



Gloom Goes Global: Towards a Transcultural History of Melancholy since 1850. Project “MC11.2—Melancholy”, Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”, University of Heidelberg, 02.10.2014—04.10.2014.

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Gloom Goes Global: Towards a Transcultural History of Melancholy since 1850

Gathering a group of experts from different subject areas and people with different cultural backgrounds, the conference “Gloom Goes Global: Towards a Transcultural History of Melancholy since 1850” offered scholars a platform to discuss competing concepts of melancholy and their mutual penetration and transformation against the backdrop of cultural flows, in particular flows of knowledge and science between Europe, Russia and Asia.

As an introduction to the field FRANK GRÄNER and MAIKE ROTZOLL (Heidelberg), the organizers of the conference, shared some reflections on the challenges of a transcultural approach to melancholy. Emphasizing the profoundly transdisciplinary nature of this concept, ranging across fields as diverse as medicine, literature, art, design, psychology and philosophy, they argued for the suitability of an approach that focuses on knowledge circulation, cultural exchange and interrelations across disciplines.

EDWARD SHORTER (Toronto) opened the first panel on “conceptualizing emotions and mental illness” by looking at doctors, patients, and the history of melancholia in Western society. He highlighted the different changes in the perception of melancholia. While for physicians melancholia was transformed from a disorder of thought to a disorder of mood, patients had formerly perceived melancholia as a deep sadness and were now rather inclined to highlight the pain of the melancholic mood, Shorter stated.

Focusing on the doctor’s perspective HELENA JASKOV (Heidelberg) addressed the ambiguity of the term “melancholia” as a diagnostic category in the early 20th century by examining its changing meanings in the context of classification systems of mental diseases used by contemporary Japanese psychiatrists. Taking as a starting point a discussion on classification systems at a conference of the *Japanese Neurological Society* in 1905, she showed that while there was considerable disagreement concerning the conceptualization of melancholia, these theoretical considerations did not seem to affect its treatment.

Turning our attention to conceptualizations of melancholia in Victorian medicine ÅSA JANSSON (London) traced the shift in the medical discourse on suicide, which brought non-pathological melancholy into the focus of physicians. Highlighting the role of Henry Maudsley, who characterized suicide as a “logical” or even “rational” impulse, she stressed the significance of this development whereby psychiatric attention was increasingly brought to bear upon aspects of the human emotional and cognitive life that were not considered to be states of insanity in the proper sense.

The second panel “Cross-Cultural Approaches to Melancholy and Depression” was opened by RADHIKA P. (Bangalore) who gave insights into the multifaceted representations of melancholy in 19th century Indian art, literature and traditional medical theory set against the documentation of melancholia in Indian asylum reports.

Noting an underrepresentation of melancholic patients in psychiatric institutions when compared with British statistics, she questioned the adaptability of this foreign illness concept in the cultural context of India.

NANCY R. HUNT (Ann Arbor) took the African continent into focus, examining three canonical sources from the early 18th century through the 1950s about African therapeutics and patterns of resort. Paying careful attention to the description of somatic symptoms, behavioural patterns and human relations she was able to uncover similarities in the way vernacular therapeutic practices, dreams and sorcery idioms played a role in giving meaning and bringing relief to suffering in Africa.

ROTEM KOWNER (Haifa) talked about 'Culture-Bound Gloom? Body, Identity and the Emergence of Neurasthenia in Imperial Japan.' By looking at the lives and melancholic afflictions of three contemporaries, Kowner showed that to some degree, gloom could actually derive from a feeling of inferiority or otherness, especially in contact with people from a different cultural and ethnic background. Japanese psychiatrists tried to overcome this almost collective feeling of racial inferiority by adapting Western concepts of melancholia and neurasthenia to the Japanese culture.

In the last talk of the panel PETER KAISER (Bremen) explained the influence of the West on depression in contemporary China. Underlying all comparisons between Western and Chinese concepts are the different perceptions of the role of a person in society. Western possessive individualism thereby contradicts the Chinese notion of the integrated individual and fostered the development of a Chinese medical terminology that is quite distinct from the West. Rather than diagnosing patients with depression, Chinese psychiatrists, Kaiser explained, tend to give a neurasthenia diagnosis as it is commonly more accepted when terming melancholic feelings in contemporary China.

Opening the third panel 'Political and Social Dimensions of Melancholy and Depression' KIM FRIEDLANDER (New York) explored the relationship between war and mental illness in the Russian psychiatric literature on the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905). Comparing different opinions about the role of war in the works of physicians treating soldiers in garrison hospitals in Manchuria and in Moscow's military hospitals she showed how war-related depression was conceptualized before Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) emerged as an overarching category in military psychiatry.

The panel's second paper was presented by SEBASTIAN MUSCH (Haifa) and provided insight into philosophical debates on spiritual renewal during the Wilhelmine era and the period of the Weimar Republic. Conceptualising the intellectual efforts of German thinkers who envisioned the East as a remedy to the crisis of the West as 'restorative melancholia,' Musch discussed counter-discourses found in the works of Jewish writers and demonstrated how these debates shaped their notion of Jewish identity.

MAT SAVELLI (Pittsburgh) presented his research on the discussions of depression in Yugoslavia from 1945-1991. While feelings of sadness were undesirable in Communist countries, Savelli showed that Yugoslavia's liberal communism profited from both Western and Eastern psychiatric concepts. Physicians in Yugoslavia did not stigmatize depressed people but accepted the influence of society on the individual. However, while psychiatrists were careful not to overestimate the biochemical nature of depression, they explicitly warned of a marked rise of the disease.

In the fourth panel on 'Scientific Knowledge Production, Public Discourses on Melancholy and Depression, and the Self' NATALIE ELLER (Heidelberg) talked on national and international perceptions of melancholia and depression in the *Journal of Mental Science*. She highlighted the different ways by which melancholia was depicted during the end of the nineteenth century and showed how the influence of the international debate on melancholia and depression grew by the turn of the twentieth century.

DIMITRIA VASSILIADOU (Crete) in her talk on autobiographics of melancholia in Greece by the end of the nineteenth century analysed the letters of two upper-class Athenian women to their husbands. Both women rationalized their melancholic conditions and put them into the contexts of their everyday lives and the relationship with their husbands. The letters, Vassiliadou explained, show a great deal of self-reflection and can in general be seen as some kind of psychotherapeutic practice in order to come to terms with the own mental affliction.

ANNE-FLEUR VAN DER MEER (Amsterdam) focused on the representation of depression in contemporary autobiographical literature. By looking at two examples she showed the influence of these works on the public's ideas about depression. The ways in which certain patterns are transmitted from the autobiographical writer to the reader provide scientific disciplines such as literary stud-

ies and social history with new perspectives on knowledge production, van der Meer argued.

The last panel addressed expressions of melancholy in literature and the arts. LISABETH M. HOCK (Detroit) led off her talk on representations of melancholy and the female life cycle in the works of German women writers. Focusing on three representative texts, she explored the manner in which these authors appropriated the medical discourse on melancholy, showing that while women writers were using the same medical language as male doctors, they nevertheless rejected the view that melancholia was of an essentially feminine nature.

Making Turgenev's story "Enough" (1865) his subject of analysis HORST-JÄRGEN GERIGK (Heidelberg) drew parallels between Hubertus Tellenbach's concept of "inclusion" and Turgenev's feeling of being imprisoned by melancholy. Arguing that even the form of the story could be read as a metaphor of the miserable human condition, he explored the nature of Turgenev's pessimistic worldview as expressed within the text and documented in the reflections of his many critics and admirers.

PETRA JOSWIG (Heidelberg) closed the panel by talking on emotions in Abstract Expressionism and Gutai. While emotions are on the one side channelled through the process of art production, they are also stimulated or created by the beholder of a specific work of art. Joswig explained that the intensity of emotions depends on the overlap of the cultural and historical background of artist and beholder. Abstract Expressionism and Gutai are characterized with an explicit emotional intensity due to an equal pool of experience of artist and beholder after the end of World War II.

In their final comments, IRINIA SIROTKINA (Moscow) and WOLFGANG ECKART (Heidelberg) both highlighted the great transcultural and interdisciplinary possibilities for a further investigation of melancholia in its different forms. Sirotkina stated that the topic of melancholia was especially interesting since views from both physicians and patients could be examined and were much better documented than other diseases. Eckart summarized the conference topics and commented that even today different conceptions of melancholia and different fields of studying this complex thematic were predominant and needed continuously to be systematized in further conferences.

Conference Overview:

Conference Opening

William Sax (Heidelberg), Speaker of Cluster's Research Area C "Knowledge Systems"

Introduction

Frank GrÄ¼ner & Maike Rotzoll (Heidelberg): "The Transcultural Approach to Melancholy: Problems and Perspectives"

Panel I: Conceptualizing Emotions and Mental Illness
Chair: Maike Rotzoll

Edward Shorter (Toronto): "Doctors, patients, and the history of melancholia in western society"

Helena Jaskov (Heidelberg): "The Impact of Clinical Psychiatry on Melancholia as a Category"

Åsa Jansson (London): "Melancholia, Melancholy, and Suicidality: Normal and Pathological Mental Pain in Victorian Medicine"

Panel II: Cross-Cultural Approaches to Melancholy and Depression

Chair: Frank GrÄ¼ner

Radhika P. (Bangalore): "Melancholia and Vishaad (dejection): The encounter between "western" and "Indian" systems of medicine in nineteenth century India"

Nancy R. Hunt (Ann Arbor): "Melancholia, Mobility, and Patterns of Resort in Africa's Atlantic and Colonial Zones"

Rotem Kowner (Haifa): "A Culture-Bound Gloom? Body, Identity and the Emergence of Neurasthenia in Imperial Japan"

Peter Kaiser (Bremen): "Depression in contemporary China and the influence of the West"

Panel III: Political and Social Dimensions of Melancholy and Depression

Chair: Nancy Hunt

Kim Friedlander (New York): "Before PTSD: Psychological Trauma, Depressive Disorders, and the Russo-Japanese War"

Sebastian Musch (Haifa): "Call for Spiritual Renewal through Eastern wisdom and Jewish

Counter-discourses during Wilhelmine Era and Weimar Republic"

Mat Savelli (Pittsburgh): "A Very Modern Disease: Discussions of Depression in Yugoslavia (1945-1991)"

Panel IV: Scientific Knowledge Production, Public Discourses on Melancholy and Depression, and the Self

Chair: Lisabeth M. Hock

Natalie Eller (Heidelberg): "Debating Melancholia: National and International Perceptions of

Melancholia and Depression in the Journal of Mental Science, 1860-1912"

Dimitria Vassiliadou (Crete): "Whenever I get sad, I feel so wiped out". Autobiographics of melancholia in Greece by the end of the nineteenth century"

Anne-Fleur van der Meer (Amsterdam): "In terms we ordinary mortals can understand": On the representation of depression in contemporary autobiographical literature"

Panel V: Melancholy in Literature and the Arts beyond National and Disciplinary Boundaries

Chair: Anne-Fleur van der Meer

Lisabeth Hock (Detroit): "Melancholy, the Female Life Cycle, and Women Writers"

Horst-Jürgen Gerigk (Heidelberg): "Turgenev's Story 'Enough' (1865): an example of being imprisoned by melancholy"

Petra Joswig (Heidelberg): "Going Back to Zero: Emotions in Abstract Expressionism and Guita"

Comments by Irina Sirotkina (Moscow) and Wolfgang Eckart (Heidelberg)

Guided tour by Maike Rotzoll through the exhibition "Uniform and Obstinacy: Militarism, World War and Arts in Psychiatry" at the Prinzhorn Collection at the Heidelberg University Hospital

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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