

NEWS IN BRIEF

AUTUMN SCHOOL CONCENTRATED ON INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUES WITH HEALTH

On 19–20 November 2020, the Estonian Literary Museum organised an international autumn school under the heading “Dialogues with health” for graduate students of the humanities in Värskä – a borough in south-eastern Estonia which is historically well known for its mineral water and therapeutic mud resources. The lectures and discussions of the autumn school approached the topic of health in a broad and interdisciplinary way, looking at respective language use, belief and narrative worlds, emotions, fears, philosophies, lifestyles, and coping mechanisms in the times of epidemic as well as in everyday life, and their cultural, linguistic, and semiotic outputs.

The event took place in cooperation with the Graduate School of Linguistics, Philosophy and Semiotics, but this did not hinder the inclusion of students from other branches (e.g., cultural research).

The title of the autumn school was chosen a few years earlier when nobody could have foreseen how exceptionally topical this would be in 2020, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even without this context, in the recent decade, there has been more and more awareness in the media as well as research articles on the role of social sciences and the humanities in analysing and commenting on thinking and behavioural models related to health and offering practical outputs and solutions, so the topic is continuously highly relevant. The autumn school offered eighteen multifarious presentations and workshops, including an experiential field presentation on Seto folk medicine in the nearby Värskä historical farm museum, which emphasised the role of singing and charms in traditional rural healing culture, and a poster presentation on etiological legends such as the creation of the womb, menstruation, and childbirth in Bulgarian folklore and their historical role in distributing traditional understandings of health.

Several presentations touched operatively on vernacular responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Angelina Ilieva (Bulgaria) described the emergence of a military doctor and professor as a popular folkloric hero named ‘the General’ during the first wave of COVID-19 in Bulgaria, introducing the concept of a ‘participatory epidemic’. Thomas Ndaluka (Tanzania) analysed the tremendous role of religion in interpreting the COVID-19 pandemic and initiating preventive measures in Tanzania. Virginia García-Acosta (Mexico) described the religious models of explaining epidemics and other disasters in Latin America through time, pointing to the repeated motifs of guilt, culprits, and punishment, and the dichotomy of right and wrong behaviour. Michele Tita added a historical touch by bringing examples of narratives and hoaxes related to infectious diseases in Italy and listing some of their contemporary counterparts.

The presentation by Kadri Vider (Estonia) gave an overview of the possibilities of the network of CLARIN (Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure); for example, describing research that has already been conducted in order to find out how COVID-19 is reflected in language use and what its impact on the humanities is

in more general terms. Kadri Simm (Estonia) dissected the ethical problems emerging in society during times of epidemics.

Terhi Utriainen and Linda Annunen (Finland) delineated their research project LeNeRe, which concentrates on the relationships between alternative medicine, spirituality, and learning, envisioning the possibilities for dialogical reflection on the example of sound healing practices. Mare Kõiva (Estonia) comparatively analysed three Estonian magical healing practitioners from various periods of time and stressed that so far the focus has been on the skills of the healers, and their personalities have not deserved sufficient attention. Tõnno Jonuks represented the archaeological view, introducing traditional magical healing artefacts in Estonian museums.

There were also several interesting case studies from PhD students. For example, Age Kristel Kartau offered glimpses into the semiosphere of Buddhistic manual medicine in Estonia, pointing out that Thai massage and some other Eastern massage and stretching systems are generally viewed as belonging to new spirituality by theologians, cultural researchers, and the general public, although the ways of participation in these techniques can vary highly based on a concrete individual. Danila Rygovskiy described reasoning models of Old Believers' ritual purity practice in Estonia and Russia (e.g., dietary restrictions, proscription of praying with strangers, and prevention of eating at the same table and with the same tableware), showing connecting points between theological and medical discourses. Saswati Bordoloi outlined some traditional healing rituals from Assam in north-eastern India, showing their interaction with certain goddesses and other supernatural beings. Alexandra Chereches described folk narratives about health and disease, especially about the evil eye in Romanian traditional and contemporary oral literature and, on the example of Roman immigrants in Madrid, concluded that in times of global immigration many respective beliefs are introduced into new urban settings.

Anastasia Fiadotava took a somewhat metaphorical angle on health when she compared humour and viruses, pointing out that because of the similarity of humorous memes to the spread of viruses, the former have been called 'viruses of mind', which infect people irrespective of their will and sometimes without any concern for the wellbeing of their host. The author concluded that not only the content of humour should be considered in the discussion of the current pandemic reflection in popular communication, but also the very mechanisms of humour contribute to a better understanding of the interrelations between social and natural phenomena.

Finally, Aimar Ventsel exemplified that in a certain segment of punk subculture, heavy drinking is seen as an act of rebellion and proof of masculinity; thus, paradoxically, the ability to drink a lot and excessively is also perceived as a sign of good health and physical form. The presenter showed how punk music is one medium that creates and carries this trickster story and the associated identity.

All in all, the presentations of Estonian as well as foreign specialists and PhD students formed a multifaceted whole which gave a concentrated picture of the topic of health on the synchronic as well as diachronic axis. As expected, the discussions deepened earlier understandings of investigating health and helped envision the potential of the humanities in dealing with the respective topics.

Although the process of organising the autumn school was extremely complicated – until it started, it was not clear whether the event could take place in physical form

because of increasing corona restrictions, and the presenters from other countries could only participate via the Microsoft Teams video platform, which generated new challenges in solving technical questions – in the end, the autumn school still proved successful. One of the relevant conclusions of the autumn school was that, besides being a medical phenomenon, health has important social, religious, narrative, and material-technological dimensions that need to be taken into consideration in policy-making and research. The event was organised with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ASTRA project EKMDHUM) and was also related to the project PUTJD962 (Estonian Research Council).

Reet Hiimäe

DOCTORAL THESIS ON THE USE OF OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Liivo Niglas. *In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography*. Dissertationes Ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis 12. University of Tartu Press, 2020. 347 pp.

On 14 December 2020, Liivo Niglas defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Tartu. The thesis was supervised by Professor Art Leete, and the opponents were Dr Toomas Gross from the University of Tartu and Dr Pille Runnel from the Estonian National Museum.

Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation "In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography" is a voluminous study consisting of an extensive cover text and four research articles published in 2011–2013. It is based on fieldwork carried out approximately within the same time period, which dates back several years. It is this time distance that has probably helped the material to mature and the research problem to crystallize. The result is one of the most interesting doctoral dissertations defended in the field of ethnology at the University of Tartu in recent years. It is important to point out that in all major and minor research projects that have formed the basis of the doctoral thesis, observational ethnographic filmmaking has played an important role, and visual anthropology is actually the core of Liivo Niglas' research approach. The duration of the research projects that are part of the dissertation, and the nature of the research problems closely related to the duration of the projects, have varied to a large extent, ranging from research based on shorter research trips to long-term collaboration with the Forest Nenets Juri Vella, his relatives and community. Such variability adds another dimension to the analysis of the research question under consideration in the doctoral thesis – the opportunities offered by observational ethnographic documentaries as an approach to anthropological research.

Although Liivo Niglas emphasizes in the introductory part of the dissertation the desire to distinguish texts and films as research outputs so that they would be able to

speak to different audiences, it is expedient for those interested in visual anthropology to consider them as a whole. If possible, those interested should simply follow his recommendation that films (which are, before they can be considered as research, still primarily film as an artistic genre) should already be known before one starts to read research articles completed alongside films.

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to analyse the possibilities offered by the ethnographic documentary film in conducting ethnographic research and presenting the results. The author's thesis is that the audio-visual approach provides an important addition to text-centred anthropology in the treatment of certain research topics. Consequently, the focus of the dissertation is not on the cultural analysis of the societies being filmed, but on the question of the ethnographic film from both the methodological and epistemological point of view. The introductory part of the doctoral dissertation is also a theoretical analysis of the research problem and in a sense the author's autoethnography, because unlike, for example, research in the field of film theory, the author has created the object of analysis by himself. It gives him an additional tool to look at the film not only as a finished text, but to approach the film process as a whole, from its preparatory stages to the stages of fieldwork, editing, and reception. Questions about the possibility and justification of non-textual research in anthropology are not new, but Liivo Niglas extends this debate into the present day, where art-based research and artistic approaches to present research results are used as experimental not only in anthropology but also in many related fields ranging from arts research to media and communication research.

However, Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation remains consciously within the field of visual anthropology, excluding the proposals made in some of the key debates in this field to reformulate this research domain (e.g. Marcus Banks) and limiting his discussion to the most central part of this approach – the observational ethnographic documentary, by both supporting and deconstructing it. As the author of films, related research articles, and finally the introductory umbrella chapter of his doctoral dissertation, he is able to talk from an analytical point of view to the previous key authors in the field, who have usually been authors and creators of film theory (most importantly Timothy Ash, Anna Grimshaw, Paul Henley, Gary Kildea, Sarah Pink, Jean Rouch, Jay Ruby, Lucien Taylor, and especially David MacDougall). In his doctoral dissertation, Niglas has addressed all major researchers in the field, including visual anthropologists from Europe, Australia, and the USA. In presenting and analysing these views, he also makes significant use of autoethnography – his personal filmmaking experience. He shows convincingly that the anguish of various critics of observational ethnographic films towards this genre (e.g. Banks, Hastrup) is largely unjustified. "Observation" as the starting point of this approach does not signify a passive, absent (positivist) pursuit of objectivity, but is rather an active process across all stages of filming, film editing, and finally reception, in which the physical and sensory aspects of filmmaking play a very important role.

Thus, it can be said that the concept of physicality (and one's body as a research instrument) is at the heart of the dissertation and constitutes a cross-cutting theme in all articles that are part of the dissertation. It should be noted, however, that despite the importance of this topic there is no dialogue with researchers in this field to the same extent as in the field of visual anthropology in the dissertation. The author agrees to the conclusions of his introductory chapter (in which he relies on the analysis of other

theorists as well as his own film practice) that the genre of observational ethnographic film is suitable for analysing and conveying various aspects of human experience, providing good opportunities for several research topics within the field of phenomenological anthropology. Especially, for example, when the goal is to understand bodily experiences, the anthropological understanding of which is difficult to express in words. This gives the research method a potential to address a number of important research questions today (sensations, emotions, material environment). To some extent, the limitation of this approach is its ability to study human agency through just particular people and particular situations which are not necessarily generalizable. Although contemporary applications of innovation in visual anthropology seek to overcome this limitation through other approaches, criticizing ethnographic film as a problematic genre, the author has deliberately left out other approaches from his research. In this way, he has been able to create his own clear view of the border between anthropology and cinema. One of the interesting concepts that emerges here, which could be considered the author's own contribution to the debates within visual anthropology, is his observation that an *ethical-aesthetic* approach is at the heart of observational filmmaking: in order to find the right approach to the research problem with the help of a film camera, the driving force is not research questions or hypotheses characteristic of science, nor, on the other hand, artistic aspirations characteristic of film as an art genre, but ethical choices, which determine Liivo Niglas' attitude as a filmmaker and his relationship with the protagonists, as well as the role that the camera can play in research. However, these choices are also evident in the editing of the film, where his directorial approach is to interfere as minimally with the material as possible and try to respect different views and moments in filming. This includes long shots, following the pace of real life within the length of film frames, which Liivo Niglas has also called 'aesthetics of humbleness'. Finally, it is worth noting that since the very voluminous introductory chapter of the work is written in Estonian, in addition to its research value, the work is also important for teaching visual anthropology in Estonia, because it introduces and synthesizes debates that would otherwise have branched out across the professional literature throughout several decades.

Pille Runnel