Dark Academia – 'anesthetic aesthetic'

Internet visions of academia in times of crisis in Western higher education

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Abstract in English

Dark Academia (DA) is an internet aesthetic that has achieved a widespread popularity across social media and has become subject for discussion outside platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram or TikTok. The purpose of this thesis is to study development of DA in the context of the common understanding of the word "aesthetic" that has developed among internet users in the last few years, as well as to scrutinize a selection of works considered by Dark Academics as crucial for the movement.

The first part of the thesis covers the origins, values, and main inspirations behind DA, as well as some aspects of visual communication employed by its followers and creators on Tumblr. Considering DA's preoccupation with romanticized visions of academic experience, which revolve around education for the sake of expanding one's horizons, reading and fascination with humanities, I argue that the movement constitutes a reaction to anxieties suffered by present-day students in Western countries in their academic environments and functions as a coping mechanism. Using user-generated-content and employing relevant statistical data, I demonstrate that modern students often feel compelled to obtain higher education, for which they sacrifice their personal interests. This, in turn, results in frustration, anxiety, and a sense of loneliness, which are additionally aggravated by high competitiveness among them. Afterwards, I select two novels and two movies frequently referred to as crucial by Dark Academics —Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)*,* M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017)*,* Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas's *Kill Your Darlings* (2013)—and analyze them in the lens of Schoolhouse Gothic, a sub-genre *or* mode of writing described by Sherry R. Truffin. I trace the five elements of Schoolhouse Gothic— curse, trap, paranoia, violence, and monstrosity—in each of the narratives and examine the structure and mechanisms behind their interactions with each other. As it becomes apparent curses usually manifest as obsessions with the past or persistent power structures which, together the physical confinement of the school and university campuses that trap their students, results in their mental suffering and disintegration. The school environments are often oppressive and violent, thus generating constant pressure on the students who usually develop violent and obsessive tendencies themselves. This, on the other hand, results in their loss of humanity and transforms them into monsters. Lastly, I engage in a discussion with critical views expressed towards DA in media, as well as provide evidence of the movement reflecting on and implementing these criticisms itself.

Abstract in Polish

Dark Academia (DA, dosł. „mroczna akademia") to estetyka internetowa, która zyskała szeroką popularność w mediach społecznościowych i stała się przedmiotem dyskusji poza platformami takimi jak Tumblr, Instagram czy TikTok. Celem niniejszej pracy jest zbadanie rozwoju DA w kontekście powszechnego rozumienia słowa „estetyka" jakie ukształtowało się wśród internautów w ciągu ostatnich kilku lat, a także dokonanie analizy wybranych dzieł uznawanych przez „mrocznych akademików" za kluczowe dla tego ruchu.

W pierwszej części pracy omówiono genezę, wartości i główne inspiracje stojące za DA, a także niektóre aspekty jej komunikacji wizualnej stosowanej przez użytkowników Tumblra. Uwzględniając, że DA odtwarza wyidealizowane wizje życia akademickiego, koncentrujące się wokół „edukacji dla edukacji", literatury i nauk humanistycznych, autorka dowodzi, że ruch ten stanowi reakcję na niepokoje, jakich doświadczają współcześni studenci w krajach zachodnich w ich środowisku akademickim, oraz że funkcjonuje on jako mechanizm radzenia sobie z nimi. Korzystając z treści generowanych przez użytkowników oraz odpowiednich danych statystycznych, autorka demonstruje, że współcześni studenci często czują się zmuszeni do podejmowania studiów wyższych kosztem osobistych zainteresowań i pasji. To następnie skutkuje frustracją, dalszym niepokojem i poczuciem osamotnienia, dodatkowo pogłębionym przez dużą rywalizację między studiującymi. Następnie autorka prezentuje dwie powieści i dwa filmy– „Tajemną historię" Donny Tartt (1992), „A jeśli jesteśmy złoczyńcami" M. L. Rio (2017), „Stowarzyszenie umarłych poetów" Petera Weira (1989) i „Na śmierć i życie" Johna Krokidasa (2013) – oraz analizuje je przez pryzmat Schoolhouse Gothic (dosł. „szkolny gotyk"), podgatunku literackiego opisanego przez Sherry R. Truffin. W każdej narracji autorka śledzi pięć elementów tego podgatunku, czyli klątwę, pułapkę, paranoję, przemoc i stworzenie potwora oraz bada mechanizmy stojące za ich wzajemnym oddziaływaniem. Jak się okazuje, klątwy najczęściej przybierają postać obsesji na punkcie przeszłości lub uporczywych struktur władzy, co w połączeniu z fizyczną izolacją kampusów skutkuje cierpieniem psychicznym i mentalną dezintegracją studentów. Środowisko szkolne jest natomiast często opresyjne i pełne przemocy, co wywiera ciągłą presję na uczniów, którzy zwykle sami rozwijają skłonności do obsesji i przemocy. To z kolei skutkuje utratą ich człowieczeństwa, czyli „przemianą w potwory". Na koniec autorka omawia krytyczne poglądy kierowane przez media pod adresem DA, a także prezentuje dowody na to, że ruch sam tę krytykę analizuje i wdraża.

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This project would have not been successful without my crazy, loving partner. He has been a great source of inspiration to find meaning in this thesis and outside of it. His presence, understanding and unwavering support transformed this research from an obligation into an explorative journey.

I am forever thankful to my parents who have always supported me in all academic endeavors. Chasing my dreams abroad would not have been possible without them.
Mamo, Tato – dziękuję. Kocham Was!

Finally, many thanks to my friends, especially to the Dinny Dinners and Feet Pic Economy. Their good spirits and kindness made the writing process far more enjoyable and fun, and definitely less lonely.

Contents

List of abbreviations

DA – Dark Academia

TSH – *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt

IWWV – *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M. L. Rio

DPS – *Dead Poets Society* (1989) by Peter Weir

KYD – *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) by John Krokidas

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Introduction

Personal motivations

Attending a university has always been implied as an inseparable part of life for people my age in the country I come from. However, the expectations about academia created over the years were not consistent with my experiences as a student. For that reason, already at the beginning of my academic journey, in 2016, I began to follow multiple accounts on platforms such as Tumblr or Instagram that were posting visions of studying at a university that were similar to mine. Some of these profiles contained tips regarding studying or managing life, some posted photos, graphics, and snapshots of their authors' universities and notes, or frames from movies and series that portrayed similar scenes. Although the types and features of content I was consuming varied, many of them followed a more or less consistent visual theme. The elements and characteristics appeared frequently included muted colors that rendered a sense of otherworldliness, or at least of anachronism; fascination with humanities, expressed by numerous references to literature, art, or history, be it textual or visual; and lastly, a sense of mystery and gloom in scenes and events depicted or referred to.

I cannot pinpoint the moment when it had become commonly accepted that the visuals followed by me, and many other students adapted the name "Dark Academia aesthetic." Nor do I remember how exactly these images appeared in my feeds. Had I known that in the future I would be given an opportunity to compile and share my observations in a form of a thesis, I would have saved these media in forms of screenshots, links, and metadata to use for research. There were, however, two factors that additionally prevented this from happening. One of them was the fact that at that time I was pursuing, as I thought, disciplines "more useful than humanities," despite my interest for them. This belief was a result of common derisive attitudes of Poles towards these branches of scholarship, which now I believe to be more global and complex than it could initially appear to be.

Yet, the ephemeral character of social media constitutes a more hindering factor than the discouragements produced by the socio-cultural aspects of my reality back then. Digital content easily perishes due to both intended actions, such as edition or removal of posts, reposts and comments, but also deletion or banning of accounts, as well as digital accidents like sharing inactive links or misspelling usernames. Even if I had regained access to my old social media accounts, a significant number of profiles would be inactive or deleted, and so

would be the media I shared or liked back then. Although digital archives such as the Wayback Machine exist, retrieving user generated content from a few years ago is hindered by lack of resources (Wayback Machine contains data provided by voluntarily by anyone and everyone), which cannot overcome the temporariness of social media.

Seven years later, I am revisiting Dark Academia from a different angle. Although still a student, this time my intention is to take on the role of an investigator and do more than just consume images that fit my vision or express parts of it. More importantly, this vision has not originated in past experiences or dreams of mine; rather, I have adopted it at some point and cultivated it as if it were my own. Where are its origins? When has it really developed? What factors made it so relatable for millions of students, including myself? How does it relate to the times that we live in? These are the main questions that drive me in this research. The accounts I once used to follow have been long deleted and gone, but my interest in the topic is stronger than ever. Most importantly, what is being published now in media proves that there are more people who share this curiosity and understand that the nature of Dark Academia, as well as other social media aesthetics, is more than appealing images on the internet.

Relevance, aims and context of the research

As trends and phenomena from social networks increasingly permeate the world outside of platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr or TikTok, they have become subjects for discussion in "real" life. In the past five years, the internet and social media have become progressively preoccupied with 'aesthetics,' which, in this context, are commonly understood as ways of styling digital content. We could observe the emergence of hundreds of such aesthetics, for instance *cottagecore,* which idealizes western rural and agricultural life, or the synth-music-and-80s-nostalgia-inspired *vaporwave.* One that has, according to Google Trends, gained massive popularity in the most recent years is Dark Academia, which peaked in January 2021, and which, in short, romanticizes education and academic experience.

Thus far, despite Dark Academia's widespread popularity online, relatively little interest in the topic has been shown by the academic community itself. As of February 2023, there are but few articles concerning the movement and most of them were published within the span of the past twelve months. This implies that academia itself is beginning to realize that it can, and perhaps should, have a say in the discussion concerning a movement that not only glamorizes but also criticizes it. This also poses a challenge for anyone writing about

Dark Academia at this moment, as there are not many scholarly sources on the topic. On the one hand, it is an opportunity to contribute to the scholarship with entirely new outlooks, theories, and analyses. However, the scholarship on Dark Academia is only beginning to develop, and, judging by the dates of available publications, it is likely that new sources are currently being produced. This naturally generates additional pressure.

Regardless of being treated as a literary genre, youth subculture, internet phenomenon, or scrutinized in any other lens, Dark Academia is yet to be fully explored with regard to its foundations, structure, variety of themes, as well as understanding of the movement by its followers themselves. Therefore, I intend to investigate it emergence as an internet trend in the context of the common understanding of the word "aesthetic" that has developed among the users of social networks in the recent years. I also intend to describe the major inspirations for the movement and categorize them. These topics constitute one area of my research which predominantly concerns social media. Moreover, Dark Academia can be analyzed by combining methods from various fields, as "it is essential to bring both literary studies close-reading techniques and media studies methods of content analysis, coupled with attentiveness to the medial affordances of specific platforms, to understand fully how DA's brand of bookishness plays out in contemporary digital environments."[1] Bearing in mind that the movement's attachment to literature, the other part my research comprises of analysis of literary works and cinematic works.

As it turns out, both user generated content and numerous works favored by Dark Academia exhibit visible references to the Gothic tradition. For this reason, I intend to use the framework of Schoolhouse Gothic, a concept formed by Sherry R. Truffin who proposes, justifies, and explores it in her monograph titled *Schoolhouse Gothic: Haunted Hallways and Predatory Pedagogues in Late Twentieth-Century American Literature and Scholarship* (2008) as a sub-genre *or* mode of writing in contemporary American literature. The Schoolhouse Gothic, much the same as Dark Academia, "draws on Gothic metaphors and themes—sometimes unacknowledged—in representing and interrogating contemporary Western education and those to whom it is entrusted."[2] Altogether, my aim is to consider how these themes are represented in works of fiction crucial to the movement, in the context of

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[1] Simone Murray, "Dark Academia, Bookishness, Readerly Self-fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's The Secret History," *English Studies* 104, no.2 (2023): 349, https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2170596.
[2] Sherry R. Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic: Haunted Hallways and Predatory Pedagogues in Late Twentieth-Century Literature and Scholarship* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 5.

anxieties experienced by present-day students, especially those living in Western countries like the U.S. the United Kingdom.

Selection of the sources

Since Dark Academia is only beginning to spark interest as a potential topic for research, the number of scholarly sources is greatly exceeded by magazine articles, blog posts and wikis. Seeing that it is more accepted to use social media content in research, I believe taking publications such as wikis into account should also be considered valuable, especially in examining aesthetics and trends on the internet. In the case of this thesis, employing a variety of non-scholarly sources is a necessity. The decision to exclude materials created by users who are passionate about the movement and actively participate in its formation could, in my view, be detrimental to this project and limit the insight into its motivations, perception and development. On the other hand, as the phenomenon is captivated by scholarly world and its productions, I could not resist but play this rather puckish move and employ sources that are far from being academic, yet which are often created by the Dark Academics themselves. Altogether, my sources include collaborative websites such as wikis, screenshots of posts published in social networks and online magazine articles. I believe that using such an array of textual and visual evidence raises a possibility to gain insight into the understanding and perception of Dark Academia from multiple points of view, thus enriching the research.

Aesthetics Wiki is a particularly valuable source, as it provides insight into its development and understanding by the participators in the movement. First, however, let us take a closer look at the nature of wikis in general. Wikis are websites whose systems not only allow users to change and advance them, but also encourage mutual effort and collaboration between the contributors.[3] Fandom, one of wiki-hosting services, states that wikis are not only pages on the internet, but also "communities of people who share a common interest, and love to write, chat and chronicle that interest."[4] Although the fact that anyone can add and edit such pages poses a threat of purposeful spread of misinformation, faith in goodwill and mutual trust within the community are the main ideas behind wikis[5]. Indeed, websites like Fandom adhere to the principle of 'assuming good faith,' which essentially represents a belief

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[3] Michael Aaron Dennis, "wiki," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* August 24, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/wiki.
[4] "What is a wiki?," Community Central, Fandom, last modified November 5, 2021, https://community.fandom.com/wiki/What_is_a_wiki.
[5] Dennis, "wiki."

that every user "is making a well-intentioned effort to help the community,"[6] be it by uploading an image, rewriting an article, or starting a new page. Moreover, because "a wiki is never complete, but always in progress"[7] and all changes can be reverted[8], wikis are not only a proof of the users' desire to record and share knowledge, but they also offer valuable, free of charge insight into a variety of topics provided by genuinely interested individuals who often share their first-hand experience and knowledge.

Users passionate about trends in pop culture and social media also create networks of wikis. With over 40 million content pages published across 250,000 wikis, Fandom is the biggest fan-run wiki-hosting platform dedicated to pop culture.[9] Since its creation in 2004, Fandom (then WikiCites) has served as a place for fans to both gain and share knowledge on their favorite characters, lore and universes, and has eventually evolved into "a deep repository of information about every fictional universe."[10] As Fandom recognizes that the desire to acquire information is not the only focus of its users, over the years it has enabled them to create communities and experiences around their topics of interest.[11] Because of the heavy emphasis on the communal values of wikis, assuming good faith and the confidence in the superiority of collective knowledge over the individual are two of Fandom's core principles.[12] One of the guide articles on Fandom states:

> A wiki doesn't have a single owner or manager, but is owned collectively by all of its community members. This means consensus, collaboration and a belief that the collective holds more knowledge than the individual is at the heart of a wiki.[13]

Therefore, when it comes to wikis, dedication to the topic, as well as documentation and distribution of knowledge itself are of higher importance than authorship. Moreover, I view this emphasis on collaboration and collective scrutiny as a non-scholarly variant of peer-reviewing that takes place in the digital communities of such kind.

This environment gave birth to Aesthetics Wiki, a community formed around visual trends. Proclaimed by its users and creators to be "a comprehensive encyclopedia of online and offline aesthetics", as well as "a community dedicated to the identification, observation,

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[6] "Help: Assuming good faith," Community Central, Fandom, last modified August 25, 2023, https://community.fandom.com/wiki/Help:Assuming_good_faith.
[7] Fandom, "What is a wiki?"
[8] "Help: Don't feed the trolls," Community Central, Fandom, last modified August 22, 2023, https://community.fandom.com/wiki/Help:Don%27t_feed_the_trolls.
[9] "What is Fandom?," Fandom, https://about.fandom.com/what-is-fandom.
[10] "About Us," Fandom, https://about.fandom.com/about.
[11] Fandom, "About Us."
[12] Fandom, "What is a wiki?"
[13] Fandom, "What is a wiki?"

and documentation of visual schemata"[14], the website not only offers a directory of aesthetics existing both in and outside the internet, but also provides guidelines for anyone willing to contribute. The rules published on the page include instructions on topics ranging from the general use of the website to formatting and citing styles, as well as regulations concerning the substance and ethics of articles. Moreover, each of the articles published on the website includes an unrestricted history of its edition. Thus, this wiki facilitates accessing information on aesthetic tendencies, as well as enables tracking the changes in both the coverage of a given topic and in its understanding by the contributors. At the same time, the website's community emphasizes the importance of quality and structure of its pages, therefore allowing Aesthetics Wiki to be considered a valuable source in research.

However, the largest body of evidence on Dark Academia is formed by digital materials posted in social media by users involved in the movement. As of the end of May 2023, over 2.1 million posts have been posted under the hashtag #darkacademia on Instagram, and 693 thousand posts feature #darkacademiaaesthetic on the same platform. Bearing in mind that the aesthetic is present on most social networking platforms, including Tumblr and TikTok, these numbers surely do not fully encompass, yet accurately demonstrate the magnitude of user generated content that could become research material. To make my research manageable, I decided to narrow the content down to a random selection of Tumblr posts published in the years 2017-2023.

There have been, however, some studies conducted. For instance, Maryann Nguyen in "Nostalgia in Dark Academia" (2022) investigates the movement's relation to anxieties experienced by students at higher education institutions, especially by women and people of color. Parami J. Ranasinghe in "An exploration of the dissemination of knowledge through the "Dark Academia" aesthetic" (2022) explores how Dark Academia contributes to the spread of knowledge on the internet, especially in the context of humanities and digital education. Furthermore, in "Social media aesthetics as a part of academic library merchandising" (2022), Magdalena Wójcik analyses Dark Academia's usability for academic libraries in marketing. In another study from 2022, titled "Dark Academia: Curating Affective History in a COVID-Era Internet Aesthetic," Robbert-Jan Adriaansen uses the movement as an example of an internet counter-narrative that through its visuals not only conveys certain moods, but also "de-historizes" and "inscribes queerness into the cultural logic of

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[14] "Home Page," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified August 16, 2023, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki.

humanism."[15] Jeffrey R. Di Leo in "Dark Academe" (2022) analyzes two stages of Dark Academia, calling them "Age of Rowling" and "Age of Tartt" and argues that the aesthetic "is a form of escape from neoliberal academe."[16] Lastly, Simone Murray in "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*" (2023) combines the methods of literary and media studies to investigate Dark Academia in the context of performing "bookishness."

The existing research, therefore, presents a fairly wide scope of perspectives to analyze Dark Academia. All these perspectives point to the fact that the movement has multiple aspects to consider, which, as some of the standpoints are in opposition to each other, may constitute both challenges and opportunities. After all, the topic can be approached by means of literary theory, English language teaching, as well as social, cultural and media studies, which do not constitute the whole list. However, the existing studies exhibit some insufficiencies within their scopes. First and foremost, in their presentations of Dark Academia and its origins, the authors above, except for Adriaansen, mention a comparable set of sources yet fail to engage materials produced the movement and its followers themselves. Furthermore, none of the authors makes use of Aesthetics Wiki as a source or an example in their research, thus significantly narrowing the insight into the movement's own attempts to define, categorize and record itself. And although Nguyen makes an argument about the connection between the creation of Dark Academia and the political climate in the U.S. at that time, she does not provide user generated content or cite sources that would do so, despite claiming that such movements "are not necessarily operating by scholarly evidence."[17]

Moreover, hardly any of the authors above engage in a discussion involving more than one work of fiction crucial to Dark Academia and attempt to explain why these works are favored by the movement. For instance, Wójcik and Adriaansen do not cover Dark Academia's inspirational works at all, and Murray analyzes only one novel. On the other hand, Ranasinghe and Di Leo mention multiple works of fiction, both literary and cinematic, but do not investigate them. Only Nguyen provides an analysis of a few literary works and forms arguments about their significance for the movement, yet does not comment on any movies, as motion pictures are outside of the scope of her paper. In terms of literature, all of them acknowledge the connection between Dark Academia and Gothic fiction, yet only

[15] Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Dark Academia: Curating Affective History in a COVID-Era Internet Aesthetic," *International Public History* 5, no.2 (2022): 112. https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2022-2047.
[16] Jeffrey R. Di Leo, "Dark Academe," *American Book Review* 43, no.2 (2022): 6. https://doi.org/10.1108/LHT-08-2022-0381.
[17] Maryann Nguyen, "Nostalgia in Dark Academia," *East-West Cultural Passage* 22, no.1, (2022): 70, n.3. https://doi.org/10.2478/ewcp-2022-0003.

Murray elaborates on the visible evidence in detail, at the same time neglecting to infer the reason for this connection.

The layout of the thesis

Following this introduction, in Chapter One, I begin the exploration of the origins of Dark Academia. Starting with a discussion about the understanding of the word 'aesthetic' that prevails among young internet users, I investigate the environment it emerged, as well as the meaning behind the movement's name. Then, I shift the lens onto the means of visual and textual communication used by Dark Academics on Tumblr. Subsequently, I discuss the movement's principles and connect them to aspects of academic environments of modern-day students and provide an overview of literature and motion pictures that Dark Academia draws inspiration from. In Chapter Two, I analyze four works critical to the movement by using Truffin's framework of Schoolhouse Gothic. The selected primary sources include two novels, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017), as well as two movies, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas's *Kill Your Darlings* (2013).'' I extend the Truffin's theory by tracing the presence of anachronisms and anatopisms, arguing that if they occur in a narrative, they form another layer of Schoolhouse Gothic and afflict the devices named by Truffin. Chapter Three provides an overview of criticisms expressed against Dark Academia by both external and internal sources. At the same time, I offer evidence for the movement's self-reflexivity and attempt to identify the motives behind it controversial practices. Finally, I provide a concluding section at the end of the thesis.

Chapter One

Dark Academia – what is hidden behind the stylized photos?

What is Dark Academia?

The multitude of perspectives in which Dark Academia can be analyzed results in a variety of terms used to describe it. For instance, Nguyen states that it first emerged as a genre and later became "an aesthetic subculture."[18] Similarly, Wójcik sees it as "both a book genre and an aesthetic concept that refers to the vintage styles."[19] Ranasinghe, on the other hand, calls attention to the communal aspect of Dark Academia, stating that it "first appeared (...) as a book club"[20], and eventually calls it a "community of dark academics"[21]. Murray calls it a "loose online community" and "scene," proclaiming it to be "less a cohesive movement or delimited subculture than a loose cluster of atmospherics and "vibes""[22]. Di Leo and Adriaansen, on the other hand, both describe Dark Academia as "an aesthetic style,"[23] thus employing the term most frequently used by internet users. Although the word 'aesthetic' is primarily linked to philosophical studies of art, now it represents an internet phenomenon that emerged among young social media users.

Aesthetics – current understanding of the term

However, it is troublesome to find an official definition of *social media aesthetics* that would accurately encompass its nature, intricacies, and new ordinary understanding. Although the research on social media is growing, the scientific inquiry into the said technologies and their links to aesthetics rarely takes place outside the scope of cosmetic medicine and marketing. Even papers analyzing particular visual practices and styles in social media, such as "food porn"[24] or "vaporwave"[25] seem not to offer any definitions of "social media

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[18] Nguyen, "Nostalgia," 70.
[19] Magdalena Wójcik, "Social media aesthetics as part of academic library merchandising," *Library Hi Tech* (December 2022): 5. https://doi.org/10.1108/LHT-08-2022-0381.
[20] Parami J. Ranasinghe, "An exploration of the dissemination of knowledge through the "Dark Academia" aesthetic," *University of Colombo Review* 3 (2022): 82. https://doi.org/10.4038/ucr.v3i2.74.
[21] Ranasinghe, "Dissemination of knowledge," 93.
[22] Murray, "Dark Academia," 348.
[23] Di Leo, "Dark Academe," 1; Adriaansen, "Dark Academia," 105.
[24] Robert Kozinets, Anthony Patterson, Rachel Ashman, "Networks of Desire: How Technology Increases Our Passion to Consume," *Journal of Consumer Research* 43, no. 5 (February 2017): 659–682. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw061.
[25] Ross Cole, "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse" *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020): 297-326. http://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2020.0008.

aesthetics." Although one may encounter an entry stating that "aesthetics in social media refers to those techniques used to analyze and detect high-quality visual content in social media for photo and video sharing,"[26] it is clear that the term is understood as a set of methods used in computer science to assess visual quality or beauty and that the entry does not provide any insight outside of scope of data processing, nor does it describe users' comprehension and current use of the word "aesthetics" on the internet.

Facing the absence of a sufficient explanation, it stands to reason to divide "social media aesthetics" into separate parts. The first element, "social media," is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."[27] When it comes to "aesthetics," it essentially signifies "[t]he philosophy of the beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful, etc.; the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre, the works of an artist, the arts of a culture, etc."[28] Yet, the way internauts understand and use the word 'aesthetics' in the context of social media is not exactly in line with such definition, and even surpasses it at times.

Even though social media accounts dedicated to aesthetics as a scholarly field most likely exist, internet users propose numerous explanations that reflect their own and collective understandings of the word, which lean towards perceiving "aesthetics" as "the (attractive) appearance or sound of something."[29] Indeed, Aesthetics Wiki, an online encyclopedia created and run by volunteers, shortly defines "aesthetic" as "a collection of visual schema [sic] that creates a "mood"."[30] Moreover, the top three interpretations of the word 'aesthetic' on Urban Dictionary, an online glossary of slang where entries are not only provided but also voted for or against by the internauts, emphasize its "pleasing to the eye" aspect and include examples of its use in the context of social media.[31]

Some journalists indicate that the ordinary understanding of 'aesthetic' in the context of social media "is totally divorced from its academic origin," as "many teenagers use *aesthetic* as an all-purpose adjective—"that's so aesthetic" as a shorthand for "that's so

[26] Miriam Redi, "Aesthetics in Social Media," in: Alhajj, R., Rokne, J. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Social Network Analysis and Mining*. (New York, NY: Springer, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-7131-2_110181.
[27] Andreas M. Kaplan, "Social Media, Definition, and History," in: Alhajj, R., Rokne, J. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Social Network Analysis and Mining*. (New York, NY: Springer, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-7163-9_95-1.
[28] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "aesthetics, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2437853627.
[29] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "aesthetics, n."
[30] "Aesthetics Wiki: FAQ," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified June 2, 2022, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki:FAQ.
[31] "aesthetic." Urban Dictionary, last accessed August 30, 2023. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=aesthetic.

aesthetically pleasing to me.""[32] Indeed, the aforementioned entries on Urban Dictionary
feature phrases such as "I like the aesthetic of your blog" or "I wish my blog was that
aesthetic."[33] It is evident that many internauts use the term both as a noun and adjective,
following their subjective sense of pleasure without referring to any philosophical principles.
In addition, as of November 2022, Urban Dictionary has no entries dedicated to "aesthetics,"
which indicates that the internauts interchangeably use the two words, and, as the users apply
them in discussing the visual style of digital content, their meanings merge in the internet
jargon.

A closer investigation, however, reveals that this departure is only ostensible. Given
that "[a]esthetic experience is ordered, clarified, intensified, and interpreted experience,"[34]
users who create original content more often than not apply aesthetic principles to the visuals
they post. Even though it is certainly questionable whether visuals posted in social media that
adhere to particular aesthetics could be considered art, according to Zettl, "[a]ll human
activities have an aesthetic potential. Aesthetic experiences can be drawn from *all* facets of
life."[35] Consequently, users plan, organize and produce their content in a way that adheres to
their chosen aesthetic, be it synthwave, goblincore or a personal, 'unaffiliated' one, which
entails using certain color palettes, filters, sounds and editing techniques that not only allude
to particular social media aesthetics. Such digital assemblage not only "creates a specific
emotion, purpose, and community,"[36] but also presents the creator's own interpretation of
their reality in the context of the principles of a given movement, and therefore becomes a
filtered and organized aesthetic experience.

There is another, personal aspect that has developed in the ordinary understanding of
"aesthetics." The third of the definitions on urbandictionary.com mentioned above states that
"Aesthetic is a word typically used to describe something aesthetically pleasing or *that fits
you as a person*."[37] The emphasized part implies the users' willingness to extend their interest
in chosen aesthetics from a chiefly digital realm to their lifestyle. Indeed, in editorials
covering the phenomenon, one may encounter accounts of users explaining aesthetics as
"something you find beautiful that you want to incorporate and embody within your own

[32] Kaitlin Tiffany, "Cottagecore Was Just the Beginning," *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2021.
https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/02/aesthetics-wiki-cottagecore-tumblr-tiktok/617923/.
[33] Urban Dictionary, "aesthetic."
[34] Herbert Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics.* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1973), 4.
[35] Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion,* 4. Emphasis by the author.
[36] "Aesthetics 101," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified July 25, 2023. https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_101.
[37] Urban Dictionary, "aesthetic" Emphasis added.

life"[38]. Aesthetics Wiki also confirms that even though it is not a precondition for engaging in them, internet aesthetics may be implemented by users in their lifestyles, which concedes possibility of its development into a subculture.[39] This usually manifests itself in applying not only fashion tendencies, but also behaviors and habits that correspond to a given movement.

Emergence, development, name

According to Google Trends for worldwide searches since 2004, the term Dark Academia started gaining popularity in the end of 2019 and peaked in January 2021. These dates are reflected by the contribution log at the subpage on Aesthetics Wiki dedicated to the movement. The subpage was created in October 2019, was most edited in June and December 2020 and since February 2021, the number of contributions has been systematically decreasing.[40] At first thought, this may be indicative of Dark Academia's decline in popularity across social media. Yet, as of November 2022, #dark academia has 187,000 followers on Tumblr, 1,910,617 posts on Instagram and 3,2 billion views on TikTok, and the numbers are still increasing. Therefore, such downturn in coverage of the movement implies that its nature has stabilized, which allows for it to become a subject of critical analysis.

As with many other internet aesthetics, it is troublesome to pinpoint the exact date or source of its origin. It is presumed that the movement started gaining popularity on Tumblr, a social platform dedicated to microblogging, in the mid-2010s[41], although one can encounter blogs, such as the one run by a user called @meetmeinadaydream, that have been posting dark-academia-like content since as early as 2011. Nevertheless, Dark Academia later spread to Twitter, and after that "shifted again around 2017 to image-centric platforms Pinterest and Instagram, before reconvening on the then-booming micro-video platform TikTok, where it was "'discovered' in the digital wild."[42] The presence of the movement on most social media platforms displays its multi-media character, as it thrives in internet environments favoring text, images, and videos alike. It also proves its mutability, in the sense that the aesthetic can be expressed by and adapted to any platform.

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[38] Tiffany, "Cottagecore."
[39] "Internet Aesthetics," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified June 12, 2023.
https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Internet_Aesthetics.
[40] "History: Dark Academia," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom. https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia?action=history.
[41] "Dark Academia," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified August 26, 2023, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia.
[42] Murray, "Dark Academia," 347-348.

As for now, Dark Academia is especially popular on Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok. Each of them offers particular affordances, understood as "both the technological capacities of the platform that users can utilize and users' perceptions of these possibilities."[43] In other words, these and, by extension, other platforms' interfaces provide the users with sets of facilities, for example for editing and sharing materials, who may also notice and implement other ways of using them. For instance, Tumblr allows their users to upload short text posts, but also images, videos, GIFS, or links; it also has "hashtag-oriented browsing structure, combined with an 'infinite scrolling' feed" thanks to which users can "endlessly explore the community", and allows for reblogging, which means "repost[ing] content from someone else, whether or not accompanied by additional commentary."[44] It is clear that Tumblr's affordances may constitute a problem of copyright and authorship, as the users can upload someone else's images without crediting the authors, which later are reblogged by others. However, users could be considered authors in the cases of sequences of photos, for instance moodboards, as they arrange, as well as describe and tag the compositions themselves.

Despite the fact that Dark Academia is now a term known to broad internet audiences, it is problematic to identify the origin of its name. The ephemeral nature of Tumblr content hinders tracking the when and where of the term and, consequently, the person or community who coined it. Aesthetics Wiki claims that the name most likely spread in the years 2017-2018 owing to a post by a user named @holocene-days, which not only features the name of the movement, but also mentions three "canonical Dark Academia films and books."[45]
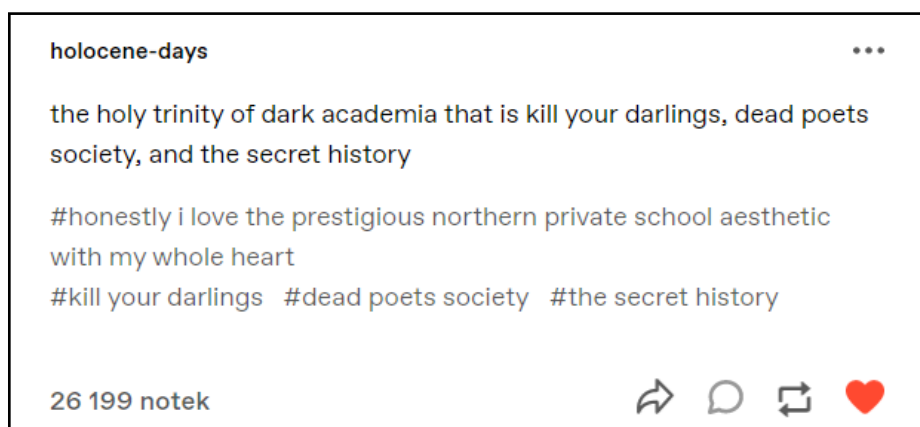
Figure 1. The post believed to popularize the name of DA. @holocene-days, "the holy trinity of dark academia," January 15, 2017, https://holocene-days.tumblr.com/post/155874596482/the-holy-trinity-of-dark-academia-that-is-kill.

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[43] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia," 107.
[44] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia," 106-107.
[45] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

Figure 1 presents the Tumblr post by @holocene-days featuring Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)*,* as well as two movies: Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas's *Kill Your Darlings* (2013). All three works are set in educational institutions in the Northeastern United States and present stories of students pursuing or who are passionate about humanistic disciplines. Moreover, the students not only struggle with the pressure of expectations and with personal traumas that take their origins in childhood or previous collegiate experiences, but each of the works also features a tragic death of one of the protagonists. It could therefore be concluded that the term Dark Academia derives from the tropes employed in the cultural texts constituting the inspirational core of the aesthetic, namely: social, moral, and psychological struggles and inequities of youth in academic settings.

It should also be noted that the spelling of the movement's name is not formally regulated. Until now, all mentions of Dark Academia in this thesis included capital letters at the beginning of both words. The reason for that was to make it stand out in the text, as well as to differentiate between Academia-the movement and academia-higher education in general. However, for the purposes of clarity, the movement will be referred to as DA in the following parts of the study.

DA's visual and textual communication on Tumblr

In terms of visuals, DA makes use of a quite fixed color palettes and values that emphasize the nostalgic aspects of its visions of education. The frequently used colors include "black, beige, dark brown, forest green, dark orange, cream, gold and burgundy."[46] Although the reason for the movement's preference for these colors and their hues is not directly explained, it can be argued that it stems from DA's values and interests.

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[46] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

Figure 2. An example of a DA moodboard. @euripideez-nuts, "october academia moodboard," October 1, 2021, https://www.tumblr.com/euripideez-nuts/663859206180503553/october-academia-moodboard.

The screenshotted fragment of a post presented on figure 2 contains a set of photographs called "a moodboard." Moodboards are a type of communication format frequently used by DA, as they can be created both out of photos and videos, which allows for their publication on Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok.[47] Their purpose is to convey a certain mood, feeling or idea, which is usually described or clarified in the description of the montage. For instance, the moodboard in figure 2 aims at representing "October academia", therefore romanticizing student experience in fall. Dimmed light, foggy weather, old leather-bound books, rotting leaves, yellowed pages, brick and stone buildings, antiques and golden-framed artworks – these are objects and conditions that the author associates with both DA and the month of October.

The set above not only includes the said color palette but and thematical objects, but most importantly, represents a vision of experiences that many users can either relate to or want to experience themselves. For those who live and study in academic cities, especially in

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[47] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

Europe, such collages are resemblant of their own life and constitute aestheticized visions of their academic reality. If their university experience does not match the vision from the moodboard—i.e., they live in a place with completely different architecture or climate—elements of the atmosphere conveyed above can be recreated, for instance by visiting museums, libraries, second-hand bookshops, and historical sites that are located nearby. In case of restricted access to institutions of culture and education, the moodboard may become or contribute to an already existing nostalgic vision of student life. Either way, the colors and objects used in the moodboard form a curated visual composition that, apart from conveying a particular mood, is aesthetically organized, and can therefore be aesthetically pleasing to its recipients, regardless of the degree to which they relate to the vision presented.

However, moodboards can also convey the author's vision or impression of a work of art, literature, or cinema, especially those considered inspirational for DA. The moodboard presented on figure 3 aims at reproducing the atmosphere and scenes from TSH, a novel that Dark Academics are most likely to be familiar with. Those in the audience who have read the book will instantly identify the themes or particular scenes described in it; those who do not recognize the story, can identify its source thanks to the quote and the title provided by the author in the description. Even though other users can have different ideas and ways to imagine and represent these elements of TSH's plot, the photos utilize the color palette that is typical for DA, which facilitates their relatability for the followers of the movement. In addition, as it was in the case of the moodboard in figure 2, this set of photos constitutes a curated visual composition and can therefore be considered aesthetically pleasing.
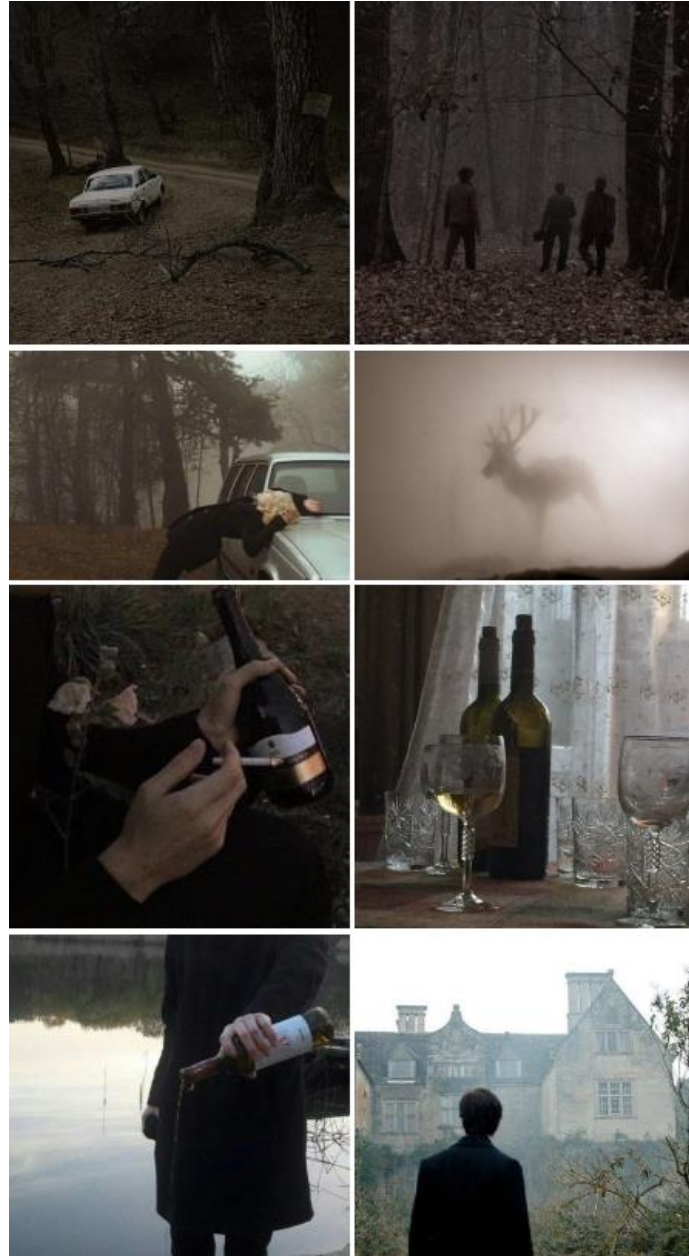
Figure 3. A moodboard portraying the atmosphere from TSH.
@corpsebibliophile, "I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any
number of stories, (…)," June 25, 2023,
https://www.tumblr.com/corpsebibliophile/721089919489032192/i-suppose-at-
one-time-in-my-life-i-might-have-had?source=share.

Apart from the color palette, DA visuals also feature high contrasts in lightning and
colors. This effect is often inspired by the painting styles like chiaroscuro and tenebrism and
can be observed both as a part of the composition, as well as visible in the style of clothing
favored by Dark Academics.[48]

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[48] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

Figure 4. An example of DA's tendency to imitate tenebrism and chiaroscuro. @thatdarkcornerofmymind, "pov: you discover a secret library," January 23, 2022, https://www.tumblr.com/thatdarkcornerofmymind/674186227093749760/pov-you-discover-a-secret-library-whenever-i-go?source=share.
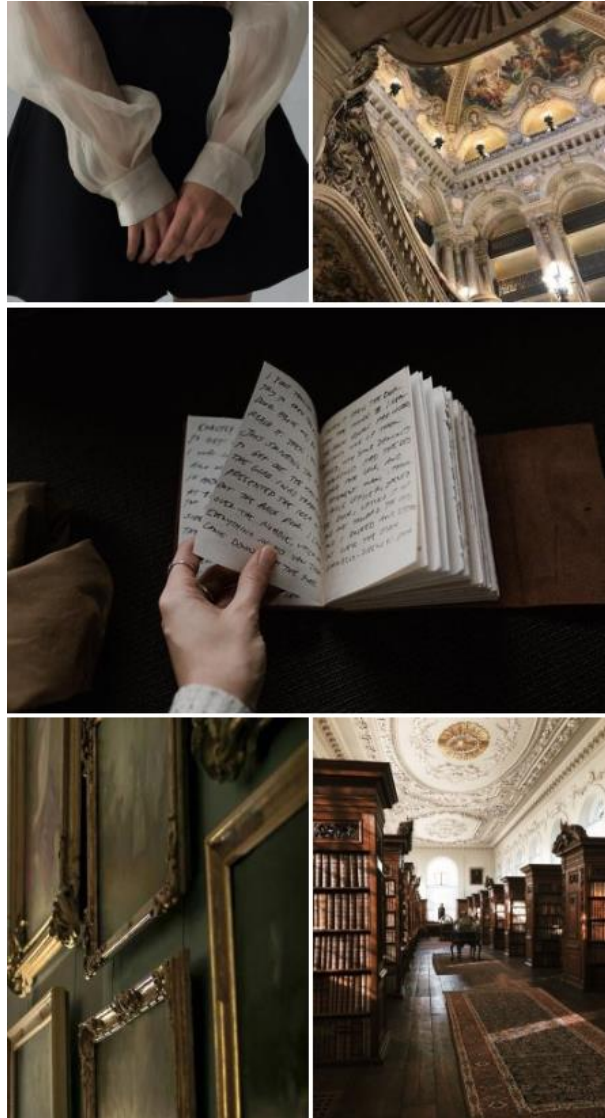
Figure 5. An example of DA's tendency to employ contrasting colors and lightnings. @duodenalis, "Dark academia aesthetic inspo." May 7, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/duodenalis/184703019086/dark-academia-aesthetic-inspo-x?source=share.

Figure 4 presents a screenshotted part of a lost containing another moodboard that, apart from utilizing the colors typical for DA, also employs the said contrasts in lightning. The pictures are predominantly dark and the brighter colors are used to emphasize the objects of DA's interest, usually books. Figure 5, on the other hand, is an example of DA's tendency to employ contrasting colors, such as whites and creams in the company of black, dark brown and dark green. Although metadata for the photos is not available, it is more than likely that the photos have been edited in order to both achieve and enhance the desired contrasts, which only confirms that DA strives for conveying certain visions and atmospherics that, despite reflecting its interests and anxieties, are not necessarily true.

In addition, DA content often features carefully selected objects and sceneries that serve as reinforcement of their fanciful visions. Although their variety is astonishing, it usually stays within the realm of widely understood bookishness, as well as scholastic and mysterious imagery. Murray provides an extensive directory of favored props and locations, which consists of

> (neo)gothic architecture, university quadrangles (especially Oxbridge or Ivy League), historic country houses, art galleries and library interiors. The interior décor featured so prominently in DA posts likewise favours the atmospherics of the Oxbridge library or stately home: spiral staircases; brocade armchairs and leather sofas; pianos; antique mirrors; chandeliers; tapestries; silverware; gilt picture frames; oil paintings and sepia-toned photographs. Objects associated with analogue-era intellectualism are especially prized leitmotifs: printed, leatherbound codices; manuscripts; quills and fountain pens; ink pots; sealing wax; candles and candelabra; typewriters; antique globes; hourglasses; Ancient Greek and Latin books; Classical statuary; Venetian masks; tea- and coffee-making items; pressed flowers; chess sets … and occasional skulls.[49]

Pieces of clothing, accessories, and fashion in general constitute a separate category of DA items frequently employed in images. Dark Academics habitually post and reblog stylized photos which portray their visions of academia. According to Murray, these looks are "[i]n keeping with this evocation of inter-war Oxford" and they feature

> wardrobe selection strongly favouring an autumnal palette: tweed jackets (with leather arm patches, naturally); corduroy or velvet trousers; turtleneck jumpers; plaid skirts; silk blouses; lace collars; wool scarves; coats; capes; tooled-leather brogues or loafers; satchel bags; and horn-rim or tortoiseshell glasses. The aspirational look of distressed gentility is aptly encapsulated by one commentator as "weathered-posh fashion".[50]

Photos featured in figures 2-5 above are excellent examples of this tendencies. It is clear that, together with the favored color palettes, the items, settings, and fashion presented by DA constitute a consistent albeit nostalgized visualization of the movement's interests/

Textual communication also plays a big role in DA community. Text posts often include lists, such as "book and media recommendations," (figures 10-17), tips on how to embody the aesthetic in daily life (figure 6), and vocabulary "including obscure words with beautiful meanings or words and phrases in Latin, Greek, French, etc."[51] (figure 7).

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[49] Murray, "Dark Academia," 350.
[50] Murray, "Dark Academia," 350.
[51] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

dark academia tips:

- *reading Byron with the glass of red wine*
- *staying up all night listening to Chopin and Vivaldi*
- *having a big library and borrowing your favourite books to your friends*
- *laying on the grass and looking at the stars at midnight*
- *spending a lot of money on fashionable clothes*
- *having dates in theatres*
- *rewatching old movies*
- *attending museums and exhibitions*
- *drinking champagne with your friends while reading poems*

Figure 6. A post with tips on how to incorporate DA in daily life. @thestrawberrynight, "dark academia tips." August 1, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/thestrawberrynight/186704339881/dark-academia-tips-reading-byron-with-the-glass?source=share.

latin phrases worth knowing:

(in case you wanted to know because i fucking love this language)

- *ad astra per aspera* - to the stars through difficulties
- *alis volat propriis* - he flies by his own wings
- *amantium irae amoris integratio est* - the quarrels of lovers are the renewal of love
- *ars longa, vita brevis* - art is long, life is short
- *aut insanity homo, aut versus facit* - the fellow is either mad or he is composing verses
- *dum spiro spero* - while I breathe, I hope
- *ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem* - with the sword, she seeks peace under liberty

Figure 7. A fragment of a post with a list of Latin phrases, also serving as an encouragement to incorporate DA in daily life. @stcrlghts, "latin phrases worth knowing:" December 28, 2017, https://www.tumblr.com/stcrlghts/169028487832/latin-phrases-worth-knowing?source=share.

Overall, both visual and textual posts contribute to what I call "performative" aspect of the aesthetic. Bearing in mind that, in simple words, "digital devices and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform,"[52] and that "[w]e live in aesthetic society where the production of beautiful images, interfaces, objects and experiences are central to its *economic* and *social* functioning, as well as the *identities* of millions of people,"[53] it can be argued that curating an aesthetic account in social media is indeed a performance of a user's identity. Manovich proposes the term Instagramism which covers both "aesthetic strategies employed in many Instagram images" and "construction of aesthetic identities through these images," that is visible in other social media platforms as well.[54]

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[52] Martina Leeker, Imanuel Shipper and Timon Beyes. "INTRODUCING. Performativity, Performance Studies and Digital Cultures." In *Performing the Digital,* ed. Martina Leeker, Imanuel Shipper and Timon Beyes. (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2017): 9-18.
[53] Lev Manovich, "The Aesthetic Society: Instagram as a Life Form." (2017): 3. Emphasis by the author.
[54] Manovich, "The Aesthetic Society," 3.

These strategies include not only staging photos, using certain perspectives (flat-lay or capturing single body parts, for instance), and editing the material by the means of filters and additional apps, but also designing the sequence in which these photos are displayed in one's feed.[55] This can be naturally applied to platforms like Tumblr which allow for posting of text and other types of content alongside with images. By creating aestheticized content, or, as it is more common in the case of Tumblr, by reblogging content posted by others to one's curated feed, users collect materials that fit their chosen aesthetics, thus creating their aesthetic identity. It should be noted that this phenomenon is not native nor exclusive to DA and can be observed within other digital movements too.

Values

DA emphasizes pursuit of knowledge, reading and passion for education as its core values. This emphasis is generally realized by romanticizing school and university activities, such as studying, notetaking, or writing essays. As explained by Aesthetics Wiki's contributors, in DA

> The learning is done for learning's sake, rather than using an education as a means of gaining employment, good grades (which is still strived for, but not the main goal), or doing it out of a sense of obligation. Studying is done for the enjoyment of it, both in connection to the subject itself, but also as a picturesque thing for a person to do. As discussed in the visuals section, note-taking and existing in spaces for studying *looks* pleasing to these people.[56]

Therefore, it is clear that apart from idealizing their university experience, Dark Academics also tend to aestheticize it, thus turning day-to-day student activities into stylish and charming acts. But what is under this need to make studying appear attractive, or, in simple terms, pretty? Where does it stem from? The answer to this question is already indirectly embedded in the cited excerpt: it originates in the feeling that one is compelled to obtain education and must graduate to become employed, and that this period in life is characterized by stress, anxiety, and competition rather than exploration of one's interests and passions.

The pressuring feeling of being compelled to obtain education stems from the growing university enrollment, which is not paradoxical but surely contrary to its general benefits. Let us consider the following argument offered by Peter Fleming, a researcher investigating the

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[55] Manovich, "The Aesthetic Society," 5-20.
[56] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

nature and implications of the future of work. He states that "universities must prove themselves as servants to the cult of work, well-functioning job factories that invariably charge students a small fortune for the privilege."[57] In Fleming's terms, present-day universities produce graduates on a mass scale to enter job markets. Indeed, in the U.S. the student and population ratio had been steadily increasing since the beginning of the 20th century, hitting its top point in 1980, when ca. 1 out of 19 of Americans was enrolled in a university or college.[58] 20 years later, it was 1 out of 18 [59] and in 2020, 1 out of 17.[60] [61] At the same time, college enrollment rate for young adults between 18 and 24 years old in 2000 was 35% and in 2018 – six per cent more.[62] While there is no doubt that universal access to education and growing numbers of people attending tertiary education institutions constitutes a great benefit for individuals as well as society as a whole, it is the commercial aspect of present-day university that, in my view, contributes to the feeling of having no choice but attending a university to progress in life.

In modern society in which education becomes a product, students who enroll into a university are virtually buying a promise for their future. According to Fleming, "[a]fter purchasing the advertised services from the brochure, the student-consumer is nominally 'empowered'. They expect good grades and a well-paying job no matter what."[63] While sense of entitlement might exist in varying degrees in students, this phenomenon illustrates the commercialization of tertiary education and the science it produces. Prospective students compete in a race of academic and financial resources to get the best "product" which value is often based on factors such as position in world rankings and admission rates. At the same time, however, the quality of education one can obtain in a mass-oriented "Edu-Factory" is often decreased, as overcrowded auditoriums and seminar groups result in overworked academic staff who "are tacitly expected to overperform in all parts of their job like some modern day *uomo universal*, excelling in teaching, publishing, research grants, administrative service, public engagement and so forth."[64] Therefore, students often spend equivalents to thousands of dollars in tuition to enter a game of chance for their future prospects. Even in

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[57] Peter Fleming, *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 36.

[58] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Rise of the Academic Novel," *American Literary History* 24, no.3 (2012): 576. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajs038.

[59] Williams, "Academic Novel," 576.

[60] National Center for Education Statistics. *The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System*, (NCES, 2021). https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/ViewTable?tableId=29448.

[61] Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Percent change in population, 2020-2022," https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17827.

[62] B. Hussar, J. Zhang, S. Hein, K. Wang, A. Roberts, J. Cui, M. Smith, F. Bullock Mann, A. Barmer and R. Dilig, *The Condition of Education 2020* (NCES, 2020): 124. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020144.

[63] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 39.

[64] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 27. Emphasis by the author.

countries where higher education is relatively cheap or free, students still pay thousands for accommodation, transport, textbooks, and other school supplies, as well as cover costs of participating in sororities, fraternities and other clubs and organizations. None of this, however, guarantees that one will find employment upon completing their degree.

Yet, the highest price paid by present-day students is their mental health. Fleming refers to multiple studies concerned with mental health of both under- and postgraduates that were conducted in years 2017-2018, which makes them especially relevant in the context of DA, as these are the years shortly before its popularity exploded. For instance, he quotes that

> 35 per cent [of 14,000 students in 19 countries] experienced (at least) one of six mental health disorders noted in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. *Contributing factors included demanding workloads, the pressure to excel and financial worries*.[65]

As well as

> A 2018 study of 2279 post-graduate students in 26 countries found 40 per cent had suffered moderate/severe depression and anxiety, six times higher than in the population at large."[66]

It turns out that psychological struggle is prevalent among university students, a fact that is certainly omitted by prospectuses and brochures. In a stress- and anxiety-inducing environment it is already challenging to stay on track with all the courses, let alone to excel in them or to find strength and time to explore other areas. One might say that a few difficult years is a sacrifice worth making in order to secure employment and have a steady start into personal career and financial stability. However, in 2020, graduation rates for full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions in the U.S. amounted to 64%.[67] At the same time, only 53,6 % of undergraduates found full-time employment within 6 months from finishing their degree.[68] In many cases, the reality is therefore less auspicious than the promises 'sold' to those who enroll into tertiary education institutions. In such circumstances, I believe the emergence of a movement like DA was inevitable, as it serves as a coping mechanism for students who romanticize and aestheticize university experience in order to persevere in their academic journey.

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[65] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 24-25. Emphasis added.

[66] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 26.

[67] National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics 2021.* (NCES 2021): table 326.10. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_326.10.asp.

[68] National Association of Colleges and Employers. *First Destinations for the College Class of 2020: Findings and Analysis.* (NACE 2021): 3. https://www.naceweb.org/job-market/graduate-outcomes/first-destination/class-of-2020/

Although there are tens of "academia aesthetics" that revere diverse fields of studies, DA focuses on the humanities. As for July 2023, there are 50 different academia movements, which, apart from DA, include creations such as Ballet Academia, Pastel Academia, Science Academia and Paleocore.[69] Each of them conveys a slightly different vision of school or university experience that depends on personal preferences regarding academic interests and/or aesthetic choices. DA, however, is the prototype of this "aesthetics family" and its fascination with the humanities is linked to one of the movement's canonical works, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989).[70]
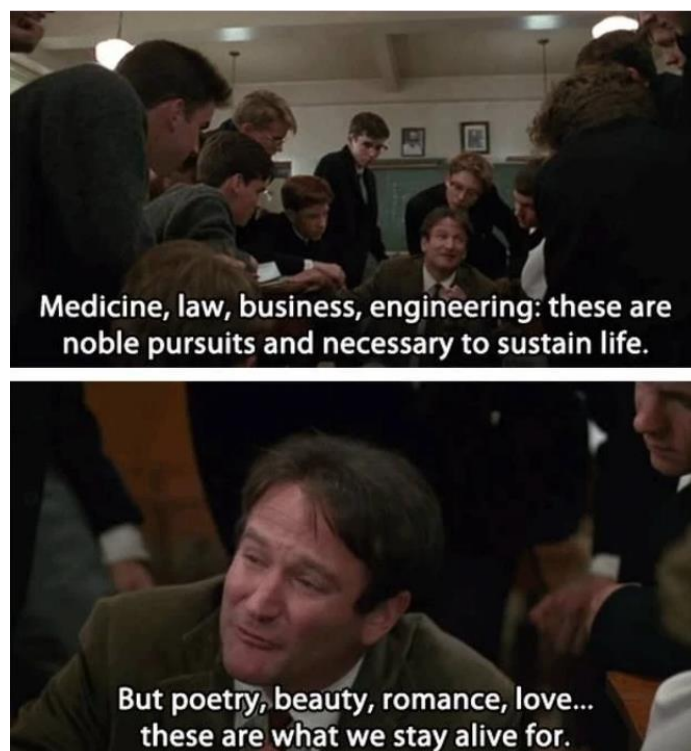
Figure 8. Aesthetics Wiki, Dark Academia, "A quote from *The Dead Poets Society* that is one of the most reblogged screencaps in the community," https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Dark_Academia.

This attachment to humanities reflects the aforementioned desire to "stay alive for" and not just "to sustain life," and, perhaps most importantly, constitutes a reaction to contempt the humanities have been held in for years.

Fleming proposes that "in order to get a proper feel for what's going on in the humanities we should ask the grad students who were promised jobs in these vanishing

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[69] "Academia," Aesthetics Wiki, Fandom, last modified June 12, 2023, https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Academia.
[70] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

disciplines."[71] Aside from that, I suggest we should also investigate what is lurking below the façade of millions of screencaps like the one in figure 8, as well as aestheticized photos of books, quills and libraries that are being posted across social media. According to Fleming, in the course of the past four decades modern universities have fallen victim to commercialization and managerialism which result in notions of economic impact and relevance of higher education and knowledge it produces.[72] He argues as follows:

> For all but the elite universities today, the impact agenda has drastically narrowed the scope of desirable scholarship, with disciplines considered more practical to industry judged superior: namely, STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), with the addition of medicine when appropriate. In this new academic environ, even subject areas once considered too vocational for universities – business education, for example – now stand outside the tent when it comes to the most robust drivers of impact in tertiary education.[73]

In addition to that,

> The big loser in this high impact culture are the humanities, of course. Their funding has dwindled, leaving English, classics and cultural studies little more than empty husks. Academic life has become grim as a vast number of jobs evaporated, making way for STEM subjects instead.[74]

It is impossible not to notice the correlation between these tendencies and the rise of DA. In a society where pursuing a humanities or arts degree may constitute a threat to future financial stability, either due to lack of opportunities or low pay, it is understandable that youth romanticize studying these areas. Although there it is likely that among thousands of Dark Academics there are people who participate in the movement just for the sake of its visuals, it is clear that those of them who dream of pursuing of such degrees or those who are anxious about the prospects of job markets create nostalgic visions of academia. These fantasies serve as their coping mechanism—an anesthetic—in coming to terms with the reality of studying at a tertiary level.

Among the humanities, history performs a special function, as DA's fascination with particular eras helps convey its nostalgic visions of the past and of academia. Although one can find references to works and cultural aspects characteristic of any period, according to Aesthetics Wiki, it is the Classical, Romantic, Victorian era, as well as the Roaring 20s that

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[71] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 107.
[72] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 99-101.
[73] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 106.
[74] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 106.

DA has a predilection for.[75] Interestingly enough, "the intent is to return to the romantic practices that are now considered outdated; people in the aesthetic are not concerned with being historically accurate in dress, slang, or have a political motivation to return to the past."[76] This lack of carefulness stems from the desire to recreate a nostalgic vision of the past and convey a mood that suits it. Nguyen argues that, in terms of characters from DA canonical works, "dark academia's individual nostalgia is not necessarily a longing for one's past but for a past that belongs to a different generation or an imagined past and a should-be present. It is a nostalgic fantasy."[77] It is thus visible that her claim also correlates with young people who create DA content online. Dark Academics long for times long before their parents and most of grandparents were born, therefore basing their visions of these periods not on first-hand relations of common people who experienced them, but on historical accounts, as well as art, literary and cinematic visions of the past. Thus, they acquire a set of images that they later utilize as a basis for creation of, in Nguyen's terms, nostalgic fantasy that is aesthetically appealing to them.

In fact, the recurrent references to the past are also a form of DA's reaction to the real environments of modern students. Murray considers it a form of "digital denialism" and links it to the linked with the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which DA rapidly increased its popularity, at the same time stating that "this apparent abjuring of the digital seems justifiable" since

> It can be read as a principled refusal to capitulate to the ubiquity of digital culture and its erosion of domestic privacy. As one commentator diagnosed during the global pandemic's second year, DA's "return to pre-digital simplicity is a response to the uncertainty and chaos of the current moment". [78]

Indeed, as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic, academic life migrated into the digital realm, thus transforming the nature of schooling and relationships between students and teachers alike. In many cases, the DA community, which has already existed for years, became not only an "idealized replacement of academia," but also a defense mechanism against loneliness and anxieties.[79]

However, DA's perennial fascination with the pre-digital past reaches back further than the times of lockdown. In a longer post explaining young people's fascination with DA

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[75] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[76] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[77] Nguyen, "Nostalgia," 57.
[78] Murray, "Dark Academia," 359-360.
[79] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia," 108.

and the vision it conjures up, one user sheds light on aspects of modern life that the movement offers a shelter from.

> i often feel like one of the many reasons why we are so passionate about the whole dark academia thing is because it gives us the opportunity to live in a fantasy where our passion, whether that's literature, art, theater, science, feels valid.
>
> we live in a world where we are constantly stimulated, constantly finding new things, constantly pressured into liking more and more stuff because the world keeps going on at such a fast pace and it never stops and it's so hard to keep up with it and it makes your breath short your mind tired your fears bigger *and*.
>
> it almost feels like we are trapped because even though we would like to slow down for a bit, we know the world won't stop with us, for us.
>
> if we turn our phones off it's unnatural and people start worrying, if we don't check our social medias during our study breaks we get anxious – no matter how much we want it not to be that way, no matter how badly we would like to dedicate ourselves completely to these passions of ours, we can't do it entirely, slaves of times so flourishing but so scary. the world has a crushing weight and most of the times we soccombe to it.

Figure 9. Fragment of a longer post explaining young's people fascination with DA which emphasizes the distress with the ubiquity of the internet and social media. @carrslullabie, "i often feel like one of the many reasons why we are so passionate about the whole dark academia thing (…)," May 30, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/carrslullabie/185246352000/i-often-feel-like-one-of-the-many-reasons-why-we?source=share.

Figure 9 presents a fragment the said post which was published half a year before the news of an outbreak in Wuhan. To begin with, it is clear that the author is well aware of the fanciful nature of representations of learning experience that are generated within DA but the commentary that follows concerns struggles that are unrelated to academia. It indicates that it is the ubiquity of social media and the internet, the vastness of information there and the way they became naturalized in our lives that severely afflict modern students. In a world which insists on uninterrupted connection and digital availability to others, a vision of becoming a scholar that spends their time on reading in quiet libraries, picnicking with friends in a park or writing poetry dedicated to the moon simply because they fancy it at the moment is understandably alluring. Moreover, as quoted by Murray, this "rejection of technology is … important given that Zoomers are the first generation that have [*sic*] really grown up with social media as an ever-present aspect."[80] Therefore, Dark Academics long for a world

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[80] Murray, "Dark Academia," 361.

without digital distractions and overwhelming number of news coming through; a world that many of them have never experienced.

Another aspect of DA is that it also expresses a desire to belong to a network which is both intellectually stimulating and, most importantly, accepting. Dark Academics appreciate narratives that follow a group of classmates united by their avid interest for a field of study and whose bond "transcends the typical thought of casual, pleasure-based friends and into something more profound and intimate."[81] These fictional circles mostly consist of youth coming from similar backgrounds or achieving similar results in school. Yet, there is often someone who does not fully fit within the group, for instance due to their class background or the willingness to conform to the school norms. Nevertheless, the struggles experienced at school bind the students together, giving them solace, aid in studying and sense of acceptance. In the view of the anxieties and competition mentioned above that real-life students have been experiencing in the past few years, DA's fascination with such themes provides a reimagined vision of academic environment where students have opportunities to form meaningful bonds that surpass the surrounding pressures and give them strength and motivation to study.

Lastly, DA is an online community that is both welcoming and encouraging towards LGBT+ people. As explained by Aesthetics Wiki contributors, the movement appreciates both fictional and historical queer figures, naming Achilles, Patroclus, and Oscar Wilde among the examples.[82] The reason for this intersection may be explained by the results of a study conducted in the U.S. among high school students between 2009 and 2016, therefore slightly prior to and at the very beginning of formation of DA. According to the study, "non-heterosexual students are more likely to dropout from high school at least once (Column 3), have lower GPA (Column 4), and accumulate a lower number of credits while in school (Column 5)."[83] They also have lower expectations about graduating high school and are less likely to enroll in and complete a bachelor's degree a tertiary education institution.[84] Above all, the study reports that contrary to these circumstances "there is no significant difference between heterosexual and non-heterosexual students when asking them how far in school they would like to go if there were no barriers."[85] Therefore, DA as an aesthetic may also serve as

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[81] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[82] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[83] Dario Sansone, "LGBT students: New evidence on demographics and educational outcomes," *Economic of Education Review* 73 (December 2019): 5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101933.
[84] Sansone, "LBGT students," 6.
[85] Sansone, "LGBT students," 6.

a consolation for non-heterosexual students who face struggles either in high school or in tertiary education, or are prevented from obtaining their education at any level.

Main inspirations

Although there is no official and comprehensive list of works constituting something that would function as DA canon, it is possible to outline the major tendencies of works that are considered inspirational by Dark Academics. Since the aesthetic places a high value to reading, books are widely appreciated withing the community. Figures 10a and 10b, posted on Instagram by @myfairesttreasure, constitute a good basis for understanding what literature is favored by DA.
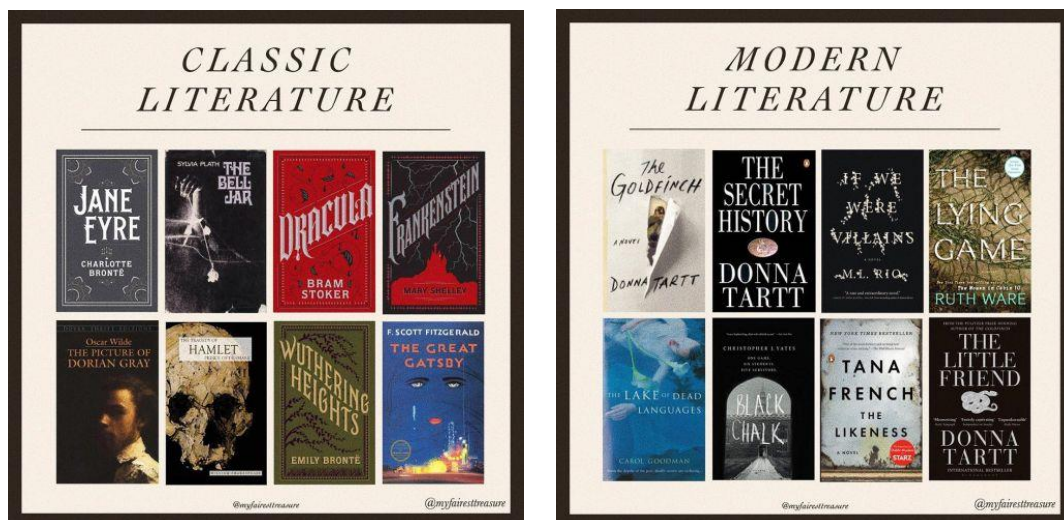
Figure 10a. & 10b. A subjective selection of 'DA classic literature,' and a subjective selection of 'DA modern literature,' @myfairesttreasure, "for those who are just starting to read dark academia novels or anyone who wants new books to read, here's some suggestions!" January 7, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B7CTeHlBNN3/.

Figures 10a and 10b above present a selection of books divided into two categories: classic and modern literature, and this division reflects the twofold nature of the literary foundation of the movement. In terms of the first category, it includes virtually any works appreciated by the western literary canon. Indeed,

> These books tend to be from the Classical Era (such as the plays of Sophocles, philosophy theory, etc.) and Western literature up to the mid 20th century. Literature such as this does not include Dark Academia tropes but are considered Dark Academia because it has the same associations with intelligence, refinement and would be

studied in the setting.[86]

When it comes to the classic novels, there is an acknowledged appreciation for works that are associated with the Western literary canon, even though their settings and tropes do not necessarily correspond to the cores of the aesthetic. Therefore, classic literature is appreciated by DA because it complements the vision of education and reading created by the movement. Yet, that does not mean the aesthetic value is the only reason for DA's fascination with classic literature. Given the movement's appreciation for the humanities, the strong interest in such works is connected to the fact that many of them are featured in university curriculums, which is line with DA's preoccupation with university life.

Yet it is clear that the idea of practicing or using something mostly for aesthetic purposes is endorsed by DA. It closely resembles the 'art for art's sake' principle promoted by Aestheticism in the late nineteenth century. Bearing in mind that Aestheticism "began in reaction to prevailing utilitarian social philosophies and to what was perceived as the ugliness and philistinism of the industrial age,"[87] it can be observed a similar pattern in DA's emergence. As explored above, DA constitutes a reaction to increasing commercialization of universities which creates pressure for higher education to generate economic impact and economically relevant knowledge. As a result, some fields of scholarship, especially the humanities, can be considered less significant, as "there is no generalizable benefit to having led a life centered on great texts."[88] "Art for art's sake" echoes in DA's fascination with the humanities, as the users express the desire to "study humanities for humanities' sake" or, to narrow it down, to "study for studying's sake," without the pressure to excel in class or having to choose one's course of study on the basis of future employability. In addition, the other way the nineteenth century slogan resonates in DA is the aforementioned tendency to aestheticize actions like note taking and studying in the library or doing them because it is simply aesthetically pleasing to the users and their audiences.

On the other hand, books that fall under the category of modern literature, as presented by Figure 10b, contain a set of characteristics that correspond to DA's core values. In terms of setting, it usually includes institutions boarding schools and universities that "have a prestigious reputation, with elements of exclusivity" and the action usually takes place in the

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[86] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[87] "Aestheticism," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* October 26, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/art/Aestheticism.
[88] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 106.

nineteenth or twentieth century.[89] Prose is the preferred genre, especially when it exhibits "elevated vocabulary, lavish detail, and insight into emotions and human character" and describes individuals, students or academics, who have obsessive or Machiavellian tendencies.[90] The typical themes include murder, complicated power group dynamics, "elements of esotericism and forbidden knowledge," and motifs like "temptation and hubris."[91] Therefore, works of modern literature favored by DA usually revolve around high school or college students, thus falling into the categories of campus or coming-of-age novels, or at least displaying some characteristics consistent with these genres.

The fact that works by modern authors are included among literature commonly considered to be classic signifies that for the people interested in DA these modern books also constitute a kind of a canon of their aesthetic. It is argued that initially the aesthetic was "focused on dark photos and written posts about what books to read"[92] and resembled a fan community of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992), with some influences of *Harry Potter* fandom and blogs posting content dedicated to history, art, and architecture,[93] which still continue to be its main inspirations. Figures 11-13 confirm these statements, as they feature screenshotted excerpts from longer posts on Tumblr that serve as reading guides or anthologies for users interested in DA.

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[89] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[90] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[91] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[92] Kristen Bateman, "Academia Lives—on TikTok," *The New York Times,* June 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/style/dark-academia-tiktok.html.
[93] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

Academia Book Recomendations

And, like, maybe a few movies too

- The Secret History By Donna Tartt (Obviously!)
- Dead Poets Society (Movie and Book)
- If We Were Villians by M.L. Rio (*Very* similiar to TSH, also a personal favorite)
- The History Boys by Alan Bennett (A play)
- Vicious by V.E. Schwab (I think more superhero oriented? Ive never read it)
- A Separate Peace by John Knowles
- Black Chalk by Christopher J. Yates
- The Lessons by Naomi Alderman
- The Rules of Attraction by Bret Easton Ellis
- Kill your Darlings (Movie, I hated it)

Figure 11. Fragment of a subjective list of DA book and film recommendations. Reblogged by @melioranda, "Academia Book Recommendations," July 17, 2018. https://www.tumblr.com/melioranda/175976568925/academia-book-recomendations?source=share.

what to read:

- the secret history (obvi)
- if we were villains
- the golden finch
- anything by V.E schwab
- shakespeare
- aeschylus
- homer
- plato
- anything by oscar wilde
- ninth house
- song of achilles
- harry potter (don't @ me it's da)
- truly devious
- edgar allan poe
- (this list could go on forever but these of some of my faves)

Figure 12. Fragment of a longer recommendations post presenting a subjective list of DA book recommendations. @make-a-god-out-of-me, "a guide to the dark academia aesthetic," December 4, 2019. https://www.tumblr.com/make-a-god-out-of-me/189466671323/a-guide-to-the-dark-academia-aesthetic?source=share.

Figure 13. A subjective list of DA book recommendations, published with a GIF featuring a frame from DPS, one of DA's most beloved films. @poppletonink, "Dark Academia: An Inspired Reading Recommendations List," November 20, 2022. https://www.tumblr.com/poppletonink/701441966457618432/dark-academia-an-inspired-reading-recommendations?source=share.

Despite the fact that a full and consistent DA canon does not exist, some authors and works are commonly recognized as the aesthetic backbone of the movement. Just by looking at figures 10b and 11-13, it is evident that Donna Tartt and her literary oeuvre are central to the aesthetic. Not only do the authors of each of the posts include Tartt's debut novel, but some of them also proclaim it as a crucial text, which is emphasized by situating the book at the beginning of each post and by comments stating that this position is an "obvious" one.

The plot of *The Secret History* (1992) revolves around the recollections of the protagonist, Richard Papen, about his university years. The narrative opens with a murder and although the reader is provided with the "who, when and where" from the beginning, the story compels with the intricacies of the motive. After leaving his dull and unexciting past in a small town in California and moving to Vermont in order to study at an elite liberal arts college, Richard becomes fascinated by a closed group of five classics students: Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, Edmund 'Bunny' Corcoran, and Camilla and Charles Macaulay. They are everything he is not; they come from affluent families, have a dose of elegance and

sophistication in both their demeanor and style, and are enrolled in the course he was initially declined from. After some time, however, Richard becomes a member of the clique and eventually joins the classes lead by an eccentric yet beguiling professor, Julian Morrow, to whom his students always refer to by his first name. The college itself is located in a rural town in New England, surrounded by woods and mountains, and consists of bricked common buildings covered with ivy and clapboard house dormitories. At some point, Richard learns that some of his friends, inspired by the ancient Greek stories, threw a bacchanal which resulted in death of a stranger. Bunny, who was excluded from the ritual does not know about the manslaughter but teases the group about their endeavor, which causes tensions between the rest of them. They become increasingly anxious that Bunny will reveal the truth to a random person if he ever learns what happened. As their mental conditions deteriorate, Henry, the unofficial leader of the group, produces a plan to murder Bunny to prevent them from suffering the consequences.

Although TSH undoubtedly explores both the wicked and collegiate themes central to DA, it is not clear how a book published at the beginning of the 1990s became the fundament of an internet phenomenon storming the internet and media thirty years later. Perhaps the publication and enormous success of Tartt's last novel, *The Goldfinch* (2013), also frequently mentioned across the internet as a DA book, contributed to the surge of interest in one of its predecessors. *The Goldfinch* was not only long-awaited, as Tartt is known for taking her time in writing, but also seasoned with coincidences such as the start of a Dutch art exhibition featuring *The Goldfinch* (1654) by Carel Fabritius, the eponymous painting, in one of art museums in New York City on the same day as the release of the book.[94] Moreover, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014[95], which must have resulted in revisiting and reexamining Tartt's literary output. In addition, Penguin Ltd. released the 25th anniversary edition of TSH in 2017, which coincides with the beginning of the expansion of DA across social media. It could be therefore argued that TSH not only embodies the movement's values and interests, but also that Tartt and her works reappeared in media at the perfect time for it to become a staple novel for DA.

A book that often follows TSH in lists created by Dark Academics is M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017). Indeed, the novel closely resembles Tartt's story, as it also revolves around memories of one year in college told by a former student around ten years after they

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[94] Julie Bosman, "Writer Brings in the World While She Keeps It at Bay," *The New York Times,* October 20, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/21/books/donna-tartt-talks-a-bit-about-the-goldfinch.html.
[95] The Pulitzer Prizes, "2014 Pulitzer Prizes," https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2014.

happened. The story begins when Oliver Marks, the narrator of the book, leaves prison under the condition that he reveals the details of a murder that took place at his college years ago to a retiring investigator. When they travel to the said place, Oliver starts reminiscing about his final year at the prestigious theatre school and the friendship dynamics between him and six other students. Their roles within the group correspond to the roles they are usually casted as in their acting classes, Oliver being the sidekick, Meredith Dardenne the temptress, Richard Stirling the tyrant, James Farrow the hero, Filippa 'Pip' Kosta the chameleon, Alexander Vass the villain, and, finally, Wren Stirling the ingenue. Yet, during their final year, this dynamic unexpectedly changes. Tensions between the students grow, especially due to Richard's escalating violence, as well as the stress caused by the expectations to excel in their performances, which results in the group murdering him. Thus, Rio's novel not only shares many of TSH's features, but, most importantly, provides an excellent example of DA literature.

However, as DA functions online, it uses both text and images to reproduce invented visions of higher education. Therefore, the movement draws its inspiration not only from literature, but also from photography and, most importantly, cinema. Indeed, Jeffrey J. Williams argues that the campus novel "transferred a good deal of its momentum to film" in the middle of the past century,[96] which certainly contributed to proliferation of visual representations of campus life and education. Figures 14-16 present screenshotted fragments of longer posts that feature selections of motion pictures which prove that the variety of academic experience constitutes a popular movie theme. These posts serve just the same function as the examples of user generated content on literature above.

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[96] Williams, "Academic Novel," 562.

Dark Academia in Films

1. Rope by Dir. Alfred Hitchcock (1948)
2. A Seperate Peace by Dir. Larry Peerce (1972)
3. Picnic at Hanging Rock by Dir. Peter Weir (1975)
4. Suspiria by Dir. Dario Argento (1977)
5. Maurice by Dir. James Ivory (1987)
6. Dead Poets Society by Dir. Peter Weir (1989)
7. School Ties by Dir. Robert Mandel (1992)
8. A Little Princess by Dir. Alfonso Cuarón (1995)
9. Lost and Delirious by Dir. Léa Pool (2001)
10. Mona Lisa Smile by Dir. Mike Newell (2003)
11. The History Boys by Dir. Nicholas Hytner (2006)
12. Freedom Writers by Dir. Richard LaGravenese (2007)
13. The Great Debaters by Dir. Denzel Washington (2007)
14. Brideshead Revisited by Dir. Julia Jarrold (2018)
15. Black Swan by Dir. Darren Aronofsky (2010)
16. Kill Your Darlings by Dir. John Krokidas (2013)
17. The Riot Club by Dir. Lone Scherfig (2014)

Figure 14. Fragment of a longer recommendations post. A selection of DA films. @aadamthorn, "Dark Academia in various medias masterpost," June 20, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/aadamthorn/185773215723/dark-academia-in-various-medias-masterpost.

movies 🎥

– dead poets society

– kill your darlings

– the history boys

– the dreamers

Figure 15. Fragment of a longer recommendations post. Essential DA films. @perhaps-im-a-wizard, "a dark academia checklist," July 31, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/perhaps-im-a-wizard/186680220789/a-dark-academia-checklist?source=share.

Figure 16. Fragment of a longer recommendations post. A subjective selection of DA films. Emphasis on the importance of DPS and KYD for the movement. @micheles-journal, "Guide for Dark Academia – movies+ my rating," December 26, 2021, https://www.tumblr.com/micheles-journal/671637156113072128/movies-with-a-dark-academia-aesthetic-are-often.

Although some of the mentioned movies favor individual stories or focus on private affairs, be it of students of teachers, most of them present stories about students struggles and disturbing aspects of academic settings, as it was in the case novels in Figure 10b. For instance, *Whiplash* (2014), directed by Damien Chazelle, focuses on a determined music student who suffers psychological abuse from one of his instructors. Another example is Lone Scherfig's *The Riot Club*, which also premiered in 2014, and which introduces the audience to an elite dining club at the University of Oxford, where most members indulge in hedonism and reckless behavior which leads to brutality and third-party harm. It is therefore evident that DA narratives feature educational institutions that become a playground for malevolent characters who are on each end of the academic hierarchy.

Yet, just as it was in the case of new DA literature, some of these films enjoy wider recognition and can therefore be considered as parts of the core of the movement. Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) is definitely such a movie, as it is mentioned or visible even in

posts concerning literature or the general understanding of the movement (see figure 1). The action takes place in Welton Academy, an elite preparatory school for boys, where students are subjected to discipline, pressure and expectations of the teachers and their parents. The narrative begins with a new semester, when Todd Anderson transfers to the school to follow the footsteps of his older brother who was a valedictorian there. He joins a group of friends thanks to his new roommate, Neil Perry, who is focused on fulfilling his father's plan to become a doctor. When John Keating, a new English teacher, joins the teaching staff, the students are faced with methods they have not experienced before: discussion, creativity, and freedom in thinking. The boys become increasingly fascinated with the new teacher, but also feel encouraged to break the existing rules and seek more independence to do what they desire. As a result, Neil not only restarts an old secret student society, but also decides to follow his dream and perform in a play put on by neighboring school against his father's will. When the father discovers that Neil disregarded his orders, he transfers the boy to a miliary academy as a punishment. Unable to confront his father, Neil shots himself out of despair at being unable to pursue his passion. Therefore, despite following high school students, it is evident that DPS reflects some of the modern anxieties that lie at the heart of DA, which is the pressure to excel and the compulsion to sacrifice one's passions for future financial prospects.

Finally, in lists prepared by Dark Academics, DPS is usually tightly followed by John Krokidas' *Kill Your Darlings* (2013). Unlike the vast majority of DA literary and cinematic works, KYD is based on true events and characters, portraying the story of the poet Allen Ginsberg and his fellow writers—Lucien Carr, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac— whom he met during his time at Columbia University. After his admission to Columbia, Ginsberg becomes disenchanted by conventional methods, attitudes and curricula at the faculty and yearns for revolutionary ideas. He meets Lucien Carr, a non-conformist student, to whom he soon becomes attracted and who introduces Ginsberg to his dissident circle of friends. There is palpable tension between Carr and one of the men, David Kammerer, who, as it turns out, has been following Carr for years and producing assignments for him. As the relations between Ginsberg, Carr, Burroughs, and Kerouac strengthen, the group begins to formulate subversive literary principles and Ginsberg becomes increasingly engrossed in exploration of new poetry and drugs. At the same time, the tension between Carr and Kammerer increases, as the latter is systematically turned down by him and excluded from the group. Soon, Kammerer is found dead and Carr is convicted of stabbing him and disposing

the body in the river. The felon asks Ginsberg for help in writing a testimony that will grant him parole but since the circumstances of the crime are not transparent, the poet is torn between telling the truth and saving his friend. Therefore, the story presented in KYD contains the themes typical for DA works, such as prestigious academic setting, focus on the humanities and exploration of one's passions, as well as complicated group dynamics and, eventually, murder.

The four works of literature and cinema introduced in the paragraphs above—TSH, IWWV, DPS and KYD—constitute the primary sources for the analysis of DA themes in the later part of this thesis. There is no doubt about the similarities between them: each narrative takes place either at a prestigious school or university, following a group of students who struggle due to internal and external pressures. Their stories revolve around friendship and group dynamics, include gay or queer-coded characters, and portray deep interest in or even obsession with their subjects of study. They also include descriptions of hostile nature of the portrayed institutions and the people who work there and, most significantly, death of one of the students. In addition, the fact that the users following and creating DA content across social media repeatedly refer to these four pieces confirms their importance and relevance for both the movement and for this analysis.

Chapter Two

Schoolhouse Gothic in selected DA texts

Schoolhouse Gothic

Sherry R. Truffin noticed that modern portrayals of teachers, schools and students in literature reproduce themes that fall into the category of the Gothic. In her monograph titled *Schoolhouse Gothic: Haunted Hallways and Predatory Pedagogues in Late Twentieth-Century American Literature and Scholarship* (2008), Truffin proposes, justifies, and explores the eponymous Schoolhouse Gothic, a sub-genre or mode of writing in contemporary American literature. She begins with considering the nature of a Gothic tale, quoting that

> [it unites] a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space," (…) "produc[ing] an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.[97]

and

> invoke[s] the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine of the hero) within the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in upon itself.[98]

Therefore, the Gothic is understood as an occurrence that emerges at the clash of time, which is rendered as a curse haunting the present, and space, understood as a physical confinement, which results in losing the coherence of the self.[99] In her theory, however, Truffin additionally distinguishes three types of disintegration: paranoia, violence, and a creation of a monster.[100] These three products of the Gothic experience can also be respectively understood as "loss of sanity," "loss of control or loss of life," and "monstrosity, wherein the protagonist loses his humanity."[101] Together with curses and traps, they constitute the basis for analysis of the primary works in this thesis. Thus, the following paragraphs discuss them in greater detail.

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[97] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 4.
[98] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 4.
[99] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[100] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[101] Thomas A. Atwood and Wade M. Lee, "The Price of Deviance: Schoolhouse Gothic in Prep School Literature," *Children's Literature* 35 (2007): 103. https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.2007.0002.

Curses

Apart from its identified origin in Late Old English, the etymological ancestry of the word "curse" is unknown. Whereas most of its definitions refer to theology and concern invoking or being burdened with evil, the one which makes the link between the Gothic and curse particularly visible defines it as "the evil inflicted by divine (or supernatural) power in response to an imprecation, or in the way of retributive punishment."[102] Here, the curse appears either as a result of deliberate conjuring or as a repayment for an earlier arrangement between the invoker and the said power. Therefore, a curse is given two aspects: it can exist both as an action and or an entity imposed as a result of a previous act. Although the Gothic cannot claim to have invented themes such as divine retribution and presence of supernatural powers, they render attitudes that emerged as the movement's reaction to the Enlightenment.

The relation between the Enlightenment and the Gothic is marked by the contrast in their approaches to the past. The Gothic is obsessed with the former times, which, in the Enlightenment's terms become "defeated," as the Age of Reason "was to save us from superstition and darkness by brining all things into the light."[103] Moreover, Truffin reasons that under this striving for clearing out the shadows of the past, there exists an insistence to attain perfection, and that this insistence is the root cause for the Gothic's opposition to the Enlightenment.[104] Interestingly enough, the fact that the Gothic denies the Enlightenment's endeavors to renounce the past indeed deepens its obsession with the bygone times and thus constitutes a new curse itself.

Therefore, the Enlightenment and its relationship with the Gothic that form a multifaceted aspect of the Truffin's phenomenon, especially in the context of curses. On the one hand, the Age of Reason functions "either as a mask for old curses or as a source of new ones."[105] Indeed, Truffin claims that it is the idea of "value-free scholarship" that acts as a camouflage for power structures persisting in academia.[106] Following this logic, it can be inferred that the objectivity and rationality identified with the Enlightenment have contributed to the academy's evolution into an environment where inequalities persist. These enduring hierarchies, together with the Enlightenment, constitute the two forms curses assume within

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[102] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "curse, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3690264898.
[103] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 6-9.
[104] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 9.
[105] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 9-10.
[106] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 14.

the Schoolhouse Gothic.[107] Thus, the Gothic's predecessor functions both as a source, as well as a manifestation of curses in Truffin's theory.

As mentioned above, persistent hierarchies and inequalities constitute the other type of curses in the Schoolhouse Gothic. Thomas A. Atwood and Wade M. Lee describe these power structures as "self-perpetuating."[108] Considering that, in Truffin's view, the academy is

> haunted by its post-Enlightenment role, which is—from Pierre Bourdieu's perspective—keeper and purveyor of cultural capital and—from Michel Foucault's perspective—site of institutional surveillance and normalizing disciplinary power,[109]

it becomes clear that educational system not only allows the existence of inequalities arising from class, but also reinforces them, thus facilitating their never-ending reproduction. In addition, the academy also perpetuates inequalities based on race and gender, despite the fact that people from marginalized groups attend universities in greater numbers, as it creates curricula that not only contain but also praise works underpinned by such principles.[110] This adds to the hierarchies' self-perpetuating character, as the academy echoes these power structures, as well as disseminates them among its students.

Traps

For Truffin, traps are the second inextricable element of Gothic narratives. According to her, they "take the form of school buildings, college campuses, classrooms, and/or offices,"[111] and therefore create a physical confinement for students and staff. Moreover, Atwood and Lee indicate that this sense of incarceration is aggravated by geographical seclusion and Gothic or Gothic-like architectural features, which is additionally "reinforced by policies, such as curfews, designed to keep students within the campus."[112] Thus, both the location and style of educational institutions in Schoolhouse Gothic narratives set a trap for people attending them. Bearing in mind that these narratives usually take place in the second half of the twentieth century, secluded campuses, apart from ensnaring their student body, constitute an expression of both anachronism and anatopism. The architecture suspends these schools in time, as their physical existence is bound to the here and now of the narrative, yet

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[107] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[108] Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Deviance," 103.
[109] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 10.
[110] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 10-16.
[111] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[112] Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Deviance," 105.

their design links them to the distant past of the Middle Ages. At the same time, Gothic architecture is also a form of anatopism for the narratives set in the United States, as this style originated and evolved from other styles that had existed in Europe.

Apart from physical traps, Truffin also discerns immaterial pitfalls of academia. She argues that modern scholarship glorifies objectivity to the degree that it "prevents the academic from seeing his or her own interests and biases, which—ironically—allows those interests and biases free play within his or her work."[113] In addition, these biases reinforce the cursed hierarchies within education.[114] Although Truffin concludes that "the teacher's version [of the schoolhouse Gothic] is as frightening as—if not more frightening than—the student's,"[115] she does not elaborate on how intellectual traps faced by scholars influence narratives about students' perspectives. She only claims this link manifests itself in form of a belief persisting among fictional pupils that they have been "unfairly subjected to a sinister power", which results in them acting in ways that are aimed at exposing the teachers' cruelty and ill will.[116] Bearing in mind the anecdote provided in the introduction to the book in which Truffin recalls pondering on Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall," it is implied that many students, perhaps unconsciously, take popular accounts of education for their own.[117] Thus, it can be considered that another form of the intellectual traps in schoolhouse Gothic that concern students is adapting someone else's beliefs without criticism or reflection.

Other than physical and intellectual traps, Atwood and Lee provide an additional form to Truffin's understanding. They propose the existence of societal traps, arguing that they are rendered in the forms of honor codes which instill dread of discipline and sanctioning in order to elicit the desired behaviors in students.[118] In addition, the closed nature of emulous and often single-sex private school environments that intensifies societal pressures, as well as the "cliquishness" among students, based both on their background and "differing attitudes towards the administration," also constitute traps in prep school fiction.[119] Therefore, in the context of school environments, social traps have external origin and become replicated by the students.

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[113] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 19.
[114] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[115] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 167.
[116] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 18.
[117] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 2.
[118] Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Deviance," 105.
[119] Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Deviance," 105.

Paranoia

It is no coincidence that from a wide array of mental disorders it is paranoia, generally understood as "any unjustified or excessive sense of fear; *esp.* an unreasonable fear of the actions or motives of others,"[120] that is particularly visible in Gothic fiction. Truffin adapts Baldick's view that the fears expressed within this literature

> "belon[g] specifically to the modern age of Europe and the Americas since the end of the eighteenth century" and are directed toward "inherited powers and corruptions of feudal aristocracy, and with similar lineages and agencies of archaic authority … which threaten still to fix [their] dead hand upon us."[121]

From this point it is evident that Gothic fears stem from its obsession with the past, as well as from the sense of being trapped within the old power structures that persist and thus haunt the present.

This impression of impalpable incarceration is paranoid in nature, but also additionally reinforced by physical confinement within academic space and the policies there implemented. Truffin connects these Gothic fears with the idea of Panopticon, a construction that facilitates monitoring those detained within it in such a way that they do not know if they are being observed. Using Foucault's view that a person confined within it "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power (…) [and] becomes the principle of his own subjection," she forms an analogy to the modern education system where students become prisoners or even guinea pigs for the teachers who exercise authority among them.[122] Moreover, Atwood and Lee's proposal of societal traps also functions within this principle. As schools employ discipline policies, students either adapt these or develop other social codes that result in their self-restraint, but are indeed always underpinned with fear, sometimes paranoiac, of being punished, watched, or disfavored, be it by the school or by their peers.

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[120] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "paranoia, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9204234371.
[121] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic*, 4.
[122] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic*, 20-22.

Violence

Much like paranoia, violence, the second product of Gothic experience, is also of intangible nature. Truffin is mostly concerned with what she calls "epistemic violence" and uses Orientalism as an example. She claims that

> Orientalism is a body of knowledge that has neither basis nor meaning apart from Western colonial power, and it is a body of knowledge that does violence to its subject: it *is* a form of epistemic violence, and it both *springs from* and *gives rise* to physical violence.[123]

Thus, epistemic violence in Schoolhouse Gothic relates to the academy's capability to create discourse that not only perpetuates external power structures, but also assaults its objects of interest. This assault is carried out specifically due to the fact the academy has "a sinister power: the power of definition," and gives the possibility to delineate the rules and norms of existence within said discourse and the education system itself, which also justifies the existence of discipline and systems of penalties in case of noncompliance with the standards.[124] It also results in oppression directed both inwards and outwards academia and the power systems it follows. Those within them must adhere under the threat of punishment and exclusion; those already on the outside, regardless of being incapable to or refusing to conform, become further ostracized.

Such environment further contributes to disintegration and eventually results in physical violence. Indeed, Truffin argues that violence "is itself a kind of disintegration of the civilized self or regression to atavistic impulses,"[125] indicating the relation between epistemic oppression and the clash between curses and traps. The implied return to ancestral urges resembles the collapse of linearity of time. As such instincts materialize in the present, they become a curse that haunts those who follow them. Bearing in mind that in the context of Schoolhouse Gothic violence can also be understood as "loss of control or loss of life,"[126] it is implied that succumbing to such primal instincts poses the threat of inhumanity and indulgence in primitive behaviors, which further ensnares in noncompliance with the rules and norms enforced by academia.

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[123] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 23. Emphasis by the author.
[124] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 23-27.
[125] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5.
[126] Atwood and Lee, "The Price of Deviance," 103.

Creation of a monster

The haunting school atmosphere generates pressures which result in creation of a monster. Truffin argues socially disintegrated person is one of the forms that monstrosity can manifest itself in Schoolhouse Gothic. It is usually "psychopaths, zombies, and machines" that are created "from the raw material of the students,"[127] although teachers themselves also can be transformed into monsters by the school systems and experiences.[128] In the case of the students, the metamorphosis is often a result of abuse suffered either at home, school, or both, as these experiences "turn victims into victimizers."[129] Therefore, the creation of a monster in Schoolhouse Gothic often embodies the phrase "violence begets violence," which constitutes a particularly grim aspect of these narratives. Apart from that, students can also be transformed into "conforming automatons,"[130] perhaps less brutal monstrous shape. This also happens under the pressure of school experiences and system but is rather connected to how the order and hierarchy of an institution shape and limit the behaviors of pupils. Since, as I argued above, DA constitutes modern students' reaction to the anxieties they suffer in their academic environments, I decided to dedicate more thought and space to perspective of fictive youth, as I find it more consistent with the nature of the movement itself.

Apart from that, Truffin also considers academic discourse as a form of monstrosity. She argues that discourse "freezes and reifies the epistemic violence that the academy visits upon its victims"[131] and reifies monstrosity itself,[132] at the same time claiming in one of her analyses that "[t]he schoolteacher's discourse and tests are forms of violence"[133] which I find somewhat incoherent. Generally understood as various forms of academic communication, discourse, in my view, can signify the mode of transmitting information not only between scholars, but also between scholars and students. That involves teaching approaches and methods employed in courses. Therefore, all attitudes to concepts, values, and subjects expressed by the teachers presented in the four chosen work, as well as their methods of dissemination of knowledge and maintaining the school order will be considered as forms of violence in my analysis.

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[127] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5-6.
[128] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 27.
[129] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 7-8.
[130] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 24.
[131] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 5-6.
[132] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 24.
[133] Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic,* 73.

Anachronism and anatopism

On a deeper level, the convergence of curses and traps that results in paranoia, violence and monstrosity can be considered as coalescence of time and space. I view this synthesis of the dimensions of time and space more as a process in which the structures of each become disassembled and disarranged, hence losing their linearity. In this manner, the breaking up of cohesion manifests itself clearer both in settings and characters of Gothic narratives, thus elucidating Baldick's and Truffin's understanding of relations between curses, traps, and the said disintegration. Moreover, such outlook also offers a possibility to consider Gothic narratives in the view of anachronism and anatopism and explore how the genre/mode approaches and renders the concepts of misplacement. As the terms begin with the prefix 'ana'- which originates in Greek and signifies 'up, in place or time, back, again, anew,'[134] it is clear that anachronism and anatopism can be considered as both one-time obstructions to the linearity of time and space and as phenomena that reoccur within these dimensions.

Firstly, however, let us consider the nature of anachronism. In the simplest terms, anachronism means "an error in chronology."[135] This implies that anachronism is something that occurs by accident, due to the failure to heed the order of time. However, it is also understood as "the placing of something in a period of time to which it does not belong," "the action or practice of making such errors or of placing things in this way," "a person or thing belonging or appropriate to another time," or "an outdated or old-fashioned person or thing."[136] Therefore, this phenomenon can be viewed not only as a passive occurrence, but also as an active deed and its results that are unfitting in their nature.

Moreover, basing on these definitions, it is possible to characterize anachronism in the following views: neglect, transgression, and inappropriateness. In this context, I consider neglect to be lack of reflection on the reasons for a thing's endurance or occurrence in time due to either indifference or inability to contemplate that. Transgression, on the other hand, can be understood as the act of committing temporal disobedience. This chiefly includes a deliberate decision to employ anachronic elements or attitudes, be it from the past of the future. It may be connected to the aforementioned neglect, which may but needs not to constitute the basis for this disobedience. Finally, inappropriateness is a quality exhibited by

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[134] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ana-, prefix", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8627605798.
[135] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "anachronism, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6842940724.
[136] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "anachronism, n."

results of temporal transgressions. Since they are taken out of time, they become improper or unsuitable for the period they occur.

What is more, analogous interruptions can be also observed in space, as there exists anatopism, a concept fairly similar to anachronism, yet much less frequently discussed. By the same token, however with an emphasis on its existence within the realms of art and literature, anatopism can be understood as "an error in geography," "the action or an act of situating something in the wrong place" or "something belonging to another place."[137] It is clear that anatopism can also be perceived as passive and active phenomenon, at the same time being unsuitable for the context it occurred in. For that reason, it can also be considered the same terms as anachronism, that is in terms of neglect, transgression and inappropriateness.

Analysis

TSH

In Tartt's debut novel, the curse of persistent power structures and power inequalities is incarnated as Julian Morrow, the professor of ancient Greek and mentor to the protagonist and the group he follows. Julian's figure is shrouded in mystery; he is known to own a considerable fortune and rumored to have connections with multiple scholars and celebrities, both dead and alive, as well as to have been involved in international political affairs of confidential nature. As much as no one is sure about the truthfulness of these rumors and there is collective disapproval of his teaching methods among the other professors, of which Julian is, nota bene, well aware, his existence at the faculty is not questioned. He is commonly considered "a special case" because "[h]e has taught here for many years and even refuses payment for his work."[138] Therefore, with his unknown origins, acknowledged power and naturalized presence, Julian functions in a similar way to a curse or ghost that haunts the present.

The forced isolation of Julian's students is a key factor allowing him to create, as described by Richard, "his own little academy of ancient Greek, student body five, six including me."[139] Firstly, the students are entrapped in a detached campus in northern Vermont belonging to a "highly selective" liberal art college with enrollment of around five

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[137] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "anatopism, n.", July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7731121720.
[138] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 14.
[139] Tartt, *TSH,* 32.

hundred.[140] Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles are not in touch with students on campus, as they rent their apartments in town. In addition, they also avoid contacts with their neighbors. On the other side, Richard and Bunny, who reside in a dormitory, naturally have contact with others, but the former becomes more avoidant in the course of the novel. Moreover, they are the only students to be admitted to Julian's classes, which take place in a "small building on the edge of the campus, old and covered with ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from the landscape," occupied only by him.[141] In addition, Julian himself admits while interviewing the protagonist for admission:

> I believe that having a great diversity of teachers is harmful and confusing for a young mind, in the same way I believe that it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially. (…) I know the modern world tends not to agree with me, but after all, Plato had only one teacher, and Alexander.[142]

It is therefore clear that Julian's approach to teaching aims at ensuring that he is the sole authority in terms of knowledge for his students. Thus, his students are both physically and mentally isolated from the rest of the faculty, which allows the existence of such a closed group.

This 'society' is strictly protected by Julian's admission criteria. As a precedent, the professor admits only a few students to his courses, which he expects to drop classes with other teachers, unless he advises them otherwise. Apart from that, Julian is described as someone who "conducts the selection on a personal rather than academic basis," since "to study with him, one must have read the right things, hold similar views."[143] Julian himself admits: "I'm afraid my students are never very interesting to me because I always know exactly what they're going to do,"[144] and thus clearly demonstrates the hierarchy established in class where he, the teacher-master, is overseeing his student-puppets. Bearing in mind the multifaceted isolation of Julian's students and considering his teaching methods, it is clear that, due to his respected position discussed above, the professor creates a group with cultish power dynamics.

Julian's greatest power comes from his obsession with the past, upon which he creates a carefully created vision of himself and students which is most likely based on his own life. Though it is not directly stated in the book, Julian has a burning desire to recreate the climate

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[140] Tartt, *TSH,* 10.
[141] Tartt, *TSH,* 15.
[142] Tartt, *TSH,* 32.
[143] Tartt, *TSH,* 13.
[144] Tartt, *TSH,* 30.

of lavish elites from his youth. Although little is known of his past, the students have proofs that the professor used to be a prominent member of the social, cultural, and literary societies in the first half of the twentieth century.[145] Being a wealthy man and still kind of a celebrity himself, yet long out of the prime of his life, Julian yearns for the times of his youth. Thus, he uses his position as a professor to rejuvenate himself and keep both his memories and aesthetic visions alive. Indeed, Julian's class consists of five students who came from affluent families, eminent either for their fortunes or ancestry. The sixth student, Richard, only joins the group as a result of skillfully belying his past and sharing what one could name "expensive taste" with his classmates. They are all accustomed to certain aesthetic of their surroundings and belongings, which includes items such as antique pieces of furniture, fountain pens, tailored suits and shirts, fresh flowers, and leather-bound books, just to name a few. These visual and lifestyle penchants correspond to Julian's vision and become additionally reinforced within the closed atmosphere of the group.

Moreover, his admission criteria constitute a set of roles that Julian appointed for his students which are, in fact, a trap. By the means of his entrance requirements, Julian selects individuals who, as proved above, are predisposed to fit into his fantasy and further manipulates them into fully embracing these visions during his restricted classes. Even small breaches of Julian's decorum meet with his disapproval and he attempts to influence his students' behavior in order to protect it. For instance, Julian immediately shifts the conversation, evidently displeased, when Bunny names "cheddar cheese and common crackers" as offerings he would like to receive, either as a joke or as an honest contribution in their discussion about becoming demigods.[146] It is, however, conspicuous that the students' background usually makes the aesthetic regime uphold itself. The fact that Henry got himself a fountain pen identical with the ones Julian used is a good example. On the one hand, it should come as no surprise that a son of a tycoon can afford buying hundreds-worth stationery, especially since it is popular among his friends. However, Henry not only purchased the pen despite expressing his strong dislike for using them before, but also was accompanied by Julian in the store, which causes consternation even in the group of wealthy young adults[147]. Thus, Julian exercises influence on his students outside of the school in order to protect his vision to the last detail.

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[145] Tartt, *TSH,* 140-141.
[146] Tartt, *TSH,* 40.
[147] Tartt, *TSH,* 35-36.

Julian's intense devotion to fantasy is also an act of violence towards his students. Since his approach to teaching "ran more along the lines of benevolent dictatorship than democracy," as he believed himself superior to his students on the grounds as he knew more,[148] Julian claimed the right to demand adherence to his fantasy. The protagonist discloses:

> He refused to see anything about any of us except our most engaging qualities, which he cultivated and magnified to the exclusion of all our tedious and less desirable ones. (…) [T]here was never any doubt that he did not wish to see us in our entirety, or see us, in fact, in anything other than the magnificent roles he had invented for us: genis gratus, corpore glabellus, arte multiscius, et fortuna opulentus – smooth-cheeked, soft-skinned, well educated, and rich.[149]

It could be argued that Julian is not willing to or, perhaps, not able to see beyond the vision he created. This, on the other hand, resembles a fatal flaw which stains Julian's mind, quite ironically since he is a professor of Greek. Nevertheless, he expects his students not only to fully embrace the characters he invented for his story as their identity, but also to discard any characteristics that do not correspond to his vision. By means of manipulating and isolating his students, he forces them to act appropriately to his fantasy and thus strips them of the freedom to seek other sources and, ultimately, to develop and grow accordingly to their knowledge.

Therefore, Julian's teachings not only encourage the students to indulge in his fixations, but also force them to take them as their own. Julian's obsession with the past is primarily visible in his devotion to the classics. His classroom, described as "some sort of Platonic microcosm of what he thought a schoolroom should be,"[150] functioned more as a meeting place or even a café in which he would dispute with his students for hours. In his teachings he would stir up ideas and hypothetical musings set in the themes of the ancient cultures, such as the aforementioned discussion about demigods. As silly as it may appear, these methods resulted in the students inheriting his obsessions. In Richard's first class with the group, the professor discussed the concept of divine madness that could be experienced by losing control in a rite such as bacchanal.[151] Henry, infatuated with the professor and his teachings, eventually persuades the group to recreate the ancient ritual. In an honest talk with Richard, the boy admits:

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[148] Tartt, *TSH,* 365.
[149] Tartt, *TSH,* 365.
[150] Tartt, *TSH,* 34.
[151] Tartt, *TSH,* 42-45.

> 'I was obsessed with the idea.'
> 'Why?'
> 'Well, as far as I knew, it hadn't been done for two thousand years.' He paused when he saw he hadn't convinced me. 'After all, the appeal to stop being yourself, even for a little while, is very great,' he said. 'To escape the cognitive mode of experience, to transcend the accident of one's moment of being. There are other advantages, more difficult to speak of, things which ancient sources only hint at and which I myself only understood after the fact.'[152]

It is therefore clear that Henry, apart from inheriting his professor's obsessions, takes these fixations as his own. His statement also points at the idea of losing oneself, which is not only an echo of Julian's teachings, but, most importantly, a form of mental disintegration described by Truffin. It is evident that under Julian's influence, his students lose the coherence of their identity, beliefs, and reality, as they develop a conviction of embodying forsaken ancient ideas.

As a result, the group develops their own power structure and establishes their own criteria for affinity and inclusion, which eventually creates a break-up within the group. Although the admission to the class is based on class and attitude, as regulated by Julian's requirements, the position and acceptance of the students also requires dedication to the field of study and to the established aesthetic of the group. Throughout the novel, Henry emerges as the unauthorized commander among the students. Indeed, he "was said to be wealthy; what's more, he was a linguistic genius. He spoke a number of languages, ancient and modern, and had published a translation of Anacreon, with commentary, when he was only eighteen."[153] His abilities, together with his appearance, described as follows,

> he was quite large, well over six feet – was dark-haired, with a square jaw and coarse, pale skin. He might have been handsome had his features been less set, or his eyes, behind the glasses, less expressionless and blank,[154]

as well as his close relationship with Julian make him the leader of the group. This grants him power to persuade his friends to throw a bacchanal and, eventually, to decide that Bunny and Richard would not be part of it.

It quickly becomes apparent that, despite sharing similar attitudes and class background, Bunny stands out from the group in terms of interests and academic achievement. Surprisingly, Bunny had been studying Greek for the longest, starting the at the

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[152] Tartt, *TSH,* 182.
[153] Tartt, *TSH,* 19.
[154] Tartt, *TSH,* 17.

age of twelve, "a circumstance about which he perpetually boasted" which was the result his prep school's policy to assign dyslexic students like him "to study languages (…) which did not utilize the Roman alphabet."[155] Yet, in comparison to his fellow students, Bunny is struggling in class, has troubles distinguishing Latin and Greek grammar, and, as described by Richard, "his talent as a linguist was considerably less than he led one to believe, and he was unable to wade through even the simplest assignments without continual questions, complaints, and infusions of food."[156] Therefore, Bunny's presence in the group is based solely on his past and Julian's requirements, and not on his dedication to the field of study. As a result, he gradually becomes excluded and later persecuted by the rest under Henry's command.

Richard's case is particular, as his background differs from the rest of the group. Yet, the student's fatal flaw, "a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs,"[157] as he describes it, provides him with the key to join Julian's class. Richard's longing is nothing but obsession with a nostalgic vision of a sophisticated life, that is, a life completely different than his. Growing up in Plano, a small village in California, his reality consisted of a mean father, ugly house, unsupportive mother, as well as cheap clothes, haircut he did not like and lack of friends; circumstances that made him feel that "[his] existence was tainted, in some subtle but essential way."[158] As he has never considered his living conditions to be attractive or aesthetically pleasing, he develops a burning desire to retell his story and refashion himself. Indeed, Richard admits that "[o]n leaving home [he] was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers."[159] Eventually, he uses this dreamed up vision "full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents"[160] to finesse Julian. As a result, the professor falls victim to a student equally obsessed with achieving a carefully created aesthetic vision and admits him to the class.

Despite his lies, Richard's existence within the group is justified by his considerable knowledge of Greek and the aforementioned dedication to the aesthetic curated by Julian. Ironically, Richard's decision to study ancient Greek was dictated by opportunity and laziness, and not fascination with languages or history. Before enrolling in Hampden, he studied

[155] Tartt, *TSH,* 103.
[156] Tartt, *TSH,* 103.
[157] Tartt, *TSH,* p.5.
[158] Tartt, *TSH,* p.6.
[159] Tartt, *TSH,* p.5.
[160] Tartt, *TSH,* p.5.

medicine and took the Greek course only to "fulfill the humanities requirement" and be allowed to "sleep late on Mondays," as the classes took place in the afternoon.[161] However, Richard claims to have "excelled in it" and to have been appreciated by the Classics department at his old college.[162] Even then his desire to create an aesthetically fulfilling life was visible, as Greek became his favorite course "because it was the only one held in a regular classroom – no jars of cow heart, no smell of formaldehyde, no cages full of screaming monkeys."[163] In the closed atmosphere of Julian's class, Richard's flair for Greek further develops, yet is overshadowed by his obsession with the group. This fascination, in fact, was the main reason for him to join. In his view, "they were an arresting party at least to [him], who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities."[164] Bearing in mind his burning desire to change the circumstances of his life, it is clear that becoming a member of the group constitutes a chance to fulfil Richard's aesthetic fantasies.

Ultimately, Julian's methods transform his students into monsters. Isolated from the faculty and the college itself, they develop a sense of superiority over those who do not share their fascinations and attitudes, which is revealed by their preparations to and reactions after the bacchanal. Infatuated with the figure of the professor and obsessed with his teachings, Henry formulates a plan to perform the rite which entails weeks of "trial and error" preparations, including fasting and other forms of spiritual and physical cleansing, but also "[d]ring, drugs, prayer, even small doses of poison," preparing chitons and chanting hymns in the woods.[165] It is this period that put the seal on Bunny's status as persona non grata of the group. During the preparations Bunny would play the fool and seem not to be fully engaged in the undertaking. Eventually, Henry decides to exclude him from the rite. He explains:

> I couldn't bear the thought that, after everything we'd done, he'd ruin it at the last minute. And I knew he would. At the crucial moment he'd start to tell some asinine joke and ruin everything. By the second day I was having my doubts, and then, on the afternoon of the night itself, Charles saw him in Commons having a grilled cheese sandwich and a milk shake. That did it.[166]

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[161] Tartt, *TSH,* 8.
[162] Tartt, *TSH,* 8.
[163] Tartt, *TSH,* 7-8.
[164] Tartt, *TSH,* 17.
[165] Tartt, *TSH,* 182-185.
[166] Tartt, *TSH,* 185-186.

Therefore, Bunny's lack of engagement and his passive interest in classics results in the group's leader animosity towards him, with the sandwich being a symbolic transgression both against the commitment to the "project" and the general aesthetic penchants of the group.

Bunny's exclusion from the ritual results in the group's success that brought about dire consequences for him, yet it was the death of a bystander that turned out to be the most fatal outcome of the rite. Without Bunny's distracting jokes, the group managed to enter the state of frenzy and lost control over their minds and bodies. They were covered in mud and non-human bite marks; Camilla believed to be a dear and the rest claimed to be chasing one for miles; eventually, Henry was attacked by "a large, indistinct yellow thing," which he brutally fought off with his fists; when they started coming to their senses, they saw a man with a crushed skull at Henry's feet.[167] Despite the blood and gore, it is their attitude towards the victim that proves their monstrosity. The group decided to flee, considering it "the smartest thing [they] could have done," as Vermont is "a primitive place" where "people die violent natural deaths all the time."[168] This, together with the confession below, proves the group's sense of superiority over other people, especially those unaffiliated with academia, classics or coming from lower classes.

> 'It's a terrible thing, what we did,' said Francis abruptly. 'I mean, *this man was not Voltaire we killed*. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it.'
> 'Well, of course, I do too,' said Henry *matter-of-factly*. 'But not bad enough to want to go to jail for it.'[169]

Finally, the accidental manslaughter results in a growing sense of paranoia. Bunny becomes the catalyst for the group's mental disintegration, as he still knew about his friends' intentions despite being excluded from the bacchanal. He learns about their success by accident, as he sneaks up to Henry's apartment to scare him as a form of a prank and punishment for not telling him where the group went.[170] Unable to cover the blood on their clothes, the group lies that they killed a deer on their way back. They were not worried that he would call the police on them but that "he's just a fool, and sooner or later he's going to say the wrong thing to the wrong person."[171] Indeed, Bunny, being the joker of the group, immediately starts teasing them about it which shortly turns into torture. Desperate to quiet him, they begin to lavish him with money and gifts, but he grows more and more erratic in his

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[167] Tartt, *TSH,* 188-189.
[168] Tartt, *TSH,* 190.
[169] Tartt, *TSH,* 220. Emphasis added.
[170] Tartt, *TSH,* 200.
[171] Tartt, *TSH,* 197.

jokes and whims, which only worsens after he discovers the truth. Eventually, their fears get confirmed the night he walks drunk in Richard's room and tells him about what happened, which results in acceleration and execution of their plan to silence Bunny forever.

IWWV

Dellecher Classical Conservatory, the setting of IWWV also features all Schoolhouse Gothic elements. As expressed by Oliver Marks, the protagonist, it took him years to understand

> what [he] as a student was willfully blind to: Dellecher was less an academic institution than a cult. When we first walked through these doors, we did so without knowing that we were now part of some strange fanatic religion where anything could be excused so long as it was offered at the altar of the Muses. Ritual madness, ecstasy, human sacrifice. Were we bewitched? Brainwashed? Perhaps.[172]

This quote will serve as a basis for my analysis of IWWV, as it encapsulates the curses and traps of the conservatory. Firstly, it is evident that the entire college is obsessed with art, to the point of elevating it to the status of not even a greater good, but a universal value and ultimate goal for those who work and study there. The imagery of walking through the door of a cultish institution also indicates a certain degree of isolation from the rest of the world, which ensnares those who enroll. Finally, the reference to losing one's mind and life naturally corresponds with the ideas of mental disintegration, violence, and monstrosity. All these elements pervade the atmosphere of Dellecher, ultimately tormenting the students.

In the case of IWWV, the curse is realized in form of a set of traditions. Firstly, the school year at Dellecher is dictated by recurrent array of events which completely engulf the students' attention in a given period. For instance, the philosophy students would "rebuil[d] their Ship of Theseus every January" or the dance department would organize a performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in April.[173] This repetitiveness contributes to the immutability and sense of isolation within the school, as it imposes an additional timeline that is idiosyncratic for this institution. When it comes to the theater students, their periodical assignments include performing "scenes from *Macbeth* on Halloween and scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* at the Christmas masque."[174] Apart from that, they also hold their own set of

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[172] M. L. Rio, *If We Were Villains*, (London: Titan Books, 2017), 106.
[173] Rio, *IWWV*, 50.
[174] Rio, *IWWV*, 50.

traditions, which include the fourth-years performing only tragedies and history plays, the third-years – only romances and comedies, while the second-years would take "all the bit parts" and the first-years would "slog through general education" and work backstage.[175] The recurrence and established importance of these customs form a certain kind of a law that, as demonstrated by the theater department, also dictates the hierarchy of students.

At the same time, the location and infrastructure of the college constitute a trap for the students. Located in "a small town of almost no consequence"[176] in Illinois, the campus of the fictional Dellecher college consists of twenty acres of a hilly terrain with a dense forest, lake with a beach and docks, and multiple aged buildings, the oldest erected in the 1850s. Inside of them, apart from dormitories and classrooms, one could find a "gold-spangled music hall,"[177] a ballroom, refectory, as well as theatre, rehearsal hall and studios. When it comes to the student housing,

> [t]he first-years were housed in a cluster of brick buildings in town, while the second- and third-years were crowded together at the Hall, and the handful of fourth-years were tucked away in odd isolated corners of campus or left to fend for themselves. We, the fourth-year theatre students, lived on the far side of the lake in what was whimsically called the Castle (not really a castle, but a small stone building that happened to have one turret, originally the groundskeepers' quarters.)[178]

It is clear that the accommodations reflect the gradually growing isolation of the students from the rest of the world, as well as other students. Moreover, the location and facilities of the college contribute to its detached atmosphere, as they appear to be suspended in time, resembling more of a fairy tale or Gothic estate than a late-twentieth-century college. This anachronistic essence of Dellecher results in the immutability of the place, which, on the other hand, perpetuates the established order and provides an environment for the cultish atmosphere to thrive and continue.

In addition, the college's elite status serves as another isolating factor. In the case of the theater students at Dellecher, the enrollment remains strikingly low. Oliver and his six friends are the only fourth-year thespians, and the student body of the remaining three years amounts to little more than forty.[179] Although the number of students of other degrees is not accounted for in the novel, it is known that the school awards degrees in only six other

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[175] Rio, *IWWV*, 22.
[176] Rio, *IWWV*, 12.
[177] Rio, *IWWV*, 45.
[178] Rio, *IWWV*, 20-21.
[179] Rio, *IWWV*, 27.

disciplines which, considering the description of the housing system above, indicates that the enrollment is similar. Moreover, Oliver openly points at the school's "dangerous exclusivity," at the same time stating that "a Dellecher certificate was like one of Willy Wonka's golden tickets—guaranteed to grant the bearer admission to the elite artistic and philological sodalities that survived outside of academia."[180] Therefore, by becoming a student at Dellecher, young people enter not only a microcosm that is closed to the world outside the arts, but also a highly competitive pursuit of excellence.

The conservatory's prestige stems from the impressive skills exhibited by its graduates, which additionally justifies the use of unorthodox teaching methods. Dean Holinshed's opening lecture at the convocation held at the beginning of the new semester hints at the nature of the teaching approach at Dellecher. The students hear the following words:

> Make art, make mistakes, and have no regrets. You have come to Dellecher because you prized something above money, above convention, above the kind of education that can be evaluated on a numeric scale. I do not hesitate to tell you that you are remarkable. However (…) our expectations are adjusted to match your enormous potential. We expect you to be dedicated. We expect you to be determined. We expect you to dazzle us. And we *do not like* to be disappointed.[181]

Despite starting in a fairly encouraging manner, the speech implies that at Dellecher "end justifies the means." It is evident that the conservatory is an institution that gives priority to cultivating its own traditions and employs nonconventional methods in order to ensure the preservation of both the established practices and their high standards.

Indeed, the unusual teaching approach at Dellecher results in mental turmoil of the students. The curriculum of the theater studies focuses solely on performing Shakespeare's plays[182] and features only the material that could deepen the understanding of his texts.[183] This dedication to Shakespeare is, in fact, a form of obsession with the past characteristic for Schoolhouse Gothic narratives and which, in the case of IWWV, comes in hand with the already established traditions at the conservatory. For instance, after being casted in the annual performances, the students are forbidden to inform others about their parts.[184] Apart from producing a sense of mystery and excitement, this practice mostly results in a growing

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[180] Rio, *IWWV*, 32-33.
[181] Rio, *IWWV*, 48. Emphasis by the author.
[182] Rio, *IWWV*, 33.
[183] Rio, *IWWV*, 41.
[184] Rio, *IWWV*, 50.

sense of uncertainty and stress. The students are expected to deliver excellent performance, yet they are clueless about what to anticipate in terms of the style of dialogue and choreography which also includes combat scenes. Moreover, bearing in mind that on the day of the Halloween performance, the students "avoided one another, slunk into corners, and muttered [their] lines to [themselves], like the inmates of a lunatic asylum,"[185] it is evident that such practices contribute to the general isolation of the actors and, by extension, negatively affect their mental health.

It is also clear that some of the professors use the school's emphasis on excellence to justify their psychologically and physically exploiting methods. The students are subjected to onerous training which is aggravated by constant pressure to impress their teachers. Gwendolyn, who is responsible for "more visceral elements of acting—voice and body, heart over head,"[186] is universally feared by the thespians, as she is determined to push her students to their limits. For instance, in order to "banish the fear of vulnerability," she ruthlessly interrogates the students about their strengths and weaknesses in front of their classmates, additionally pressuring the actors by interrupting their sentences, raising her voice and picking holes in what they say.[187] She expects nothing less than perfection, be it in dedication to physical exercise, knowledge of the assigned lines, posing for publicity photos and posters or conveying her artistic vision on stage. After one of the rehearsals for *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar,* Alexander complains:

> Every time we do The Fucking Tent Scene with Gwendolyn's commentary, I just want to lie down and die. (…) Look, I expect to be emotionally exhausted after a show, but she makes that scene so real that I look at you *off*stage and I can't decide if I want to kiss you or kill you.[188]

Undoubtedly, Gwendolyn's methods and perfectionism, both justified by the school's pursuit of excellence in the name of art, result in emotional abuse of her students. It is therefore clear that Dellecher's unorthodox teaching approach allows for the use of violence which is aggravated by the closed and obsessive atmosphere.

The department's obsession with Shakespeare together with the teachers' striving for perfection results in normalization of violence at the faculty. As the professors are determined to push the students to their limits in order to deliver the most convincing performance, they

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[185] Rio, *IWWV*, 69.
[186] Rio, *IWWV*, 41.
[187] Rio, *IWWV*, 37-40.
[188] Rio, *IWWV*, 112. Emphasis by the author.

induce most fierce emotions in the actors, especially when it comes to scenes of violence and combat. This involves teaching students to experience emotions of their characters alongside their own, as "a character's emotions don't cancel out the actor's—instead [they] feel both at once" which results in difficulty "to sort out which is which."[189] It is therefore not unusual for students to experience problems with quitting their roles and being themselves again. Moreover, the professors and actors alike acknowledge that "[i]t's remarkable how the theatre—and Shakespeare in particular—can numb us to the spectacle of violence."[190] These two factors together result in normalization of violence, additionally aggravated by the fact that the students find it challenging to tell the difference between reality and theatre, which is reinforced by combat and swordplay classes, as well as by hours of rehearsing and recreating brutality.

Apart from that, Dellecher's system grants its teachers the power to define the identities of their students, which also constitutes a form of violence. As per custom, the result of the first audition in semester is the decisive factor for the parts the students would take in the yearly staging.[191] Yet, the isolated setting of an exclusive school allows the teachers to abuse their positions in the name of art, and their choice becomes a curse for the young actors who are doomed to play the same type of character in each production. Countless hours of rehearsals compel the students to adapt the literary archetypes as their own identities. In addition, the students are aware of the fact that they are acting off-stage too. At one of the parties, Meredith discloses that she views Oliver as "the only one of [them] who isn't acting all the time, who isn't just playing whatever part Gwendolyn gave [him] three years ago."[192] Oliver himself only understands it years later, and admits that they were completely "*immersed* in Shakespeare," to the point that they "spoke it as a second language, conversed in poetry, and lost touch with reality, a little."[193] It is therefore the professors' power to assign their students to certain archetypes, aggravated by the conservatory's obsession with Shakespeare and the general consent to justify everything in the name of art, that disperses their sense of identity, thus gradually turning them into monsters.

In this manner, the normalized and inflicted "from above" brutality at the Dellecher's theater department perfectly embodies the phrase "violence begets violence." There are two significant ways in which the students impose violence within their group: upon each other

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[189] Rio, *IWWV*, 297.
[190] Rio, *IWWV*, 56.
[191] Rio, *IWWV*, 22.
[192] Rio, *IWWV*,.268.
[193] Rio, *IWWV*, 297. Emphasis by the author.

and upon themselves. The first one stems directly from the archetypes enforced onto them. For instance, as the borders between reality and acting blur, Richard, usually casted as "warlords and despots and anyone else the audience needed to be impressed by or afraid of,"[194] becomes increasingly violent both on- and off-stage. During the rehearsals and performances, he leaves "bruises in raw, vivid blue"[195] on James's arms and "lashe[s] out wildly and hit[s] Filippa right in the stomach, hard enough to knock her sprawling."[196] Outside of the theater, Richard abuses his girlfriend, Meredith, whose skin turns out to be covered with marks which "showed where a heavier hand (…) had touched her, where phantom fingers had squeezed too hard,"[197] and attempts to drown James, who regularly plays his opponents, claiming it was "just a game."[198] Therefore, he literally becomes the tyrant the professors see in him, leaving friendship, compassion and common sense behind.

The latter takes on a form of substance abuse that is a direct result of the stress and anxiety caused by the teaching approach at Dellecher. A psychiatric evaluation of the entire group carried out after Alexander overdosed prescription drugs during the midterm period has the following conclusion: "[b]eyond the obvious problems of stress and exhaustion," which concerned all of them, James and Wren were additionally "exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder."[199] It is therefore evident that Dellecher students misuse substances to release the tension they experience in the course of their studies. Moreover, there is a common acceptance, and even expectation, that the thespians organize lush parties throughout the year, usually at the start of a new semester or directly after their performances. Indeed, Oliver claims that "Frederick and Gwendolyn and probably even Dean Holinshed knew about it but gamely pretended not to," naming the students' "unsupervised residence in the Castle and their infamous penchant for overindulgence" as the reason for this unofficial approval.[200] Therefore, the environment and atmosphere of the conservatory both induce and facilitate such behaviors. In addition, the "bacchanalian proportions"[201] of these festivities which can indeed lead to a direct life-threatening condition, substance abuse at Dellecher constitutes a form of normalized violence that students inflict upon themselves.

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[194] Rio, *IWWV*, 23.
[195] Rio, *IWWV*, 118.
[196] Rio, *IWWV*, 146.
[197] Rio, *IWWV*, 166.
[198] Rio, *IWWV*, 95-97.
[199] Rio, *IWWV*, 344.
[200] Rio, *IWWV*, 42.
[201] Rio, *IWWV*, 82.

The atmosphere of violent tensions and cruelty, aggravated by substances and mixing reality and fiction forces the group to discard their humanity as well. In order to destress after the spring production, the group customarily throws a party, due to alcohol, Richard's hostility transforms into frenzy. Eventually, he storms out of the building, disappears into the forest, and is found floating in the lake with a crushed face the next morning. At first he appears to be dead, yet the group discovers that he is still breathing. When James sets out to save him, Alexander forces everyone to face an uncomfortable truth by asking "Don't say it out loud if you don't want to. But five minutes ago when we thought he was dead, what did you feel?"[202] Exhausted and terrified by Richard's violent outbursts, and, most likely, still intoxicated after the party, they all agree to do nothing and leave him to death. Immediately after, Oliver realizes:

> That loathsome opiate, relief, raced through my veins again—sharp and lucid at the initial prick, before everything went numb. I heard one of the others, maybe Filippa, exhale and I knew I wasn't the only one who felt it. *The moral outrage we should have suffered was quietly put down, suppressed like an unpleasant rumor before it had a chance to be heard.*[203]

There is no doubt that, although they remained passive, it was a deliberate choice to do so. Moreover, the emphasized fragment demonstrates their collective awareness that their decision is unethical, thus proving they have embraced inhumanity as part of their nature.

However, the gravity of their situation torments their minds and contributes to the group's mental disintegration. Oliver confesses:

> What became painfully clear to me, however, was that we had greatly underestimated the enormousness of Richard's absence. He was more than a vacant bedroom, an unoccupied seat in the library, a chair at our refectory table where he sat like *Banquo's ghost*, invisible to everyone but us. (…) He was as much a bully in death as he was in life, a giant who left behind not an empty space so much as a black hole, a huge crushing void that swallowed up all of our comforts, sooner or later.[204]

Richard's absence haunts the rest of the group when they are awake and asleep. He is more than a ghost of the past; he is Banquo's ghost, their collective conscience filling them with remorse. As a result, Oliver suffers from frequent nightmares where he sees Richard with blood dripping from his face, sometimes even seeing him "out of the corner of [his] eye, a

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[202] Rio, *IWWV*, 184.
[203] Rio, *IWWV*, 186. Emphasis added.
[204] Rio, *IWWV*, 314. Emphasis added.

passing shadow, slipping out of sight around the corner."[205] In fact, most of the group are tortured by nightmares, as James "had taken to muttering and fidgeting in his sleep," Meredith trembled during the night and "twice [they] were all woken by sounds of screaming and sobbing from Wren's room."[206] Wren additionally suffers a nervous breakdown, which weakens her physically for a longer period. Alexander, in turn, takes refuge in drugs. Despite desperately wanting to believe that "sometimes [people] drink too much and fall in the lake,"[207] they realize that it was their decision that ultimately killed Richard. His permanent exit forces them to face the brutal truth that they let themselves be blinded by violence and poetry, and that they are indeed unable to separate their own feelings from the characters they play.

Paradoxically, Richard's death also proves the immutability of the order existing at Dellecher. After the case is closed, James is cast as Edmund in *King Lear,* the final production of the year and, not coincidentally, becomes more violent. Eventually, he lashes on Oliver who plays Edgar, his rival, and breaks his nose in a rehearsal, which gives the fictional conflict real life consequences. The next day, Oliver finds a bloody boat hook hidden in James' bed and coerces him to confess the truth during a break in the next staging of *Lear.* Upon discovering that James, overcome with fear for his life and anger, panicked and hit Richard harder than intended, Oliver decides to take the blame on himself. As his friends visit him in custody before trial, he explains that "It's like *Romeo and Juliet.*" (…) "Would you change the ending, if you could? What if Benvolio came forward and said, 'I killed Tybalt. It was me.'"[208] In doing so, Oliver refers directly to the Christmas masque, when he indeed performed as Benvolio, and James was cast as Romeo, who is responsible for Tybalt's death in the play. It is therefore evident that, although their roles eventually change, the students still embody the archetypes forced on them earlier as their moral code. In the end, they leave reason behind and are unable to tell the truth, thus shedding their own identities for the sake of what "Gwendolyn always cast [them]," which in Oliver's case is "simply the loyal sidekick."[209]

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[205] Rio, *IWWV*, 314.
[206] Rio, *IWWV*, 314.
[207] Rio, *IWWV*, 322.
[208] Rio, *IWWV*, 407.
[209] Rio, *IWWV*, 25.

DPS

The school system portrayed in DPS is firmly based on four values that form the backbone of Welton Academy, the setting of the narrative. Referred to as "the four pillars," tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence are not only ubiquitous in the teachers' methods, but also perpetuate the existing power structure of the school. It is impossible not to notice the cross-knit connections between these principles. In DPS, tradition is the cornerstone of the academy's order. As only few have the honor of attending Welton Academy, its customs and practices add to the school's prestige. At the same time, the striving for academic excellence also contributes to the school's considerable reputation and the desire to protect this renown justifies the enforcement of harsh discipline. As a result, the implemented rigor additionally reinforces the traditions, as it aims at preventing deviations from the established norms. Thus, the four pillars form a continuous loop that preserves both itself and the power dynamics at the school.

Therefore, the environment of Welton Academy is a perfect illustration of a curse realized as persistent, self-perpetuating power structure within education system. In this case, students occupy the lowest position in the school's hierarchy and are compelled to adhere to its standards. Students, apart from preparing for university, undergo obedience training which often has already started at home. They are expected to obey the rules and demands of the adults around them and never question their decision. Most of the teachers disregard the boys' individual traits and dignity, which is emphasized by the school's dress code, discipline, as well as their personal attitude, exhibited for instance by Mr. McAllister calling the boys a "horrible phalanx of pubescence."[210] The parents demonstrate similar attitudes, disregarding their emotional needs by, as in Neil's case, punishing them for wanting to pursue their passions, or neglecting to develop a relationship with their children, as exemplified by Todd's parents sending him the same birthday gift every year. Therefore, the school's curse uses this drill to transform its students into prisoners who are stripped from right to self-determination and to develop personal identity, which, ultimately, dehumanizes them.

As it was in the cases of the narratives above, the environment of the school also forms a trap for the students. Typically for Schoolhouse Gothic, Welton Academy is an institution located in a picturesque but detached setting. The school's buildings are mostly built of brick and stone, often covered with ivy and the entire complex is placed upon water

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[210] *Dead Poets Society,* directed by Peter Weir (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1989), 10:17.

and surrounded by fields and woods. Despite the charming setting and architectural features such as a patio with trees and ambulatory, the dormitories are modest in furnishing and certainly not sizeable, as the rooms contain only metal-framed beds, tiny desks, chests of drawers and bare walls.[211] This quite austere style, together with the accommodation plan of the building where the dorms are located in a long one-way corridor, and the detached location of the campus, creates an atmosphere of confinement that isolates the students from the rest of the world. This is additionally aggravated by school policies. For instance, the students are forbidden to leave the grounds without permission and they are subjected to almost constant supervision in study or common rooms. During the day, the teachers ensure the boys adhere to the daily routines and curfews; at night, a janitor and dogs guard the building to prevent anyone from going in or out. Therefore, what seems to be measures of ensuring the safety and steady academic progression of the boys, also functions as a punitive system which, considering the school's isolated location and selectiveness in contacts with other schools or even the town nearby, resembles a prison.

The physical confinement of Welton Academy is inextricably connected to the rigid discipline exercised at the school. On the one hand, the policies described above reinforce both the established practices and the students' adherence to them, thus restricting the boys' freedom of movement. However, it is evident that the teachers' methods also form a mode of exercising discipline. For instance, in their first trigonometry class in the new semester the students hear "Your study of trigonometry requires absolute precision. Anyone failing to turn in any homework assignment will be penalized one point of their final grade. Let me urge you now not to test me on this point."[212] Such approach to teaching, exacerbated by heavy workload, contributes to the punitive nature of the school's regimen but also exacerbates the stress and mental exhaustion experienced by the students. Not only are the boys pressured to exhibit only a desired set of traits and behaviors, but also they are subjected to a regimen that is based on fear and aims at preventing them from questioning the rules. Therefore, the discipline at Welton can be considered a denial of their right to individuality and self-expression and, by extension, as an act of violence committed by the school system.

Apart from that, tradition can be viewed both as the said principles and the circumstances in which they are transmitted. The importance of this value is firmly established and emphasized by the fact that the school crest with "tradition" embroidered on it

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[211] *DPS*, 6:20.
[212] *DPS*, 10:58.

opens the procession at the opening ceremony of the new semester.[213] Together with the three other virtues, it constitutes a creed that is instilled in its students. At the same time, tradition can also be understood as the very environment where it continues to exist, and it is especially visible in the school's exclusivity. Since its foundation a century earlier, Welton Academy has always had a limited body of students, having only five graduates in its first year and granting diplomas to fifty one students in the prior semester, most of whom went on to study at Ivy League schools.[214] It is not unusual for the students to have the school's alumni among their immediate family, which is the case of Todd Anderson, and neither is it uncommon for the staff to have graduated from Welton Academy, with Mr. Keating being an example. Therefore, those who enter the school, both as students and professors, are likely to have already existed within its system, be it directly or not. In this way, being present in the school and being exposed to its principles can be generationally transmitted, taking a form of tradition itself.

Such exclusivity contributes to the school's emphasis on honor. Although the admission requirements and the course of recruitment process are not stated in the movie, its prestige indicates that, in order to protect its reputation, Welton Academy exercises its right to selectivity, which is additionally reinforced by impressive results of its students. As the institution has established excellent reputation of being "the best preparatory school in the United States,"[215] joining its circle of pupils and alumni also becomes a way of earning respect. As a consequence, being granted the privilege of admission generates the expectation to contribute to the school's prestige which, in Welton's terms, signifies adherence to its principles and meeting the standards of academic achievement. In this way, the virtues of honor and excellence are tightly connected, as they both enforce each other. Their existence, in turn, urges the school to employ systems of control that ensure their preservation which requires the students continue to produce the desired outcomes.

In this way, honor is inextricably connected to high expectations that ensnare the students. It is made very clear from the beginning of the movie that the boys carry a heavy burden on their shoulders. Todd is constantly compared to his older brother, an alumnus commonly recognized among the students for his academic achievement. When Knox visits his father's friends, the host immediately refers to the resemblance between the boy and his father who works as a lawyer, assuming "I know where you're headed. Like father, like son,

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[213] *DPS*, 1:32.
[214] *DPS*, 2:30-3:23.
[215] *DPS*, 3:40-3:45.

huh?,"[216] without giving him a chance to answer. Finally, it is undoubtedly Neil who is the most trapped in the expectations of him, especially those expressed by his dad. Not only does he urge Neil to study during the summer "to get ahead," but also strictly forbids the boy to pursue anything that will not prove useful in becoming a doctor.[217] Apart from that, all of them are additionally weighed down by the rules and standards of Welton Academy. Bearing in mind that both parents and the school itself apply different forms of discipline, including physical punishment and, in Neil's case, emotional blackmail, it is visible that these expectations constitute a trap and thus imprison the students.

The weight of expectations, together with the sense of physical and emotional imprisonment, has negative impact on the boys' psyche. Neil's figure is the most prominent and tragic example of mental suffering brought about by the environment of Welton Academy. On the one hand, he is an ambitious student and both the headmaster and his family "expect great things"[218] from him. At the same time, the boy fantasizes about becoming an actor; a dream that is shattered by his father who prevents him from going to "summer stock auditions"[219] and refuses to issue a letter of approval when Neil is casted in a play staged by a nearby school. Eventually, the boy produces a fake letter of approval on behalf of his father and takes the risk of performing in the play and, consequently, disobeying him. Trained to always obey, both at home and at school, Neil is unable to speak up for himself in any confrontation with his dad, even when he decides to punish the boy by transferring him to a military academy, despite being an outspoken student at school. His individuality is completely subordinated to fulfilling the vision of his father and the rules of conduct at Welton Academy only reinforce Mr. Perry's ambitions. As a result, finding himself utterly trapped between the high expectations and his own passions, which is exacerbated by the sense of confinement at the school, Neil commits suicide out of a desperate need to be heard and express himself.

The school's attachment to traditions and, as a consequence, to the past is inherited by its students. The ghost of the past is indeed ubiquitous. For instance, a wall in one of the assembly halls is adorned with a fresco portraying students gathering around St. Mary as they hold the English and American flags, which hints at the institution's foundations in or at least connection to colonial times. The memorabilia displayed in honor of the school's alumni

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[216] *DPS*, 19:21-19:29.
[217] *DPS*, 6:24-9:00.
[218] *DPS*, 5:07.
[219] *DPS*, 45:56.

constitute another example. The employment of Mr. Keating is particularly compelling in this context. Despite being the most recent member of the teaching stuff, he is not actually new to the school, which is additionally emphasized by the headmaster's pride in hiring an alumnus. His newness, then, is only apparent. Yet, for students kept in a system venerating the past and preventing them from developing their own ideas, it constitutes enough of a reason to develop curiosity. It is not surprising, however, that they become interested in the teacher's past, not his present. By restarting a disbanded secret society, they are figuratively exhuming his ideas and youthful passions that began to haunt them like ghosts, which is exacerbated by his unconventional teaching methods.

Mr. Keating's ideas resemble ghosts because his presence at Welton Academy is, in fact, a form of misplacement. Although his passions and views started to develop when he was still enrolled as a student there, which evidenced by his membership in the Dead Poets Society, Mr. Keating not only must have found himself within the school's order as he graduated with honors, but also remained within that system. Therefore, despite recognizing the faults of the approaches persisting at Welton Academy as a student, he took on a teaching position at another "highly regarded" institution in London and eventually returned to his alma mater. Even though he became a member of the teaching staff, his ideas still are incongruous with the beliefs persisting at Welton Academy, making his presence there out of place as well. Mr. Keating, therefore, is and has always been somewhat an anatopism in the system of his school. Ironically, regardless of his attempts to change the practices there, he becomes a part of the school's hierarchy and system. As an individual, he is powerless against the practices established long before him. The fact that he acts alone and does not try to discuss changing the teaching approaches with the headmaster or other professors—in other words, to introduce a systemic change—suggests that he is unable to realize his inadequacy, which is perhaps a result of his years spent there as a student. Regardless of the reason, his methods cannot be fully incorporated. Their appearance shortly disturbed the order of Welton Academy and contributed to the students' distress, as Neil commits suicide and Knox becomes expelled.

Therefore, contrarily to Mr. Keating's intentions, this anatopism does not produce change in Welton Academy, but only exacerbates the already existing curses at the school. In his first class, as the teacher and his students enter the school corridor, the viewer sees trophies of alumni exhibited on the left of the frame and the crests with the school's four pillars by the ceiling. Interestingly enough, the one praising tradition is not visible in this

scene. I view this as a hint towards Keating's teaching approach; his methods are not traditional, but he still respects the other established principles. Therefore, when Mr. Keating takes on the position at Welton academy, his aim is not to spur rebellion. He understands that critical thinking skills and creativity are missing in the school's curriculum and attempts to provide his students with means and environment to develop them. However, as a result of years of focusing on fulfilling the school's and their parents' expectations to excel at studying and conform, the students are unable to think for themselves. They are placed in a system that is designed to elicit obedience through fear, control, and repetition, which constitutes a curse bestowed on them. As a result, they do not fully recognize Mr. Keating's intentions and the true meaning of his teachings. Instead of being an encouragement to independent thinking, appreciation for beauty and finding passions outside the world of responsibilities, his methods are received as incentive for the boys to disregard the rules existing within their academic and societal reality. Ultimately, Mr. Keating is blamed for Neil's suicide, which results in his dismissal and the school returns to its own ways, now additionally justified as legitimate and proper.

In DPS, however, the school does not produce monsters per se, as the students at Welton Academy do not lose their humanity under the pressures exerted by the school, unlike it was in the case of TSH and IWWV. Although the boys experience tensions both from the outside of their environment and the school itself, they do not engage in obsessive or life-threatening endeavors, neither do they commit crimes or felonies. Yet, it is compelling that the students visible on the fresco with St. Mary and the graduates captured on photos in the gallery look virtually the same as the boys who study there at the time of the events. Even Mr. Keating points it out during his first class ("They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you."[220]) prior to encouraging them to seize the day. In fact, Mr. Keating is warning them from living the life the school has in mind for them: as graduates who act accordingly to what is expected, thus abandoning some of their needs and interests. He notices and understands that the school's insistence on conformity strips its students of individuality and passions. Due to the constant supervision and expectations of unquestioned adherence to the rules, Welton's system gradually turns them into a curated mass, more resembling an army of obedient animals or even zombies, than a group of well-educated young men. Therefore, although the main characters of the movie do not turn into monsters themselves, it is clear that Welton Academy uses methods that ultimately

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[220] *DPS*, 14:54-16:35.

dehumanize students, which constitutes a different, but not less valid, case of Schoolhouse Gothic monstrosity.

KYD

KYD differs from the previous works, as it is the only narrative that features real-life characters and events. It could be thus argued that discussing it in the lens of a concept created in the context of literary fiction is not appropriate. Yet, as the movie is frequently referred to as an essential work for DA, and the plot focuses more on the murder-mystery-side-of-the story of the Beat movement and not the principles or biographies of its members per se, I choose to attempt to approach this narrative using the same framework as I did before. Therefore, the following paragraphs only concern the bits of reality portrayed in the movie, treating it as a *fictionalized* biography. By that I understand that, for instance, the aim of this part of the thesis is not to research and analyze the teaching methods and curricula employed at Columbia in the 1940s, nor to interpret them. It is solely to evaluate those that appear on screen and determine if they can be considered as consistent with the concept of Schoolhouse Gothic.

Unlike it was in the cases of the narratives above, the setting of KYD is does not trap the students, as the plot follows the characters during their time at Columbia University. Located in Manhattan, New York, the institution is neither closed nor detached a setting, as the students and staff are placed in the center of a bustling city. The students have contact with those enrolled at other faculties and are free to move within and outside of the campus. In fact, the university is well-connected, due to which Allen and Lucien frequently use the subway to get to the city or to their friends' apartments. When it comes to the dormitories, despite them being presented as quite dark, the general atmosphere there is not stifling, as the rooms are spacious and well-furnished. Apart from that, other campus locations, such as the library or the lecture halls, are spacious and full of light. Therefore, it is clear that the academic environment of KYD does not confine the students to its grounds. The said access to public transport constitutes another difference in comparison to academic settings of the other DA works, which do not have any public transport at all.

On the other hand, the atmosphere of the poetry class at Columbia University presented in KYD is consistent with the conventional moods expressed by teachers in the works above. At the beginning of the movie, the professor is discussing Victorian sonnet and

emphasizing the importance of rhyme, meter, and conceit, arguing that "without this balance, a poem becomes slack, an untucked shirt."[221] In a short discussion started by Allen's question about the professor's view on Whitman, who "hated rhyme and meter," the teacher states: "This university exists because of tradition and form. Would you rather this building be built by engineers or Whitman and his boys at play?"[222] However, this attachment to conventions neither transforms into an obsession or nor acts as a curse haunting the students, as it was in the case of the other narratives. Although Allen eventually becomes expelled after submitting a piece of controversial writing, he already has had a record of incomplete classes and academic probation. Even though the expulsion is a result of his own decision not to comply with the rules and approaches at the university, it is clear that his lack of academic progression is the main factor. In addition, despite the visible contrast in approaches to literature, Professor Steeves recognizes Allen's talent and encourages him to continue writing. Therefore, the attitudes at the university in KYD, although they favor conventions, do not haunt, or burden the students.

If fact, the students develop obsessive tendencies and engage in risky behavior themselves. At the beginning of the movie, when Allen is toured with other freshmen in the university library, the guide compares the institution to a church and calls their collection of "original folios of the most important texts in history" "the sacraments."[223] The tour is disrupted by Lucien, who jumps on a table to recite a fragment from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer,* a restricted position at the library, provocatively falling to his knees and grunting with a lamp between them at the end of the quote.[224] Thus, he purposefully mortifies the library staff and, on a figurative level, desecrates the entire institution. As Lucien befriends Allen and introduces him to his friend, William Burroughs, the three become obsessed with creating a new literary movement, naming it "New Vision." As a part of developing their creative identity, Lucien, and Allen attempt to hang themselves, believing that "to be reborn, you have to die first."[225] Later, the trio begins to create their manifesto, the process of which includes destroying books written by canonical western authors and skipping class to indulge in a variety of drugs in order to produce experimental poetry. Finally, they break into the library and replace "the sacraments" with materials referring explicitly to sexuality and reproduction, as they consider the university's appreciation for classical works as oppressive towards other

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[221] *Kill Your Darlings,* directed by John Krokidas (Sony Pictures Classics, 2013), 7:56-8:07.
[222] *KYD*, 8:11-8:54.
[223] *KYD*, 6:40.
[224] *KYD*, 6:58.
[225] *KYD*, 22:32-23:19.

literature. As much as they believe they "make the prisoners come out and play,"[226] the young poets themselves are by no means confined or maltreated by the university. Their obsessions and destructive practices are therefore not a result of a predatory atmosphere or methods at the institution but appear independently.

Yet, the themes of mental disintegration, violence and monstrosity are prominent in the plot of the movie and they all circle around David Kammerer, Lucien Carr, and their predatory relationship. Lucien describes the other man as "a professor working as a janitor so he can be near his precious Lu" and "a goddamn fruit who won't let [him] go."[227] David's behavior is indeed of stalking nature, as he unexpectedly appears at every college Carr is enrolled to. In addition, when David discovers that his object of interest forms a close friendship with Allen, he becomes even more possessive of Lucien and even begins to appear in his dormitory. It is evident that student feels beset, which results in his attempts to escape, first by transferring between universities and, when it proves to be unsuccessful, by attempting to enlist to Merchant Marines with Jack. However, David's obsession with the younger man does not have its cause in the education system or any of the colleges Carr attended, but rather is a disturbing psychological trait.

In their case, education functions as a currency in their relationship, as they both use knowledge and academic obligations to exploit each other. The former teacher produces all written assignments for the student and by doing so, keeps him close and also gains an emotional advantage that prevents Carr from breaking away. In turn, Lucien takes advantage of Kammerer's knowledge and affection to obtain papers for his courses and also uses the man's apartment for his entertainment. The plot, apart from a few scenes in the lecture hall and mentions of a few assignments, does not portray the workload, or pressures the students are subject to. Thus, in the case of this narrative, it is reasonable to assume that the mental struggles faced by the students do not have their cause in university and the institution only becomes the background for their difficulties, or, as it is in the case of Lucien, a medium of exchange in a complicated relationship.

However, it is doubtless that both men inflict violence on each other. David not only obsessively follows Lucien wherever he goes, having "spun a web to ensnare [him],"[228] but also manipulates the student. For instance, when David appears at a college bar where the

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226 *KYD*, 18:40.
227 *KYD*, 29:57-30:30.
228 *KYD*, 1:13:50

poets are celebrating their manifesto-prank at the library, he begins sweet-talking infuriated Lucien: "Stop, Lu, you're losing control. You know what comes next. I know what comes next."[229] Rejected, Kammerer cries out that "[Lucien]'d be dead if it weren't for [him]"[230] and storms out of the locale. Therefore, David, apart from stalking his victim, attempts to influence and emotionally blackmail him to keep the student within his reach. On the other hand, when David appears at the Merchant Hall as Lucien and Jack are trying to enlist on a ship, the young man persuades his stalker to join him for a walk and eventually murders him. Although the vision of the killing is presented in a discontinued, shattered manner, it is doubtless that Lucien repeatedly stabs David and then drowns his body in the Hudson river. All things considered, both men doubtlessly commit acts of violence against each other.

It is quite a challenge to unequivocally consider Lucien a monster in the understanding of Schoolhouse Gothic. On the one hand, the fact that Kammerer is a former teacher that hounds the young man can be viewed as a personification of a predatory education system. Yet, bearing in mind that contrary to the narratives above, the campus and approaches at Columbia do not confine or dehumanize Lucien, and that the culprit is not employed at the institution, this view appears to be implausible. Then, it could also be argued that their relationship also embodies the phrase "violence begets violence" and consider Lucien's cruelty as a desperate act to break away from his oppressor. In this case, the fact that "he tied David up, put stones in his pockets to weigh him down and then dragged him into the Hudson,"[231] thus drowning him alive, proves that Lucien did not miscalculate in self-defense, but most likely gave in his build-up fear and rage and lost control over himself. The situation is additionally exacerbated by the fact that Lucien did not confess the full truth to Allen, whom he asked to produce a testimony for his defense, which implies insincerity and hints at non-randomness of the killing. In any event, it is doubtless that Lucien's deed is inhuman and that the reasons for it do not originate in the academic setting of the movie.

Therefore, it is certain that KYD contains some elements characteristic of a Schoolhouse Gothic narrative. Set in a prestigious university that values traditional approaches to curriculum and teaching, the plot focuses on a group of young poets, some of them still students, and portrays their passions and struggles prior to and shortly after a tragic event. Yet, unlike it was in the cases of other narratives discussed in this thesis, mental suffering, violence, and loss of humanity do not directly stem from the academic setting and

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[229] *KYD*, 54:00-54:10.
[230] *KYD*, 55:07.
[231] *KYD*, 1:15:31-1:16:26.

its atmosphere, but rather develop independently. In this case, the university does not trap or isolate the students, nor does it enforce a set of beliefs or aims at depriving them of their individuality. However, it is clear that KYD contains a number of themes that are popular among the social media creators and followers of DA. Apart from the already mentioned academic setting, the story reflects the movement's fascination with humanities, especially with literature. Not only are the characters passionate about their creative work, but they also form complicated relationships that are a mixture of friendship, obsession, and romantic interest, all intensified by excessive use of substances. They violate the established laws in art, education, and general conduct, and, eventually, one of them commits murder. For these reasons, I view KYD as a "dark academic" but not Schoolhouse Gothic narrative, whereas the three other works discussed above can be included in both categories.

Chapter Three

Criticism towards DA

Due to its popularity, DA has become a subject of both external and internal scrutiny and criticism. Aesthetics Wiki contributors report that the main accusations made against Dark Academics include "aestheticization of unhealthy behavior," "eurocentrism," "lack of true academic thought' and "romanticization of humanities."[232] Apart from that, DA has also been criticized for elitism and fixation on self-presentation.[233] As eurocentrism and elitism often overlap, they shall be discussed together. "Lack of true academic thought" and preoccupation with appearance tend to occur together as well and therefore shall be jointly considered as "academic posturing." Interestingly enough, there is also evidence relating to the movement's attempts to reevaluate and redefine its practices, and it is included in the discussion, if applicable. These cases of self-reflexivity are particularly compelling, as they prove that DA and its principles are still evolving.

Aestheticization of unhealthy behaviors

Even by quickly scanning DA content, it is noticeable that the movement displays alarming predilections "in the pursuit of both the aesthetic itself and academic achievement."[234] Indeed, Dark Academics tend to upload texts and images that

> encourage the mindset that pulling all-nighters and subsisting on coffee and crusts of bread—raised at regular intervals to the mouth with one hand while the other hand is busy writing—is the ideal lifestyle for anyone who is truly devoted to their studies.[235]

Sometimes such references appear alongside other descriptions of aestheticized actions, as evidenced by figure 17 which contains references both to staying up late and to handwritten notes. Figure 18 exhibits similar attitudes, although it focuses solely on documenting the author's day. Regardless of the nature of the post—be it a string of aestheticized ideas or a form of a digital diary—such publications are not so much an inspiration to be persistent in studying, as they are a glamorization of inefficient and even harmful routines.

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[232] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[233] Murray, "Dark Academia," 352.
[234] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[235] E. R. Zarevich, "The Perils of "Dark Academia,"" *Women in Higher Education,* 30, no.5 (2021): 2, https://doi.org/10.1002/whe.20982.

little ways i've noticed the dark academia in my life:

falling asleep at 1 a.m. reading 100+ paged academic articles; ink marks on the outsides of your hands, smudging the paper before you even have a chance to write. waking up at dawn, and staying in a satin robe until well past noon, unsuccessfully trying to write. freshly lacquered nails only to pick at them once they've dried. throwing out the fresh flowers you can't be bothered to care for. or giving them away. open windows in the winter. a pile of moroccan coasters never used in favor of putting mugs on paper, smiling when it stains. notes all in black, but with different pens; handwriting floating between print and cursive on the same page when something becomes interesting. buying used books and annotations that only make sense to you. corners in coffee shops, baristas leaving the counter to bring you a smile and more black coffee without you asking.

Figure 17. An example of DA's tendency to normalize unhealthy behaviors, somewhat masked by the description of other aestheticized actions. @sarahelizabethstudies, "little ways i've noticed the dark academia in my life." January 27, 2019. https://www.tumblr.com/sarahelizabethstudies/182348002114/little-ways-ive-noticed-the-dark-academia-in-my?source=share.

25.01.22, tuesday

ended up doing an all-nighter, so (unsuprisingly) today was heavily caffeinated & very unorganised

Figure 18. An example of DA's tendency to normalize excessive caffeine use. @why-the-heck-not, "25.01.22, Tuesday." January 25, 2022, https://www.tumblr.com/why-the-heck-not/674389032771436544/250122-tuesday-ended-up-doing-an-all-nighter?source=share.

Both figures 17 and 18 allude to another unhealthy habit often referred to by Dark Academics, which is overindulgence in substances. Indeed, DA is also criticized "for glamorizing a dangerously unhealthy lifestyle characterized by over-consumption of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and illegal drugs."[236]
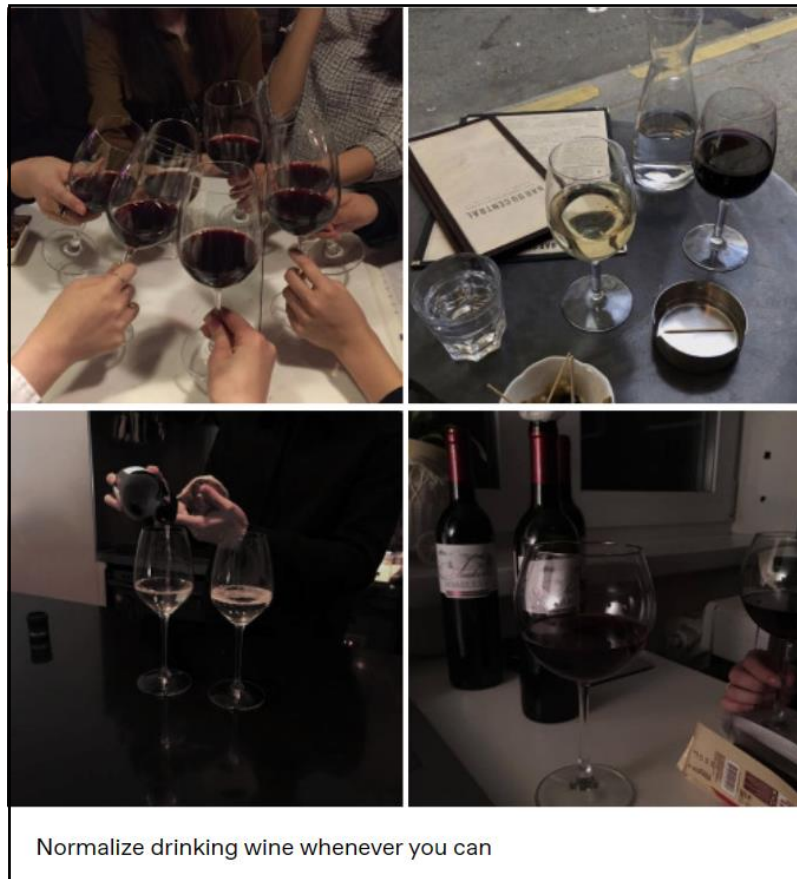
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[236] Murray, "Dark Academia," 353.

Figure 19. An example of DA's tendency to normalize and aestheticize drinking alcohol. @classycoffeesublime, "Normalize drinking wine whenever you can," July 4, 2021, https://www.tumblr.com/classycoffeesublime/655808096027983872/normalize-drinking-wine-whenever-you-can?source=share.

The photos featured in figure 19 clearly fall into the category of "the pursuit of the aesthetic itself." The images are styled in accordance with tendencies typical of DA, as they employ contrasts in colors and lightning, as well as use the color palettes discussed above. Yet, they do not refer to the academic interests of the movement at all. Aside from that, the description underneath makes it perfectly clear that the author's aim is to "normalize" drinking alcohol on a whim. Similar approach to alcohol is also visible on figure 6 above, with words of encouragement towards activities like "reading Byron with the glass of red wine" or "drinking champagne with your friends while reading poems." At the same time, both posts completely ignore the university experience otherwise emphasized by DA and focus on glamorizing substance use for the sake of aesthetics.

Yet, despite the conspicuous aestheticization of unhealthy habits, mental problems and additions by some Dark Academics, such practices only constitute a veil for other underlying issues. Indeed, Fleming argues that, as a result of commercialization of higher education,

"[w]ithin the span of a few decades, student culture has become isolating, high-pressured and anxious."[237] He makes further comment that

> "(…) while being processed in the Edu-Factory, students are put under immense pressure to complete their degrees, often while holding down part-time jobs and servicing debt obligations. This inevitably isolates people and normalizes the ritual of overwork. Idle socializing may seem like a waste of time, an indulgence."[238]

It is impossible not to notice that these anxieties are reflected in the posts above. Take, for instance, figure 19 where all the photos were taken in social contexts, or at least were stylized as such, which is evidenced by multiple glasses featured in each of them. In the view of Fleming's claim about "idle socializing," I consider this tendency to romanticize drinking as a cover for unsettling loneliness experienced by students. Indeed, findings presented in the National College Health Assessment II published in Fall 2017 by American College Health Association (ACHA-NCHA II) confirm Fleming's claims. The section dedicated to mental health reveals that 63,1% of students felt very lonely any time within the last 12 months, 29,3% of which felt very lonely within last 2 weeks.[239] At the same time, 21,6% of students "felt things were hopeless," 31.3% "felt very sad," and 28,5% "felt overwhelming anxiety" within last 2 weeks.[240] In such circumstances, it is clear that the stress and anxieties experienced by modern students contribute to the feeling of loneliness. Therefore, as DA wallows in romanticized visions of university experience, the indulgent images of alcohol constitute an inverted reflection of the reality where many students suffer mental health issues which prevents them from socializing or, in even simpler terms, from having fun. Such representations of alcohol, especially in social contexts, may thus be an expression of urgent need to relieve stress but also to find company, understanding, and, ultimately, support.

The references to excessive caffeine use function in a similar manner. They are likely connected to stress and mental health struggles, another thing DA "has come under fire for." [241] Indeed, "[s]tress and procrastination related to education, depression and its symptoms, unhealthy sleep habits, including both under and oversleeping and excessive consumption of coffee" constitute recurrent themes among Dark Academics.[242] Yet, considering the data from the ACHA-NCHA II Fall 2017 report again, it turns out that 56% of students "felt

[237] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 83-84.

[238] Fleming, *Dark Academia,* 86.

[239] American College Health Association. *National College Health Assessment. Fall 2017 Reference Group Executive Summary.* (ACHA 2017): 13. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2017_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf.

[240] American College Health Association, *NCHA II*, 13-14.

[241] Amal Abdi, "Meet Dark Academia, The Bookish Fashion Trend That's All Over TikTok," *Refinery29,* last modified October 7, 2020. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/10/10079305/dark-academia-aesthetic-tiktok-trend.

[242] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

overwhelmed by all [they] had to do" in the last 2 weeks[243] and 45% experienced "more than average stress" within the last 12 months.[244] In terms of sleep, in the past 7 days only 7.8% of students reported *not* feeling "tired, dragged out, or sleepy during the day" and 8.9% claimed to have no problem "with sleepiness during daytime activities."[245] Finally, 46,8% of students deemed "academics" to be "traumatic or very difficult to handle" within the last 12 months, and 30,7% expressed the same about sleep difficulties.[246] If managing academic workload demands sacrificing one's sleep and mental health, then producing images normalizing drinking countless cups of coffee, staying up all night and mental health problems, in the view of these statistics, can be understood to serve as a coping mechanism for navigating through these problems in real life.

Eurocentrism and elitism

One of the most frequently criticized aspects of DA is its evident elitism and eurocentrism, which are prominent both in its inspirational sources, and in its aesthetic fixations. Murray argues that

> The default Eurocentrism criticised in DA subculture is everywhere apparent in Tartt's novel. In this less positive sense, The Secret History is indeed DA's true ur-text. The book admits no conception of culture outside of European high culture. No students from minority backgrounds are depicted, and the only working-class characters are walk-on figures who labour largely unseen as dining-hall staff and have at best a single line of dialogue.[247]

Many other dark academic narratives, including IWWV, DPS and KYD exhibit similar tendencies, although in varying degrees. For instance, apart from a subtle hint that Alexander from IWWV may have Hispanic father, there is no other instance of racial diversity among the main characters in any of these works. Moreover, M. L. Rio uses questionable comparisons in her novel. Passages such as "(…), she said, gaze descending slowly from the top of my head to my feet with the cold scrutiny of a slave trader at auction"[248] or "[w]e sat in a ragged circle, legs folded like storybook Indians,"[249] apart from containing slurs, are plainly offensive towards people of other ethnicities, especially when used in the context of fictional

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[243] American College Health Association, *NCHA II*, 14.
[244] American College Health Association, *NCHA II*, 16.
[245] American College Health Association, *NCHA II*, 16.
[246] American College Health Association, *NCHA II*, 15.
[247] Murray, "Dark Academia," 357.
[248] Rio, *IWWV,* 26.
[249] Rio, *IWWV,* 35.

white students at an elite college. In addition, portrayal of BIPOC in these works can only be noticed in KYD, but even there they are confined to jazz clubs and completely invisible in the academic setting. Therefore, the issue of racial representation in works favored by DA is particularly problematic as they exclude BIPOC from their narratives either by choosing a predominantly white setting, or by focusing solely on white characters.

In terms of class background, each of the narratives above includes at least one student of lower-income family, although this fact is usually overshadowed by the splendor of the setting. It is particularly visible in the case of Richard from TSH who tries to erase his working-class background and refashion himself to fit in with the group he becomes infatuated with. Other characters, both significant and peripheral, either come from upper-class or for wealthy middle-class families. In the case of DPS, it is implied that most of the students come from prosperous families, with a vague hint that Neil may be an exception, as his father mentions he "made a great many sacrifices to get [him] here."[250] The group of friends from IWWV, in turn, features a quite balanced ratio of students coming from prominent and "ordinary" families, which is also the case of the poets portrayed in KYD. However, it is clear that all of these narratives favor the image of upper classes, usually by presenting them as desirable and aesthetically pleasing, or by employing settings hardly available to people of other class background.

Even more so, DA romanticizes a vision of a prestigious Western university and thus, a vision of curricula that would be studied in such setting. Therefore, it is not just an obsession with "preppy fashion," but also fascination with primarily Western literatures and arts, which is reflected by DA's inspirational works, as discussed in Chapter One. In so doing, DA often "perpetuates the increasingly high value placed upon Eurocentric studies and continues to preserve colonial mentality in the 21st century" as "[t]hese studies are always centred on Europe – you will rarely hear about Dark Academics who study Classics with a focus on Mesopotamia or the Shang dynasty."[251]

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[250] DPS, 45:53.
[251] Aseel Sahib, "The Secret History of Eurocentrism in Aesthetics," *Bossy,* November 1, 2021. https://bossymag.com/2021/11/01/the-secret-history-of-eurocentrism-in-aesthetics/.

Figure 20. An example of DA's eurocentrism. @maggieobyrnepoetry, "Research ideas for bored students," April 10, 2020. https://www.tumblr.com/maggieobyrnepoetry/615047866110590976/research-ideas-for-bored-students?source=share.

Posts such as the one featured in figure 20 confirm this claim. Figure 20 presents a list of "research ideas" that do not cover areas outside the history and culture of the British Isles, with the one exception of the Netherlands, which makes it particularly narrow even in the context of Western civilizations. However, together with DA's romanticization of early-twentieth-century elite scholarship, such lists can indeed contribute to the further "[reinforcement of] the idea that BIPOC history, art, and literature is inferior."[252]

       At the same time, the internet community itself strives towards creating an inclusive digital space for people of all ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and cultural heritages.

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[252] Sahib, "The Secret History of Eurocentrism."

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Colombian:

• Chronicle of a Death Foretold by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
• Delirio by Laura Restrepo
• ¡Que viva la música! by Andrés Caicedo
• The Sound of Things Falling by Jim Gabriel Vásquez

Mexican:

• Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolf Anaya
• Adonis Garcia/El Vampiro de la Colonia Roma by Luis Zapata
• El Complot Mongol by Rafael Bernal

Egyptian:

• The Cairo Trilogy by Nahuib Mahfouz
• The Book of the Dead

Nigerian:

• Rosewater by Tade Thompson
• Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe
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Figure 21. An attempt to include works of other cultures into DA. @sappylittlebitch,
"Cultural Dark Academia," June 9, 2020.
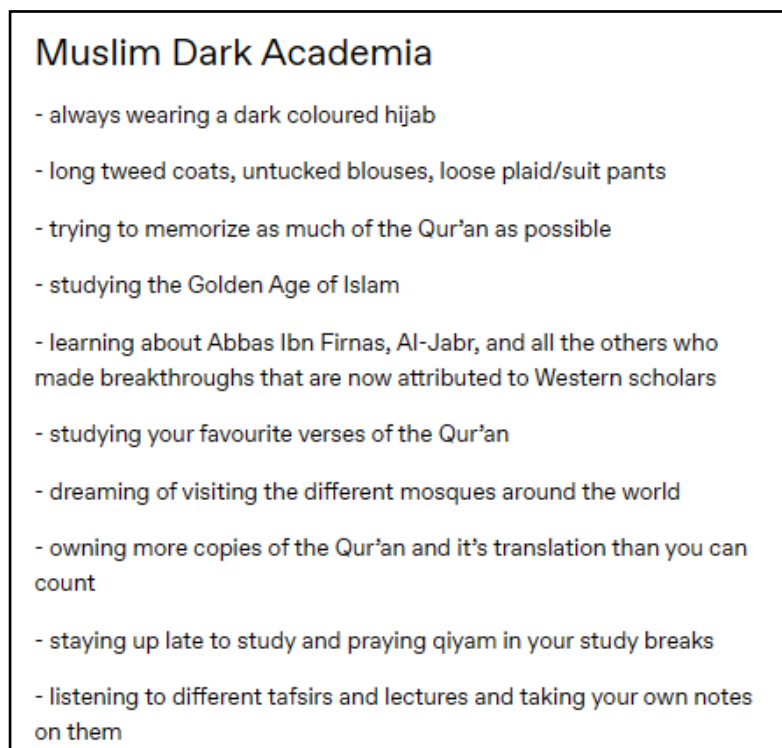https://www.tumblr.com/sappylittlebitch/620401404176154624/cultural-dark-academia.

Muslim Dark Academia

- always wearing a dark coloured hijab

- long tweed coats, untucked blouses, loose plaid/suit pants

- trying to memorize as much of the Qur'an as possible

- studying the Golden Age of Islam

- learning about Abbas Ibn Firnas, Al-Jabr, and all the others who
made breakthroughs that are now attributed to Western scholars

- studying your favourite verses of the Qur'an

- dreaming of visiting the different mosques around the world

- owning more copies of the Qur'an and it's translation than you can
count

- staying up late to study and praying qiyam in your study breaks

- listening to different tafsirs and lectures and taking your own notes
on them

Figure 22. An attempt to adapt DA to other cultures. @lothloriien, "Muslim Dark
Academia," May 21, 2020,
https://www.tumblr.com/lothloriien/618731713405796352/muslim-dark-
academia?source=share.

Figures 21 and 22 present fragments of longer posts listing book recommendations and lifestyle tips in a style typical for DA that challenge the movement's fascination with Western education. The post in figure 22 features authors, both contemporary and ancient, originating in all continents but Europe, as well as includes a link to a continuation of the list. It thus demonstrates that the movement is challenging both its strong interest in Western literary canon and its own perceptions of what is and can be considered "a classic" and deemed "worth reading." On the other hand, figure 22 is an example of adapting the already existing preconceptions about student lifestyle to other cultures and religions. Desire to read, study and experience culture is universal, and so users find ways to translate DA's fascinations into their own realities, thus proving this community has potential to evolve and become more inclusive despite the fairly narrow scope of inspirations.

Academic posturing

It is not rare to encounter opinions accusing DA of superficiality in its preoccupation with reading and studying. As aptly described by Amelia Horgan,

> Learning in dark academia is an object of fantasy: the books are to be posed with rather than read; the photos of libraries rarely show them actually in use; the writing might come with difficulty, torn up paper scattered everywhere, but the end result is always flawless.[253]

Indeed, posts like those featured in figures 23 and 24 present books as aesthetic objects that are usually closed or browsed through. Such portrayals reduce books to props and are an example of "proliferation of creative acts that fetishize and aestheticize the book as artifact".[254] This is additionally emphasized by the quotes under the sequences of photos, accidentally from the same author. The excerpts are most likely taken out of context, as the posts do not refer to the works or circumstances in which the author produced them. Apart from that, they rather do not correspond to what is captured on the photos. Thus, such representations not only expose DA as shallow, but also contradict its own strongly emphasized affection for reading and literature.

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[253] Amelia Horgan, "The "Dark Academia" Subculture Offers a Fantasy Alternative to the Neoliberal University," *Jacobin,* December 19, 2021. https://jacobin.com/2021/12/instagram-tumblr-humanities-romanticism-old-money-uk.
[254] Murray, "Dark Academia," 348.

Figure 23. An example of DA fetishizing bookishness. @ghosts-who-haunt-me, ""Life is the flower for which love is the honey."." May 23, 2019. https://www.tumblr.com/ghosts-who-haunt-me/185083972821/life-is-the-flower-for-which-love-is-the?source=share.

Figure 24. An example of DA fetishizing books. @secretwurlds, "Whatever causes night in our souls may leave stars." December 12, 2020, https://www.tumblr.com/secretwurlds/637269822199234560/whatever-causes-night-in-our-souls-may-leave?source=share.

Moreover, Dark Academics are often criticized for focusing on the fashionable side of academia and neglecting or even completely ignoring academic responsibilities. According to Murray,

> DA too often seems to posit higher education as so much set-dressing for a solipsistic performance of external styling rather than genuine intellectual labour—with its accompanying potential for philosophical and ideological transformation.[255]

Indeed, the preoccupation with style among Dark Academics is indisputable. In addition to compiling reading recommendation lists, users often create more general "guides" for other followers. Figures 25 and 26 below present fragments of such manuals which, not accidentally, begin with styling advice and ideas. What is more, figure 26 features a list of "dark academic activities" which, with the exception of reading, virtually does not encourage the audience to undertake academic work. It is therefore difficult to avoid the impression that DA is preoccupied with objects and activities that have, paradoxically, little in common with actual school or university experience.
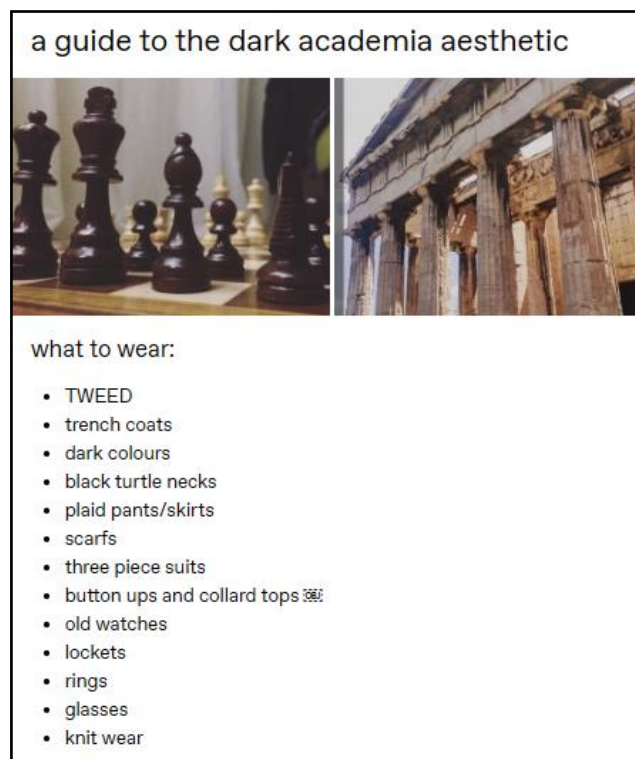

Figure 25. An example of DA's preoccupation with styling. @make-a-god-out-of-me, „a guide to dark academia aesthetic," December 4, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/make-a-god-out-of-me/189466671323/a-guide-to-the-dark-academia-aesthetic?source=share.

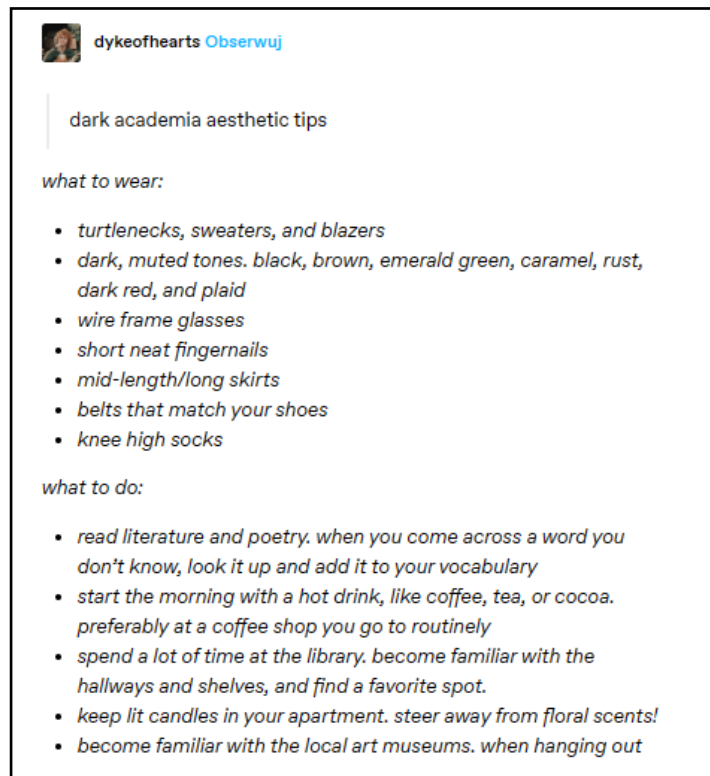
[255] Murray, "Dark Academia," 352.

Figure 26. An example of DA's negligence of actual academic work @x-carpe-o-noctem-x, „dark academia aesthetic tips," July 3, 2019, https://www.tumblr.com/x-carpe-o-noctem-x/186014123139/femmepeony-dark-academia-aesthetic-tips-what-to?source=share.

Strikingly, DA fashion can be considered both exclusionary and inclusive. On the one hand, it cannot be ignored that DA fashion "emphasizes a high-class and vintage form of dress which is an amalgamation of different historical periods"[256] and that it reflects the movement's "veneration of public/prep-school and Oxbridge/Ivy League aesthetics," thus additionally reinforcing its elitist tendencies.[257] Yet, these fascinations may also assume an inclusive aspect of the DA community. As argued by Adriaansen, "the androgynous qualities and possibilities of the fashion involved allow exploration and experimentation with a plurality of gender configurations."[258] Indeed, items like the ubiquitous tweed blazer "can be worn by boys, girls and anyone who does not fit into any of these definitions. Anyone can be feminine and anyone can be masculine."[259] Therefore, the nature of DA fashion reflects the complex blend of its principles and fascinations and the movement itself is yet to develop a clear and consistent practices to reconcile them.

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[256] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."
[257] Murray, "Dark Academia," 352.
[258] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia," 111.
[259] Bateman, "Academia Lives."

Fascination with the humanities

Finally, DA's fascination with the humanities and liberal arts is a target of criticism as well. The contributors to Aesthetics Wiki note that

> Humanities degrees are seen as luxuries reserved for the elite, with their low earning potential and high cost in comparison to more practical STEM degrees. Critics view this romanticization as incorrect, citing that elite education is more accessible than ever with the modern internet.[260]

Indeed, universities such as Harvard increasingly share free materials and courses on the internet, including those covering various fields from the humanities, which constitutes a perfect opportunity for Dark Academics who are truly passionate about these topics and would otherwise have not been able to access these resources. However, participating in free online courses and being granted admission to, for instance, a private research university that circulates them are not equivalent. Such online learners naturally cannot access facilities and resources that are otherwise available to the enrolled students; neither can they participate in research groups, clubs and receive feedback from professors and supervisors. Whereas it is true that the internet contributes to the dissemination of knowledge and learning materials, it is clear that they cannot substitute academic experience of an enrolled student, which still remains out of reach for many. Moreover, the financial prospects of those enrolled in humanities degree programs are not as bright as those of STEM graduates, as I discussed in Chapter One. Therefore, conjuring up romanticized visions of studying the humanities in tertiary education institutions is, to all appearances, a legitimate way of coping with the anxieties caused by either fear of not being able to obtain financial stability after one's graduation or frustration originating in sacrificing one's interests to a course of study chosen on the basis of future prospects, not to mention the pressures and workload present in both cases.

In addition, movements like DA which present a romanticized vision of humanities and liberal arts can appear to be concealing the underbelly of the reality of studying these disciplines. As pointed out by Robin Waldun, a video and content creator, also known for posting DA content, "there is a gap between how literature is portrayed under these buzz terms like dark academia, light academia (…)" and that "these representations are inherently erroneous, they're inherently not the real thing that you will be tackling when you're

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[260] Aesthetics Wiki, "Dark Academia."

engaging with these pursuits at universities."[261] Waldun then adds that content created by influencers, including himself, carries the risk of misreading works and ideas due to their limited knowledge and formats of the content.[262] For him, movements like DA do not fully represent the "hours of unglamorous work" like finding quotes and references, shutting oneself away with books only, embracing discipline, rigor and solitude, or even truly understanding the complicated concepts one is studying.[263] Indeed, DA images usually present props like notebooks, ink and bookstacks, and posts dedicated to helping others "become a dark academic" usually list activities like reading Shakespeare in a bath or wearing tweed. Yet, as I discussed above, these representations stem from the reality Waldun describes. In fact, they constitute a reaction to much darker aspects of academia, such as pressure to excel, uncertain financial prospects after graduation and mental pressures and anxieties experienced by modern students, which he omits to mention.
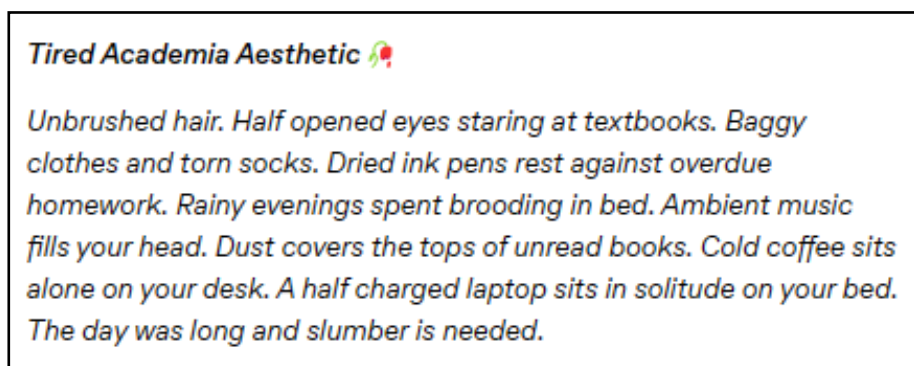

Figure 27. An example of DA indirectly approaching the realities of overwork and stress.
@yoursecretmuse, "Tired Academia," November 15, 2019.
https://www.tumblr.com/yoursecretmuse/189076880217/tired-academia-aesthetic-unbrushed-hair-half?source=share.

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[261] Robin Waldun, "The Dangers of Romanticizing The Liberal Arts - Problems with Dark Academia and Aesthetics," YouTube Video, 05:20-05:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OS46W4l8so.
[262] Robin Waldun, "The Dangers of Romanticizing The Liberal Arts," 8:52-11:32.
[263] Robin Waldun, "The Dangers of Romanticizing The Liberal Arts,"16:00-17:44.
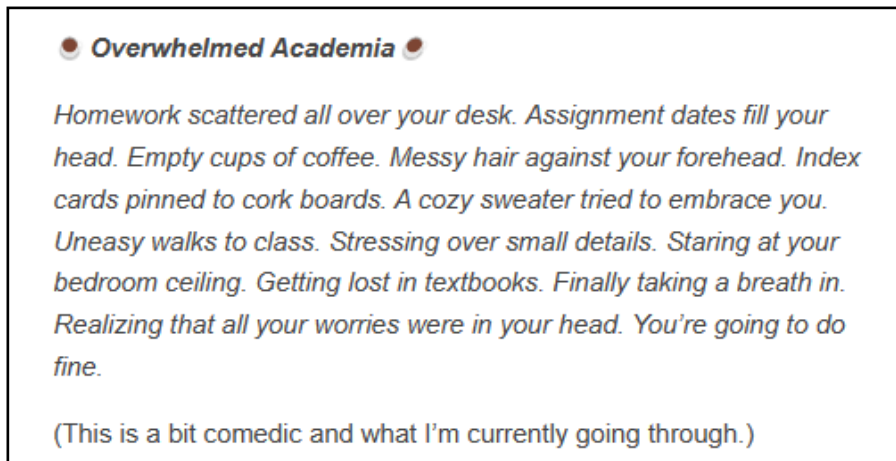
Figure 28. Another example of DA indirectly approaching the realities of overwork and stress.
@yoursecretmuse, "Overwhelmed Academia," November 18, 2019.
https://yoursecretmuse.tumblr.com/post/189160288392/overwhelmed-academia-homework-scattered-all.

While it remains true that the arduous aspects of humanities and university experience in general are fairly rarely covered in DA posts, users include them as well, although not necessarily in a direct manner. Figures 27 and 28 present screenshots of two posts of themed lists concerning student life – tiredness and overwhelm. The perspective from these posts, although, as admitted by the author, "a bit comedic," reflects Waldun's point that pursuing a degree in liberal arts or humanities involves hard labor and effort. The screenshotted posts romanticize the visible effects of "hours of unglamorous work" like being too tired to maintain one's hygiene, increased need for rest, being too busy to remember about one's coffee or cleaning, and stress caused by paralyzing number of assignments, papers, and pressures.

Conclusions

In conclusion, in this thesis I have carefully explored the circumstances, grounds and inspirations for DA's origin and development, as well as successfully traced Gothic elements in four staple narratives of the movement in the context of the realities of present-day students in Western countries. I have argued that DA, as an internet aesthetic, constitutes a reaction to anxieties suffered by modern students in their academic environments and functions as a defense strategy in coping with these pressures.

As it turns out, young internet users have developed their own understanding of the word "aesthetic." Originally signifying "the philosophy of the beautiful or of art" or strategies and conventions behind them,[264] the term came to denote either subjective sense of aesthetic pleasure or a style of creating and organizing social media content that reflect these personal sentiments. Despite critical voices attempting to claim that the present understanding and use of the word "aesthetic" is detached from its philosophical principles, I argue this separation is only ostensible. Since these visual compositions are often carefully planned, arranged, as well as aim at capturing the author's perspective on reality by the means of conventions of a given movement, I view them as processed and curated aesthetic experiences and therefore reject the contrary claims. I also indicate that these aesthetics exhibit another, more practical aspect, as the users apply some of their principles and conventions to their lifestyles.

Although it is commonly considered that DA emerged on Tumblr in the mid-2010s, due to the ephemeral nature of user-generated-content on that platform it is troublesome to clearly identify the date it emerged. There is, however, evidence that DA conventions have been present on the platform since the beginning of the decade. In later years, the movement expanded to other platforms and developed diverse formats of visual and textual communication. In terms of Tumblr, its affordances allowed DA to develop forms such as moodboards, blog posts, but also a variety of text posts, which include recommendation lists, which are particularly popular among Dark Academics. The visual aspect of the movement involves use of fixed color palettes, usually autumnal and dark, as well as use of contrasts in lightning and colors. DA images often include props and sceneries that enhance the academic and mysterious themes favored by the movement.

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[264] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "aesthetics, n."

DA declares pursuing education, reading and thirst for knowledge as its principles. Its followers tend to idealize and aestheticize ordinary activities connected to studying, which, as I argue, stems from the pressures suffered by real students at Western universities. The convergence of economic demand and academic environments generates a sense of compulsion to obtain higher education in order to find employment in the future. Oftentimes, universities are expected to mass produce graduates in fields considered useful or profitable which forces many students to abandon their passions and enroll into "more desirable" courses of study. This has mostly financial motivations as, in order to ensure future economic stability, young people have to first cover considerable costs of tuition and accommodation. They often pay with own mental health, which is proven to have been steadily deteriorating among undergraduates. Apart from that, the time spent at a university or college often proves to be marked by high competition among students and pressure to excel which generate further frustration, anxiety, and a sense of loneliness.

DA as a movement is also a form of a reaction to general depreciation of humanities and art degrees, which stems from the relationship between modern universities and economy as well. Since the principle of economic usefulness is prevalent at modern universities, students often abandon their passions in the name of pursuing degrees that answer the demands of job markets, which usually include science, engineering, and medical studies. Therefore, it is understandable that students who either dream of enrolling into or actually study humanities and arts need a space to share and take pride in their passions. DA provides them with possibility to do so.

It is thus evident that the visions of education produced by DA are nostalgic and clearly removed from the realities of modern students. Dark Academics often long for a life in an unspecified past, principally in pre-digital times. Although the impact of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in migration of student and academic life online, definitely contributed to the popularity of the movement among young people, DA has exhibited anti-digital tendencies even before that period. I argue that being mostly a digital-native generation, Dark Academics are distressed by the ubiquity of the internet and social media, which constitutes the ground for their fascination with and yearning for the past.

Moreover, DA draws many of its inspirations from literary works which can be divided into two categories: classics and modern narratives. The first category can include virtually any works that could belong to the Western literary canon, as they are simply

consistent with DA's appreciation for studying humanities. The second group is formed by modern narratives that feature themes typical for the movement, such as exclusive academic setting, complicated group dynamics, obsessive dedication to study, and involvement in mystery and crime. These themes are also discernible in motion pictures beloved by DA. One can easily notice that some works are frequently referred to by the followers. In terms of literature, it is undoubtedly Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) that enjoys the widest recognition. Tartt's novel is often closely followed by a much recent work, M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017). When it comes to the motion pictures, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas's *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) emerge as most popular choices.

Since these four staple narratives are repeatedly referred to within the DA community, and sometimes even elevated to the status of a classic, I decided to consider them in greater detail. Apart from being set in elite academic institutions and following groups of students tormented by diverse pressures, they all feature a tragic death of one of the characters and are permeated by atmosphere of violence and degeneration. Thus, I employ the framework of Schoolhouse Gothic, first described by Sherry R. Truffin, as the basis for my analysis. Following her theory, I trace the five crucial elements of Schoolhouse Gothic: curses, traps, paranoia, violence, and creation of a monster in the selected narratives and investigate the manner in which they are manifested in the plots and how they interact with each other. I also extend this theory by the concepts of anachronism and anatopism, and argue that, provided they occur, they additionally afflict the Schoolhouse Gothic experiences of the characters.

The five elements described by Truffin are indeed prevalent in the selected narratives. Curses are usually manifested as obsessions with the past, be it in the form of teachers' or faculty devotion to an area of studies (classics in TSH and Shakespearean theater in IVVW), or as a strong attachment to traditions and conventions expressed by the teachers and school authorities (both DPS and KYD). These attitudes usually haunt the students who often adapt them as their own, thus either losing touch with reality (TSH and IVVW) or abandoning their own identities. Interestingly enough, the attachment to tradition does not burden the poets from KYD. Even though they develop their own obsessions, they are contrary to the university's approaches and occur independently. In addition, some of the professors are able to appreciate their students' talent despite the differences in beliefs.

At the same time, the academic settings definitely trap their students, which occurs mostly due to their detached location, prestige and, in the case of TSH and IWWV, additional

physical isolation of some students from the rest of the faculty. This isolation results in developments of cliques among the students which trap them even more. Once again, KYD is a notable exception, as its plot is set at Columbia University in Manhattan, New York. Not only does this setting not confine the students, but it also enables them to establish contacts with other faculties and people outside of their academic environment.

The three products of Schoolhouse Gothic experience are often intertwined with each other. Paranoia, also understood as mental disintegration or suffering, appears as a result of the closed and oppressive atmosphere of the academic settings. At the same time, violence is not only omnipresent in these narratives, but also exercised by the teachers and students alike. Teachers are especially powerful in these settings, as they are often given the power to define their students, thus forcing them to abandon parts of their identities. The atmosphere of mental pressures and violence results in creation of monsters which usually emerge from students who abandoned their identities, turned to violence themselves or lost their humanity in other way.

For instance, in TSH and IWWV, the isolated students inherit their professors' obsessions and, consequently, lose their sense of self and reality. As a result, they turn to violence towards themselves, which is manifested as excessive substance use, and towards each other, which not only leads to murder, but also demonstrates their transformation into monsters. In DPS, mental struggles stem mostly from the rigid discipline and high expectations held by the teachers and parents. Eventually, one of the students inflicts violence onto himself and commits suicide. Although none of the boys turn into social degenerates or criminals, it is clear that the school's system aims at transforming them into a mass of automated, obedient creatures, which I view as more resemblant of monsters than humans. Lastly, although filled with psychological and physical violence, which result in the young man's deterioration of mental state and, consequently, lead him to murdering his stalker, the turbulent relationship between a former teacher and a student portrayed in KYD does not stem from the academic setting. In this narrative, the students are not ensnared or oppressed by the university which becomes either a background or, at best, a catalyst for their experiences.

Finally, it cannot be omitted that DA is also a source of controversy. The movement has been criticized for glamorizing addictions and unhealthy studying habits, such as excessive caffeine and alcohol use, or normalizing lack of sleep. Moreover, DA and the works it draws inspiration from are considered to promote eurocentrism and elitism, as they mainly

revolve around upper-class students who attend prestigious schools and colleges. At the same time, it is evident that the internet users often tend to be more preoccupied with achieving a desired "dark academic look" than actually participating in academic learning and research. On top of it all, the movement's fascination with humanities and, consequently, the way it portrays studying them, is viewed as deceptive and misleading for anyone who is not enrolled in any of such degrees but might be considering it. However, there is also evidence that DA attempts to reconcile its interests with these critical opinions, thus proving its mutability. Therefore, it can be argued that DA and its conventions are still evolving, despite its apparent decline in popularity.

I believe this research has the potential to become an invitation to explore other social media trends popular among young internet users, which is perhaps its greatest implication. As I prove, DA has its roots in real academic and economic realities of modern students, at the same time being heavily inspired by literature, cinema and history. This demonstrates that DA is a subject complex and fascinating enough to be studied in its own right, but also allows the possibility to explore it with regard to other disciplines, such as literary and media studies. Therefore, it also suggests that other internet aesthetics may offer similar research opportunities, be it examining the origins and principles of other social media trends, practices of their followers or searching for convergence points between social media, literature, arts, and social sciences.

However, this research is subject to some limitations. For instance, the decision to restrict the study only to Tumblr results in absence of user-generated-content posted on other social media platforms where DA has also been a prominent trend. This implies that, perhaps, this research excludes some features of the movement's nature or practices adapted by the users. Had it not been for the time constraints, this research could also benefit from employing digital humanities and media studies methods in order to obtain a wider and more systematic selection of content published on Tumblr. Apart from that, this study focuses solely on perspectives of students, both in terms of nostalgic representations of academia produced by the movement itself, and the analyzed narratives. Therefore, the research excludes perspectives of lecturers, professors, teachers, and other members of faculty personnel. By extension, it does not analyze their representations within the movement, nor does it cover the reasons for these depictions and their relation to actual academic environments.

Therefore, future studies could investigate DA's development on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok and explore their implications for the movement. Moreover, the fact that this thesis employs a narrow selection of narratives and includes only those currently considered essential offers another possibility for further research. For instance, analyzing other works of literature and cinema that are also referred to within the DA community, but are overshadowed by the four narratives discussed here, could provide further insight into the movement and the evolution of its principles. At the same time, using works from more diverse time periods, not just contemporary as it is in the case of this thesis, may provide a wider scope of perspectives on representations of academia and students within the movement, as well as in western societies in general. Lastly, I believe that, due to DA's versatility, using frameworks and methods from other disciplines may shed light on the aspects of the movement's nature that are yet to be discovered, as well as prove its adaptability and usefulness for other areas of research.

On the whole, the purpose of this thesis was to investigate the development of DA, an internet aesthetic with its roots on social media platform Tumblr, examine the main values and inspirations behind it, as well as to perform a close analysis of four crucial works for the movement—Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992)*,* M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017)*,* Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and John Krokidas's *Kill Your Darlings* (2013)—in the context of Schoolhouse Gothic, a sub-genre *or* mode of writing described by Sherry R. Truffin. Chapter One sets out the inquiry into the nature and beginnings of the movement which I begin with an introduction into the common understanding of the term 'aesthetic.' Having clarified that, I proceed to investigate the origins of the movement's name, its values, inspirations, and visual language on Tumblr. Chapter Two consists of the analysis of two novels and two films frequently referred to by Dark Academics. I trace the five elements of Schoolhouse Gothic in each narrative and thus present the mechanisms behind their functioning and interactions with each other. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I provide an overview of critical views on DA, comment on them and present evidence of the movement's reactions to the said criticisms.

Whereas it is doubtful that all content creators and followers recognize the origins and nature of the principles underpinning their favored internet aesthetics, I believe that DA is more than just "silly Gen-Z pictures on social media," as I have once heard in a personal conversation. It should not be overlooked that DA is but one of hundreds of visual trends, be it niche or prominent in- and outside of social media. In view of DA, other internet aesthetics

may also have their origins multiple in aspects of existence of young internet users, such as their cultural and pop cultural tastes, lifestyle preferences, as well as economic, professional, and academic circumstances. Therefore, instead of scrolling, liking, and sharing, or, contrarily, criticizing and dismissing such trends, it is worth considering them as social and cultural indicators. What can they tell us about the realities of youth? What are the motivations, anxieties, inspirations behind each of them? And lastly, what consequences do they have for their creators and for everyone else?

Afterword

On a personal front, this project started as a set of vague ideas and assumptions that were bound together by a mixture of academic curiosity, personal frustration, and a glint of mischief. Longing for novelty, I took it as my objective to produce a piece of research that would be both appealing and thorough, as well as would investigate a subject that is still fairly unheard-of in academia. Soon, as a result of hours spent on reanalyzing and annotating the sources, scouting the internet for pieces of evidence, and endlessly generating ideas for new arguments, the project has become too extensive. Monstrous, dare I say. It was indeed quite ironic. My attention was focused on the subject to such a degree it eluded me that I was somewhat embodying both DA and the Schoolhouse Gothic experience myself.

At the beginning of the writing process and long before it, I was allured by DA and its nostalgic representations of university life. Throughout my work, this charm turned out to be a beguiling trick. Confined to the library, often disconnected from family and friends, with a ruined circadian rhythm and Chopin's nocturns playing in the background, I was not only trying to fulfill my objectives, but also fighting almost a losing battle with perfectionism and past academic experiences. As a double university drop-out, finishing this thesis was, apart from pursuing personal interests and contributing to the existing research, a matter of proving myself capable of obtaining post-graduate education. Despite progressing academically and professionally, the lack of reconciliation with my past was both haunting and blinding me, as it would happen to some of the characters discussed above.

Fortunately, producing a thesis requires engaging not only with gathered materials and sources, but, most importantly, with one's own thoughts and circumstances. Researching DA offered me an opportunity to address patterns existing in social media, literature, cinema and my own reality. Perhaps this idea may seem ridiculous, but upon acknowledging the disaster of my own making, I decided to evaluate myself both as a dark academic and protagonist of a Schoolhouse Gothic narrative. What was I working towards? What were the mechanisms behind my writing and academic experience? Some of the answers are indirectly voiced in the paragraphs above, others are detained in drafts and cut-off parts. Yet, because it would not have been possible to finalize this project without both, I decided to produce this final part to acknowledge it and emphasize that, despite being written in an academic manner, this thesis is a deeply personal piece of writing.

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