The Secret Histories of Dark Academia

This exhibition is the work of MA students of the seminar "**Dark Academia: Aesthetics, Culture, Genre**" offered by the university's English Department in the winter term 2024/25. Students were asked to creatively engage with the course's discussions and readings and find ways of visually representing the seminar's discourse. We explored the world of Dark Academia, which is a style, an aesthetic, a visual form native to Pinterest and Tumblr blogs of the early 2010s. The mode is marked by a romantic idealization of archaic ideas about the university regarding disciplinary hierarchies, architecture, and curricula. It blends these fantasies with gothic representations of the campus, clothing styles, and a sinister mysticism. What seemed to be a fad has turned into a popular cultural phenomenon especially on TikTok during the Corona pandemic. There, Dark Academia sparked a community of creators to use the aesthetic to comment on literature and culture in the context of BookTok, a subgenre for book reviews and armchair literary commentary.

In this class, we considered texts that became classics in the Dark Academia lore: Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). Both of these are regarded as cornerstones informing the literary style and form of more recent novels that mark a contemporary literary trend, among these R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022), Alex Michaelides' *The Maidens* (2021), or Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019). The literary genre blends mystery, thriller, and Gothic elements, often set in elite academic settings where crime, tragedy, and intellectual pursuits abound.

The genre tends to challenge notions such as academic elitism, ambition, and social structures, and it shines a light on issues of race and class through character dynamics and its themes. As this is an aesthetic that predominantly reflects a nostalgia for a pre-digital era while ironically thriving on digital platforms, the seminar also considered how and why this genre's aesthetic has evolved on platforms like TikTok, Pinterest, and Instagram. Dark Academia illustrates how conceptions of the literary world are circulated in the digital world as mass-cultivated and public phenomena and thus how deeply enmeshed printed texts are with digital media.

At the same time, the popularity of the genre is expressive for a yearning to a more classical education. Paradoxically, the universality of classical education is rendered as elitist, corruptive, even lethal. In the novels, quite frequently students of Ancient Greek or Latin become murderers, are manipulated by the power play of their mentors, and throw into question the use of liberal arts.

These observations suggest a close link between the popularity of this aesthetic and how it is complicit with the neoliberalization of higher education in favor of STEM sciences. In this sense, Dark Academia can also be seen as a symptom of the tiresome public debates about the value of "Liberal Arts" and the "Humanities" and the restructuring of the university towards a more vocational institution.

The works of this exhibition are reflective of these trends and try to render the aesthetic in line with the discussions and explorations made in a critical encounter with Dark Academia. We invite you to get inspired and engage with the artworks exhibited here. Feel free to wander through these works and reflect on your own academic experiences: What shadows of romanticized scholarship, what whispers of intellectual ambition or institutional critique might resonate in your personal experience of education, its promises, and its paradoxes? Maybe you wish to pick up one of the above-mentioned novels yourself after your visit here and experience this cultural phenomenon with fresh eyes.

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