

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