

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### THE 29TH INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR HUMOR STUDIES CONFERENCE IN MONTREAL, CANADA

On July 10–14, 2017, practitioners and researchers of humour were invited to share their most recent experience and results concerning humour studies at the 29th ISHS Conference in Montreal in Québec, Canada (see the webpage of the event, <https://ishs-2017-montreal.uqam.ca/en/home/>). This conference was organised by professor Jean-Marie Lafortune and Dr Christelle Paré, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Comedy Studies Research (Brunel University London) and hosted by the University of Quebec in Montreal (Université du Québec à Montréal; UQAM), in collaboration with the Observatoire de l'humour. During the five days packed with academic discussion and social events, the participants tried to find out about humour's *je ne sais quoi*, attempting to define and describe the power that humour holds.

For many reasons, Montreal was a perfect place to host a humour conference. Located in the heart of the *Quartier des spectacles*, an international centre for artistic creation, UQAM offered an opportunity for the conference participants to access a variety of cultural activities, venues, and shows just a short walk away. The world-famous comedy festival, *Just for Laughs*, was going on parallel to the conference and in the evenings the streets were packed with shows and spectacles performed by circus artists, comedians, and actors.

The annual event is frequented by researchers of an interdisciplinary background, who try to tackle humour-related issues from various angles. One of the aims of this convention is to bring representatives of different disciplines (linguists, folklorists, social scientists, psychologists, historians, etc.) together and help them find a common language to describe the complicated phenomenon of humour in order to contribute to a general understanding of how to define humour, how it works, and how to study it.

The president of the ISHS, Delia Chiaro, stressed in her opening address on the evening of July 10 that it is these simple questions – where does humour come from and why do we need it in the first place – that are the central tenets in the field of humour research. Pursuing these questions might result in fascinating discoveries that benefit from the contribution of the numerous disciplines.

The binding framework of the conference, however, was set by Sharon Lockyer, professor of communication and sociology from Brunel University London. In her plenary lecture, she looked back at her contacts with humour research during the past 20 years that she has been active in the field, and gave an elegant overview of the history of humour research, thus positioning its place in the humanities throughout this period. In the 1970s, psychologists lay the ground for the scientific study of humour, but nowadays the psychological viewpoint does not precede over the other possible angles; instead, different disciplines seem to contribute equally in their own ways. Folklorists, for example, have an important role to carry in the scientific study of humour, because they have access to longitudinal data that can prove or refute hypotheses posited by sociologists or psychologists as they have access to centuries of folkloric data. Lockyer referred to three

main reasons not to take the study of humour lightly: 1) humour is not trivial; 2) humorous is not the opposite of serious; 3) taking humour seriously is not anti-humour. Even though it is not yet possible to defend one's degree in the field of humour studies, and humour still remains the object of a number of separate disciplines, the International Society for Humour Research has brought into life international summer schools as well as published humour encyclopaedias and international volumes of articles in order to shape this field into an interdisciplinary, yet coherent area of research.

During the five days, the conference participants could attend more than 170 presentations grouped thematically into panels and sessions. The International Association for the Study of Humour, for example, organised a set of sessions that delved deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of humour and joke. Next to that, there were separate panels dedicated to Persianate humour, or humour and the media, literature, and art. Sessions discussed humour from the gender studies point of view – both women's and men's studies framework. Humour in social media proved to be a burgeoning field. An entire conference day was dedicated to political humour. The day began with a plenary section that analysed topical humour: Brex(sh)it jokes (Delia Chiaro), jokes about the South-African president Jacob Zuma and his representation in different comic genres, e.g. caricatures and stand-up (Debra Aarons), references to taboo topics in the speeches of Donald Trump (Chiara Bucharia), and kinetic and memetic warfare in the US presidential elections (Anthony Mitzel). Humorous forms of expression allow for conveying political and ideological messages, even though the messages coming from competing sources can give a totally different (albeit humorous) picture.

Estonian humour research was represented by four scholars. Liisi Laineste gave a presentation about ethnic humour in Estonia as part of the panel on transcultural humour lead by Jean-Marie Lafortune. She analysed the trends of globalisation and localisation of the material that covered more than a century of jokelore. Piret Voolaid's paper was a part of a session on humour and identity. She focused on the connotational field of the phrase "Estonian national sports", analysing internet media and memes as well as her survey results. She found that fields of sport that are based on historical cultural traditions (e.g. wrestling and weight-lifting; cross-country skiing, etc.) have a large group of fans and followers in Estonia. In those fields, Estonian sportsmen have acquired higher positions in international competitions, and thus the fields have been used as building stones of national identity and carry a role in related narratives. Voolaid also pointed out the ironical rhetoric use of these phrases (Estonian national sports is armchair sports, alcoholism, "throwing" despair (~throwing a javelin, etc.)). Certain national behavioural patterns, entrenched habits and stereotypes are ridiculed through the use of a playful phrase. In the same session, Anastasiya Fiadotava (PhD student at the University of Tartu) presented her paper on dyadic humour in Belarusian couples, basing her analysis on the theoretical insights of Elliott Oring, Gary Alan Fine, and Christie Davies. In the panel dedicated to humour and technology, Mikhail Fiadotau (doctoral student and junior research fellow at Tallinn University) showed how humour is used in video games to attract attention and create in-group humour among gamers.

ISHS conferences have established a tradition of awarding young scholars. This year's emerging scholars were Ying Cao from Australia (the recipient of the Don and Alleen Nilsen award with her study on constructing gender identity in Chinese sitcoms), Shuming Bai from Singapore (who studied humorous devices in the speech of Singaporean prime



*The 30th ISHS annual conference will be held in Tallinn, Estonia. The conference convener Liisi Laineste is Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum. Photograph by Piret Voolaid.*

minister, held on August 2, 2016, during a dinner in the White House), and Antony Mitzel from Italy (focusing on jokes about Italians in memes and advertisements).

Apart from paper sessions, there were also symposia, open fora, practical workshops, and other formats that addressed, among other issues, therapeutic aspects of humour. There were several practitioners who explained the physical and psychological benefits of “doctor clowns” in hospitals. A separate session addressed the post-traumatic humour of rape victims.

This year’s participation in the ISHS conference in Montreal was especially important for the Estonian research team because the 30th International Society for Humor Studies conference will take place in Tallinn (see the conference webpage at <https://www.folklore.ee/ri/fo/konve/ishs2018>). Conference convener Liisi Laineste held a promotion speech at the ISHS members’ meeting on July 13. Throughout all the conference days in Montreal, there was an ISHS 2018 booth set up for anyone interested in more information about the next conference or its location. Piret Voolaid, Liisi Laineste, Anastasiya Fiadotava, and Mikhail Fiadotau talked about Tallinn and Estonia, and distributed materials connected with the destination. Hosting the next ISHS conference in Tallinn will undoubtedly be an important event in next year’s academic calendars for a large interdisciplinary crowd of humour researchers. At the same time, it is an opportunity for the Estonian folklorists to show their professionalism and academic accomplishments to an international audience.

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