The Self-Overcoming of (Western) Postmodern Aesthetics

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Abstract: This essay explores the nihilistic nature of the idea of postmodern aesthetics in the Western world by highlighting its historical and cultural specificity in contrast with non-Western postmodernities, in particular in East Asia, and this in spite of their formal similarities. We then have to question the nature, possibility and implication of Western postmodern aesthetics overcoming itself within the context of globalisation.
Keywords: postmodern aesthetics, East Asian postmodernities, globalization

In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (1949) Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji claimed that nihilism is a crisis that has affected the foundations of European culture since the second half of the nineteenth century to the point *"that life itself is being uprooted and human 'being' itself turns into a question mark"* (Nishitani, 1990, p. 173). Indeed, when a civilisation flourishes in a self-built edifice that is as firmly grounded as rock-solid it just needs to be exposed to other constructions sheltering other modes of life to realise the human, all too human nature of its undertaking. This phenomenon, or "crisis," has very complex origins and causes, one of the most impacting being the development of information technology, communication and transportation. Postmodern aesthetics is arguably one of the most emblematic symptoms of such a crisis. It is, however, possible to reflect on this phenomenon as a historical necessity that can admittedly become an ethical void unless it finds the means to overcome itself.

Postmodern aesthetics, doubtless, is a very loose term; so loose that some have actually questioned its relevance if not validity. Even more, it seems that the term is little by little fading – I would even dare to say "out of fashion" as it is being swallowed up by this no less loose term called globalisation. Günter Figal in his study on aesthetics as phenomenology uses the expression "placid modernism" to describe that *"postmodern attempt to replace emphatic modernism with a hodgepodge of styles,"* which *"no longer* [needs to] *assert itself over against tradition and thus combines casually with it."* Postmodern aesthetics for Figal is no more than a *"short-lived totalizing of aesthetic relativity"*; an *"attempt"* that has *"remained devoid of consequences and appears in retrospect as no more than a curiosity"* (Figal, 2015, p. 1). It is clear, however, that the significance of postmodern aesthetics can only be understood within its historicity, making thus the question of its universal worth all the more irrelevant if not meaningless. True, postmodern aesthetics, because of the very nature of its motivations, is made of heterogeneous tendencies. These can nonetheless be paradigmatically characterised within particular contexts, be they geographical, historical, or cultural.

The postmodern, obviously, does not only concern *aesthetics*. It is an evolution, mutation, or, for some, even a regression that concerns the course of histories, ideas, cultures, social mechanisms, economics, politics, and even sciences. The postmodern, as its etymology suggests, is a phenomenon that takes place "after" that which is thought to be "here and now," or rather "just now" – in Latin *post* = after and *modo / modernus* = just now; in other words, what comes after "modernity" (Onions, 1966). Needless to say, there

are "modernities" that have taken place outside of the Western world, but these, often but not always for colonial reasons, coincide with the moment in history when Western sciences and cultural values were imported by other civilisations. For example, there is modernity in China as much as in Japan, India, or the Arab world.[1]

In China we can see modernity starting at the beginning of the twentieth century with the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty – the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) – by the Republic and the subsequent importation of Marxism.[2] In Japan, modernity arguably started at the end of its relative period of isolation – the Edo period (1603-1868) – and the advent of the Meiji Restoration or renewal in 1868 (see Jansen, 2000). This was the time when Japan begun to embrace Western thought systems and values. What comes *after* these modernities can take an even more complex and perhaps more confused shape than in the Western world. East Asian postmodernities, so to speak, do not emerge from the same backgrounds of values and traditions in spite of traceable formal similarities with aspects of Western postmodernity. David Pollack in *The Fracture of Meaning* (1986), for instance, points to the fact that many Japanese intellectuals such as Asada Akira and Karatani Kojin argued that "*it is not so much that Japan has been catching up with the latest Western ideas as that the West has perhaps only belatedly begun to come around to a 'postmodern' position that has existed in Japan ever since the seventeenth century, if not before*" (Pollack, 1986, p. 76). For Karatani, the Western challenge on "logocentrism" that makes up much of the postmodern endeavour was already ingrained in Japanese thought and literature of the Edo period, for example in their rejection of conceptions of "rational principle" or "natural law" (*li* 理) advocated by the Neo-Confucianist Chu Hsi school (see Huang, 1978, pp. 155–193) – and as such the Western postmodern challenge was hardly ground-breaking within the context of Japan. In Karatani's words (1999, p. 278),

> "[...] *the up-to-date problem of contemporary thought showed itself in the form of poststructuralism as a critique of, to use Derrida's word, 'logocentrism'. The critique of such Western thought was already present in Japan in a different form and was received, therefore, as an old acquaintance. The most advanced thought in the Western world, on further reflection, was only natural for us Japanese and did not look like anything new.*"

For others such as Miyoshi Masao the cultural *forms* of postmodernity qualify in the most accurate way Japanese society (see Miyoshi, 1989, pp. 143–168). And to make matters more complicated, the alleged "postmodern-like" elements already identifiable from the seventeenth century on have come to be superimposed by diverse cultural imports since the Meiji Restoration and, most significantly, the end of the second world war in 1945, blending thus with the formal paradigm of playfulness, parody, or simulation all too familiar to the canons of Western postmodern aesthetics. However, as Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian rightly stress, "postmodernism is a Western *event* [added italics]" (Miyoshi, 1989, p. vii) whereas "[i]*n the context of Japanese society, it is clearly not a periodic term*" (Miyshi, 1989, p. 148). However debatable the latter statement may be as regards the cultural history of Japan, in the Western world "postmodernism" is a phenomenon that takes all its significance within the context of its own historicity even so parts of its aesthetic forms have had well-ingrained resonances in Japanese society for a sizeable period of time.

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[1] For a criticism of Eurocentric conception of modernity, see Bhambra (2007).
[2] See, for example *China: A Modern History* (Dillan, 2010), which expounds the many aspects of China's modernisation, be they political, economic, or cultural, including how ethnic minorities have been exposed to the phenomenon.

As for modernity and postmodernity in China, their backgrounds, origins, contexts and motivations are equally fundamentally different than those of the West. Chinese modernity is generally understood to begin at the dawn of the twentieth century which, ironically, saw the progressive decomposition of what made China a world civilisation for centuries. Ancient doctrines and curricula were being disposed of, including the imperial system itself. That modernity found a radical form with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 which, as we all know, reached its nihilistic peak with the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This uprooting of civilisational and cultural foundations led subsequently to what would be labelled "postmodern China"; an opening to the world market economy and its inexorable importation of cultural goods, in particular Western, while at the same time retrieving and cherishing its ancient civilisational cultural values.[3] And just as the cultural forms of Chinese modernity have different sources and motivations than those of Japan, the same applies to their respective postmodernities.

If there is, however, a common denominator that characterises, at one civilisational level, the cultural forms of East Asian postmodernities it is the origin and nature of their self-overcoming of modernities. East-Asian postmodernities obviously do not seek to uproot any embedded Enlightened Judeo-Christian foundations nor any centuries-old traditions of metaphysics and logocentrism. In this sense, what Karatani points to only holds true from a formal perspective; Western postmodernism *looks* the same as aspects of Japanese aesthetics from the Edo period on, but only on the surface. Furthermore, reactions against modernities in East Asia within the turmoil of the overwhelming technological metamorphosis on a global scale, can overall translate into the drive to preserve or rediscover past "foundational" modes of thought or practices (e.g. Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Shinto) or de facto into the aforementioned paradigm of postmodern cultural forms. In whatever case, such reactions stand hardly any comparisons with attempts to uproot established values, truths, or thought systems of the kind alluded to in the context of the Western postmodern world albeit admittedly loosely understood.[4]

The question here is obviously the discrete nature of what comes after Western modern aesthetics at its fatal height – in other words *modernist* aesthetics – be it interpreted as the sign of "an incomplete project" in crisis or a renewing rupture for a forthcoming renovating postmodern era, to borrow Jürgen Habermas' and Jean-François Lyotard's respective paradigms. To recall, Habermas criticised Lyotard's "postmodern" suspicion against modern "metadiscourses" looking for "universal finalities" self-legitimised by "grand narratives" of the kind found in Marx' and Freud's projects of "unmasking" or Hegel's emancipated "absolute spirit" reached by means of dialectics. For Habermas, suspicion against the Enlightenment's ideal of emancipatory rational critique and knowledge could only lead to "totalizing self-referential" practices. It is in this sense that Habermas interpreted "modernity" as an "unfinished project" and "postmodernity" as a "neoconservatism." Lyotard, on the contrary, saw in the "great stories" of

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[3] In *Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate: Memories of Empire in a New Global Context*, Charles Horner explores the concept of "post-Mao, postmodern China" as what came after the radicalism of "modern China" in its repudiation of Western capitalism and Confucianism (see Horner, 2009).

[4] In a recent article, Jun Deng and Craig A. Smith show the extent to which "New Confucianism" is undergoing a revival by retrieving and promoting foundational Confucian values in the spheres of politics and spirituality, in a way that is adapted to contemporary China and as alternative to liberalism and socialism. See Deng – Smith, 2018, pp. 294–314; and also Lin (1999) which provides an illustration of how contemporary Chinese intellectuals struggle to pin down what exactly constitutes modernity in a rapidly mutating China exposed to the outside world. Another striking example is the idea of "overcoming modernity" that developed in wartime Japan as a reaction against the ills of modernisation imported from the West during the Meiji period. See the collection of texts from the 1942 symposium organised under the title *Overcoming Modernity* (Calichman, 2008).

modernity the drive to impose some utopic totalitarian version of universal history when postmodernity breaks-off such coercive determinism to allow for freedom and *jouissance*.[5]

Now, if modernist aesthetics in the West is understood to be self-reflexive, against representation, freed from the duty to narrate, autonomous, or liberated from external coercive forces (whether religious, cultural or political) as alleged to be the case in pre-modernist times, then the correlative postmodern aesthetics that seeks to retrieve past values in representation and narration appears to be akin to formal aspects of East Asian postmodern aesthetics in its search for lost values and authenticities or in its pastiche, second-degree, or imitative forms. In China, for example, the albeit selective retrieval or reconstruction from the 1990s on of parts of what had been ransacked during Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to annihilate the "Four Olds" – i.e. old customs, thinking, habits, and culture – does amount to renovation towards a sense of lost authenticity inexorably by means of simulation.[6] Regardless of the motivations behind (historical, political, economic) the rebuilding of particular demolished cultural sites, temples, artefacts, and shrines pertains to configurations whose elements of virtual reality share much in common with the formal features of Western postmodern aesthetics. Another example is the Post-Cultural Revolution Art movements of the 1980s and 1990s, whether "Cynical Realism," "Political Pop," or "Critical Symbolism" with artists such as Wang Guangyi (王广义), Zhang Xiaogang (張曉剛), or Zhang Hongtu (張宏圖) (see Gladston, 2014). Their endeavours are certainly not about retrieving through simulation lost values and authenticity, but they do perform pastiche, irony and second-degree visual quotations.

In point of fact, beyond (or underneath) the mere formal similarities, the reasons and motivations behind such "postmodern" aesthetics are fundamentally different from those in the Western world because of their divergent historicities. Aesthetic pastiche, irony and fragmentation in contemporary Chinese culture are not used to deconstruct any metaphysical reification that sedimented over several centuries in the collective unconscious, but rather a political reification that took place at the speed of a lightening on a civilisational timescale. The same diverging causal historicity and therefore intrinsic meaning apply to the genuine retrieval of some sense of cultural origins through aesthetic simulation and imitation. The Post-Cultural Revolution rebuilding of lost values and authenticity is not commensurable otherwise than formally with the repetitions of past or previous cultural configurations found for example in György Ligeti's latest music, Andy Warhol's Pop Art, or Las Vegas' building simulacra (although recent "copycat" architectural developments in China bear striking similarities with the latter both in form *and* intention).[7]

Western postmodern aesthetics does not seek to recover some lost foundational values when it refers to its cultural past. Western postmodern architecture, for instance, rejects the kind of formal purism or self-referential formalism of the Bauhaus of Walter Gropius or Mies van der Rohe, amongst others.[8] But, again, cultural quotations, historical references and formal simulations that have created the postmodern

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[5] Divergent views on the nature of "Modernity" and "the Postmodern" gave rise to a well-known and widely commented argument between Habermas and Lyotard (see Habermas, 1972, 1985, pp. 3–15; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1991, pp. 164–176).

[6] For an overview of the evolution of architecture in modern China up to the end of the cultural Revolution (1976), to the Tiananmen Square events (1989) and after, see for example Zhu, 1998, pp. 3–14.

[7] The spread of "copycat" architecture à la Las Vegas is, however, in the process of being restricted by the Chinese government (see Hickman, 2020).

[8] Walter Gropius expounded the principle of the nascent International Style architecture in the first of a series of publications on the Bauhaus in 1925, focusing on functionality contra the ornamental (see Gropius, 2019).

zeitgeist of architecture as defined notably by Charles Jenks are no attempts to reclaim any lost authenticity – in point of fact, quite the opposite.[9] In this sense there is a world between Ricardo Bofill's reusage of past classical ornamental motives and Albert Speer's Nazi architecture equally inspired by classicism.[10] In the context of Western postmodern aesthetics, quotations, references and simulations are the acceptance of the great metaphysical disillusion whereas modernism is its enacted confession. In literature modernist writing is generally characterised as tending towards self-reflexivity.[11] Writing becomes aware of itself by negation, as it were, through fragmentation, temporal contortion, stylistic dislocation, or subversion of narrative conventions, as in James Joyce or T.S. Eliot – a tendency that enacts the same disillusion, a feeling of existential crisis since it foresaw in the horizon the inexorable fate of the void. Then, although the boundary between modernist and postmodern literatures can be hard (and even sometimes meaningless) to define, the latter tells us that all there is left to do is play with the remains through pastiche, playfulness and patchworking among others, but again never with the aim to retrieve some sense of authentically inherent reality.[12] And even if we look at other areas of Western postmodern aesthetic practices whereby the formal layouts appear to be different if not diametrically opposed, the causes and motivations belong to the same disillusioned paradigm.

This ostensible common denominator is not to suggest, however, that postmodern aesthetics in the West constitutes *from within* a homogeneous, coherent, and clearly identifiably whole. If one can sense a common albeit loose conceptual thread, there are varying degrees and forms in the ways postmodern aesthetics developed in the West depending on the cultural practices, methods, or even geographies. For instance, postmodern aesthetics in Europe developed against a background with a sizeable longer history of Western cultural values and traditions than, say, North America. In this sense postmodern European aesthetics was naturally more driven to feel the need to uproot its own foundations, as Nishitani would have it. Other example, in dance criticism the so-called "analytic postmodern dance" tends towards purity and self-reflexivity, which would have been identified as modernist in other areas. And at the same time, forms of "postmodern dance" designated as such seek to rediscover "narrative structures" and everyday life experiences and situations (Banes, 1985, pp. 81–100). In film theory the postmodern becomes again something different. Theorists such as Maureen Turim identifies different periods in (Western) film history: "primitive" (1895-1906), "early classical" (1906-1925), and "classical" (1925-1955), which would basically correspond conceptually to "modernism" in the visual arts (Turim, 1991 ú- 182). Western modernism in film history would then start around 1955 and end around 1975, giving the way to

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[9] See Charles Jenks' seminal publication of the subject, first published in 1977: The Language of Postmodern Architecture.

[10] For an account of Ricardo Bofill's architectural vision of postmodern classicism, see Stern, 1988; on Speer's classicist Nazi architecture, see Krier, 2013.

[11] Among other self-reflexive modernist works T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* are archetypical examples. M. H. Abrams (2009, p. 202) observes that, "[l]*ike Joyce, Eliot experimented with new forms and a new style that would render contemporary disorder, often contrasting it to a lost order and integration that had been based on the religion and myths of the cultural past. In The Waste Land (1922), for example, Eliot replaced the standard syntactic flow of poetic language by fragmented utterances, and substituted for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a deliberate dislocation of parts [...] Major works of modernist fiction, following Joyce's Ulysses (1922) and his even more radical Finnegan's Wake (1939), subverts the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language by the use of stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration.*"

[12] Postmodern literary works may involve "*not a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist 'high art' by recourse for models to the 'mass culture' [...]*"; Moreover, postmodern works "*so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics*" (Abrams, 2009, p. 203).

"postmodernism." In other words, Turim's modernism and postmodernism are embraced by what is usually understood as being "postmodern" in other aesthetic practices. Photography also has a different historical agenda. When purism, self-reflexivity, and formalism are associated with modernism in the visual arts or architecture, in photography it is "content" and "realism" that are usually labelled as "modernist," for example the work of Robert Doisneau. Postmodernist photography on the contrary runs against realistic representation and narration, as in Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, to name some of the most often cited representatives (see Crimp, 1980, pp. 81–101).[13]

The list of overlapping, superimposed, or embedded definitions of what constitutes postmodern aesthetics in the West can be endless, for it depends on the practice, period, or geography. Postmodern aesthetics is truly what it embodies: simulation, parody, indeterminacy, undecidability, fragmentation, relativism, perspectivism. Yet, the Western versions of postmodern aesthetics share a historical and cultural background that could only lead to a particular nihilistic development.

Whether in practice or theory postmodern aesthetics as it has evolved in the West expresses scepticism towards our capacity to narrate the truth or represent reality, be it by means of reason, geometry, or rules of perspective. Moreover, it is claimed that any attempt to narrate or represent contributes to the construction of an illusionary sense of truth and reality. From this interpretative viewpoint narration and representation do not mirror anymore, for there is nothing, there, waiting to be mirrored in an un-biased fashion. Narration and representation generate the truth and reality they misleadingly attempt to mirror, in the same fashion as philosophy generates "pseudo-problems" when it strives to mirror nature through its own language-games as Richard Rorty persuasively demonstrated.[14] It comes as no surprise, then, that language ceases to be thought as a neutral medium. Language contributes to the world it claims to depict; language distorts the knowledge of a world that we once believed could be rendered by means of reason. Moreover, what we once thought as emancipatory theories based on reason is interpreted as modes of coercion and control. Reason ceases to be promoted as the source of progress in knowledge and society. In the sphere of culture and beside the forms of nihilism already mentioned such as fragmentation or the metamorphoses of perceived space and time, postmodern aesthetics indulges in the celebration of subjectivity and the rejection of any form of universalism. This interpretive practice could only have taken place within a specific historical background that is not shared by any civilisation other than the West. And within the Western world, Europe, no doubt, occupies a special place.

What is, then, so specifically European within the context of postmodern aesthetics? Europe has uniquely built its cultural identity in a way that remains closely connected to its alleged single, foundational origin, that is, ancient Greece.[15] Edmund Husserl infamously suggested, when comparing European and non-European civilisations such as China's, that only the mind that developed from the Greek *logos* could

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[13] For a comprehensive account of the evolution of photography worldwide from its origins to the 2000s, see Marien, 2015.

[14] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[15] For example, the following passage from Husserl's (1970, p. 280) *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie* is particularly telling: "*But only in the Greeks do we have a universal ('cosmological') life-interest in the essentially new form of a purely 'theoretical' attitude, and this as a communal form in which this interest works itself out for internal reasons, being the corresponding, essentially new* [community] *of philosophers, of scientists (mathematicians, astronomers, etc.). These are the men who, not in isolation but with one another and for one another, i.e., in interpersonally bound communal work, strive for and bring about theoria and nothing but theoria, whose growth and constant perfection, with the broadening of the circle of coworkers and the succession of the generations of inquirers, is finally taken up into the will with the sense of an infinite and common task. The theoretical attitude has its historical origin in the Greeks.*"

transcend religious-mythical practices and thereby establish knowledge proper. In Husserl's words from *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937)*,

> "[W]*e grant to European culture – whose type of development we have described precisely as realizing [the transformation of itself and its world by pure autonomous reason, by scientific reason] – not just the highest position relative to all historical cultures, but rather we see in it the first realization of an absolute norm of development, one that is called to the task of revolutionizing all other cultures in the process of development*"
> (Husserl in Welton, 1991, p. 597).

This determinant foundation of European culture is precisely what postmodern aesthetics has striven to uproot whether in practice or theory with modernism as its generating breaking point. And it is precisely for this reason, to return to Figal's disparaging of postmodernity, that nowhere other than in Europe has this uprooting been historically so badly needed to overcome the unavoidably reifying nature of its logocentric ideology.

Overall, the Western house of *logos* and its windows on the world were after all only made of stones that were carved and assembled to live, think, and relate to each other in a particular way. As soon as the house of *logos* became exposed to other worlds, again for a variety of complex reasons, time had come to realise that the building did not only shelter human lives and their worldviews; the building also fashioned human lives and their worldviews.

In the sphere of culture, modernism understood as the necessary breaking-off of a long tradition rooted in ancient Greece and reborn in modernity can be thought of as a moment of self-reflexivity in the form of a confession that had not yet provided any constructive answer to its nihilistic realisation. And what came after modernism faced – and is still facing – the difficult question of how to overcome this nihilistic evidence.

For Umberto Eco (1994, p. 67), the historic avant-garde understood as the epitome of cultural modernism

> "[…] *tries to settle scores with the past* […] *The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past* […] *But the moment comes when the avant-garde* […] *can go no further. The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.*"

Do irony, together with fragmentation, indeterminacy, relativism, and subjectivism in the specific context of Western postmodernity amount to a genuine self-overcoming of nihilism? Or are they simply symptoms of postmodern aesthetics not coming to terms with its "innocent" past in a way no other civilisations have experienced?

As already suggested, the nihilistic crisis within the context of Western culture and even more so European aesthetics can be interpreted as a historical necessity. If, as Nishitani suggests, Western nihilism is a crisis within a particular space and time, it must inevitably overcome itself at some stage. The self-overcoming of nihilism, however, surely cannot mean to resign oneself to the nothingness enacted in the uprooting of whatever civilisational foundations. This confessed disillusion, from one daring angle, could amount to what Nietzsche called "passive nihilism" as a destructive surrender to the fate of the void, which would characterise the kind of existential crisis that pervaded cultural modernism – unless, like Lyotard, one reads modernism as a renewing point of rupture instead of an agreeable negating faith in no-faith. Western postmodern aesthetics as previously described could then be interpreted as a form of

"active nihilism" whereby positive creation arises from the ethical void of destruction.[16] Still, does this creative dimension truly amount to growing out of its nihilistic historical condition? The self-overcoming of the nihilistic nature of Western postmodern aesthetics has in truth not yet come to an end as long as it expresses a bad conscience about its logocentric metaphysical tradition. But soon will come the time when the cultural specificity of Western postmodern aesthetics will be completely swallowed up by the phenomenon of globalisation whose effect will be to reduce civilisations to a single formal paradigm of virtual values. If the self-overcoming of Western postmodern aesthetics is brought to this fate, some of us may mourn the time when their particular tradition looming in the background stood as a *garde fou*.

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[16] See Friedrich Nietzsche's differentiation between "active" and "passive" nihilism in *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (2003), or, in *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche defines "active nihilism" as "a violent force of destruction" yet as "a sign of increased power of the spirit" whereas "passive nihilism" is "*a sign of the lack of strength to posit for oneself, productively, a goal, a why, a faith*" (Nietzsche, 1968, § 22–23).

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