibition, that Barthes first used the word *ma* which he helped to introduce and legitimate, especially in France. “...[I]f we are more or less acquainted with the ideas of time and space,” he writes, “Japan does not seem to make this distinction. What it feels, what it expresses, is something common to space and time; every relationship, every separation between two moments, two places, two states: *Ma*” (Barthes 1978: 475–6).<sup>5</sup> Or as he specifies just before, the “concept” of *ma*.

In general, words do not have a great deal of conceptual autonomy in Barthes’s thought. They are meaningful within networks of signs but constitute no more than glittering facets. They correspond to one manner of signifying a reality that can only be understood in multiple ways. The word *ma* is thus associated with French terms that are given either in the form of words (interval, sanctuary) or in the form of phrases (“subtle interplay between materials and penumbra,” “what [is] between two states,” “a fluid, loose, instantaneous passage which does not stem from any lexicon,” etc.). Elsewhere *ma* is connected with Japanese terms (*michiyuki*, *yami*, *sabi*, etc.) that are somewhat arcane variations of it. Its meaning is therefore not closed. Quite the contrary, it is to be grasped within an open semantic field. From one word to another within the field in question, there are substantial differences that Barthes does not attempt to reduce; rather, he accentuates them. No word occupies a central position, other than in a transitory way, like a point in a Brownian field. As a result, the way Barthes uses the word *ma* echoes the meaning he gives it, namely an interval, at once shifting and sacred, *in-between* two signs. His interest in *ma* is thus far from superficial; it belongs to a line of critical thinking that had been fighting against all forms of idealism since the 1950s (cf. his book *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, 1953, translated as *Writing Degree Zero*, 1967). *Ma* is one tool among others aimed at loosening the grip of logocentrism, a means of breaking the monopoly of conceptual thought, resisting the *logos*, and by extension, naming. The attraction that the notion of *ma* exerted on Foucault or Derrida can probably be understood within the same framework (Isozaki and Hino 2004).

In *Empire of Signs*, which he published in 1970, following several visits to Japan at the end of the 1960s, Barthes explores themes close to *ma* without actually using the Japanese word. In the section on packages, he notes a tension between omnipresent “boxes” and “frames” and an equally systematic ability to undermine their rigor (Barthes 1983: 44).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, he observes that *ikebana* is less an art of flower arrangement than an art of “circulation of air” between flowers spaced, I cite, “according to the notion of a *rarity* which we dissociate, for our part, from nature, as if only profusion *proved* the natural [...]” He goes on to speak of the importance of the “interstice” that separates and joins the branches of the Japanese bouquet (Barthes 1983: 45). In Barthes’s oeuvre, the word *ma* is simply integrated into other images already there; it is only the local coloring of a well-established idea.

After the 1978 exhibition, Barthes only used the term *ma* five or six times. The following year, in a catalogue essay on the North American painter Cy Twombly, he writes: “Two thin white lines are suspended askew (this is still the *Rarus*, the Japanese *Ma*); this could be very Zen-like [...]” (Barthes 1979).<sup>7</sup> Here too, the association of the words *rarus* (rare, scarce) and *ma* goes back to an idea in gestation in *Empire of Signs*, where rarity already borders on the interstice. For Barthes, rarity implies what is diffuse, plural, and yet difficult to count or reduce to an unequivocal meaning, a formal equivalent of the *non-vouloir-saisir* (non-will-to-possess), to borrow the expression “imitated from the

Orient” in his 1977 *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*) (Barthes 1978: 232–4).<sup>8</sup> We can thus see that in Barthes's thinking, it was not only *ma* but the entire aesthetic of sobriety, refinement, and patina in Japanese culture that constituted a system capable of undermining the west's bourgeois certainties both poetically and politically.

From the standpoint of deconstructivist criticism, *ma* is reductive, a concentrate of the “Orient.” It is what affects, upsets, moves off-center. But Barthes's Orient is also a fundamentally unknown space, a world which offers no possibility of in-depth communication, one which allows us to take but not to share. It is a toolkit, an objectified, distanced whole, not an alter ego, as we can see in the following passage:

[...] some of us look for a certain idea of difference by questioning the absolute Other, the Orient (Zen, Tao, Buddhism); but what we need to learn is not to recite a model (which the language renders impossible for us), but to invent a ‘heterological’ language for ourselves, a ‘heap’ of differences intermingled so as to destabilise the terribly ancient (historically) compactness of the western *ego*. This is why we are trying to be ‘Mixers’, borrowing here and there bits of ‘elsewhere’ (a bit of Zen, a bit of Tao, etc.), to blur that western identity which often hovers over us like a lead weight [...]. (Barthes 1971: 667)<sup>9</sup>

The idea of the so-called Orient as the reverse side of the so-called Occident, the absolute Other, has an age-old history. But it has been particularly strong since the end of the eighteenth century and the Romantic era. It was during this period, when the superiority of the European “We” was asserted throughout the world, that saw the beginning of the outright rejection of the Other, from the Ottoman Empire to Japan, in a radical form of alterity. In the twentieth century, it can be found, among others, in the thought of Heidegger, who contrasts the western “saying” to the far eastern “saying” and denies the possibility of any profound mediation “from home to home,” as he puts it, between the languages (Heidegger 1971: 45).<sup>10</sup> As has often been pointed out, Barthes's interest in the “Orient” remains exotic, in the sense that it involves a desire which reflects of a cultivated, bourgeois, masculine Us exerting a hold over an elsewhere from which one can borrow at will but seemingly without any possibility of blending in. It is not a question of mixing *oneself* with the others but mixing *something* with oneself. Barthes is not thinking in terms of hybridization, as a fusion of equal parts; he remains within the idea of an internal regeneration through borrowings from outside. His relationship with the “Orient” is not fundamentally different from the waves of Orientalism or “Japonisme” that have succeeded each other since the nineteenth century. His assertion that Japan makes no distinction between time and space reveals as much fantasy and blindness as that of the voyagers who used to speculate on the unchanging nature of Asian civilizations.

Along the same lines, Barthes rejects the idea that the Other can serve as a “model”; rather, he portrays himself as an “inventor.” But while he states his intention to break out of the mold of the ego and the western logos, the text unconsciously reproduces the idealistic Romantic schema that promotes the value of creation, rejects imitation, and splits the world into an active Us and a passive Them.<sup>11</sup> In sum, there is on the one hand an Us insisting on its “identity” but looking for solutions to remain within the dynamics of history—as seen in the repeated recourse to verbs that speak of changing states (*borrowing, destabilizing, blurring, mixing up*)—an Us that takes itself for granted but always needs to be different in order to exist. And on the other hand, an abstract, disembodied Other, admittedly composite but without a history, from which one can freely remove “bits,” as if it were a boat run aground on the beach, a “heap” of forms.

For Barthes, *ma* and the “Orient” perform the same function, namely, opening the gates of the logos. But ontologically, there is an essential gap between the two. While *ma* isolates and reconnects

objects that are different but have the same value (e.g., two flowers in an *ikebana* bouquet), the “Orient” is no more than a crucible nourishing the western Us. In visual terms, we could imagine a single flower, western identity, and alongside it, a tub of compost. *Ma* applies to the relationship between subject and object, not the very identity of the subject. In deconstructionist criticism, *ma*, the idea of the interval, the gap, is subsumed by that of an absolute split between two radically different ontologies, that of the “West” and that of the “East.”

Barthes used many foreign words in his writings, but also photographs and sometimes calligraphy. This was a way of accentuating and enlivening his language and thought within the interval, within the *ma* of a difference. The choice and layout of the illustrations in *Empire of Signs* and *Camera Lucida* are striking in this respect. From 1970 on, his work shows a real concern for expressing his thought spatially, in the sense of *ma*, where “exogenous” elements would be visually harmonized so as to echo and reinforce each other. In *Empire of Signs*, on the page opposite the statue of a buddha whose face opens to reveal another buddha, we can read the handwritten phrase “The sign is a fracture that always opens onto the face of another sign.” And further on, under the portraits of General Nogi and his wife: “They are going to die, they know it, and this is not seen” (Barthes 1983: 92–3).<sup>12</sup> The tension generated by the encounter between the handwritten phrase and the image is an extremely successful application of the sense of the interval that Barthes saw (and sought) in Japan at the end of the 1960s.

On the other hand, the photographic image, like the foreign language, remains an Elsewhere in relation to an idea that is thought in one language, French, and shaped through words. Bridges, stimulating encounters, are possible between the *here* of the French language and the *there* of the foreign image or culture. But a hierarchy remains insofar as the image is captured within the text of the captions, but the foreign words are interconnected, substituted for one another and translated in different ways, none of which really impose themselves, as if they were just passing through. They do not exist in and of themselves but insofar as they allow the writer’s ideas to be brought to light (in space and time). This amounts to a new variant of what we have already observed with regard to the “Orient.” For Barthes, the notion of interstice or interval corresponds above all to the distance that the western logos must constantly re-establish in relation to itself in order to remain within its being, according to a logic that extends from Hegel to Sartre. Barthes is not a theorist of the blending of cultures in the sense of an organic fusion. At best, we might call him a theorist of the weaving of cultures, in that weaving means combining different elements of meaning that can be separated again if necessary.

The logic of weaving is only of interest if the threads of the warp—the logos, the law—are interlaced around those of the weft in a new way, in other words, if the encounter gives rise to a difference. By using the Japanese word *ma* for the first time in 1978 and then occasionally (in an infrequent, *rare* manner) during the next two years, Barthes created the impression of a sudden emergence, a difference relative to his earlier writings, both formally (the visible) and conceptually (the intelligible). The heuristic function of the word *ma*, like all the Asian words in Barthes’s work, prohibited a repetitive, predictable, ordered use. Any evolution of the approach to *ma* could only be exceptional. The critical and even journalistic *ma* that developed after 1978 is thus in complete contradiction with the very nature of the word within the internal dynamics of Barthes’s works. As is often the case with avant-gardes, the very popularity that promised the word a place in history in fact hastened its decline.

## 2 The *ma* That Overcomes Modernity

German architect Günter Nitschke played a pioneering role in introducing the concept of *ma* in the western world. From his first article on the subject, published in 1966 in the renowned magazine *Architectural Design*, to his 1993 book *From Shinto to Ando: Studies in Architectural Anthropology in Japan*, he was one of the main defenders of the idea that a specific conception of space exists in the Japanese archipelago. He belonged to a generation of European and North American architects, urban planners, and geographers who drew on contemporary Japanese studies to break with certain schematic ideas and nourish their own reflections. In his 1966 article, Nitschke gives the concept of *ma* a broad and resolutely transnational significance:

The Japanese sense of space is *ma*, best described as a consciousness of *place*, not in the sense of a 'piazza,' an enclosed three-dimensional entity, but rather as Hans Scharoun used the word 'Platz' in his first Berlin competition scheme, where he spoke of 'Zentrale Plätze' or places of central activities. I feel, even though English is not my mother-tongue, that the English word *place* could be used to imply the simultaneous awareness of the intellectual concepts *form* + *non-form*, *object* + *space*, coupled with subjective experience. In this way, we can go a bit nearer to the Japanese concept of *space*, which, from now on, I will refer to as sense of *place*, or simply *ma*. So—this Japanese sense of *ma* is not something that is created by compositional elements; it is the thing that takes place in the imagination of the human who experiences these elements. Therefore one could define *ma* as 'experiential place,' being nearer to *mysterious atmosphere* caused by the external distribution of symbols. (Nitschke 1966: 117)<sup>13</sup>

Hans Scharoun, whom Nitschke cites in this passage, was a German architect who defended an organic conception of architecture whereby the building had to be adapted to its site and function. He was also close to Bruno Taut, the Weimar architect and urban planner who found refuge in Japan after Hitler's rise to power.

Nitschke's definition of *ma* thus reflects a Germano-Japanese approach sharing the idea that a *place* should be an open space, in contrast to the Latin *place* that would be confined within vertical walls. On the one hand, there is a direct, perceptible relationship to the world (experiential), a free subjectivity, a liking for unobstructed places, and a fragmented organization of space; on the other, a desire for centralization and isolation based on the idea that human space is always delimited and hierarchical. The definition of *ma* thus provided a new imaginary containing a whole series of representations that opposed Germanic space to the Roman space whose origins go back to the nineteenth century and before.

The issue here is not Nitschke's own thought. Rather, the purpose of drawing attention to these few points is to show that the use of Japanese concepts is no exception to the rule that the assimilation of exogenous terms always occurs for or against those already existing in a given intellectual field. In other words, it implies power relations. The absence of common roots with western languages or the fact that we are dealing with a term from the domain of aesthetics does not change the general kinetics of the circulation of ideas. That said, we will encounter this link between *ma* and German thought often, a sign that there is a deep connection here.

Unlike Barthes, Nitschke does not establish a radical difference between "East" and "West." On the contrary, he suggests a parallel in the evolutions of Europe and Asia, which can be perceived, for example, in the way he describes the changing relation to space. In his view, the history of architecture in Japan consists of three phases. The first is that of "apparent disorder," during which the natural order dominates and humans act intuitively, unconsciously, as extensions of nature. The

second is that of “geometric order,” during which humans consciously seek to impose a conceptual order, based on numbers and geometry. The third, which he calls “sophisticated order,” implies that humans have pushed the logic of the preceding phase to its limit and discovered the order of a universe in constant change. This final phase, Nitschke adds, “is not altogether unlike the first, but the intuitive grasp of nature has been replaced by perception and a conscious application of her principles” (Nitschke 1966: 118). Although applied to Japan, this analysis obviously echoes western history as well: first of all, in its organization, which reflects the logic of the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) developed in late nineteenth-century German philosophy, but in its content as well. The dialectic between a natural/preconceptual phase and a conceptual/mathematical one that would surpass itself through a conscious return to the natural order recalls numerous debates from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aimed at overturning Cartesian logic and going beyond humanism. In a more general context, the spread of the concept of *ma* in the west thus reflects the aim of participating in the birth of a new era stemming from modern rationalism but more sensitive to interactions between humans and nature, an era that would *rediscover* the meaning of diversity and intuition and which would be capable of adapting itself to situations, accidents, and difference.

Since the 1960s, western architects have often looked towards “Japanese” conceptions of space and time, and the notion of *ma* in particular. The many European and North American projects commissioned from Japanese firms since the 1990s have further amplified the phenomenon, and not only in the case of architecture. We could point to the same dynamics in music or dance. Indeed, the philosophical perspective adopted by French geographer Augustin Berque clearly shows that we are not dealing with a current of thought limited to a single domain but rather one that cuts across art and culture as a whole.

Berque first addressed the question of *ma* in *Vivre l'espace au Japon* (*Experiencing Space in Japan*, untranslated), published in 1982. From that time on, the term has played a key role in the reflection he has developed around the concept of mesology (from the ancient Greek *mésos*, middle), the science of environment.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the word *ma* is noted by the character 間 (composed of a graph designating the sun between the two wings of a door), whose different readings suggest the general idea of the “in-between” and thus the Greek *mésos*. In a section devoted to *ma*, Berque gives the following definition: “[*Ma*] functions in a way similar to symbols: it separates while bringing together. Which explains the difficulty of grasping *ma*: it is, but is not what it implies” (Berque 1982: 63).<sup>15</sup> *Ma* is thus an interval that joins elements together, a form of rhythm, a movement that “strings situations together one after another, each one in its own simultaneity, with neither beginning nor end” (Berque 1982: 203). Its value is not solely artistic, however; it also has a social significance. For Berque, the awareness of *ma* reveals the existence of a genuinely collective subject in Japan, based not on a shared logos but a deep sensory understanding of “the atmosphere permeating the word and individual subjects” (Berque 1986: 289).<sup>16</sup>

Berque traces his discovery of mesology to his reading of a 1935 essay by Watsuji Tetsurō, a Japanese thinker and critic who taught at the University of Kyoto. Watsuji’s works provided a new intellectual foundation for those who were then opposing “western logic,” an expression encompassing Soviet materialism as well as Anglo-Saxon rationalism. In this essay, entitled *Fūdo* (a common word composed of the characters “wind” and “land,” which, in the 1930s came close to the idea of the French *terroir* [the natural environment of a given land] or the German *Heimat* [homeland] and designated the climate, the environment, the atmosphere of a place), he maintains that Heidegger’s phenomenology is limited by the fact that it is an ontology of the ego. As he writes in the preface, “Heidegger stopped short at this point because his *Dasein* was the *Dasein* of the individual only” (Watsuji 1935: 2).<sup>17</sup> He therefore proposes to explore *fūdōsei* (Berque renders this term in French by the neologism *médiance*, a dynamic interaction or “intermediacy” between a society and its environment,

but it might almost be translated by “*terroir-ness*” [or a kind of “*grassrootedness*” in English]), which he sees as the counterpart of historicity. Berque’s mesology thus has its direct roots in the reflections of an author claiming to go beyond Heidegger in order to anchor phenomenology in the here and now of local situations and place the individual in an interacting natural and cultural milieu. As for *ma*, Berque would consider it as the aesthetic aspect of a study of such environments, which is essentially an attempt at a phenomenological reworking of the humanities and social sciences in a broader context.

Although Berque is careful to distinguish his position from that of Nitschke, their perspectives are similar.<sup>18</sup> Like the German architect, the French geographer proposes a three-part periodization. The first period, which Berque has mainly emphasized in his more recent studies, corresponds to the pre-Aristotelian world and more specifically the world of the Platonic *khôra*, or *chora*, which he qualifies as a concrete, non-dualist milieu.<sup>19</sup> The second period, which begins with Aristotle (or sometimes Descartes), is the era of anthropocentrism, rationalism, modernity, and the mechanization of the human being. The third period emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century with the theory of relativity and phenomenology. Berque thus places himself at the same stage as Nitschke, and like him, sees Japanese culture as a potential model for developing this third phase.

One feature of Berque’s thought that runs through all of his works is the opposition between a bankrupt Cartesian modernity, with its legacy of violence, and a promising new (or Japanese) era, attentive to *ma* and environment (taken to encompass nature, culture, and society). On the one hand, he singles out the “obvious failure of modern rationalism in terms of urban planning,” “the modern alternative, which reduced the form of things to the status of objects,” “the illusion of Romanticism that feeds the architect’s individual gesture,” and on the other, he cites the emerging world of a kind of environmental “intermediacy” (*médiancé*), which, in the wake of phenomenology, “has definitively invalidated that dualistic model” (Berque 1993: 235–6).<sup>20</sup> This new world—which also constitutes a return to the ancient Greek *polis*, the “primary reality of the surrounding world” (Berque 1996: 239)—is, in social terms, that of the true bond between humans, and in aesthetic terms, that of the harmony of the forms and the shared emotion. Which leads Berque to associate *ma* and Japanese spatiality with the “union of viewpoints,” the “full communication between the subject and others,” but also “unaccustomed pleasure” and the ability to create “surprise, a source of aesthetic emotion” (Berque 1982: 65, 144–5).<sup>21</sup>

Berque’s reflection on the concept of *ma* falls within a dialectic that is both historical and epistemological: historical in the sense that humanity would have already experienced two phases and would be in the process of entering a third, through which it would be reconciled with itself and nature, and epistemological to the extent that, as he makes clear, “an order [i.e., *ma*, Japanese spatiality] that appears to be a disorder is an order twice over” (Berque 1982: 144). Understanding and assimilating Japanese spatiality as it is expressed in *ma* is still a kind of *Aufhebung* (sublation, in Hegel’s sense). Although Berque stresses his desire to break with the illusions of Modernism, his methodological approach hardly differs from it. Even if the notions of interval, gap, distance, and *ma* could, as he maintains, point to a way out of modern Romanticism, this is not likely to occur through a process of dialectical overcoming, in other words, a conscious synthesis that would negate the negation and proclaim the triumph of the spirit. It is somehow contradictory to think that the transition to a new configuration of “being-in-the-world” (to borrow the phenomenological term) can be achieved on the heroic model of one individual’s affirmation of a theory, a set of neologisms, and a ready-made system. This kind of shift can only take place through an approach that corresponds to the objective, one that embodies the logic of the new spatiality/temporality, in other words, in an open, collaborative way that facilitates interactions.

Moreover, it is difficult to speak of the logic of *ma* solely in terms of the discovery, surprise, and positive human relations it engenders. In fact, *ma*, the distance from things, is not only a link to



an attentive, astonished other; in many cases, it also includes lying, duplicity, constraint, the feeling of being limited in one's choices so as not to disturb social consensus or aesthetic harmony. The essentially positive sense of *ma* in Japanese is not the reflection of the concept's inherent positivity but rather the expression of a social polarization of norms. Indeed, someone who is not within *ma* is violently rejected as a *ma-nuke*, literally an "outside-of-*ma*," otherwise stated, a fool. The coercive dimension of Japanese spatiality, its tendency to produce uneasiness or lying through the insistence on the primacy of the social space are hardly given prominence in Berque's analysis. And yet, the particular success of Sartre's Existentialism in post-war Japan largely reflects an awareness of the violent nature of this "national" intersubjective space that Watsuji had helped to sketch out in the 1930s.

If we take a step back, the similarities and differences between the *ma* of Barthes and of Berque become clear. Neither of them seems to have considered the constraints, and the violence, of this approach to space. Barthes, however, integrates the violence through a style that breaks down syntax, multiplies sudden interjections (including the frequent use of neologisms and foreign words), and moves quickly from one thing to another. By contrast, Berque limits violence to modernity, a present that already belongs to the past, while eliminating it from the new era he expects to emerge from the dialogue with Japan. In fact, for both of them, *ma* is above all a tool for decentering the subject. But it is necessary to make a further distinction here. For Barthes, this decentering is the only way the subject can recover his or her balance, following a logic that is an extension of Romanticism and the avant-gardes, in form and content alike. By taking a distance and introducing a new, and *ultimately* positive, relationship with the world, decentering, and thus *ma*, allow the subject to find him- or herself. In his enunciative method and his intellectual stance, Berque is at one with Barthes. Japanese spatiality is only a tool for his own decentering as an individual, through which he makes his contribution to history. On the other hand, what he announces is not the perpetuation of this model. Quite the contrary, drawing on Japanese and German phenomenology, he formulates the possibility of a society where the subject would manage to escape his or her confinement and reconnect with the world, a lastingly non-alienated subject attentive to his or her place in relation to others and envisioning at all times both movement and non-action.

### 3 The National *ma*

In parallel with the exhibition organized by Isozaki, several books and articles analyzing the origins and expressions of the concept of *ma* appeared in Japan. *Ma no Nihon bunka* (*The Japanese Culture of ma*) by Kenmochi Takehiko, published in January 1978, was the first monograph on the subject, followed in 1983 by *Ma no kenkyū: Nihonjin no biteki hyōgen* (*Studies on ma: The Aesthetic Expression of the Japanese*), a collective work edited by Minami Hiroshi, a sociopsychologist who helped to develop studies on Japanese culture (*nihonjinron*) after World War II. Including some fifteen articles (e.g., "The Rhythm of the Japanese Language and *ma*," "Ma in Japanese Music," "The Art of *ma* in Eastern Painting"), the latter publication examined different aspects of the national culture that were held to share a specific way of approaching the question of distance, especially compared to the west, often used as a countermodel. While these studies were exactly contemporary with those of Barthes and Berque discussed above, they were developed in greater detail and paved the way for an abundant culturalist literature that was to appeal to the west. In particular, we can cite the works of Okuno Takeo, Matsuoka Seigō, and Kimura Bin.<sup>22</sup>

As of the 1980s, the concept of *ma* thus spread among art historians, architects, and philosophers, as well as the general public. Since then, there has been a tendency to place it on the

same level as other emblematic notions of Japanese artistic discourse such as *nabi* (rustic simplicity), *sabi* (the patina of time), or *yojō* (emotional aftertaste), which had been used in a generic sense for centuries and reappeared in critical discourse just after the rise of modern philosophy in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. Such a reading is quite debatable, however. If hindsight allows us to find elements in the Japanese arts and discourse on art that correspond to Isozaki's definition of *ma*, in the ancient texts the term is used in a strictly technical way, expressing a certain distance or length of time necessary for the proper realization of a given visual or musical object. It is never used in an abstract sense to define an aesthetic ideal. Nor is it found in the works of Zeami or Rikyū or any of the leading theorists of premodern Japanese aesthetics. In general, the ancestry of the word is retraced through synonyms (*ken*, *hima*, *suki*, *sukima*, *kūkan*, etc.) or formal analyses.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise stated, until recently, the notion of *ma* in Japanese was like that of *distance* in French or English. Like the "distance point" (*point de distance*) that classic European painters sought to establish before undertaking their works, it was quite useful for describing the relationships between forms within a composition. But it had no generic value, just as the ideas of distance, gap, or interval do not spontaneously designate a quality proper to western art. At best, we might say that in the past, the notion of *ma* was a *variable* serving in the realization of aesthetic ideals like rustic simplicity. As Kitagawa Junko sums up in a study on the teaching of the *shamisen*, "the concept of *ma* [interval] is not different from what we find in western music and is not specific to Japan" (Kitagawa 2010: 9).<sup>24</sup> In practice, she adds, its meaning is almost exclusively technical. The idea that *ma* is one of the essential elements of Japanese aesthetics is, in conceptual terms, a contemporary construction.

The view that *ma* would have a specifically Japanese dimension began to spread during the 1950s and 1960s. The most important text in this regard is *Bigaku nyūmon* (*Introduction to Aesthetics*), a small book by Nakai Masakazu, published in paperback by Kawade Shobō in 1951. Nakai, who was at that time the vice-librarian of the National Diet Library, sought to provide a synthesis of his earlier philosophical studies through a short work written in an accessible language. In a chapter entitled "Life and Art," he explains:

In tea houses, every attempt is made to avoid the feeling that the pillars bear weight or soar up to the sky. They are made to appear light, extremely light, as if they were floating in the air. But this lightness has something terribly strained about it. It gives the impression of wanting to stay in place at all costs, a fixed place that cannot be anywhere else, in front or behind, within a given order of the universe.

The notion of *ma* that artists often use in Japanese, the *ma* that is employed for both time and space and that is found in *maai*, *ma ga au*, *ma ga nukeru*, *ma ni hamaru*, *ma ga nobiru*, *ma ga chijimu* is a difficult word to translate into English.<sup>25</sup> It is neither rhythm nor space in the western sense.

In Nō, for example, when the beat of the drums resounds, we have the feeling that all the time that has elapsed until now is eliminated, which is absolutely not like the rhythm of an orchestra, where the beat of the drum is given with the knowledge that there will always be another one. It is a perfectly sharp beat that in one go fills an interval of time as solid as steel, with neither past nor future. It is so clear that it seems to open a breach in the brain. It gives the impression of being ridden of all embellishment.

Time in Japanese art is precisely that of *ma*. While we generally think of time as something that flows continuously like a thread, it is in fact cut up and gives the feeling that the true self is renewing itself in movement.

Time that has elapsed stagnates if it continues on its way without encountering constraints. Whereas if it is interrupted, purified and invited to be reborn, it is truly living.

What we call *ma* is that lapse of time, that cut, that echo during which we remember that we are alive.

In music, dance, theatre, visual arts, we thus find *ma*, that light, compact in-between. (Nakai 1981: 35-6)<sup>26</sup>

This passage contains the main features of contemporary *ma*: a definition based on examples from everyday language; the demonstration of both the spatial and temporal nature of the concept; the emphasis on its national character and the assertion that it would be difficult to translate<sup>27</sup>; the reference to ancient arts like Nō as a guarantee of its historical legitimacy; the assertion of its cross-disciplinarity beyond the differences separating artistic genres. These five points are regularly found in later texts. This is the case, for example, in the catalogue of the 1978 exhibition organized by Isozaki and the writings of Nitschke.

Nakai's essay was written shortly after World War II, at a time when the main current among intellectuals was not directed towards a redefinition of universality but rather a redefinition of national specificities. For it is important to understand that the period of the war was in fact less marked by an assertion of that Japanese specificity than by an assertion of the universal, or at least Asian, nature of the national attributes.

Nakai was a philosopher who studied at the Imperial University of Kyoto and went on to teach there from 1935 to November 1937, when he was arrested and imprisoned for his antifascist positions. As a result, he became a symbol of resistance to the rise of militarism after the war.<sup>28</sup> His thought did not have a national impact (unlike that of Sartre in France during the same period), but it remained decisive for a certain number of major artists until the 1960s, including the novelist Noma Hiroshi, who expressed great admiration for him throughout his life, the painter Kitawaki Noboru, whose art was radically changed by Nakai's lectures, and the filmmaker Yoshida Yoshishige, who wrote enthusiastically about his intellectual contributions.<sup>29</sup> And we can also cite the architecture critic Kawazoe Noboru, one of the founders of the Metabolism movement, who recalls: "Whenever I want to try to have something like a serious reflection on the nature of architecture, I start by rereading Nakai Masakazu's essays" (Kawazoe 1981: 12).<sup>30</sup> The aura of the philosopher's ideas and way of life was considerable in some of the most innovative circles of the Japanese intelligentsia between 1930 and 1960.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in the view of Hasumi Shigehiko, the distinguished film critic and former president of the University of Tokyo, "It could be said that Nakai was the precursor of everything commonly known in Japan as 'contemporary thought'" (Hasumi 1997: 256).<sup>32</sup>

In the course of the 1950s, we find practically no other occurrence of the word *ma* used in Nakai's broad philosophical sense, as when he writes: "Time in Japanese art is precisely that of *ma*." It only appears occasionally to signify, for example, an actor's pause between words, namely in a limited, specific sense, and most often only in relation to music or theatrical recitation. Thus, in *Nihon no geijutsu*, a collective work on Japanese art edited by Minami Hiroshi in 1958, the only appearance of the word *ma* concerns kabuki, where it is associated with the pauses required for breathing.<sup>33</sup> This is quite different from Minami's 1983 book mentioned above, where the term *ma* is used throughout. Similarly, we can cite a 1964 publication of the Japanese Ministry of Education intended to present the national culture abroad, which contains one of the first occurrences of the word in English: "Blank space in painting and architecture and *ma* (interval) between sounds are very important factors in these arts in which *yojō* is respected" (1964: 98).<sup>34</sup> Here, *ma* is only applied to music and is explicitly subordinated to the attainment of a higher ideal, in this case the "emotional aftertaste" (*yojō*).

It was only gradually, from the beginning of the 1960s, that *ma* reappeared with the new, cross-disciplinary meaning promoted by Nakai, notably in the writings of his student Kurita Isamu, a literary and architecture critic. A proud heir to Nakai's legacy, Kurita develops his teacher's ideas in *Dentō no*

*gyakusetsu* (*The Contradictions of Tradition*), published in December 1962.<sup>35</sup> Like Nakai ten years earlier, he relies on the lexicological analysis which is characteristic of conceptual generalization and concludes that the word *ma* in Japanese expresses “a spatial relationship between two poles” and that “when [this relationship] shifts, or rather, changes into something temporal, we obtain a polarisation between two distinct moments” (Kurita 1962: 163).<sup>36</sup> What is involved is thus a form of sequence, an irregular pace or pattern, that can be found in many domains, from music to architecture.

Over the years that followed, *ma* was reinterpreted as a generic concept within each of the specific fields of artistic creation. And if it attracted contemporary artists and fed their work in formal terms, this was due to its innovative dimension. Isozaki Arata and the critic Itō Teiji were among the first to make use of it, in a special issue of the magazine *Kenchiku bunka* (*Architectural Culture*) published in 1963.<sup>37</sup> Although their presentation of *ma* through lexical examples was not very different from that of Kurita, the concept now became one of an “imaginary space” (*imaginari supēsu*) that allowed architecture to be rethought not as a form taking possession of an empty space but as the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements within the urban space or even within a building. This approach allowed architects to focus their attention on the way the space could be hollowed out rather than filled. It also permitted them to reexamine ancient Japanese architecture and selectively adopt earlier techniques. And it offered an effective tool for critiquing a western approach that was once again presented as rationalist, violent, and naive in its illusory aim of dominating space through geometry and linear perspective. A similar phenomenon can be observed in many other disciplines, be it music with Takemitsu Tōru, design with Sugiura Kōhei, or even linguistics with Ōno Susumu. Although the 1964 Summer Olympics, Japan’s economic achievements, and the gradual lifting of foreign exchange controls gave the impression that the country had regained its place on the international scene, the reflection around the concept of *ma* provided artists and intellectuals with an opportunity to define a space of their own, one that would be intrinsically non-western but in tune with postmodernity. This assertion of a purely Japanese space constituted a form of cultural nationalism which, as Berque regrets, limited the possibilities of any real cross-cultural dialogue (Berque 1982: 62–7). In the writings of the 1950s and 1960s, the philosophical bases of the reflection on *ma* are not foregrounded, or only in a vague way. The fact that we find allusions to Heidegger in the texts of Kurita and Isozaki, along with references to Buddhist thinkers, suggests, however, that the development of the reflection on *ma* in Japan is an outgrowth of phenomenology, as was the case in Europe with Berque. The appearance of the concept in Nakai’s reflections around 1930 confirms this impression.

#### 4 The Heideggerian *ma* in Nakai’s Theory

Nakai, born in 1900, was active from the late 1920s until his death in 1952. He is generally situated within the left wing of the Kyoto School, whose best-known representatives are Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) and Tosaka Jun (1900–1945). But he can be associated more broadly with a wave of young intellectuals who became interested in aesthetics following the creation of the first specialized chairs at the imperial universities around 1910. By 1930, the philosophy of art was a flourishing discipline. Among the preferred subjects of these young intellectuals was, quite logically in the context of rising nationalism, the question of space, and in particular, Japanese space. If we consider Tosaka Jun’s *Kūkanron* (*On Space*) in 1931, Shimomura Toratarō’s “Chokkan kūkan no senkenteki kōzō—Bekkā” (*The A Priori Structure of Intuitive Space—Becker*) the same year, Kōyama Iwao’s *Bunka ruikeigaku no gainen* (*The Concept of a Typology of Cultures*) in 1933–1934, Watsuji Tetsurō’s *Fūdo* in 1935, Yasuda Yojūrō’s *Nihon no hashi* (*The Japanese Bridge*) in 1936, and Ueda Juzō’s *Nihon bijutsu* (*Japanese Art*) in 1940, what all of the authors have in common is the fact that they were trained in philosophy or aesthetics in one

of the imperial universities and directly investigated the question of space. In these writings, however, none of them uses the word *ma* in the generic sense. However, the importance of thinking about time and space together, one of the key ideas conveyed by the concept of *ma* since the 1950s, was quite widespread, which recalls the influence of Bergson, whose writings had been considerably read, translated, and analyzed in Japan during the 1910s and 1920s. The concept of *ma* thus appeared at a time when numerous Japanese intellectuals were striving to define a space that was both contemporary and national.

The work of Kinbara Seigo, a philosopher and art historian trained at Waseda University in Tokyo, is of particular interest insofar as it proposes an aesthetic rather than formal analysis of art, in line with a method that was then developing in several countries throughout the world (and in France in particular with Raymond Bayer and Étienne Souriau). In his *Tōyōbiron* (*Treatise on Beauty in the Orient*, 1929), Kinbara includes more than twenty entries, such as *ten* (heaven), *rō* (maturity), *mu* (nothingness), *chi* (knowledge), *kotsu* (mastery), and so on. While he avoids using words that are overly connotated historically, the notion of *ma* is equally absent from his lexicon and does not appear in his later writings. By contrast, like most of his generation, he is extremely interested in the question of space. He addresses the subject of the void (*kyō* or *kyōmu*) several times, explaining that in “Eastern art,” it should not be conceived as an absence or the negative of fullness (the ink stroke, the motif) but as “something that is above matter” (Kinbara 1929: 187).<sup>38</sup> This means that the void is not to be considered on the basis of fullness, but rather, fullness is to be considered on the basis of the void. Otherwise stated, the void is the point of departure for conceiving and appreciating a work of art: “Fullness can only be achieved when one arrives at the void” (Kinbara 1929: 187). Kinbara’s understanding of space and the void, like that of other members of his generation, is thus not far removed from what we find among authors who would later use the concept of *ma*, namely that forms come to life from the void (Nakai’s “cut”). In both cases, artists were supposed to bring out this void if they wanted to give strength to the forms they created. We can infer from this analysis that if the term *ma* had been commonly used at the end of the 1920s, Kinbara would certainly have adopted it, or at least discussed it. And this raises the following question: How did Nakai come to use the word *ma* around 1930, and what did it contribute to analyses like those of Kinbara?

The word *ma* in a generic sense first occurs in Nakai’s work in 1929. It appears in teaching notes that were published after his death, but the essence of his conception of the term is already there. He distinguishes the interval (*kankaku*), which is objective, measurable space, from “distance” or “remoteness” (*kyori*), which immediately implies an emotional reaction. One can fear that a distance imposes itself in the relationship with the other, but the same fear does not apply to an interval (Nakai 1981: 290).<sup>39</sup> Since space is first of all the awareness of space, the consciousness of the gap between being and oneself, distance, which is subjective, takes precedence over the interval and measurable space. For Nakai, “What we call physical space is the shadow of the space of the spirit. Consequently, when time and space are rooted in veritable life, we can speak, ontologically, of a living space” (Nakai 1981: 290). He then gives several examples of the use of the word *ma* demonstrating that it not only has a spatial or temporal meaning but that it can also designate a “sphere of life,” a social milieu (Nakai 1981: 291). In Japanese space-time, *ma* thus expresses a form of consciousness of the primacy of the human being’s intersubjective space over objective, quantifiable space.

This first discussion is important, but since it appears in course notes, the philosophical references are vague. It is only in October 1931 that Nakai makes a formal reference to *ma* in an article published in the journal *Risō* (*Ideal*) under the title “Anthropological Reflection on Art” (Nakai 1931: 3–4).<sup>40</sup> This short essay is explicitly presented as an attempt to apply Heidegger’s idea of being to the question of beauty. It begins with an argument that the Japanese philosopher had repeated many times and which constituted the basis of his reflection theory, namely that gazing (*miru*) is always gazing at

something and that the structure of the gaze is fundamentally reflexive. Gazing implies two moments, two “gaps” (*sukima*), a first which is a simple opening up to light and a second which is a return to the self after the confrontation with the object. Only this double movement allows self-discovery as such; in other words, the discovery of self is always enhanced by the gap separating it from the Other. Consequently, at a more complex level, when humans create works, to the extent that they create them by means of their senses, they necessarily intensify their own questioning, which in turn enhances their understanding of the world, and so on. Technique is therefore only the intermediary moment between the self and the object, the operation through which man is immersed in himself (Nakai 1931: 5). Once he has arrived at this stage, Nakai continues:

Oskar Becker, in his text ‘The a priori structure of intuitive space,’ constructs the dimensionality of space on a pure human physics.<sup>41</sup> For art, such an approach is extremely important. Moreover, this line of thought seems possible in the context of the conception of space in Japanese. *Ma*, which we find, for example, in *maai*, *ma ni au* (whether in the temporal or the common social sense), *ma ga nukeru*, *magiwa*, *nakama*, *maotoko*, *shima*, *machigai*, *bema*, *tonma*, *ranma*, *ima*, and which constitutes the basic tonality of space, always signifies a unidirectional tension, whether in the domain of time, society or art.<sup>42</sup> It follows the same logic as the construction of the ontic space of the *Gerichtetheit auf Etwas* (orientation towards something) that sets the tone of Becker’s first dimension.

[...] There is something highly stimulating in an anthropological approach to art as soon as we accept such a formation of the living being’s space. Which means that it is not life that inhabits space but space that inhabits life. (Nakai 1931: 8)

In Nakai’s mind, what the word *ma* covers in Japanese thus corresponds—as he repeats in a 1951 article<sup>43</sup>—to the space of “unidirectional tension” (*ichihōkōteki kinchōsei*), which is Becker’s first dimension of the human being, that of “orientation towards something” (in Japanese, *nanimono ka ni mukau tokoro*). In other words, *ma* corresponds to the moment when being projects itself to the point of encountering something which provokes self-awareness, surprise, and joy in return. However, despite the reference to the German philosopher Becker, whose article aroused great interest in Japan, Heidegger’s shadow is obvious, not only because Nakai situates his article in the continuity of his thought but because Becker, who was in Freiburg between 1928 and 1931, borrowed many theses from him.

Japanese philosophers paid considerable attention to Heidegger early on. A surprising number of them took his classes, beginning with Miki Kiyoshi and Kuki Shūzō, whom Nakai knew quite well. Even if Heidegger only conceived of philosophy within the Greek tradition, his conception of ontology attracted followers in Japan because it permitted a positive repositioning of the subject in its own language and culture. Some of them also perceived correspondences with Buddhist thought. The first mention of Heidegger in Nakai’s work dates from February 1929, and he refers to him regularly afterwards (Nakai 1929: 259).<sup>44</sup> It was thus shortly after reading *Being and Time* (in German) that he used the example of the word *ma* for the first time.<sup>45</sup>

Several passages from *Being and Time* shed light on Nakai’s understanding of *ma*. In particular, Heidegger explains that what he calls a “phenomenon” is a “distinctive way something can be encountered,” something immediate in the literal sense of non-mediated, which he also terms “self-showing” (Heidegger 2010: 29).<sup>46</sup> This idea that the world is discovered immediately corresponds closely with Becker’s idea of “unidirectional tension” used by Nakai to establish space as living space, or in other words, as *ma*. Similarly, Heidegger’s central idea that being can only be known on the basis of “being-there,” *Dasein*, presumes an essential, intimate connection between being and “there.” Every

form of knowledge implies some form of the revelation of being in space. This animated space of *Dasein* is what Heidegger also calls the “between” (*Zwischen*) or the “clearing” (*Lichtung*) (Heidegger 2010: 128–9). Even if Nakai does not draw directly on the German philosopher when he discusses *ma*, there is little doubt that his thinking on the question was nourished by the reading of *Being and Time*, as can also be sensed in a 1932 article on the subject of rhythm: “The structure of *ma* is a profoundly comforting, soothing tension that arises from the abandoning of body and mind at the very moment when being understands itself in being-there, reverses itself and penetrates itself” (Nakai 1932: 33).<sup>47</sup> In sum, the influence of Heidegger indubitably lies behind Nakai’s transformation of the word *ma* into a generic concept.

Seen from Japan at the time, one of the features that made Heidegger attractive was the originality of his language, which stimulated a vast wave of lexical and conceptual inventiveness not only among his translators but more generally among philosophers and critics. To some extent, Kuki Shūzō’s thoughts on the word *iki* (chic) and those of Watsuji on *jūdo* and *aida* (between) should be seen in this context. The same is true for *ma* in Nakai’s case, especially since he had never completely embraced Heidegger’s thought, which must have seemed too somber and lacking in dynamism. In many respects, Nakai felt closer to Ernst Cassirer, whose functionalist approach interested him a great deal. He saw *ma* as a relative space or, to borrow Cassirer’s terminology, a “connection,” a “systematic totality,” a “transsubjective” projection permitting the “retention of the identical relations in the varying content of presentation,” an expression that Nakai often used in Japanese (Cassirer [1923] 2003: 335, 333, 294).<sup>48</sup> It therefore had a form of lightness; it was without pathos and far from Heidegger’s worry and being-towards-death. This is why he associates it with pleasure, calm, or even the “perfect moment of Buddhist law” (*hōki no gokusoku*), as he writes in reference to the doctrines of the True Pure Land School (Nakai 1932: 32).

Given the richness and originality of Nakai’s thought, many other elements could be introduced to further define the meaning *ma* takes in his work, for instance, its connection with Nishida Kitarō’s concept of *basbo* (place), but this is not possible here.<sup>49</sup> Our purpose in this article is basically to bring out his role in the formation of the concept. It is possible that another author had occasionally employed the word *ma* before him, in a generic sense, but the clarity Nakai provided was decisive. A concrete proof of this is the fact that Kurita Isamu, who played an important role in spreading the concept among architects in the early 1960s, was one of his disciples. The same is true in terms of content. Nakai saw *ma* as a possible response to Heidegger’s idea of space, and it is striking to observe that most of the authors cited above—whether Kurita, Isozaki, Kenmochi, Berque, Matsuoka, or Kimura—anchor the concept in a phenomenology of being. Each of them interpreted *ma* in his own way, but Nakai is the one who situated it within a common perspective, which is that of a non-alienated space, prior to all determination, where being is discovered and developed in resonance with the world.

## 5 Conclusion

The concept of *ma* in the generic sense is recent in Japanese aesthetic thought. After its appearance in Nakai’s work, most likely in 1929, it spread in the 1960s and gained international attention in the late 1970s. Consequently, it must be associated with the long list of constructed traditions. Not only is the concept less than a century old, but when it began to circulate in the 1960s, it was seen as something fresh, different, revitalizing, first of all because it had never been employed in this way before, but also since it had not been used during the war. Thus it permitted a reconciliation of aesthetics and national idea, while words such as *wabi* were controversial because they were associated with imperial ideology. The fact that Nakai emerged from the war as a rare figure of resistance undoubtedly helped to reinforce this impression. At the same time, however, the “Marxist” label

attached to him probably explains why his name appears so rarely in texts dealing with the question of *ma*, given that phenomenology and Marx became incompatible after 1945. In addition, the initial dependency of the concept of *ma* on Heidegger's thought that is evident in Nakai's writings was certainly detrimental to the recognition of his contribution, in particular in Japan where it points to the hybridity of vernacular concepts.

To come back to the questions we raised at the beginning of this essay, it is now possible to reformulate them in the following way: Does the fact that the word *ma* was not used in a generic sense within critical discourse before the twentieth century prevent us from thinking that the whole of its different uses have always formed a system and therefore reflect a reality of Japanese thought that must be accepted as such, in all of its specificity?

It is clear that in the Japanese arts, regardless of how it is expressed, there is an appreciation of the gap, the void, the in-between space, especially compared with European arts. At the end of the nineteenth century, the painter Oswald Sickert already wrote that the Japanese were "lax about the interval between one note and another" (Sickert 1950: 312).<sup>50</sup> This is a time-worn observation, and saying that the concept of *ma* in Japan is a recent invention is unlikely to change it. From a distance, it is impossible not to notice the difference in the meaning of space in Japan, which explains the need to find words to express it. The problem, however, is precisely the vision from a distance, which is no longer adequate. In this case, suggesting that the specific uses of *ma* have always constituted a system, and that the reformulation sparked by the contact with German phenomenology in the twentieth century contributed nothing new, amounts to underestimating the importance of the historical nature of the formation and circulation of words and hiding the historicity of thoughts. Giving a history to "non-western" realities (i.e., outside the west) is still a distant horizon; until now, the tendency has always been to bury diachronic change under essentialist representations. And such a view of *ma* also overlooks the fact that the conception of space in the past was necessarily different because the hierarchy of values was different. Since the 1960s, *ma* has been predominantly understood as a space of intersubjective tension. In a disillusioned world, it often serves as an ideal. On the other hand, musicians or actors of the Edo period (1603–1867) who were looking for the right *ma* in the exercise of their art were striving towards something of another order. What makes contemporary *ma* radically different from that of the Edo period is its place in the value system.

Through the exercise in anamnesis that ends here, we have concretely raised the problem of translating the word *ma* into French or English. The assumption that it corresponds to *distance* or *interval* has consistently been refuted by the empirical analysis of the Japanese texts. Following the example of the bilingual dictionaries, I have used a wide range of words (interval, distance, living space, moment, gap, etc.). However, when *ma* appears in French-language texts that are not direct translations from Japanese, it essentially signifies the intersubjective space of phenomenology. Transcribing the Japanese word as such is therefore unnecessary because this conceals both the modernity and the history of the concept in Japan.

A few years ago, in October 2012, the filmmaker and actor Kitano Takeshi published the book entitled *Manuke no kōzō* (*The Structure of the Fool*) which, notwithstanding its comical tone, is in fact a profound reflection on *ma* in contemporary Japanese culture. The development of intersubjective space has had many positive aspects. In terms of artistic creation, it has stimulated a lot of innovative works; in terms of society, it has allowed individuals to find their place in spite of the demographic pressure; in terms of collective identity, it has helped the Japanese assert themselves on the international scene. But as we have already indicated, this trend also has a violent side, to the extent that taking the other's difference into account clearly reinforces the "other," but also reinforces the "difference." Space as *ma* tends to exclude fusion on its inner margin, and to maintain beings (or forms) in a system of relationships that can obstruct movement on its outer margin. As Kitano writes, "The



sense of distance [*ma*] that the Japanese display with so much flair can on the contrary become a barrier to the creation of new things” (Kitano 2012: 157).<sup>51</sup> This is why today, at a time when Japan has to face challenges other than those confronting it after World War II, the filmmaker defends a *ma-nuke*, an “outside-of-*ma*” that would no longer evoke foolishness or idiocy but would be synonymous with freedom, creativity, and the ability to enter into genuine contact with the other.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isozaki Arata, “Japanese Time-Space Concept,” in *MA Espace-Temps du Japon* (Paris: Musée des Arts décoratifs, 1978, bilingual French-English), n.p. Throughout this essay, Japanese proper names are presented according to the usage in Japan, with the family name (Isozaki in this case) preceding the first name.

*Translator’s note:* The exhibition, presented at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York from 3 April to 27 May 1979, also gave rise to an English edition of the catalogue: *Ma, Space-Time in Japan* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, [1979]).

<sup>2</sup> See the French definition in, for example, the *Trésor de la Langue Française*.

*Translator’s note:* The same is true in English, cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (UK) or Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* (US).

<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Guilhaumou, “De l’histoire des concepts à l’histoire linguistique des usages conceptuels,” *Genèses*, no. 38 (2000/1): 105–18.

<sup>4</sup> Isozaki is quite clear on this point in his interviews. Cf. Arata Isozaki, “Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist for UnDo.net,” 29 November 2000, <http://1995-2015.undo.net/cgi-bin/openframe.pl?x=/cgi-bin/undo/features/features.pl%3Fa%3Di%26cod%3D22> [accessed 6 August 2020]; Isozaki Arata and Hino Naohiko, “‘Nihon no toshi kūkan,’” no koro — *Kenchiku bunka*, ‘Ma-ten,’ Derida,” (In the era of “The urban space in Japan”: *Architectural culture*, exhibition ‘Ma’, Derida), *10+1*, no. 37 (December 2004), 196. It should also be noted that Barthes’s name does not appear anywhere in the exhibition catalogue.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, “L’Intervalle,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 23 October 1978, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1995), 475–6.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Wisdom of Art/Sagesse de l’Art,” trans. Annette Lavers, in *Cy Twombly. Paintings and Drawings 1954–1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, “Ce que je dois à Khatibi,” postface to Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée* (Paris: Denoël, 1971), in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5, 667.

*Translator’s note:* This text is not included in the English version, *Tattooed Memory*, trans. Peter Thompson (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016).

- 10 Martin Heidegger, “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1971), 1–56.
- 11 See Michael Lucken, *Imitation and Creativity in Japanese Arts. From Kishida Ryūsei to Miyazaki Hayao*, trans. Francesca Simkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 9–60.
- 12 *Translator’s note*: The statue of the buddha (the monk Hoshi Washo) and the handwritten comment are not included in the English translation; cf. *L’Empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970), 72–3.
- 13 Günter Nitschke, “Ma—The Japanese Sense of Place in Old and New Architecture and Planning,” *Architectural Design* 36/3 (March 1966).
- 14 *Translator’s note*: While *mesology*, as the study of interactions between living beings and their environments, remains in use in French, the current term in English is *ecology*.
- 15 Augustin Berque, *Vivre l’espace au Japon* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).
- 16 Augustin Berque, *Le Sauvage et l’artifice* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986). He then goes on to indicate: “Regardless of the level of discursiveness or elucidation of the language employed, Japanese culture has recognised and systematised the incompleteness of every message, in particular when it is spoken; this explains certain processes which, like *ma*, give rise at every level of language to levels of discourse that are ever more profound, more ambient and less discursive.”
- 17 Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fūdo* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1935), 2.  
*Translator’s note*: The English edition of the work, commissioned by the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, was first published as *A Climate, A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Ministry of Education and Hokuseido Press, 1961); a revised version was reprinted as *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988). See also the French translation by Augustin Berque, *Fūdo: Le milieu humain* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2011), 36. The introduction to the revised edition of the Spanish translation by Juan Masiá and Anselmo Mataix, *Antropología del paisaje. Climas, culturas y religiones* [1973], 2d rev. edition (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2016) addresses the question of developing equivalents for Watsuji’s vocabulary.
- 18 Berque (1982: 63–4).
- 19 Berque, “La *chōra* chez Platon,” *Mésologiques*, 5 January 2012.  
<http://ecoumene.blogspot.fr/2012/01/la-chora-chez-platon-augustin-berque.html>
- 20 Augustin Berque, *Du geste à la cité* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1993).
- 21 See also Berque (1986: 258).
- 22 Okuno Takeo, *Ma no kōzō: bungaku ni okeru kankeiso* (*The structure of ma: related elements in literature*) (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1983); Matsuoka Seigō, *Ma to sekai gekijō* (*Ma and world theatre*) (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1988); Kimura Bin, *Aida* (*Between*) (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1988). This last work has been published in French as *L’Entre. Une approche phénoménologique de la schizophrénie*, trans. Claire Vincent (Grenoble: Millon, 2000).
- 23 In addition to the works of Kenmochi and Minami cited above, see Richard B. Pilgrim, “Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan,” in ed. Charles Wei-hsün Fu, *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 55–80.
- 24 Kitagawa Junko, “Nihon ongaku ni okeru ‘ma’ gainen no kentō” (Exploration of the Concept of *ma* in Japanese Music), *Ōsaka kyoiku daigaku kiyō* (Osaka Kyoiku University Bulletin), no. 59/1, (September 2010): 9.
- 25 *Maai*: [literally] meeting of *mas*; finding the distance (esp. in the martial arts). *Ma ga au*: [literally] having *ma* that connects; having the right timing. *Ma ga nukeru*: [literally] having *ma* that misses out; not keeping to the beat. *Ma ni hamaru*: [literally] falling into *ma*; adapting perfectly. *Ma ga nobiru*: [literally] extending *ma*; putting off (in time). *Ma ga chijimu*: [literally] shortening *ma*; moving forward (in time).
- 26 Nakai Masakazu, *Bigaku nyūmon* (*Introduction to Aesthetics*), in *Nakai Masakazu zenshū* (Complete works of Nakai Masakazu, hereafter NMZ), vol. 3 (Tokyo: Bijutsu shuppansha, 1981).

- 27 It should be noted, however, that Nakai, who was at that time a member of the Japanese Socialist Party, is not taking a nationalist stance. Several pages after this passage, he explicitly states that the awareness of *ma* or the (right) distance is not specifically Japanese: “To be genuinely in tune with *ma*, all that matters are preparation and repeated practice. It is necessarily the same thing in other countries” (Nakai 1981: 41).
- 28 Cf. Tsurumi Shunsuke et al., “Nakai Masakazu to wareware no jidai,” (Nakai Masakazu and Our Generation), *Shisō no kagaku* (Science of thought), no. 14 (May 1963): 71–89.
- 29 See in particular Yoshida Yoshishige, “Eiga no okeru kūkan to jikan” (Space and Time in the Cinema), *Henbō no rinri* (Ethics of Transformation) (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2006), 257–80.
- 30 Kawazoe Noboru, “Shisō sensen no senkun toshite” (Lessons from the Intellectual Front), *NMZ*, vol. 3, appendix, p. 12. Metabolism (Metaborizumu) was a prominent Japanese architectural movement founded in 1959. Its leading members are architects Kikutake Kiyonori, Kurokawa Kishō, Maki Fumihiko, and art critic Kawazoe Noboru.
- 31 On Nakai’s legacy, see Michael Lucken, “On the Origins of New Left and Counterculture Movements in Japan: Nakai Masakazu and Contemporary Thought,” *Positions. Asia critique*, no. 26–4 (2018): 593–618.
- 32 Hasumi Shigehiko, in *Kindai Nihon no bishyō*, ed. Karatani Kōjin (Modern Japanese Criticism), vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997), 256.
- 33 Cf. Tobe Ginsaku, “Bi wo toku geijutsu” (The Art that Explains Beauty), *Nihon no geijutsu* (The Art of Japan) (Tokyo: Tōyō keizai shinpōsha, 1958), 110–1, 124.
- 34 *Japan. Introductory Cultural Profiles* (Tokyo: Monbushō, 1964).
- 35 On the relationship between Nakai and Kurita, see Kurita’s remarks at the round table organized by Tsurumi Shunsuke, “Nakai Masakazu to wareware no jidai,” *Shisō no kagaku*, 75–7.
- 36 Kurita Isamu, *Dentō no gyakusetsu — Nihonbi to kūkan* (The paradoxes of tradition: The Japanese aesthetic and space) (Tokyo: Shichiyōsha, 1962).
- 37 ed. Itō Teiji, “Nihon no toshi kūkan” (Urban space in Japan), *Kenchiku bunka*, December 1963.
- 38 Kinbara Seigo, *Tōyōbiron* (Treatise on Beauty in the Orient) (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1929).
- 39 Nakai Masakazu, “Tenkanki no bigaku” (Aesthetics in Times of Crisis), *NMZ*, vol. 2, 1981.
- 40 Nakai Masakazu, “Geijutsu no ningengakuteki kōsatsu,” *Risō* (Ideal), October 1931; *NMZ*, vol. 2. “Anthropological” (in Japanese, *ningengakuteki* and not *jinruigakuteki*) is to be understood here in the sense of philosophical anthropology, or, to quote Heidegger, as a “philosophical interpretation of man which explains and evaluates beings as a whole from the standpoint of, and in relation to, man,” and not as a “science of man” where the human is simultaneously subject and object.
- Translator’s note:* See Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *Off the Beaten Path*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002), 70.
- 41 Cf. Oskar Becker, “Die apriorische Struktur des Anschauungsraumes,” *Philosophischer Anzeiger* 4 (1930): 129–62.
- 42 *Maai*: [literally] meeting of *mas*; finding the distance (esp. in the martial arts). *Ma ni au*: [literally] meeting *ma*; being on time/being suitable. *Ma ga nukeru*: [literally] having *ma* that misses out; not keeping to the beat. *Magina*: [literally] the edge of *ma*; outermost limit. *Nakama*: [literally] internal *ma*; companion. *Maotoko*: [literally] man of *ma*; adulterer; lover. *Shima*: island, delimited area, country, stripe. *Machigai*: [literally] difference in *ma*; error. *Hema*: blunder, mistake. *Tonma*: idiot, moron. *Ranma*: [literally] *ma* in the shape of a strip; trumeau. *Ima*: [literally] *ma* where one is located; living room.
- 43 Nakai Masakazu, “Geijutsuteki kūkan” (Artistic space), *Higeki kigeki* (Tragedy / Comedy), September 1951; *NMZ*, vol. 3, 277.

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- 44 Nakai Masakazu, “Hatsugen keitai to chōshu keitai narabi ni sono geijutsuteki tenbō” (Declarative form and auditive form, as well as their artistic developments), *Tetsugaku kenkyū* (Philosophy studies), February 1929; NMZ, vol. 1.
- 45 It is worth noting that in the *Japanisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, a bilingual dictionary commonly used at that time, the word *ma* was rendered by *Raum* (space), *Zeitraum* (period of time), and *Zeit* (time). Cf. Okakura Ichirō, *Japanisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Tokyo: Kanazashi Genji, 1912), 501.
- 46 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 29.
- 47 Nakai Masakazu, “Rizumu no kōzō” (Structure of rhythm), *Bi-bihyō* (Beauty — Criticism), September 1932; NMZ, vol. 2, 33.
- 48 Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function & Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* [1910], trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923; reprint New York: Dover, 2003) (italics in the original).
- 49 As a student at Kyoto University, Nakai was working under the supervision of Fukada Yasukazu (or Kōsan). It is only after Fukada’s death in 1928 and particularly in the mid-1930s that he would become more attracted and familiar with Nishida’s thought.
- 50 Oswald Sickert, “Letters from Japan,” in Arthur Waley, *The Nō Plays of Japan* [1921] (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1950), Appendix 1.
- 51 Bīto Takeshi, *Manuke no kōzō* (The Structure of the Fool) (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2012), 157.
- 52 English translation: Miriam Rosen. Revised and amended by the author.