

Call for papers

Dark Academia

Theme issue *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht (LWU)* fall/autum 2024, edited by Martin Klepper (Berlin) and Nicola Glaubitz (Kiel)

'Dark Academia' is a social media trend devoted to the stylization of academic life in the humanities. Against a backdrop of the Gothic façades and wood-panelled libraries invoking Ivy League colleges, Oxford or Cambridge, bookish (usually white) academics sport tweed garments in subdued colours, cultivate melancholia and thoughtfully quote from Greek and English classics – or study all night by candlelight. Photos and videos also feature leatherbound books, handwritten notes, fountain pens and the mandatory coffee cup arranged in an artful mess on scarred wooden desks. Reference works for Dark Academia are the still popular *Harry Potter* franchise, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Donna Tartt's newly popular *The Secret History* (1992), *Dead Poets Society* (1989, dir. Peter Weir) and thrillers like Suzie Yang's *White Ivy* (2020); serials and miniseries like *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) and *Wednesday* (2022) also feature Dark Academic aspects. Here, the 'darkness' of academic aspiration or close-knit academic communities sometimes surfaces in Gothic and Dark Romantic modes and motifs - violence, angst, amorality, ruthless competition, drug excesses, transgressive sexuality and mental instability.

Dark Academia imagines an elite academic culture of the past that may never have existed in this form. Its social imaginary of the humanities and its distinct 'social figures' (Tobias Schlechtriemen) is both cosily nostalgic and riddled by a decidedly contemporary 'cruel optimism' (Lauren Berlant). The phenomenon has been discussed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to remote instruction by video conferences and learning platforms. The technology-free imaginary world of devoted scholarship, unlimited reading time and handcrafted study utensils is, paradoxically, sustained and produced by the digital infrastructures and technologies it carefully eliminates from its representational surface. In a longer temporal perspective, Dark Academia's rehearsal of nostalgic but also menacing images, narratives and figures of academic life can be seen as an oblique engagement with the neoliberal restructuring of higher education since the 1990s: The student loan crisis in the US, expensive tuition fees in the UK, underfunded departments and increasing pressure to study for 'employability' posit new challenges to the humanities. And aspiring to become a humanities scholar involves considering the precarious employment situation of young researchers in North America and Europe. The (New) Englishness of elite education celebrated in Dark Academia (echoed on university websites and promotional videos) is highly problematic, also in the light of the increasingly transnational orientation and reach of educational programs.

Dark Academia lends itself to approaches from visual and literary studies (exploring e.g. the function of gothic, dark romantic or decadent motifs and genres; concepts like vibe, atmosphere, structure of feeling), media and cultural studies (e.g. addressing the dynamics of social media communities, platformization, material culture; race, class and gender; (New)

Englishness) and many more. The phenomenon can also be approached with concepts from cultural sociology and discourse analysis such as: students and academics as 'social figures', social and cultural capital in schools and universities; self-presentations, narratives and re-presentations of higher education institutions; representations of knowledge or epistemological practices and timescapes. We also invite contributions that take Dark Academia as a point of departure for charting the post-pandemic situation of the humanities. Papers can build on the thought-provoking yet impressionistic essays in a 2022 *Post-45* issue on *Dark Academia* (edited by Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau).

Papers may address (but are not restricted to) questions such as:

- How does Dark Academia stage and imagine education, academic roles, academic practices, groups and/or academic lives and spaces?
- How does it use and transform generic models of Gothic and Dark Romantic narratives, the institutional novel, the thriller or 'Generation X' writing (Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland)?
- Is the nostalgic yet often ambivalent (re)creation of past academic communities an implicit criticism of the present situation and what kinds of alternatives does it suggest?
- What is the significance of the contrast between representations of a technology-free world and the advanced digital technologies and infrastructures enabling them? Do contributors to social media platforms find particular ways of negotiating the mediality and materiality of Dark Academia?
- How white and how inclusive are Dark Academia communities and aesthetics – and how do variants and counter-trends (Muslim Academia, Indian Academia ...) negotiate this issue?
- Does Dark Academia displace and deny the realities of mass education by celebrating the ideal of individual tuition? What is the status of elitism in Dark Academia?

Please send abstracts (ca. 400 words) to glaubitz@anglistik.uni-kiel.de or martin.klepper@staff.hu-berlin.de by the end of January, 2024. Final papers (ca. 9000 words) in English or German are due by 1st July 2024. The theme issue will be published in autumn/fall 2024.

<https://www.lwu.uni-kiel.de/cfp.htm>

References

Dark Academia. Post45. 15 March 2022. <https://post45.org/sections/contemporaries-essays/dark-academia/>
Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Schlechtriemen, Tobias. „Sozialfiguren in soziologischen Gegenwartsdiagnosen.“ Alkemeyer, Thomas, Nikolaus Buschmann, Thomas Etzemüller (eds.): *Gegenwartsdiagnosen. Kulturelle Formen gesellschaftlicher Selbstproblematik in der Moderne*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019. 147-166.