

---

# Dark Futures

## Designing in Darkness : Rethinking Futures, Ecology & Identity

Adrien Cadiot / Emilie Roulland / Article / Février 26



# Abstract

---

In a time of ambient uncertainty, climate anxiety, and societal dissonance, this paper explores how embracing darkness (as metaphor, method, and material) can offer new pathways for design, foresight, and cultural analysis. Challenging the dominant aesthetics of bright futures, optimism, and greenwashed imaginaries, Dark Futures repositions darkness not as pessimism, but as potential: a space of fertile rupture, radical introspection, and regenerative creativity.



Drawing from dark ecology, tragic optimism, neo-romanticism, and critical design, the paper proposes a set of alternative foresight methodologies rooted in shadow analysis, cultural dissonance, and emotional realism. These approaches question the overexposure to linear progress narratives, inviting foresight practitioners, designers, and brands to embrace neo-darkness: a mood, a lens, and a tool that brings nuance to future-oriented thinking.

Through notions like “dark mode”, “shadow forecasting”, and “cultural shadowing”, this essay offers concrete strategies for working with uncertainty as design material.

It advocates for an active disengagement from solutionist, hyperconnected noise, and proposes the abandonment of clarity as an epistemic posture to re-attune perception and renew meaning-making. Far from nihilism, Dark Futures imagines hope within the opaque, the obscure, and the overlooked: where futures are composted and generated, not consumed.

# Summary

---

## Introduction

–  
**01** - The Ouroboros : Dark Cycles and the Illusion of Innovation

**02** - “Show Must Go On” : Consumerism, Obsolescence and Denial

**03** - Dark Cultures : Fear and Rise of Apocalyptic Ecology

03.1 - Dark Optimism: Exploiting Darkness to Reveal the Potential of Futures

03.2 - Dark Ecology: Revealing the Darkness to Inspire a Better Future

03.3 - Dark Euphoria: Exposing the Light of Darkness

**04** - Dark Futures : Darkness in Future Studies and as a Foresight Approach

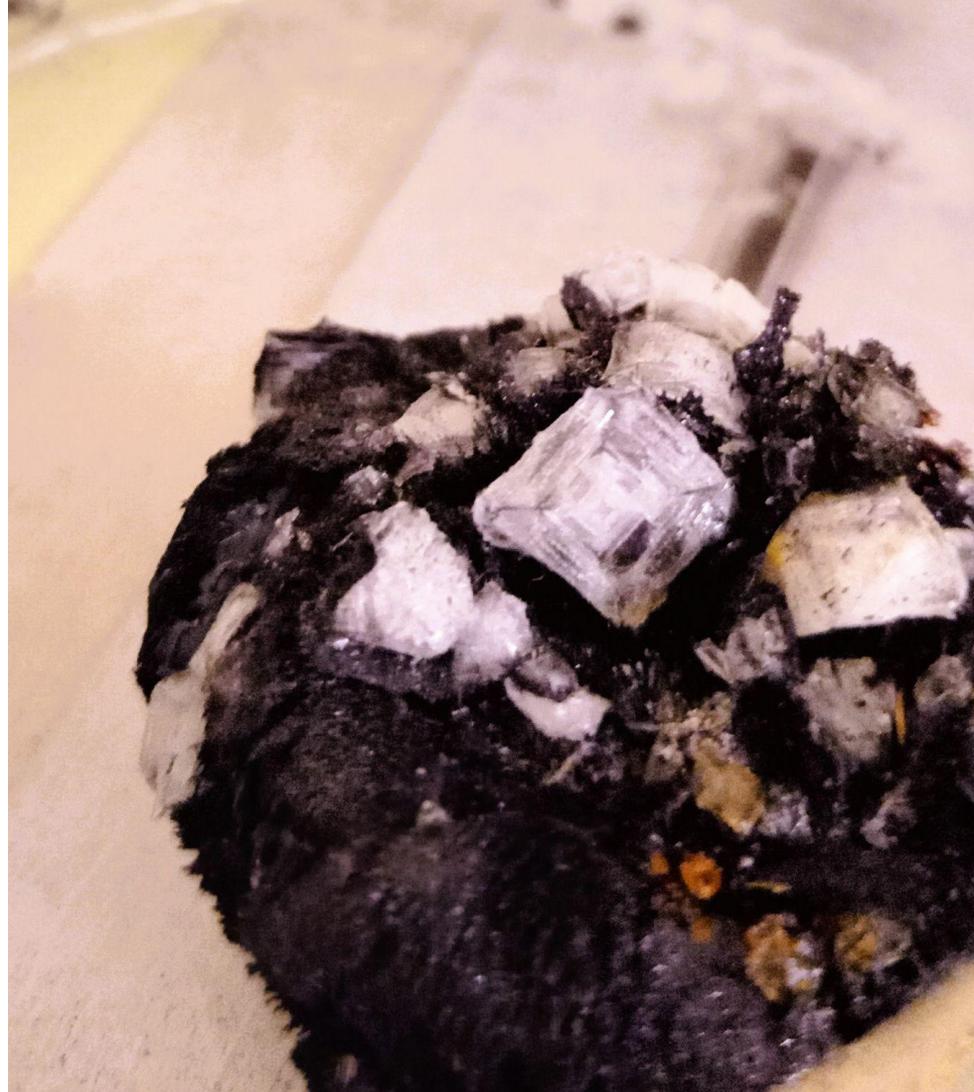
04.1 - Embracing the Dark Mode

04.2 - Dark Forecasting

04.3 - Cultural Shadowing

**05** - Neo-Darkness : A Romantic Cultural Movement

–  
Conclusion : Beyond Dark Culture: Toward Responsible and Colourful Futures



# Introduction

---

In our ever-shifting context, the disjunctive reference points of previous decades are becoming increasingly blurred. They reveal systems of norms and values in the process of renewal, learning to evolve differently. These multiple disruptions serve to invigorate scientific and social disciplines, their proposals, models, and classifications. New modes of communication enrich increasingly complex environments that are learning to domesticate themselves step by step, tentatively: “chemin faisant”, in the words of E. Morin. In this way, it is the reference points that once reconstructed the world in the 1950s and again in the 1970s that now find themselves destabilised, sometimes darkened



As they explore this renewal, these paradigmatic shifts unsettle societies still barely healed from the World Wars and their totalitarian climates. Terrorist events, the changing pace of life, real-time media, and the transformation of decision-making systems all resurface trauma and anxiety. Each challenges the illusory gains that had become comfortable and reassuring at the end of the 20th century.

Beyond quantum theory and complex thinking, it is uncertainty that now pervades our everyday lives, an awareness humanity has been developing for approximately fifty years. The fluctuating contexts and hyperconnected environments with which humans interact contribute fully to this.

This consciousness of uncertainty is now recognised by contemporary societies: a novel context, whose vagueness may be experienced as burdensome, oppressive, or even anxiety-inducing darkness, particularly for those suffering from eco-anxiety. Society finds itself in a darkroom, deprived of a nightlight to illuminate or reassure its path.

Thus, uncertainty summons diverse ways of being in the world. Of approaching the unknown and adapting to it. These responses (both human and animal) manifest as “re-actions” and various forms of adaptation. They represent deep-rooted sociological trends that describe our century’s evolving societies.

These “societal flows” speak of their instability and ceaseless motion. They thereby highlight transitional changes occurring in the short term while projecting their trajectories into the medium and long term.

Among the societal flows that seek to express our era’s haziness, some erupt with particular virulence. In recent years, we have witnessed conservative approaches driven by dark emotions: fear, anxiety, eco-anxiety, and disgust. They manifest in multiple forms of resistance to change. Thoughts and practices of the “re-”: returns to history and heritage, glances in the rear-view mirror, identity withdrawal, reuse, revaluation of all kinds, the renewed emphasis on the duty of remembrance:

these are all signs of nostalgia, disappointment, and/or frustration.

Fears of future possibilities and anger stemming from climate damage; disgust towards the limits of progress (as proclaimed by ICTs until the 1990s); or anxiety over the potential misuse of information on our screens, also black. A pessimistic and darkened mood sustained by real-time connected screens and a media economy thriving on the profitability of dramatised information. Gloomy inclinations toward “things were better before” inevitably revive some of the most lugubrious historical debates.

A range of complex issues, multiple theories, and unlimited inventive fictions all animated by a common thread: the relationship to time, often “darkened” by associations with the mediaeval “Dark Ages”. While some theorists of the “Anthropocene” believe humanity’s planetary impact has never been so devastating, Michel Serres speaks of a new era: one we have entered and one in which we are all actors, capable of rethinking its values and reference points. Such a novel context might allow us to perceive the present moment through more colourful shades of grey. Rather than retreating into isolation or denial of responsibility, every encountered situation could be approached through its potential and possible futures. For this, it is up to us to question and work with and for the generations to come.

This paper will consider the following key questions raised by these transformations that will guide our exploration throughout this essay.

- . How and why did we enter this supposed dark state?
- . How crisis-related imaginaries are shaping culture and ecological consciousness?
- . How darkness could be leveraged for foresight-related practices?
- . What worldviews, aesthetics or methodologies are driving this shift?
- . Could neo-darkness become a regenerative and imaginative space for design?
- . And finally, how might we move beyond Dark Culture: towards more responsible, vibrant, and connected futures?

01.

# The Ouroboros: Dark Cycles and the Illusion of Innovation

---



The inertial pull of conservatism and protectionism is undeniably resurging across international landscapes. Fuelled by primal fears of the “dark” (reptilian in nature), by catastrophe scenarios, and cultivated by media outlets that revel in rehashing problems instead of posing deeper questions. A fear of again suffering extremes still fresh in collective memory, extremes some current events may even resemble.

A perfect opportunity for fatalistic obscurantists to drag the Ouroboros from the old drawers. Let us, then, examine the example of this mythological creature from the cosmogonic representations it bears, to its symbolic limitations in grasping the complexities of the world.

Being a transcultural figure of the serpent–dragon “biting its own tail”, the Ouroboros has indeed evolved across cultures, eras, and mythologies. This mythical creature aims to explain the transformations of the world. Created by humankind, it is a cosmogonic model of the universe’s origin and its fundamental movements.

A figure of that which “goes around in circles”, it proposes a framework for understanding Life among many others. This quest to comprehend what is conceived, born, and lived reveals a questioning of temporal dimensions, through tensions, oppositions, and contrasts that challenge humans and their knowledge.

In this way, the Ouroboros formalises the paradoxes humankind seeks to unravel in its attempt to tame its environment (para- and doxa, meaning “against common belief”). In short, through it, humans attempt to understand themselves by engaging their ego and their most anxious emotions. And the circle was not chosen at random: it refers to ancestral symbols of reproduction vital to species survival. From maternal curves to the reassuring revolutions of the sun, warding off the apocalypse of a morning that may never come. In short, it betrays a fear of death.

As though habits were hard drugs from which it is difficult to withdraw, the lazy highways of thought unfortunately condition perception to the point of forgetting their influence.

Prepackaged, ready-to-use images become so commonplace they permeate reflection. The Ouroboros is one such image (like invisible viruses, these archetypal representations conceal themselves to better disappear.) Yet by regularly engaging our emotions, memories, and critical faculties, the trap of collective and personal unthinking is disarmed.

The Ouroboros thus becomes an exercise in “re-bending”: of questioning and reflecting anew. Tools to prevent us from falling into the trap of simplified answers that disregard fluid and inventive complexity. In other words, the Ouroboros’ loop is indeed the image of endless repetition and of those who struggle to “change the record”. But it can also serve to re-fluidify that which had become rigid or crystallised.

Above all, the Ouroboros is a darkened and darkening mental image despite appearances. It exists first in the mind of the one who conceives it, then as a projection onto a chosen medium, and finally as a diffused reproduction. In its case, it is drawn in two-dimensional space (length and width). These are dimensions humans perceive intuitively, conceive easily, and establish as their complete reality, reassuringly so.

Unfortunately, these are then perceived as the only possible dimensions. The imagined and then visualised creature (flattened on paper) becomes an epistemological obstacle. For though its circular shape suggests rotation and a third-fourth dimension of space-time, it remains a line.

It will not come alive as it strives to imply. It will merely create its own referential dimension, one which slowly becomes an automatic reference.

We might therefore say the Ouroboros “turns in on itself” or “loops endlessly”. In linear fashion, the circle merely delineates its own obscure limits. Like a conservative, fatalistic attitude toward uncertainty, it locks itself into a singular, repetitive motion: its own, cultivated to excess. Transmitted and repeated, it is thus reproduced, and validates its self-reproducing model through its actions. As if trapped in the two-dimensional spatiality of its projection medium, the Ouroboros reflects the limitations of oversimplified representations.

Those that mirror Descartes' classical logic, decried by thinkers of Complexity. In short, those that constrain our understanding of ever more complex realities, realities darker than they appear. Like a cropped and stereotyped image, it narrows divergences and, with them, imaginative questioning. Trapped in its own epistemic snare, the Ouroboros clings to it nonetheless for comfort.

In this way, the culture of "Re-" manifests internal barriers that, at a societal scale, can become actual resistances to scientific, epistemological, and artistic transitions. Where different logics and potentials are attempting to emerge, the thoughts and practices of this culture of "Re-" "dig in their heels".

Wise, constructive caution for some; but for others, it becomes a defensive barricade, or worse, a denial of responsibility as seen in recent trends like "all-washing" or "eco-hushing", where companies project positive images while concealing harmful practices. Armours for burying one's head in the sand, revealing just how difficult change and line-shifting can be for humans.

Imagining oneself elsewhere, envisioning the ego in terms not of "better or worse", but of different adjacent, more nuanced. Thus, some men and women of the 21st century choose comfort and simplification, even if it deceives them. They exhibit reactions that feed their deepest, sometimes unjustified fears: alterity and the unknown, implied by our uncertain contexts and futures.

More tangibly, the Ouroboros' circularity resonates today with certain logics of "eco-" (etymologically, "home"). In radicalised ecological thinking, or in beliefs tied to ancestral representations of the "Mother Earth" archetype. The goddess Gaia is being revived by societies facing climate crises searching for reassurance, for new meaningful reference points.

More neutrally, closed scientific ecosystems help to understand climatic and biological changes (water cycle, photosynthesis, food chain). "Eco-design" and "ecoconception" promote models and diagrams of circular economies in an effort to "safeguard" humanity from its often deeply darkened unconscious excesses.

Our era thus seems paradoxically anchored in a dynamic linking Dark Ages and ancestral myths (reassuring because familiar) with continuous models. Vortices that are sometimes hard to escape, yet which reveal new shades of future. Different forms, equally representative of our transitional era's complexity and emerging challenges.

02.

“Show Must Go On”:  
Consumerism,  
Obsolescence and  
Denial

---



The crisis of modernity has led to the “crisis of the very idea of the future.” Our societies regularly invoke cosmogonies and primitive conceptions, representations that may express deep-seated fears, but also preserve ancestral know-how with prudent foresight.

It is an era where “Re-” is “cultivated”, much like the nurturing Earth. Yet it coexists with another flow: The Show Must Go On by Freddie Mercury, echoed by author and cultural editor Alec Leach in his 2023 essay titled “The world is on fire but we keep buying shoes.”

Indeed, “innovation” (formerly “progress”) has become a key term of our somewhat greyed and blurred 21st century. It is held as a guarantee of “re-newal”, provoking a marketing frenzy, a supposedly luminous headlong rush. Novelty for novelty’s sake gives rise to creative methods from all sides. According to their proponents, these methods provoke a deluge of ideas, like machines for creating at all costs.

In short, to keep pace with a speed now inseparable from our age, within survival logics saturated by what is called the “spectacle”. These methods illustrate what might be called a “Show Must Go On” flow—a tribute to the famous warnings of Freddie Mercury.

It was amid the upheavals of the 1960s that The Society of the Spectacle was theorised by Guy Debord. A Marxist and critical text, it became renowned for its social analysis. The central thesis revolves around the capitalist ideology in which commodities are deemed alienating and obscuring.

They exercise a dominating power over life within a consumer society darkened by the post-war period. “Spectacle” refers to a form of social reproduction that mimics the reproduction of goods. Processes of “individuation” become behavioural and societal models. According to Debord, the systemic logic of the spectacle is thus a propaganda tool of the liberal, consumerist model on its rather dark side.

A mechanism that keeps economic, industrial, and socio-cultural systems in place through their rigidity. However, though individuals are absorbed actors in these transitions, they remain neither blind nor naïve.

In Relational Aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud explains that “our optimism regarding the emancipatory power of technology has largely faded. We know that computing, technology or atomic energy represent threats and tools of enslavement as much as they represent improvements to daily life.” For him, screens derived from photography are one of the origins of our societies’ obsession with light-seeking visuals. They have, as he puts it, altered “artists’ relationships to the world and the very modes of representation.”

Screens have thus gradually become the “new spectacles” and new “Enlightenments”—a nod to Renaissance philosophies. Like the interactive images that populate and animate our daily lives, scenography and backdrops evolve, stagecraft is renewed, and societal programming transforms.

In such a context, some cling to ultra-imagination, while others turn it into all-out communication—overflowing and darkened. The show must go on, even if backstage, introspection seems urgently needed. Nonetheless, some visual artists and designers attempt to use these same images differently, prompting us to look at our world otherwise: to question, debate, and critique consciously.

Critical Design seeks to raise awareness, invent, or quite simply imagine, propose, and bring alternative visions to life.

In this Show Must Go On era (no matter the cost), ultra-liberalism in its most excessive form thrives just as much as the conservative “Re-” factions mired in their gloom-ridden obscurantism. Silicon Valley, for example, has become the epicentre for start-ups aiming to succeed in record time. The idea is to be bought out for a fortune within a year of founding. Fantasising about Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, or Microsoft (the “GAFAM”), many micro-enterprises now view profit as an end in itself, coveting the exponential, quantifiable growth models of these tech giants.

They rub shoulders with “business angels” who may (or may not) lead them to a maximised return on investment. It’s a race for “silicon-dolls” (or “bitcoins”) that fuels the urgent renewal of products whose newest versions are already obsolete.

Despite growing awareness of this reckless race toward unbridled production and consumption, a topical expression has emerged: “planned obsolescence”. A dark point of no return inherited from the Industrial Revolution and leading to suffocation: it reflects “cradle to grave” logics. Products more disposable than durable that drive the bleak production system into a spiral of constant “more”. A system now visibly reaching its limits on human, societal, and environmental scales.

Fast Fashion is just one example among many. The Show Must Go On thus implies pressing forward: fighting against wind and tide, regardless of consequences, even if devoid of any viable or desirable hue for the world or humanity. It is not about conservative withdrawal, but rather an opposite extreme: an unreasoned belief in total rupture, hyper-consumerist and hyper-technological.

A pledge to break free from the post-war model, to “blow it up” out of fear, under the guise of “progress” making a grand return. With little inwardness, and above all, negative emotions as driving forces. Emotions that do not necessarily reveal “advancement”, but toxicity and herein lies the paradox.

For adherents of this societal flow, capitalism is to be redirected toward hyper-equipped humans, even techno-libertarians à la Elon Musk. Connected technologies would become accomplices of a robotised new economy seen as liberating or “emancipatory”, albeit sadly conditioning.

All this, even at the cost of a deliberately ostrich-like climate-sceptic stance on environmental change. While some praise this approach as “bold” for facing “the Future” head-on, it is unfortunately with blinkers on that it denies the impact of its excessive actions. Dominant forces that are now consciously ignored by climate sceptics.



03.

Dark Cultures :  
Fear and Rise of  
Apocalyptic Ecology

---



“To lose face” in the “stock market games of life” (or rather to take time to reflect on less violent alternatives) seems to be one of the deepest anxieties of movements darkened by their inner fears and headlong rushes. Fans of the spectacular, they embody the dystopian extremes envisioned by Aldous Huxley, adapted by Andrew Niccol in *Gattaca*, and more recently updated in films and series such as ‘*Westworld*’, ‘*Alien:Earth*’ or ‘*The Substance*’ to name a few.

These are reactions to the uncertainties and transformations of our 21st century. Catastrophe-driven narratives have notably emotional traction because they echo the collapse of modern promises.

Dystopias now feel more plausible than utopias. Ultra-technicism and the perceived immateriality of Big Data now sound like answers to the ills of our time. In such a context, transhumanist fantasies flourish, and the “augmented human” regularly fuels philosophical, scientific, and technical debates.

Cinema is overflowing with superheroes and mischievous robots. Research budgets are increasingly dedicated to all things AI. Not to mention memory externalisation and the mythical “fountain of youth”, which we supposedly approach ever more closely, a promise of eternal life through longevity science.

Creating machines that can feel, learn, create, and love is indeed one of the ambitions of this new century. These are fiercely contested hopes, which Jean-Michel Besnier describes as “deeply mystical”. So many fantasies and ongoing projects that concern Ethics, and challenge Law. For while information can be a luminous ally, it can also become a dark enemy. As connected objects practise sourcing through all sorts of sensors, the Paris Law Courts organise “Trials of Transhumanism”.

A way to anticipate the problems linked to such practices, while global cyberattacks have become a weekly reality. As some treat the intimacy of others as mere merchandise, this globalised movement tends towards generalised indiscretion.

If “taking time to think” was considered a luxury in the 2000s, respecting the right to privacy is likely to become the new luxury of the next 20 years. Beyond essential and integral research, new peer-review ethics and protections against intellectual abuse or the emotional interiority of individuals are becoming issues to consider seriously.

These contradictory conservative and ultra-liberal logics each have their own systems of norms and values. They project themselves differently, with differing priorities and representations. Yet it must be emphasised that these are deeply human behaviours. In fact, each of us sometimes oscillates between one and the other: between these “re-actions” in the face of uncertainty.

These societal flows are born from equally legitimate sensitivities, whose possibilities and imaginaries are amplified by the Web, the recent knowledge revolution, or the perceivable complexity of our worlds. From anxious fears of the unknown to transitional projections, they can all lead us toward a form of societal ecology with apocalyptic tendencies: “dark” and “obscure”.



## 03.1

Dark Optimism :  
Exploiting Darkness to  
Reveal the Potential of  
Futures

---



“Over on Reddit, interest in r/nihilism soared in the last few years, up from 31k members in January 2019 to 175k in March 2025.” — Reddit, 2025

–

“Consumer confidence in the future has significantly declined, reaching a 12-year low, tumbling 9.6 points to 65.2.” — The Conference Board, 2025

Tragedies are multiplying. Ongoing crises, global pandemics, recessions, systemic risks, nuclear war threats, the illusion of the end of civilization, geopolitical conflicts...

Everything darkened to the point of being institutionalised by the World Economic Forum during January 2023 with the keyword “polycrisis”. This is the apocalyptic narrative that has inhabited us for several years, along with dystopian visions more realistic than ever. We are collectively and globally confronted with a state of generalised darkness marked by pessimism, to the point of questioning the very survival of humanity.

A scenario of “Apokalupsis”, leaving our societies in obscurity and obstructing our path to securing the future mirrored in a growing interest in nihilism and a global fascination with emergency kits, end-of-the-world films and survivalist cultures.

As English geographer Danny Dorling notes in his 2025 essay “The Next Crisis: What We Think About the Future”, crisis have commonly been spoken “often by implication of the next crisis, precisely because we were experiencing an increased capacity to sit back and think about the future”. Our own ability to acknowledge the dark reveals our own privilege to step back and decipher what might come next. Rising phenomena of eco-anxiety are becoming an everyday reality.

Defined as “extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change”, it affects us all. Similarly, forms of nyctophilia are emerging states of being “very happy and comfortable in darkness [...] enjoying sitting alone in the dark late at night, wide awake” (Cambridge Dictionary). Etymologically, “darkness” comes from the Proto-Germanic “derkaz”, literally meaning “to hide or conceal”, to conceal brighter futures and their potentials for the sake of lingering gloom.

But what if darkness were instead revealed? What if the path forward were to embrace more realistic, protopian and euphoric possibilities? Dark optimism, dark ecology, and dark euphoria allow us to feel at ease in darkness without becoming sense deprived... Let us expand on this.

But what if darkness were instead revealed? What if the path forward were to embrace more realistic, protopian and euphoric possibilities? Dark optimism, dark ecology, and dark euphoria allow us to feel at ease in darkness without becoming sense deprived... Let us expand on this.

In 2020, we entered a phase of “tragic optimism”: a profound hope while recognising the state of the world and its many tragedies. In the face of current and future discomfort, denial has emerged as a convenient strategy. The ostrich approach leads to a detachment from reality and diminishes our capacity to act. But rather than follow this path, “tragic optimism” has been increasingly embraced by a growing community of dark optimists.

These individuals are more inclined to recognise our actual situation and the reality of tragedy, while maintaining faith in future potential.

In other words, this dark optimism rejects utopian ideals in favour of more achievable outcomes, while still acknowledging the underlying dark possibilities our futures hold. Offering a more grounded, yet no less inspiring vision than utopia, protopia “involves as many new problems as new benefits, and this complex interaction of work and breakdown is very hard to predict.” (P2P Foundation). In tragic optimism, dark optimism and protopia, darkness is no longer something to obscure but to expose. It strikes not to conceal, but to reveal both issues and possibilities.

“What really reflects the permacrisis is the feeling that there is no way out and that we are close to the collapse of our civilisation.”

— Encyclopaedia Gizapedia

–

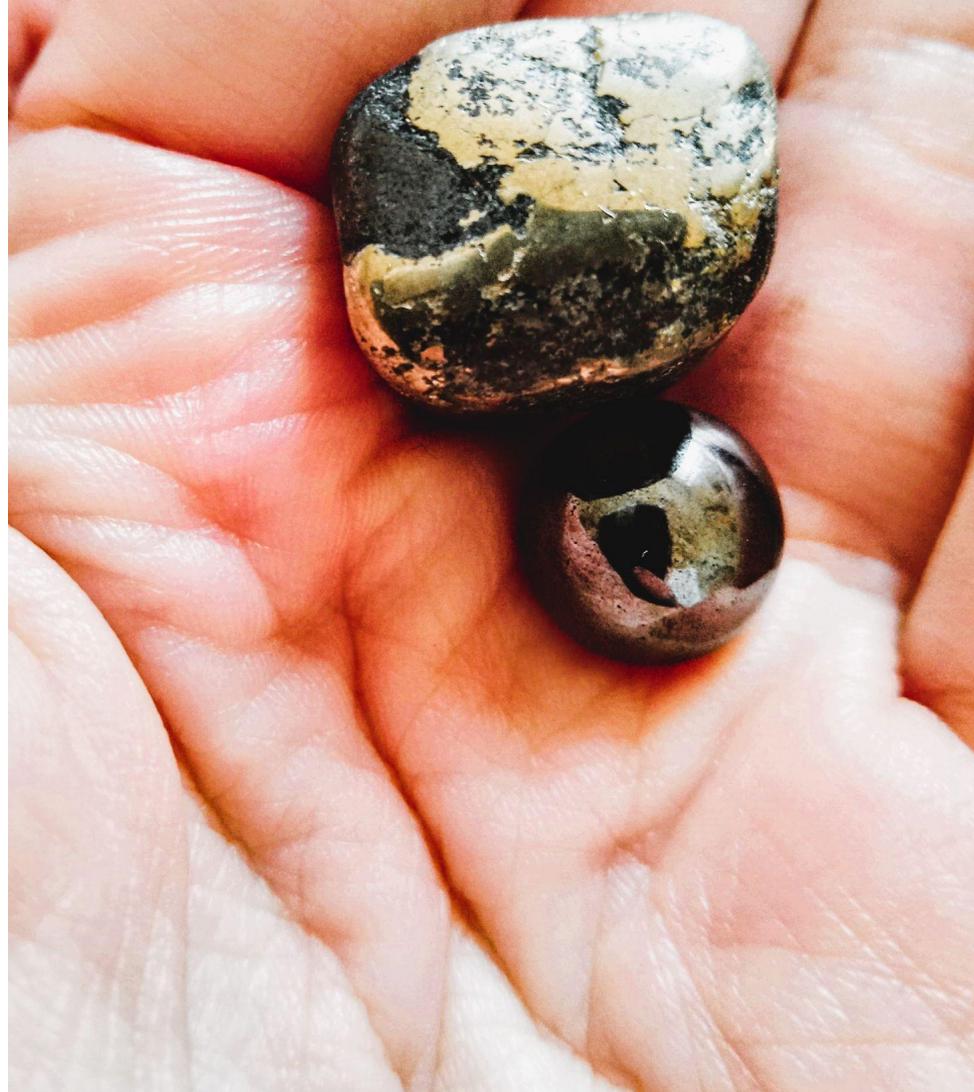
“Considering all the crises we are currently experiencing, it would make total sense to wonder if the end of the world, as we know it, has not already begun...” — Vlanpodcast, January 2023

“We are resolutely optimistic about the kind of world humanity could create, and resolutely realistic about how far we still are from reaching it. [...] Dark optimism is not that kind of sparkling optimism, which I find rather frustrating. [...] It’s the capacity to look directly at the most difficult aspects of our situation and our actions, while holding deep faith in human potential.” — Shaun Chamberlin, Kosmos Journal, 2014

## 03.2

Dark Ecology :  
Revealing the Darkness  
to Inspire  
a Better Future

---



With the idea of an unguaranteed future comes the rise of ecology. Originally coined to describe the study and “economy” of living beings, the term (along with its concepts and challenges) has become a condition of survival. Our contemporary imagination associates ecology with everything bright: utopian futures, salvific technologies, green cities, and so on...

Under techno-solutionism, ecology as a whole concept suffers a semantic and marketing bleaching to the extent of giving birth to Green Positivism and green washing practices, leading to a loss of meaning behind the co-opted word. This is also the view of Timothy Morton, philosopher of the Anthropocene, in *Dark Ecology* (2016).

For him, ecology, having no boundary in what it encompasses (biosphere, culture, humans, solar system), lives in our collective unconscious as a strange loop. Involving both action and appearance, what seems ecological (cleaner, greener, more aware) often matters more than genuinely ecological actions. In this luminous framing of eco-logic, darkness has no place. Yet darkness is necessary. Johan Eklöf’s “Manifesto of Darkness” “urges us to cherish natural darkness for the sake of the environment, our wellbeing, and all life on Earth.” Morton challenges our objectified, utilitarian and beautified approach to ecological awareness by re-evaluating the old idea of “the beauty of nature” through a rehabilitation of ugliness and the strange. But under one condition: ugliness in its natural form.

As embodied by viruses, radiation, rain, iron, concrete, or pollution. In short, in dark ecology, it does not privilege the human, is not something beautiful, and serves no real utility for the old notion of nature.

“What is dark ecology? It is an ecological awareness—dark and depressing. Yet this ecological awareness is also gloomy and uncanny. And, curiously, it is dark and gentle. Nihilism still tops the charts these days. One rarely gets beyond the first darkness, and even less if one cares. [...] Lighten up: dark ecology doesn’t mean heaviness or gloominess; it is oddly light.” — Timothy Morton, *Living Earth, Field Notes from the Dark Ecology Project 2014–2016*

“Against the paternalism of certain ecological movements, dark ecology advocates irony and ugliness as means of awareness.” — Roc Jiménez de Cisneros

Dark ecology enables liberation from ecological anxiety, from solastalgia, and from usual guilt-laden ecological philosophies. It offers a broader view of our environment and its inhabitants including inanimate beings, emancipating ecology from the ‘economy’ and study of solely living beings.

At a time when greenwashing has become widespread and green-hushing has emerged (where companies refrain from disclosing their climate goals to avoid scrutiny and accusations) it becomes impossible to recognise the dark parts of the ecological journey, which is precisely what must be revealed. It is not about lighting the dark, but exposing it.

To inspire a better future from utopian promises to grounded, hopeful realities.

### 03.3

Dark Euphoria :  
Exposing the  
Light of Darkness

---



Alongside these emerging societal trends, doom-washing is also gaining ground. It refers to situations where brands capitalise on apocalyptic and dystopian aesthetics purely to win consumer empathy during hard times. It signals a turning point in creativity: inspiring a more accessible form of escapism, one rooted in present-day reality. Neither dystopian nor utopian, it is protopian and darkly optimistic.

An aesthetic fuelled by feelings of gloom and misfortune, this newer euphoric yet realistic aesthetic acknowledges and literally exploits the darkness of our times. Exhilarating, it is also energised by those same dark optimists and dark ecologists.

While symbolism and traditional belief systems associate light with good and darkness with evil, current trends show a more nuanced approach reframing the acknowledgement of darkness as a virtue. 2023 marked the beginning of an aesthetic relationship to darkness that seeks to inspire optimism, truth, and hope.

To quote a few miscellaneous cultural manifestations from 2023's rebranded darkness: the series Wednesday in 2022 by Netflix; Fall Acne Studios' dirty denim campaign featuring Kylie Jenner; Rodarte Fall Winter show and collection during New York Fashion Week; Julia Fox fashion and cultural hype; fragrance brand Seven London gained recognition (a label and platform that takes inspiration from the seven deadly sins.)

Similarly, the same year, a survey conducted by Wunderman Thompson Intelligence among over 3,000 adults in the UK, US, and China revealed that 50% of respondents said they were fascinated by content that explores dystopian themes.

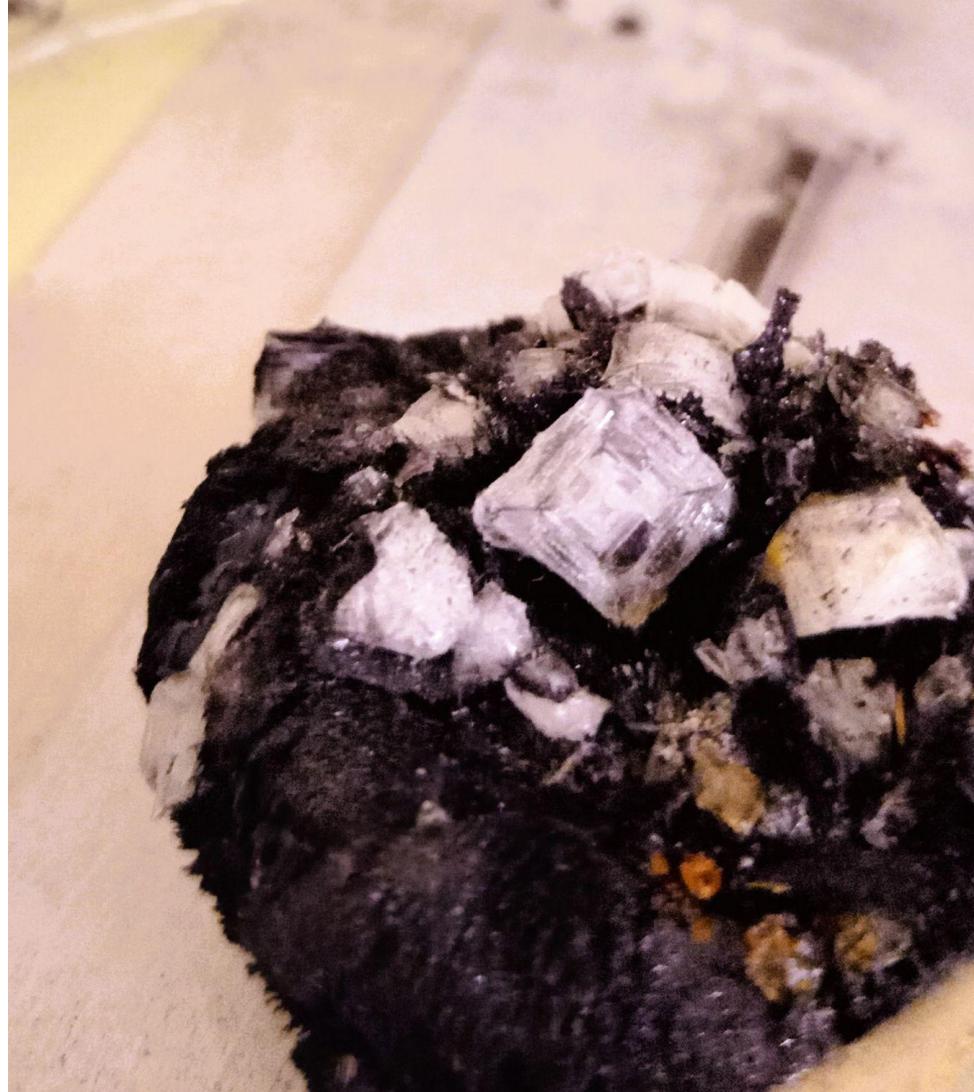
Whether through introspective exploration, embracing our inner villain, or stylising our own grotesque selves, creative territories into which brands invest are thriving. All aim to reconcile with our inner shadows. A deeper trend seeking to glorify internal darkness, counterbalancing periods of uncertainty and contextual unhappiness. By offering a creative framework for expressing emotions and lived experiences, communities are freed from the fear of darkness. Through this outlet, they regain a sense of control over their futures.



04.

Dark Futures:  
Darkness in Future  
Studies and as a  
Foresight Approach

---



Having the role to mitigate uncertainty, foresight-driven designers, analysts and trend forecasters share the same subject of research, dealing with the complexity of the present, cutting through the noise, identifying signals of change in order to provide companies with clarity and meaning by making sense of the chaotic culture of consumption through specific trend directions and sophisticated visual storytellings.

“The trend forecaster becomes a ‘sociologist of the now’, decoding shifts before they stabilise” — Raymond, 2010, as cited in Rodriguez Nieto, 2018, p. 14

Therefore, trend studies intersect with cultural studies through their shared humanistic foundations. The darkness of the unknown becomes not a lack of vision, but a space of signal detection. Today, cultural analysis in trend forecasting methodologies and approaches is more than ever focusing on counter-cultures, underground movements and even “extreme consumers”. As so, counter-cultural voices and marginal communities often coded within ‘dark’ cultures act as early sensors of social change, essential to anticipatory practices.

“Feminism, post-colonialism, hybridity, language and globalisation... all are key to understanding contemporary consumption as identity expression” — Rodriguez Nieto, 2018, p. 2

While debates between experts on the field (ranging from trend forecasters and anthropologists) regarding the accuracy and relevance of the nature and concept of “counter-culture” being in itself a product of capitalism, the current state of affairs reveals how much budget companies and international renowned brands spend on marketing studies and reports deciphering those lesser mainstream cultures.

Beyond future cultural studies, what appears to be happening right now when it comes to the state of foresight reports and future studies has also taken the form of an Ouroboros.

From vintage fashion, to recommerce to reboots, remakes, remixes and prequels, culture, cultural consumption and trend forecasting have been influenced by the production mechanisms tendencies of their very own objects of research.

As a result, year-on-year content pages from foresight studies and trendbooks are turning into a circle, taking the very form of a ouroboros. While some believe that trends are going faster in terms of speed of adoption and diffusion on social media platforms, the reality is that trend content production from agencies and organisations in the Western countries tend to also be the result of reboots, remakes and remixes.

In 2024 data trend forecasting company EDITED published a new report titled “Are Micro Trends Over?” while in June of the same year, fashion journalist Madeleine Schulz released the opinion piece “Did micro-trends kill the trend cycle?” in Vogue Business.

“Scientists are now beginning to figure out something we’ve known in the humanities and arts for some time: one is entangled with the data one is studying.” — Morton, Dark ecology, 2016, p29

“Trends have lost all meaning: Brands’ fascination with social-media fads has devalued the rigorous practice of trend forecasting, says Reddit’s head of global foresight, Matt Klein. Brands should remember some simple laws of physics to get back on track.” British agency Contagious, <https://www.contagious.com/news-and-views/trends-have-lost-all-meaning> “Trends have lost all meaning”, May 22, 2023

Believing the end of trends or fashion has become in itself a regular tendency in media culture that does not indicate the real Ouroboros here. But when it comes to future studies, consensus on regular themes and macro-trends seems to be rooting year-on-year just looking at the contents pages. It seems that well-established Western trend forecasting reports and future agencies have been constantly rebranding the same signals to a point of exhaustion.

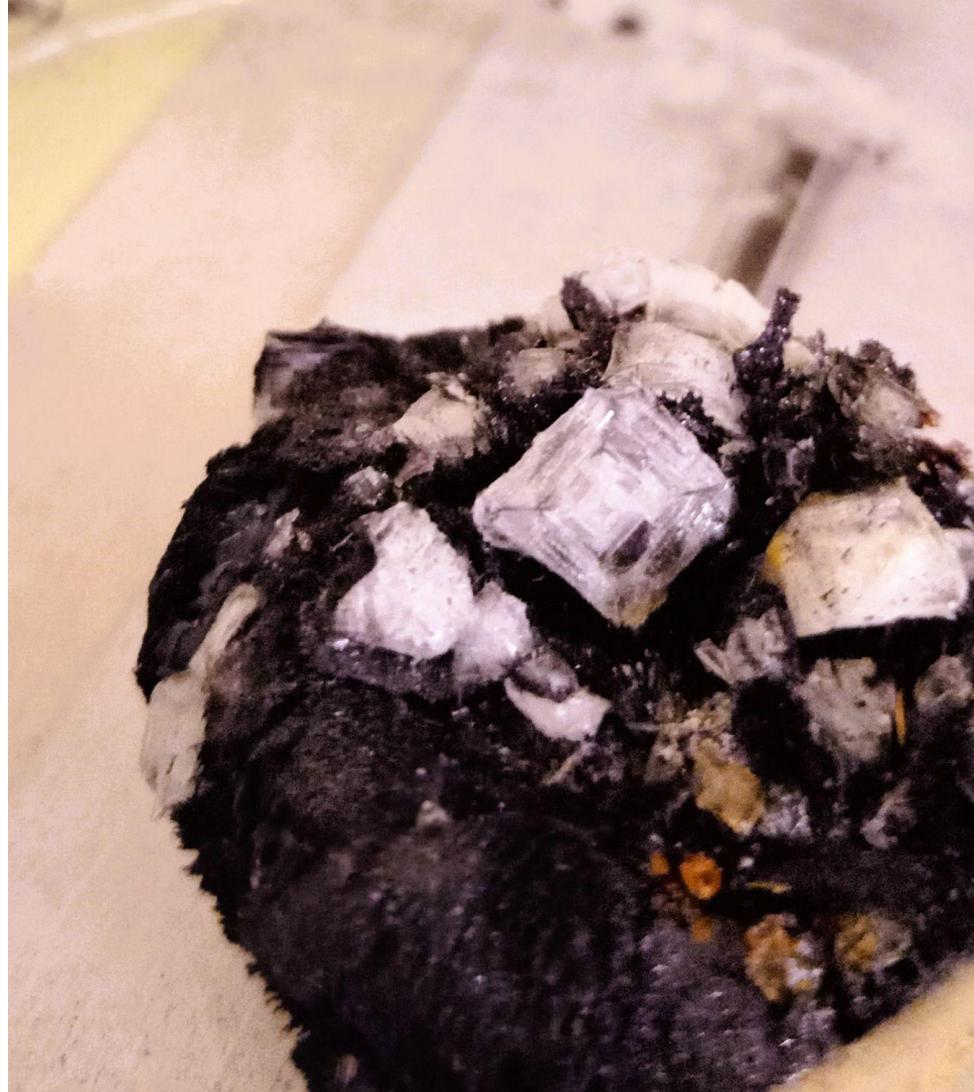
As a whole, innovation, trends and signals of change have been commodified to better suit product-oriented consideration of commercial organisations, acting now as forces going against the production of alternative possible futures.

Darkness has become the beginning stance numerous forecasters use to contextualise their future-oriented narratives, but as a result, trend production and communication has become an obscure repetition.

Considering this state, future researchers and foresight investigators could benefit from what Dark Optimism as a mindset, cultural movements such as Dark Ecology and aesthetics investigated previously in Dark Euphoria to break free from the loop they participated in shaping. Leveraging those three lenses: mind, culture and aesthetics, could instead shape a new generation of future-proof design and foresight practices. The dark becomes here a condition, a state, a material but overall an opportunity to investigate cultures and possible futures.

Darkness allows the speculative imagination to disengage from solutionism and start from rupture, pain, or refusal. Dark trends are not pessimistic: they act as the soil where the future already comes to gestate. By crafting from compost, waste, decay or even individual unconscious dreams, we generate new soil for plural, hopeful, and situated futures.

The following is intended to open discussion on new methodologies and approaches, providing food for thoughts on how and what foresight could implement or embrace dark futures.



## 04.1

# Embracing the Dark Mode

---



In this perspective, the notion of abandon emerges as a subtle yet powerful coping tool for navigating uncertainty and dark times. Abandoning does not mean giving up: it suggests stepping away from the compulsion to constantly monitor, respond, and remain hyper-available to the surrounding noise of newness and innovation.

It is a refusal to be enslaved by the imperatives of the connected age. To abandon is to let go out of apathy, but in order to open new forms of reception, depth, and discernment. In silence, and through temporary detachment, one may become more attuned to weak signals, latent tensions, and emerging patterns. It is within this pause that other futures, less saturated and more lucid, begin to reveal themselves.

Rather than being in a constant state of trend tracking or signal monitoring, adopting a “dark mode” would imply an empowered “pattern recognition” ability for the foresight practitioner, strengthening their cognitive ability of attention and selection.

## 04.2

# Dark Forecasting

---



Rather than solely considering Black Swans events while creating future scenarios, forecasters could tune in overlooked cultural residues and ignored voices to reveal what dominant trends exclude. Gathering for instance decolonial critics, dark ecology and trauma sociology, the practice of shadow forecasting would focus on mapping dissonances, contradictions or even absent opportunities for organisations.

This approach could also be developed to the extent of identifying what needs to be ending, what must be let go and what futures emerge from those mourning scenarios, making grief a generative state of future design.

In this matter, logics of decay, decomposition, disassembly, waste, failures and residues become frameworks, processes and “poietics” of production for material and tangible artefacts. Furthermore, when doing cultural fieldwork through interviews and focus groups, forecasters could leverage serendipity, blind walks, not-knowing exercises and shadow journaling as experiences to gain specific insights from their recruitment panel.

## 04.3

# Cultural Shadowing

---



“Anger is a stronger predictor of climate protest participation than hope, with every increase in anger correlating with increased activism, while fear and guilt predict policy support, and sadness, fear, and hope predict behavioral change; however, intention doesn't always lead to action, and increased hope might result from action rather than prompting it, according to a study of over 2,000 Norwegians.” — The Strength and Content of Climate Anger by Thea Gregersen, 2023)

While trend forecasting and strategic foresight especially aims at describing future cultural communities or brand's future audiences, a new stance on future archetype or consumer typology building could be further investigated. Diving into the shadow-self, inner villains and anti-heroes dimensions of consumers or the study and anticipation of individuals' fears, dreams, or perceived crisis can yield meaningful insights and unlock deeper cultural resonance.

While people connect on vulnerability instead of perfection or non-linear life stories, what they avoid, repress or dream of reveals rational signals of emerging behaviour and innovation appetite levels. Bypassing a performative authenticity to embrace genuine truths is particularly one of the crucial steps towards building desirability with meaning.

Tracking moods, shadows and hidden currents becomes a tool of detection making darkness act not as noise, but signal of change. Finally, embracing darkness allows forecasters to exit the logic of commercial prediction and move towards uncertainty as design material.

Open questions:

- . How is “pattern recognition” exercised differently?
- . How would a foresight workshop look under “dark mode”?
- . What data would be collected in “cultural shadowing”?

05.

Neo-Darkness :  
A Romantic  
Cultural  
Movement

---



The attempt to face a state of generalised gloom has led us to chase luminous promises of change. But as we find ourselves caught in the multiplication of tragedies, the collective unconscious is gradually shifting towards the recognition of real darkness as a path back to hope.

Dark optimists, as a growing cultural movement, recognise just how far we still are from solving the challenges at hand. And yet they nourish their mindset with informed and grounded optimism. From green to dark, dark ecology, as an emerging philosophy, offers a non-punitive and less moralistic approach to our environment challenges where sustainability is no longer just a box to tick, and where a broader definition of nature is revealed: from clean, green and useful to global and non-linear.

In short, “Neo-Darkness”, as opposed to the capitalist paradigm of progress, challenges the supposedly “blinding” brightness of Progress with a regenerative darkness. A form of Neo-Romanticism, the dark becomes a territory for innovation: its traditional association with taboo is pushed to the margins in order to create something new. For invention sometimes lies at the edge of twisted paths in dense forests. Hymns to the night that resonate with the deciphering of the world’s hieroglyphs.

Heidegger already noted in his time: “Indeed, the night is dark. But darkness is not necessarily gloom.”

–

Adolphe Bossert spoke of the “mystical joy of the night”, and Trakl wrote poetically:

“Oh how dark is the night! A purple flame  
Died on my lips. In silence  
The soul’s anxious lute fell quiet.  
Your wine-drunken head rolls into the  
stream.  
Do not resist.”

Many forms of compromise are now gradually gaining ground. Mediated through the inter-net (rather than traditional channels), they take on varied shapes and hues to counter our anxious and darkened times. Subtle nuances emerge step by step, gathering around the idea of alternative possible futures. Conscious tomorrows, respectful of both humans and the environments they inhabit.

A sustainable quality of life, wished for our children and grandchildren, rooted in a long-term spirit of generosity. Neo-Darkness thus embodies a movement of individuals who champion the prefixes: co-, inter-, poly-, and trans-.

These movements embrace cooperative collaboration inspired by bees. They celebrate multiplicity, diversity, and resourceful blending valuing transversality and transdisciplinarity. They move beyond binary contrasts through solidarity-based alternatives, reimagining the 21st century more responsibly. They act already today, learning from past lessons, without ignoring its darkest aspects.

Emerging from outdated contradictions, they dare to transcend thought patterns boxed in by conceptual grids that no longer suit our age of interconnections. In other words, like quantum theory or complexity, they embrace uncertainty. They no longer exhaust themselves resisting chance or the unknown, they choose to welcome it.

As a source of initiative, and as projects drawing from surprising references. In doing so, they embody a movement inventing new societal shades. They operate at international and even transcultural scales.

The “co-” (together), “poly-” (multiple), “inter-” (between), and “trans-” (across) interactions are what Edgar Morin called “complex reliances”. They represent the emerging potentials of our time, carried by individuals who are conscious actors at all the scales they inhabit. These are civic wills which, as J. Rougerie puts it, equip themselves to engage with the challenges of transition. Transgenerational initiatives, projects to democratise access to knowledge, or advocacy for gender equality are but a few examples.

All of them choose sustainable development over greenwashing. These societal commitments and creative design proposals challenge and displace outdated oppositions through cohabitations in all forms. This is what we might call assertiveness: fertile democratic compromises allowing different opinions to be expressed and defended, without denying or scorning those that differ. In short: to replace darkened gloom with more colourful, resolutely luminous shades.

In other words, for these movements, it is time to act “with one another”, rather than choosing between “one or the other”. These are new ways of making choices, until now overlooked.

Currently in emergence, these societal flows are less visible than the catastrophic extremes deeply anchored in biblical-style apocalyptic traditions. Though better known and more spectacular, these discreet initiatives are no less present, teeming, and relevant in terms of resilience. A cornerstone (a shared value) of these active Neo-Darkness movements.

Referring to the self-regenerating capacity of organisms, resilience applies to all complex systems: from healing humans to metamorphosing societies, to evolving ecosystems. It is the autopoiesis that enables us to overcome harm while transforming.

Allowing us to tend and transcend our traumas, resilience is the capacity to adapt and build beyond wounds, fears, and anxieties. It helps us recover from hard blows. In this view, nothing is irreversible.

This movement believes in environmental regeneration and actively pursues it. Its projects promote diverse forms of better living together, between humans and with the planet. Concerns that equally affect designers due to their awareness of potentialities to work with: possibilities that underlie an entire culture of creative professions.

To work with what we face is to act pragmatically in inventing alternative solutions, one of Design's core purposes. To refuse answers that no longer respond to contemporary problems is to imagine, design, and implement other projects connected yet decidedly "alongside". Proposals that go beyond worn-out practices and push the boundaries of the "Possible" and the politically acceptable.

Motivated as they are, Design practices and Design Research professions intentionally embrace assertiveness and resilience. They do not stop at the walls encountered; instead, they seek and design new ways of connecting the paths that join us.

To go beyond the wall, to pass “through” in order to rise above it—this is to design new possibilities for linking and building bridges “now and holding the world in our hands”, as Michel Serres put it.

The concepts of resilience and assertiveness become full-fledged conceptions of living worlds. They give rise to new choices and different projects. They may draw from what already exists, but above all, they dare and propose, with benevolence, more vibrant shades than those of “Dark Culture”. Other links and other bonding agents, for new ideas and uses. For in linking differently, it is the subtle interstices that are revealed. It is there that the seeds of new sprouts grow.

From a Colour Design perspective, these emergences are born neither in white nor in black but in the desaturated, among greys, even across infinite “coloured greys”. Lucid, yet conscientiously optimistic.

These nuanced reflections and committed initiatives offer both paths and potential answers to shared questions. C. Dion and M. Laurent express this with great relevance:

“In the end, what are we really defending by maintaining this consumerist and capitalist model? Our freedom? Our comfort? If we are lucky enough to be among the privileged of this planet, we know this situation will not last. So perhaps our happiness? But who can honestly say that we are happy this way?”

For while some cling to the old adage that “one man’s misery is another man’s joy”, these questions speak to co-poly-inter-trans sensibilities in another way. Beyond the number of lives the show aims to sustain, it is the quality of life that this empathic thinking interrogates. The role of the human beyond numbers—but also diversity, freedom of expression, and the right to think and act differently, despite a world that may appear grim and dark.

This new humanism brings shades closer together while respecting them, and in doing so, challenges the so-called impossibles. Fertile dialogue brings about fertile solutions: it sketches out constructive potential for better living together.

Thus, these new “operators of reliance” (co-, poly-, inter-, and trans) represent a true consciousness of possibility. They project and design potentials, and they realise complexity in projects that transcend darkened times. Dia-logics, in the most literal sense, are “logics that pass through”: by dialoguing, they initiate, carve out, and construct possible pathways. They connect from within, breaking down boundaries in the process.

By creating new porosities step by step, this societal flow proposes and actively participates in our scientific and epistemological transitions. Neither whims nor utopias, just pragmatic projects acting differently.

Thinking of themselves, they experiment and act at both local (community and individual) and broader (international and transcultural) scales. Sometimes controversial, these decisions, commitments, and investments have the merit of valuing so-called “positive” initiatives. These no longer refer to Comte’s scientific positivism, but to new forms of innovation and professions proudly claimed by Positive Design and Transition Design.

For if these bold connections manage to bring together the supposedly incompatible, they also spark profound questioning within our societies. Those that sometimes abuse individualism, or collective efforts that fail to recognise and respect their contributors.

The aftermath of an overly “darkened” era thus calls for metamorphosis into new and unprecedented question marks.

## Conclusion

---

Beyond  
Dark Culture :  
Toward  
Responsible and  
Colourful Futures



Mutual aid, new forms of cohesion, collaborative dialogues, intercultural exchanges, and transdisciplinary projects all require transboundary action.

Pragmatic means are needed to go beyond the limits imposed by the previous century and its now “obsolete” paradigms, as Edgar Morin puts it. For him, a “reform of thinking enables the integration of these modes of connection [...] where uncertainty is inseparable from living. [...] The education of life must encourage and stimulate [...] autonomy and freedom of mind.” He therefore positions himself firmly within the co-inter-poly-trans movement, as the initiator of complex logics, and directly implicates the field of knowledge production.

He addresses pedagogical creatives and knowledge-makers of our 21st century: freedom of thought, conscious choice, and critical thinking put into practice form the fundamental basis of sustainable reflection. Reflection that is carried out with and through the current generations for those to come. All such capacities allow us to anticipate and adapt, rather than merely react to toxic energies and negative emotions that Dark Culture unconsciously holds dear.

Thus, according to Morin, the role of education (of teaching and sharing knowledge) would now consist in “showing how it is possible, starting from existing disciplines, to recognise human unity and complexity.”

For him, “the regeneration of education depends on the regeneration of understanding [...], the mother of benevolence [...], and of the full dignity of others. [...] Understanding and recognition not only allow us to live better, [...] but also to establish a virtuous circle that encourages the combination of knowing-how-to-live-think-act in the 21st century.”

These values, practices, and lived experiences lead to the questions and inventive projects of Design. For, as he says, “we move forward driven by a creative passion that [...] becomes metamorphosis: a deviation more relevant than reform, and richer than revolution.”

These emergent initiatives and dynamics aim to illuminate nuances, shedding light for those still struggling to discern colour within the shadows and darkness of our turbulent transitions. They therefore go beyond a dramatised, overly depressive romanticisation of ambient darkness.

## Adrien Cadiot,

Trends et Foresight Director Cadiot Agency

[contact@adriencadiot.com](mailto:contact@adriencadiot.com)

[adriencadiot.com](http://adriencadiot.com)

---

## Emilie Roulland,

Designer, Docteure-PhD et

Enseignante-Chercheure indépendante

[emilieroulland.designresearch@gmail.com](mailto:emilieroulland.designresearch@gmail.com)

[emilieroulland.com](http://emilieroulland.com)

Article / Février 26

