DARKNESS IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

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Darkness has always been defined in binary opposition to light. As Toni Morrison puts it in *Playing in the Dark* (1992): “Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). While darkness and light are mutually constitutive, the threshold between the two is ambivalent, as it can turn blurry and changing as notions, characters, and states of mind can shift from one to the other. In addition to its symbolic dimensions, the darkness-vs.-light binary can also be taken literally: the dark may be rife with danger, a metaphorical space of erasure, and a tool of obfuscation. However, at the same time, the dark may provide protection, a space for subversion, and a place of beauty—throughout history, darkness “has been imbued with positive qualities for a range of subaltern and oppositional groups. […] In the dark, persecuted minorities, marginal groups and the lower classes may escape domineering masters, carve out time and space” for themselves against oppression (Ekrich 5).

Despite “all the advantages of light for vision, there remains something curious and untold and deeply attractive about the dark” (Edwards 251) that makes it the object of human interest, inquiry and expression, both as a physical and abstract notion. While in real life “[u]nless proactively sought out, true darkness eludes the vast majority of people for their entire lives” (Lowe and Rafael 216)—and artificial darkness is, rather, a dispositif (see Elcott)—cultural artifacts have long represented and exploited darkness as a means to convey a variety of meanings, in particular interrogating moral and political aspects of the human experience. The nocturnal side of one’s own consciousness and morality has been explored by many a text, marking in particular mediascapes that rely on gothic and noir modes that delve into darkness and the night as a “realm of fascination and fear which inhabits the edges of our existence, crowded by shadows, plagued by uncertainty, and shrouded in intrigue” (Sharpe 9). The unconscious has been long linked to a dark metaphorical place and dark embodiments “that can come to light only when the subject turns away from the ordinary everyday to face its intimate, inner nocturnality” (Bronfen 199)—and thus it is represented in popular culture by means of visual and metaphorical strategies.

In the texts examined by the papers collected in this dossier, disembodiment, erasure, and oppression happen in the dark, as do ambiguity, corruption, and decay. At the same time, darkness becomes the embodiment of one’s own internal turmoil or a means to signal the grittiness and complexity of both collective and individual trauma. The dossier looks at popular culture across media, including music video, film, and TV series. Offering a holistic approach to the uses of darkness and its possible meanings in various genres, the articles explore monster narratives, pop music, horror, and noir. These texts amount to a balanced dossier that approaches the theme of darkness taking into account the gendered, political, and social realities that the analyzed popular culture texts emerge from.

The special dossier opens with Alex Adams’s paper “The Blackness of The Beast: Godzilla in the Heart of Darkness,” which examines the feature *Godzilla* (Edwards, 2014) and the deployment of darkness as both a reference to the original film it reboots and a sign of commitment to the representation of war-related themes. Adams first introduces a reasoned overview of *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) and its function as a cathartic parable of the military violence of the Second World War, nuclear warfare, and the autocratic character of the Japanese state. The use of light and darkness as devices to configure the film’s political workings is reprised by the 2014 US reboot, as a means to convey the “seriousness” of the film and its commitment to the war film genre. Signaling “authenticity” and “grittiness,” Edwards’s film purposely employs low-key lighting and multiple visual references to post-9/11 war film, legitimizing itself as a “serious” warfare parable rather than an “unserious” monster flick and placing itself in direct dialog with the Japanese original—while presenting a very different political message and stance.

In her paper “‘How did it get so dark?’ Mapping Liminal Spaces in Music Videos of Billie Eilish,” Kavya Mitchi D looks at Billie Eilish’s videos highlighting how the mise-en-scène and representations of darkness reflect the meaning of her lyrics. Familiar spaces such as the home become dark and uncanny while retaining their emotional connection to the singer’s states of mind and configuring her experience of reality. Mitchi evidences how darkness is both a recurring theme and a visual device to convey feelings of gloom, emotional turmoil, irrationality, and grief—as darkness is the only thing that is left when the boundaries between habitable and uninhabitable spaces collapse. The liminality of the home and the spaces in which Billie Eilish moves help tap into the metaphorical monsters that haunt her and reshape the notion of Self versus the Other, exposing the precarity of human existence, belonging, and un/happiness.

On its part, Pauline Trotry’s “‘Floating in this ocean of nothing’: Women in Dark Waters in Mike Flanagan’s *The Haunting of Bly Manor*” tackles the de/construction of horror and abjection in relation to the female body in the TV series through the connection of the characters with water. Both of Flanagan’s sister series, *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), feature a lake and thus dark waters as a trope embodying darkness, haunting, and death—specifically in relation to female characters. Drawing on Bachelard’s work on water and space in connection to death and dark imaginations, Trotry provides a close reading of the TV series and how it configures the presence, role and uncanniness of the lake. The dark and unfathomable depths of its waters come across as threatening and inhospitable as they equate to the lack of space or time, just as death does. Underwater, women find their haunting and ending, their freedom and independence submerged; when they resurface, in Flanagan’s imagination they remain bound to the stagnant darkness of the waters and the abjection that they embody.

Closing the dossier is the paper “‘Gotta light?’: Interrogating American Darkness in Episode 8 of *Twin Peaks: The Return* through Formalism,” in which Nick Davie provides a formalist reading of the episode “Gotta light?” (2017) with a specific focus on how darkness is a thematic constant that shapes the US American psyche. Throughout its seasons, the TV series *Twin Peaks* posits the eponymous town as a ground where the battle between light and darkness, good and evil, unfolds. Drawing on Block’s formalist methodology, Davie examines the ways in which aesthetic devices and visual strategies are deployed in the eighth episode of the third season to expose the darkness intrinsic to the contemporary US American political climate, conveying moral corruption and societal decay through the use of lighting, shapes, and spaces that reflect the ambiguity and ambivalence of its characters.

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