Is it mere Game of Thrones afterglow that, as we close out this profoundly strange decade, references to a darker, colder, less plugged-in time are seemingly everywhere? In the mainstream, one could cite Madonna’s “Dark Ballet” (or ode to Jean d’Arc featuring a persecuted Lupe Fiasco burned at the stake) or Post Malone’s “Circles,” where the pop star appears on a barren English Isle, immolated in full armor in his own medieval end. Yet behind this Ren Faire pastiche, there seems to be a deeper psychological turn playing out: a growing mass-cultural desire for darkness, for interiority and privacy, even an embrace of chaos, the unknown or other instantiations of the divine.

Take, for instance, the wave of climate scientists that have shifted from a strategy of “resilience” to one of “relinquishment,” a mode of “deep adaptation” that, rather than seeking to control what happens (expecting a return to “rational” order), accepts the radical restructuring that climate change is already bringing and advocates for the psychological preparation of letting go. It’s been a little more than a year since James Bridle published his book New Dark Ages (Verso), which argues that increasing technological complexity is inversely impacting our ability to make sense of the world. But “darkness” for Bridle isn’t necessarily a place of dis- possession; it is also, he writes, “a place of freedom and possibility, a place of equality”—especially for those who are already precarious. “We have much to learn about unknowing,” Bridle concludes. “Uncertainty can be productive, even sublime.”

In many ways, this productive darkness can be found anywhere outside of our illuminated screens. Darkness serves as an oppositional force, a strength that comes from beyond the financializing logic of data trackers, algorithms and digital nudges to become more visible, to get “verified” and maximally self-capitalized. When, in 1550, Giorgio Vasari wrote Goths into the art historical canon, he placed them squarely outside it: “The Goths and other barbarous and outlandish peoples destroyed, together with Italy, all the finer arts.” Vasari was speaking of The Visagoths’ 5th-century sack of Rome, but also more generally of the Germanic tribe’s affront to classical culture. For Vasari, the Goths symbolized the enemy of bourgeois norms and the chaotic force that brought about the 1,000-year period that was long called (albeit spuriously so) the “Dark Ages.” But Vasari’s account was only a partial telling of classicism’s demise. By the late 4th century, the Roman Empire was, in fact, rife with corruption and blighted by famine. In taking Rome city, the Goths had revealed an outside regime to be already weak at its center.

 Nevertheless, Vasari’s use of “Gothic” stuck, and he imaginatively deployed it as a descriptor for the heavily ornamental aesthetic that prevailed just prior to his Renaissance time. Think gargoyles and vaulted cathedral ceilings; the earthy remains of saints enshrined in glass-and-metal reliquaries; shards of sunlight filtered through the stained glass, animating the stone walls like LED club lighting. Gothic architecture wasn’t about reason; it was about mysticism and the unknown. It was about the power of nature and of chaos.