

Alone in the Crowd: Urban Hermits in American Film

Rüdiger Heinze (TU Braunschweig, Germany)

When we think of recluses and hermits, we usually think of an anchorite in the tradition of Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder or, less radical, Henry David Thoreau; someone who withdraws from society and all social and public life to an isolated place like a hut in the forest, a cave, or some other place in the wilderness far away from urban hustle. We are less likely to think of the city and urban space in general as a place for voluntary withdrawal and isolation.

And yet, at a closer look, US-American narrative fiction, poetry, drama, comics, and film are full of urban hermits: people who live in the city, right among the crowd, but who are nonetheless almost invisible to their surroundings and do not participate in social life. Their voluntary isolation and reclusiveness is of a substantially different nature from “wilderness hermits” because their withdrawal occurs in the spatial proximity of society: they could at any given point easily participate and interact; and they can observe society and the social life of people in their surroundings. In other words, they are distant and yet close, occupying a position of liminality and potentiality.

In my talk, I will use the movie *Finding Forrester* (2000) as a starting point to look at the depiction of urban hermits in US-American film and to discuss their particular kind of withdrawal (where and how they live, which kind of society they withdraw from for which reasons), their “philosophy”, and their (inevitable) interaction with other people.