# On_Culture Issue 22: Darkness (Winter 2027)

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What emerges out of darkness? Who and what thrives in the dark? What happens when we conceive of darkness as a tool for re-framing theory, critique and interpretation?

A growing body of scholarship has taken to these questions and suggests an examination of darkness as a phenomenon, an experience and a cultural category with its own history, geography and politics, prompting what some have termed a phenomenology, or even 'skotology,' of darkness (Handelman 2005; Pint 2017). When approached in this way, darkness emerges as more than just a moral or epistemological void. It is also a space of rest and recovery for the human body, habitat for countless non-human species, a realm of resistance and concealment, and a category whose meaning shifts considerably across cultures, religious traditions and historical periods. In its 22nd issue, On_Culture takes darkness as its central concept to ask what becomes visible when darkness is not considered merely as the absence of light, but as a subject of study in its own right.

Taking darkness as a conceptual framework offers fruitful insights into cultural and political spheres. A prominent example of the intersection between blackness, aesthetics, and politics is (the discourse around) the 'Hottentot Venus' figure (Gilman 1985). The woman behind this figure, Sara Bartmaan, a South African Khoisan woman was objectified as a symbol of the alleged ugliness and excessive sexuality of African peoples (Hobson 2005). The concepts of beauty, identity and desire(ability) have become deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness through the legacies of imperial visual language, iconography, colonial narratives and racialized thought—something that can still be felt today through, for example, the inherent biases of visual technologies such as photographic film calibrated to lighter skin tones (Roth 2009) or dating app algorithms that disadvantage darker-skinned users (Hutson et al. 2018). Thus, demonstrating how the devaluation of darkness has been encoded in technical infrastructures. Darkness plays a comparable role in the entertainment industry, where it is either avoided or cultivated. Casinos eliminate any trace of daylight, replacing it with spectacular artificial illumination designed to keep patrons immersed and disoriented from the passage of time (Schüll 2012), while the film industry uses darkness as an aesthetic and narrative tool to create a mystical and spooky atmosphere in horror and noir as well as symbolizing a space of peace and rest (Keating 2024). Certain music genres and subcultures, such as punk, metal and goth, take darkness as a central point of reference, using it to express melancholy and a sense of theatricality, as well as an artful way to style oneself (van Elferen 2017, Robb 2026).

Issue 22 also explores the social implications of darkness, asking how its uneven distribution across spaces and populations shapes everyday practices, social relations, and even produces

inequalities. Historical scholarship traces nocturnal labour and sociability before the “colonisation” of the night by church, state, and commerce (Ekirch 2005; Koslofsky 2011), to its complete “disenchantment” through nineteenth-century urban illumination (Schivelbusch 1995). Modernist architecture’s ideal of “Licht, Luft, Sonne” [light, air, sun] extended these efforts to reorganize everyday life through access to light (Horvat 2024). It thus produced specific domestic and urban settings in which sunlight, shadow, and artificial illumination together structured social rhythms, including altering gender roles. Yet these transformations were neither linear nor irreversible. In contemporary post-socialist cities such as Mitrovica (Kosovo), which developed and electrified through the Trepça mining complex, recurrent power outages accompany the city’s industrial decline and its growing peripheralization within the global economic system. Alongside job losses, the resulting darkness meant a new set of social practices: in place of everyday routines organized around industrial employment, there were now religious observances that gave rhythm to the day and night (Berisha 2024). The ambivalent cultural meanings of darkness can furthermore be deduced from workers’ responses to nocturnal labour. In post-WWII socialist societies, some female factory workers resisted proposals to abolish night shifts, defending work at night as a source of economic independence (Simić 2018). Contemporary ethnographies likewise reveal that the night-shift workers experience both a sense of peace and security, as well as uncertainty, in their work regimes (Duijzings 2012).

An often-disregarded aspect of darkness is its significance for mental health and the environment. Darkness is not just a space of danger or the ‘shady’ side of society. It is also a necessary condition for health and recovery, as in the case of sleep and the circadian rhythm. It is also essential for ecological well-being, sustaining nocturnal and light-averse species whose habitats are shrinking due to light pollution and relentless illumination from the built environment. Bats, moths and countless other species that are either nocturnal or sensitive to light depend on unlit night skies in order to feed, navigate and reproduce, making artificial light at night a significant driver of biodiversity loss (Gaston et al. 2013). Darkness is essential for the human body as well. Circadian rhythms, sleep quality and mental health depend on adequate exposure to darkness (Bonmati-Carrion et al. 2014). This begs the question of what forms of living, working and resting for the human and more-than-human world might be possible when the potential of darkness is appreciated more fully?

The seemingly oppositional conceptualization of darkness and light has significantly influenced our structures of thought in philosophy and literature. For instance, in his seminal 1952 study Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon posits darkness (Black) and light (White) as forces that establish not only ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ but also who is considered human and who is not, who is sovereign and who is beast, who is French and who is Other. The association of darkness with evil and light with goodness can be traced through the long history of Western metaphysics, from Neoplatonic hierarchies of light to Enlightenment epistemology, in which reason itself figures as illumination and its absence as a ‘dark age’ to be overcome (Burik 2019). The concept of good versus evil has also shaped literary plots. One of the oldest examples is the Epic of Gilgamesh, which features a two-character narrative later defined as the ‘Heavenly Twins,’ representing two opposing forces (George 2003). Gothic literature, in turn, has embraced darkness as its dominant aesthetic, portraying night, shadow and obscurity as sites of terror, transgression, and the supernatural (Punter 2013). Through its entanglement with empire, the Gothic genre also features darkness in relation to race, landscape and desire (Smith and Hughes 2003). Postcolonial writers have since

appropriated and reworked this darkness to explore the anxieties and traumatic legacies of colonialism (Rudd 2010).

We invite scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines such as ethnography and anthropology, art and art history, architecture and urban planning, literary and media studies, religious studies, environmental humanities, and postcolonial studies to contribute to this issue with approaches that foreground and complicate the understandings of darkness. We are especially interested in contributions that ask: In what contexts and cultures does darkness signify something other than danger or evil? How have artificial light and its absence been distributed as privilege, discipline, or tradition? How do cultural and social concepts of darkness reinforce or unsettle stereotypes and structures of discrimination? And what might it mean—politically, ecologically, aesthetically—to take darkness seriously on its own terms?

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:
- Epistemological approaches to darkness
- Darkness in post- and decolonial discourses
- Ecological notions of darkness: light pollution, biodiversity, and more-than-human habitats
- Darkness and physical or mental health: rest, recovery, and the circadian body
- Religious and spiritual conceptions of darkness and light
- Electrification, infrastructure, and the politics of artificial light
- Urban planning and architecture: darkness as unsafe space, or as a resource to be protected
- Night work and the ethnography of nocturnal labour
- Darkness, race, and technology: photography, algorithms, beauty standards
- Symbolism and metaphors of darkness and light in language and literature
- Darkness as a philosophical, cinematographic and aesthetic tool
- Darkness in consumption, entertainment, and nightlife economies

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Please note: On*Culture also features* Perspectives, a section devoted to shorter, creative pieces pertaining to each issue topic. These can be interviews, essays, opinion pieces, reviews of exhibitions, analyses of cultural artifacts and events, photo galleries, videos, works of art… and more! These contributions are uploaded on a rolling basis and can be connected to every one of On_Culture’s issues. Interested in contributing? Send your ideas to the Editorial Team at any time: content@on-culture.org

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*and develops key concepts and methods in the field by means of a collaborative and collective process. On*Culture is dedicated to fostering such engagements as well as the cultural dynamics at work in thinking about and reflecting on culture.

The journal consists of three sections: peer-reviewed academic *Articles, as well as* Essays, and the aforementioned *Perspectives. On*Culture brings new approaches and emerging topics in the (trans)national study of culture 'on the line' and, in so doing, fills the gap__ between 'on' and 'culture.' There are numerous ways of filling the gap, and a plurality of approaches is something for which the journal strives with each new issue.

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Reference:

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