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Eugene Thacker, author, philosopher and associate professor of Media Studies and Film at New School for Public Engagement and Liberal Studies at The New School for Social Research, has written several books focusing on nihilism, philosophy and media theory.

In the Dust of

You know you've made it when Glenn Beck views you as a threat.

This Planet: Eugene Thacker Confronts the Unthinkable

Nov 4, 2014

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That's the position Eugene Thacker found himself in when, during a recent episode of *The Glenn Beck Program* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IW8OK4_1gQ), the right-wing pundit bashed an "obscure author" whose book was contributing to a surge in "pop nihilism."

Referring to a *Radiolab* episode (<http://www.radiolab.org/story/dust-planet/>) in which Thacker was interviewed, Beck complained that ideas from the author's book had shown up in the script of the HBO TV series *True Detective* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8x73UW8Hjk>), the videos of Jay Z and Beyoncé (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INcJg5svv9A>), the pages of fashion magazines (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2546967/Lily-Collins-rocks-Gothic-look-pale-skin-deep-red-lips-photo-shoot-contrastingly-cheery-Mexican-cantina.html>), and the work of contemporary artists (<http://www.maureenpaley.com/artists/gardar-eide-einarsson/images/14>).

"Suddenly, this obscure book is everywhere," Beck complained, without naming Thacker directly. "It's cool to be a nihilist."

After hearing the host's eight-minute diatribe, Thacker was perplexed; he didn't even know who Beck was.

"Apparently, if you want somebody to be threatened by you, he's the person," Thacker joked during an interview in his office at The New School for Public Engagement's School of Media Studies (<http://www.newschool.edu/public-engagement/school-of-media-studies/>). "I was told it was sort of a backhanded compliment."

Although Thacker dismisses Beck's comments "as just another part of the media circus," they do bring up important questions about how nihilism and pessimism are perceived by the general public.

"Why are these positions so threatening to some people?," asks Thacker.

And why, as Beck wondered, are they becoming so popular with others?

"Nihilism poses difficult philosophical questions — questions that may have no answers," he says. "It has nothing to do with good and evil."

To answer these questions, it's best to read Thacker's *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (<http://www.amazon.com/In-Dust-This-Planet-Philosophy/dp/184694676X>), the "obscure book" to which Beck was referring. In it, Thacker — an author, philosopher, and associate professor of media studies and film at NSPE and of liberal studies at The New School for Social Research (<http://www.newschool.edu/nssr/>) — describes a world of natural disasters, emerging pandemics, and the looming threat of extinction. Existence, he writes, is becoming increasingly "unthinkable."

Thacker, who teaches courses such as Media and Philosophy and Pessimism, looks at these phenomena through the lens of the horror genre. According to him, whether it's a slasher flick, a black-metal dirge, or a story by Edgar Allen Poe, "you typically have characters who begin in a place where they think they know about the meaning of existence, and who by the end have no idea." To confront the unthinkable—a central motif of the horror genre—is to confront the limits of our ability to understand the world in which we live.

When we do that, Thacker says, we come to a sobering realization:

“that there might not be a purpose to things, or to your life, or to your existence, or to the cosmos; that there might not be an order; that we’re not here for a reason; that it’s arbitrary and an accident.”

And therein lies the aversion to nihilism and pessimism: Knowing that your life has no meaning can be scary. Beck channeled the popular antipathy toward these philosophical doctrines during his radio show by dramatically proclaiming that “there is evil. There is real evil. And then there’s nihilism.”

But Thacker doesn’t see it that way.

“Nihilism poses difficult philosophical questions—questions that may have no answers,” he says. “It has nothing to do with good and evil.”

This year, Thacker looked on with surprised interest as young writers (*True Detective* creator Nic Pizzolatto has taken cues from Thacker’s books) and designers (the title *In The Dust of This Planet* was printed on fashions worn by Jay Z (<http://entertainthis.usatoday.com/2014/09/10/jay-z-true-detective-in-the-dust-of-this-planet/>) and model Lily Collins (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2546967/Lily-Collins-rocks-Gothic-look-pale-skin-deep-red-lips-photo-shoot-contrastingly-cheery-Mexican-cantina.html>)) took this idea and ran with it. During the *Radiolab* episode in which Thacker was interviewed, the show’s host, Jad Abumrad, floated a theory to explain the phenomenon: Nihilism is, as Beck warned, cool.

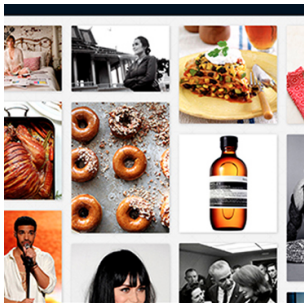
“You see young people glom on to this idea again and again to say no to the older generation,” Abumrad said, mentioning Dada and punk rock as examples of ways the younger generation has repudiated rules, values, and traditions that, in its view, have fostered destructive outcomes. All it takes is a brief tour through history—from World War II and the War on Terror to climate change and Ebola—to understand the need to question, to rebel.

Thacker still isn’t sure what to make of all the attention his book is getting; his previous texts—*Excommunication*, *Biomedica*, and *After Life*—have been popular in philosophy circles but haven’t made nearly as big of a splash. Whether the next two volumes of the *Horror of Philosophy* will be as popular as the first remains to be seen.

Thacker is sure of one thing, though: He doesn’t have much control over of what the public does with his writings.

“Even if you are a control freak, one thing you learn when you write a book and send it out is that it has a life of its own,” Thacker says. “It’s open to interpretation.”

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