

Travel Report

Loneliness on Valentine's Day

My journey to the Lisbon Colloquium on Loneliness

Dr Benjamin Schaper

St Anne's supported my trip to the International Colloquium on Loneliness at the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa with an Early Career Research Grant. I set out for Portugal to get some inspiration for my post-doctoral research project on loneliness and human-machine interaction from Romanticism to the Digital Age. In line with recent historical approaches to loneliness such as Fay Bound Alberti's *A Biography of Loneliness* (2019), the conference followed a cultural historical approach in order to comparatively grasp fictional representations of loneliness across various media and in various cultural contexts, providing a background to contemporary debates on loneliness as a potential modern pandemic (see e.g. George Monbiot: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>; or Manfred Spitzer's 2018 monograph *Einsamkeit: Die Unerkannte Krankheit / Loneliness: The Undetected Disease*).

I initially contacted Lisbon's German Department and Research Centre for Comparative Literature in spring 2018, proposing my idea for what would eventually become the conference held on the 13th and 14th of February 2020. The Call for Papers that I drafted with Professor Gerd Hammer, Head of Lisbon's German Department, attracted colleagues from institutions around the world, including Columbia University in New York, the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa, the Universidad de Granada, Warsaw University, and the Freie Universität in Berlin. (For the programme see: <https://lisemotions.weebly.com>)

The conference traced loneliness as a literary motive across a range of periods and artistic forms. Presenters focused prominently on the German Romantic phenomenon of *Waldeinsamkeit*, a rather positive idea of loneliness as seeking refuge from the accelerated pace of life experienced by most people in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, stemming from the tradition of Rousseau's 1782 book *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. The conference's exploration of this particular notion culminated in Kathrin

Wittler's detailed analysis of Goethe's famous poem "Über allen Gipfeln" and Professor Jochen Hörisch's enlightening keynote speech on the influence of Romantic poetry on Karl Marx. In addition to presentations exploring the productive and beneficial solitude of German Romanticism, colleagues gave intriguing papers on gender politics in recent Sci-Fi literature, East German queer cinema, and the loneliness of the monarch in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Overall it became clear that earlier periods, particularly before the recognition of transcendental loneliness as established by Friedrich Nietzsche, had a much more positive view of loneliness, which was seen as a state of connection with the divine and nature and as a source for artistic inspiration. This differs quite significantly from the supposed contemporary desire for constant digital connection, which eventually more often than not rather aggravates than cures loneliness (see e.g. Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*) – an issue that is all the more pertinent during the global COVID-19 pandemic, in which lockdowns and border closures enforce loneliness by keeping families and friends apart, with potentially grave effects on mental health. Particularly social media are seen as a tool to replace to ensure social connection virtually when embodied meetings could prove fatal. In this context, nature becomes an important meeting space, resembling the Romantics desire for *Waldeinsamkeit* as a secure refuge.

This basis in Romantic literature was the most valuable insight I gained for my post-doctoral project as besides the period of Modernism in the beginning of the 20th Century and the Digital Age, it is the one at which the question of technology's influence on social bonds intersects with a striking artistic interest in human-machine interaction. I am currently preparing two articles on the topic: The first explores the potential of human-machine interaction as a cure for loneliness in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, Spike Jonze's *Her*, and Charlie Brooker's and Annabel Jones' *Black Mirror*, with reference to Romantic predecessors such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's novella *Der Sandmann* or the Brothers Grimm's version of the Bluebeard myth. The second article analyses Austrian author Marlen Haushofer's influence on the novels of Robert Seethaler and Thomas von Steinaecker, drawing on the Romantic notion of *Waldeinsamkeit* and the escape into nature from an accelerating technical world.

On the whole, my Lisbon conference experience has not only deepened my knowledge of the loneliness in the 19th Century but also expanded my international academic network. After the presentations, our discussions continued over bacalhau and vinho verde and future collaborations were initiated: I was invited to join the *Solitude – Die Einsamkeit der Literatur* ("Literature's Loneliness") early career research group supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* ("German Research Foundation"), which is currently being established at the Freie Universität, Berlin, which opens up the possibility of a further conference on loneliness as the source for artistic inspiration. A

conference anthology will be published as a special issue of the academic journal *Dedalus - Revista Portuguesa de Literatura Comparada* in summer 2021.

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages