Recent work in cinema studies has begun to explore the histories of film theory beyond those preserved in the canon, especially in those areas of the world beyond the Euro-American nexus. In this talk, I will sketch the issues involved in researching Japanese film theory—what I call the “theory complex”—using as an example the work of Nakai Masakazu, an aesthetic philosopher and activist. In from the 1930s to the 1950s, Nakai engaged in a critique of aesthetics which saw in the machine art represented by cinema a new form of enunciation that enabled the masses to express their world historical importance. Approaching Nakai’s film theory can help us interrogate not only the Western canon, but also the cultural foundations of theory.

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