

NEWS IN BRIEF

INTERPRETATION, TRUTH, AND FEELINGS: LEGENDS AND RUMORS IN CULTURE: CONFERENCE AT THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM, TARTU, ON SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

The conference organized by the Department of Folkloristics under the heading *Interpretation, Truth, and Feelings: Legends and Rumors in Culture*, focusing on the study of modern traditions, was held at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. This one-day conference was dedicated to the 65th birthday of Eda Kalmre, the most recognized expert in contemporary folklore research in Estonia.

Eda Kalmre's main area of research is legends and rumors and their functioning in society. She is equally familiar with traditional legends and contemporary folklore. Therefore, in her analyses, the knowledge of old beliefs and legends creates a bridge between the traditional world and modern people. She has analyzed the ghost story about the Lilac Lady in the modern office, the old heroic myths juxtaposed with narratives about outlaws in the recent past, similar and different stories in connection with the sinking of the Titanic and the ferry Estonia, the dynamics of fact and fiction in popular ballads or in tales about an Afghanistan soldier, as well as in stories about food fraud. Eda's excellent monograph on post-war rumors, *The Human Sausage Factory: A Study of Post-War Rumour in Tartu* (2013), is based on interviews and historical archive documents and photographs. The collection of articles, *What a Wonderful World of Legends! Articles on Rumours and Legends* (2018), includes a selection of interesting approaches. The methods used by Kalmre are characterized by adherence to three principles: the dynamics of the text and context of folkloric phenomena, the rhetoric of truth, and the reliance on the discourse of social history. She regards the legend genre as relevant today, and believes that the source of its vitality lies in its ability to change and express itself in many different forms in culture.

The conference presentations were made by researchers whose topics were related to the aspects of folk culture of interest to Eda.

Semioticians Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel (University of Tartu) addressed the media panic in their short lecture titled "Who is afraid of conspiracy theories?", which in the circumstances of COVID-19, as well as energy and security crises, dealt with the fear of conspiracy that engulfed society. Using media criticism, the speakers found that conspiracy theories are not so pervasive that we could talk about mass psychosis. Based on academic studies, the picture is not so uniform, the popularity of conspiracy narratives on social media does not necessarily mean an epidemic of belief

in them. As social scientists, Madisson and Ventsel presented the descriptive term ‘phobophobia’ – a feeling that the collective fear and helplessness might have a dangerous effect on what is happening in society, as the created fear limits people’s ability to comprehend and makes them manipulable.

Liisi Laineste (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) and Anastasiya Fiadotava (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu; Jagiellonian University, Kraków) analyzed the layers of political humor in their presentation “Opposite, but similar: Russian and Belarusian anti-government and pro-government political humor”. The experienced humor researchers, who in their articles observe the action mechanisms of humor in society, showed how jokes are used to comment on the views of strangers, thereby indicating opinion gaps in public space. The presentation was based on humorous reactions on polarizing conflicts (2020 protests in Belarus and 2022–... war in Ukraine), expressed in different forms. There were overlapping elements in anti-government and pro-government jokes. Pro-government humor had fewer hidden layers, but anti-government humor was more multi-layered and spread more globally.

Mare Kõiva’s (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) presentation titled “The Devil in Noah’s Ark (ATU 825): About variation and the search for truth” addressed the diversity of the episode of the villain entering the ship in different cultures and in different eras. The speaker, who is very familiar with the huge variety of legends, etiologies and myths, discussed the stories of the rescue of people and animals and referred to the attempts made at different times to prove the existence of Noah’s ark as a historical fact. At least 18 versions of the story of the devil entering the ship are known in Estonia. The tales have unraveled and interwoven with other motifs – keeping the ship’s construction a secret, the devil’s resourcefulness to enter the ship (e.g., by turning into a mouse), with various insect, fish, bird and animal etiologies unraveling around them. It became evident that in the Estonian tradition, the story of Noah’s ark and the flood myth are expressed in various types of folklore – in riddles, proverbs, legends, spells, humorous stories and in modern forms of folklore.

Alexander Panchenko (University of Tartu) studied a singular demonological legend in his presentation titled “The devil baby legend: Between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’”. Panchenko, who is a long-term cooperation partner of Tartu folklorists in the field of contemporary legend studies, had already discovered the article “A devil is born (contemporary legend)” by the Russian ethnologist Vasili Smirnov, published in 1923. Smirnov relied on a specific alleged case of the birth of a devil baby but showed the background of the story in European folk tales and legends about the birth of Antichrist. The story about the devil baby circulated internationally already at the beginning of the 20th century and was related to medieval and early modern tales about blasphemy and contextualized in religious polemics of various kinds. The legend is presented in more entertaining contexts in modern times, and so it becomes possible to find both similarities and differences between traditional and contemporary legends.

On the basis of written stories sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, Astrid Tuisk (Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu) addressed the question of how films shown in cinemas in the middle of the 20th century influenced children at that time and how watching films and games inspired by them were reflected in their later memories. Part of the title of the presentation was a quote from a reminiscent story, “An utterly brighter world’: Foreign films in the childhood memories of those who grew up in the 1950s”. The 1950s appeared to be an unusual time in the Soviet reality, as the so-called trophy films from the United States, Germany and other countries, released in the 1930s, were shown. They were totally different from Soviet films – in terms of topics, portrayal, ideals, characters, and sound. From the films, young viewers found inspiration for their games. Acting in this manner, they both consumed adult culture and shaped their own subculture.

Mare Kalda