

# On the horrors of being human



Author Eugene Thacker discusses the historical trajectory of pessimism, getting in touch with the shimmering failure of our meaningless existence, and why we keep teaching despite it all.

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As told to Meredith Graves, 2792 words.

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**Why would an artist or a writer want to keep themselves off social media and not do interviews at a time when everyone else seems compelled to take the opposite approach?**

It wasn't a conscious decision. It's just that I was never on it to begin with. Then it became weirder as time went on.

As dedicated as I am to the craft of writing, I also feel very ambivalent about all the accoutrements that go around being a writer and being published. People forget that this is all a very recent invention, that authors have to do this dog and pony show. I also made a decision early on to take a particular path, because the kind of writings that I was inspired by were by obscure dead people that lived hand to mouth. It was obvious I wasn't going to be paying the rent.

For me, going the academic route, I was more comfortable with having that sort of steady paycheck, and at least you're in an intellectual environment that's related, versus the other options. What that also meant is that even though there were compromises I would have to make, I would not have to compromise the writing, because I wouldn't be beholden to doing all these things just to make rent.

...So I'm speaking out of turn, but for me, it seems like one of the attractions of [Twitter] is the spontaneity and the immediacy of it. That you have it, and it's transparent—which of course is false, because it is a technology, and a medium. You adjust language to fit the constraints and whatnot.

One thing you realize about the aphoristic writing going back to the French Moralists is the way that what appears to be spontaneous and sort of off the cuff is actually the result of a lot of negative labor. A lot of the one-liners I have, they started as three-pages. Then you go back over them and you cut away. "Is this necessary?" You cut it away. You cut it until you get to something that's like the chiseled kind of quintessence of it.

**If all you need to yell is, "We're the youth of today," 50 times and that gets the feeling across and everybody gets it, then that's great word economy.**

It's part of the trick, right? Because it comes across as spontaneous and fresh, but you don't see all the labor on the back end of it. It's just as much work as you do if you're writing, say, a traditional essay, but then you do that negative labor, and then it cuts down, which is why that's eight years of work to get that much. You have to sit with it for a while, too. A lot of things don't stand the test of time, and then you completely delete it so it's completely gone.

**Is the real book just the stuff that you deleted?**

A lot. It's more stuff I deleted. That's over a long period of time. Not every day working on it, but working on it consistently over a long period of time. There's probably more that you can cut out, I guess, or save for other projects and stuff.

**Around the first season of *True Detective*, you experienced a little pop culture blip with regard to interest in your work.**

Yes.

**And it was cool, ostensibly?**

Yeah. It was interesting.

**It was nice.**

It was a meme.

**It was a meme, sure.**

It did demonstrate that you can, indeed, judge a book by its cover.

**Solid point. Okay.**

But if I think about, say, my desert island books, they all found me, and pre-internet, too. There wasn't an algorithm that told me I would like it. It was just serendipity in a used book store—or I was a student, I worked in the library, and I'd find things, or somebody would mention it to me, and that would lead me down that path.

I feel like once I write a book, even if there are five readers or whatever, the book does its work... That's another reason why publicity within the whole circus never made as much sense to me, because something else happens when you send it out there. It does its thing, and it has a life of its own.

**What was the purpose of writing *Infinite Resignation*? What did you want it to accomplish once you let it loose in the world?**

The initial impetus is sort of a long-standing interest for me, in that I've always had this very tenuous arms-length relationship to philosophy. I realized as a student early on that the kind of philosophy that I was interested in or that spoke to me was not necessarily taught in traditional philosophy departments, and in some cases wasn't even considered serious philosophy.

That space between philosophy and literature, for instance, became really interesting to me where an author like Nietzsche explores it from one angle and Dostoevsky from another angle, and there's this middle zone that's super interesting. When I was a student, at least, programs like Comparative Literature allowed you the freedom to work across disciplines in a way that traditional philosophy departments did not.

In particular, I've always been interested in philosophies that work against themselves as philosophy, especially those that work against this idea of the philosopher as the one who knows, the know-it-all. That seemed more interesting to me because it was more humble. It was more about the humility of thought, the humility of being human. It was more honest in that it was grappling with constraints and finitude and limitations.

It was also working against this long-standing humanist tradition of human beings setting themselves at the center of the planet and the universe, as masters of this domain. It works against all of those things. If you

want to call it anti-philosophy, you could call it that, but it was philosophy that was against philosophy. You could use a music metaphor: in the key of philosophy. It wasn't jumping ship and doing mathematics or poetry or some other way to figure it all out, but working intrinsically with those limits and then grappling with these really interesting ideas, like the limit of thought, and the failure of thought.

**And this is where your idea of "the horror of philosophy" comes from, correct? The way that you've defined it in the past is from Bataille, I know that.**

In part. It occurred to me that the idea of *the thought of limits* and *the limits of thought* could be found in other non-philosophical venues. Certainly in other kinds of literature, but specifically the horror genre, and a particular kind of horror that's usually referred to as supernatural horror that's more than just sort of shock and gore and effects. There's a kind of horror where you have characters confronting something that their frameworks for understanding the world couldn't explain. They either had to try to ignore it and sweep it under the carpet, or actually say, "This is something that we can't explain. Perhaps we'll never understand what it is."

This already has a sort of mystical, even quasi-religious element to it, because it's talking about something that lies outside of the scope of human comprehension. In these works, back to the gothic novel and Poe and Lovecraft, into contemporary film, a lot of Japanese and South Korean horror film and stuff, there seemed to be a through line in this kind of thinking. It occurred to me that it would be interesting to actually think about these two things—philosophy and horror—side by side, because philosophy is typically thought of in a very beard-stroking, highbrow sense. Horror as a genre is historically very anti-intellectual and sort of brutalist in its approach. For me, bringing them together was interesting to do.

I had this whole task, in my head at least, of: "What if I read works of philosophy as if they were horror novels? What if I even read Descartes and Kant as if they were Lovecraft stories about the limits of thought and running up against the limits of what can be understood and known?" Then vice versa: "What if I read people like Lovecraft or Izumi Kyoka as treatises of philosophy about the constraints and limits of knowledge and thinking?" That became the basis for the project.

**Between the above and *Cosmic Pessimism*, which pre-empted *Infinite Resignation*, people have begun to ask whether you yourself are a pessimist. But the idea posed by much of your work is that *pessimism* is more a descriptive adjective than a philosophical or political allegiance.**

I think for me, these things like *pessimism*, maybe *nihilism*, maybe certain forms of radical *skepticism*, *cynicism*, these things, you can find entries in a dictionary of philosophy for all these things, because they're -isms, but they never seem to have the same status as other -isms, like *empiricism* or *idealism* or *rationalism* or whatever. That always was interesting to me, that they have this weird, dubious status. If anything, it's often more of an indictment than just a description of a philosophy. There was something marginally not respectable about these things.

Also because very few people own the label, it's always something that's put on you in a kind of, again, finger-pointing way. I like that about it. I also like that the ways in which they often fail to live up to the standards of philosophy are sometimes very mundane—that notion of something between an axiom and just a bad attitude, the grumpiness part of it.

**If the philosopher, as you outlined, is generally someone who, prior to writing word one, decides they'll be living hand to mouth in bullshit alley, naturally that seems like the next logical thought.**

Yeah, yeah. That's part of it. What happens then is that if you're deciding to work in that space, you sort of—if you've let go of certain expectations, so you've accepted that, "Okay, I'm not going to be writing a big dramatic tome, *Theory of Everything*, door-stopper of a book like Kant is." Those books are fascinating, and they're admirable in their own way, but they very much have this architectonic splendor where every part goes into a whole, and it's a picture of the world or of existence or whatever it is.

You've given that up, because at some point you've called bullshit on the game, so to speak. But you haven't left philosophy, and this is that *against* philosophy and *the key of* philosophy. So what are you left with? What are the tools you're left with, because you've refused the conventions of the genre, let's say? Now this is where poetics becomes important. This is where writing becomes important. This is where craft becomes important.

**And this is where philosophy becomes the theory-fiction that you talk about.**

Yeah, you've got to make it up. You've got to figure it out. What some people do, like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, is they opt for the short form. "Instead of a whole, I'm going to work with parts. Instead of a totality, I'm going to work with fragments and shards. I'm just going to embrace that: that thought is partial, it's fleeting." Nietzsche has a whole aphorism where he commends the incomplete thought as more interesting. Thoughts that fail, thoughts that don't go anywhere, thoughts that crumble—there are all these interesting new models that come out of that. Then it becomes much more about this sort of poetic space, I guess.

**Many times throughout *Infinite Resignation*, you suggest the best thing a philosopher could do would be to say nothing at all, to be silent, to write their ideas on a piece of paper and then burn it... while you're actually writing those things in a very long book.**

Absolutely. Yeah, and even though a lot of these writers are working with the short form, aphorisms and so on, there is a loquaciousness to a lot of it, too. I think that there's something about contradiction that, again, in classical philosophical logic, is always a problem. It's something you have to resolve, contradiction, but there's a lot more contemporary philosophy of logic that's understanding contradiction as actually a part of logic and not a problem that has to be fixed or anything.

You can think about the analogy to everyday life, in that sense. There's something about engaging with contradiction as it stands and not trying to treat it as a problem that you have to fix. In some cases, a lot of these writers are struggling with things we would look at and say they're struggling with anxiety or depression or what have you. In some cases, the practice of writing as an end in itself becomes a way of, if you like, working through.

I think to me, the more interesting idea is that thinking and writing just become a practice, in the sense that they're an end in themselves. There's not any sense that Schopenhauer was happier or better off for writing what he wrote, but he still felt compelled to do it. There's something about craft, if you like. It's just what you do. There's an awareness, in the sense that futility is sort of built into it, but then you're trying to find poetics or structure that will be capacious enough to accommodate this building up and then crumbling down again. That's where it becomes really compelling to me. Philosophers, yeah, they're so depressive, it's sort of inspiring.

**How can we teach these ideas safely, is another question that comes to mind?**

I don't think there's a way to do it that will guarantee interpretation in the right way. I'm not even sure what that is really. Half of me thinks that the notion that there are dangerous ideas around, and that they would come from philosophy is... I don't know if that ever existed, we're definitely past that sort of point. But on the other hand, there is a sense in which you make a decision to confront these issues sort of face on, and immediately what becomes apparent is, there's no simple answer. There's no simple, straight-ahead interpretation. You can ask the question, but what do I do? How should I live? Good luck. You won't find any of these authors saying you should do this or you should do that.

The important point is, they are just as confused and bewildered and uncertain as you and I are. I think that's a different kind of philosophy, versus the philosophy that's telling you, "This is what we should do." There are a lot of public intellectuals out there saying you should do this, we should do this, we shouldn't do this. These are philosophers that are saying, "How can I even presume to know what we should or shouldn't do, given how confusing everything is?" That might be interesting to think about in itself. There's not an easy sort of take-home instruction manual. But that's just part of it, I think. That's one of those things you can't control as an author.

Functionally speaking, do you think people should be comforted or not by the idea of an indifferent world?

I wouldn't ask it in terms of consolation, comfort.

Like, the planet's going to be fine. It's very narcissistic to think that we could bring about the end of "the world." We'll bring about the end of ourselves, but there will still be a rock in space. Should we be psyched on that? Should that make us feel good?

If I knew that, I wouldn't be an obscure author somewhere. I would start a cult.

#### Frozen Warnings - A Playlist

"My publisher asked me to create a playlist as a soundtrack for my book *Infinite Resignation*, out this summer. To be honest, I still don't really understand the "playlist" idea (...and why bother others with what I'm listening to?)—and I have neither the energy nor patience to write elaborate exegeses for each bespoke selection detailing its rarified nuances and subtleties. So I've simply listed music that I've been listening to recently—sometimes while writing, other times while reading, thinking, resting, waiting, having a coffee, doing nothing, keeping busy, staring at the slowly turning day and night. Much of it is "dark ambient" but labels are, of course, beside the point (though I've learned that one side of a vinyl record is about the time I should take a break from writing...). The selections are on the long side, and if listened to straight through it should take a bit less than 24 hours."

#### Name

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#### Vocation

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