

Humour and laughter in the globalizing world: the 6th international gelological congress in St Petersburg

[Umorismo e risata nel mondo globalizzato: il 6° congresso internazionale di gelologia a San Pietroburgo]

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Brief report

Ricevuto il 2 Luglio 2021; accettato il 10 Luglio 2021

This is the sixth time it has happened! As regularly as clockwork, on every odd year, specialists in the field of laughter gather in St Petersburg for the International Gelological Congress. This year's Congress was held from May 12 to 15 at the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, and included not only a traditional academic programme, but also book presentations, caricature exhibitions, and other events besides. The pandemic brought with it more than just negative aspects, such as restrictions for foreign participants, it also forced the organizers to find technical solutions to maintain the event's traditional high standards. Thanks to these solutions (the event was held both online and offline, with simultaneous Russian-English translation available online), the topic of the conference was revealed not only theoretically, but also practically: participants from the other side of the globe, separated by huge time differences, such as Canada, Australia and Nigeria, whose participation in Russian events is always quite difficult to organize for a number of reasons, were able to join the programme. In all, the event's participants represented 16 different countries, including Germany, France, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Moldova, Switzerland, Finland, Estonia, Spain, and of course Russia.

One of the most important themes to which the speakers returned time and again throughout the congress was the coronavirus, and the restrictions caused by it. Particular attention was paid to the issue in papers by Ksenia Shilikhina (Voronezh State University, Russia), Alla Kornienko (RAS Sociological Institute, Russia), and Massih Zekavat (Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany). Additionally, a special exhibition "Coronature: Caricature of the Time of a Pandemic", organized by students of the Institute of Human Philosophy of the Herzen State Pedagogical University, was held as part of the congress. Ten masters of caricature from around the world submitted a total of 52 works for display. In their work, the caricaturists offered an original view of the pandemic, the virus, the restrictions it has caused, and people's reaction to them.

An important role in the discussion about the globalizing world was played by the issues of understanding, communication, and language, themes taken up by Jarno Hietalahti and Joonas

Pennanen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Ian Brodie (Cape Breton University, Canada), Nadezhda Kazarinova (St Petersburg State Electrotechnical University), He Jiafu (St Petersburg State University) among others. Furthermore, the roundtable “Who are they, these laughable Dutch / Russians?“, devoted to the issue of understanding Dutch national stereotypes about the Russians and Russian stereotypes about the Dutch (as manifested in humour), with the discussion involving students and lecturers of the Institute of Human Philosophy of the Herzen State Pedagogical University (Russia) and Radboud University (Netherlands), and the session moderated by the Netherlands Instituut in Saint-Petersburg.

Special attention was paid to intercultural communication in respect of religious differences between Christianity (Dmitry Kurdybaylo (Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, Russia; Herzen State Pedagogical University, Russia), Maxim Prikhodko (The Parish of St Nicolas Russian Orthodox Church, Spain), Daria Chentsova (St Tikhon's Orthodox University, Russia / Moscow State University, Russia) and Sergey Nevodov (Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia)) and Islam (Olga Efimova (Charitable Foundation for the Promotion of Awareness Raising & Social Enhancement Projects «PSP Foundation», Russia)), and to the problem of understanding the cultures of Ancient Greece (Fyodor Shcherbakov (St Petersburg Mining University, Russia)) and Ancient Egypt (Andrei Murashko (Higher School of Economics National Research University, Russia)).

Of course, various media, both traditional and new, are an important part of the modern world. As a result, numerous papers were devoted specifically to the issue of the media. The speakers talked about literature (Evgeniya Voloshchuk (European University at Viadrina, Germany), Aleksandr Lavrentev (Udmurt State University, Russia), Yaroslav Bigun (the Christian-Albrecht University of Kiel, Germany / St Petersburg State University, Russia), Sofia Nemkova (Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, Russia)), about cinematography (Tatyana Serebrennikova (State Museum of the Political History of Russia)), about theatre (Galina Ryabova (Penza State University, Russia)), about the printed press (Elena Sonina (St Petersburg State University, Russia)), as well as about social networks and online media (Denis Artamonov (Saratov Chernyshevsky State University, Russia), Irina Busurkina (RAS Institute of Sociology, Research Centre for Cultural Exclusion and Frontier Zones (RCCEFZ RAS), Russia)). The problem of intermediality was presented by Beata Waligórska-Olejniczak (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland).

In continuation of the topic of media issues, the caricature was extensively presented as a theme, with not only papers delivered by Lidia Zhirnova (MGIMO University, Russia), Alexandra Zhuravleva (Historical and Memorial Museum-Estate of P.E. Shcherbov, Russia), Tatiana Alentieva (Kursk State University, Russia), Alena Rezvukhina (Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow, Poland / Centre for Biographical Research AITIA, Russia), Alena Rezvukhina (Center for Biographical Research AITIA, Russia), Maria Filimonova (Kursk State University, Russia) and others, but also the presentation of the book «Разящее оружие смеха. Американская политическая карикатура XIX века (1800–1877)» [“The Striking Weapon of Laughter’. American Political Caricature of the 19th century (1800-1877)”] (St Petersburg: Alethea, 2020) by Prof. Tatiana Alentieva. Moreover, several events were held in honour of the 155th anniversary of the famous Russian caricaturist Pavel Shcherbov. The Historical and Memorial Museum-Estate of P.E. Shcherbov presented the exhibition “From Sketch to Caricature. The 155th anniversary of Pavel Shcherbov” and held a roundtable discussion entitled “The museum of laughter. What can a cartoonist's museum be like?”, involving scholars from France, Ukraine and Russia as experts.

An important component in the academic discussion during the congress were the issues of social practices, to which were devoted papers by Jessica Milner Davis (University of Sydney, Australia),

Sergey Troitskiy (Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia; St Petersburg State University; Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences - Branch of the Federal Research Sociological Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg, Russia) among others. As a development of the issue of social humorous practices, there followed a presentation of the scientific proceedings of the International Bakhtin Conference "Street Theatre vs Theatre of Military Actions, October 16–18 2019, Moscow". As part of this practical case, two research teams presented studies on gelotophobia. The first team (Denis Shunenkov (Federal Research and Clinical Center of Intensive Care Medicine and Rehabilitology, Russia), and Alyona Ivanova (Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, Russia / The Mental Health Research Centre, Russia)) is engaged in the study of gelotophobia in neurotic disorders. The second (Daniela Graziani (Meyer Children's Hospital, Italy), Laura Vagnoli (Meyer Children's Hospital, Italy), Ekaterina Stefanenko (Mental Health Research Centre, Russia), Mirko Duradoni (University of Florence, Italy), Alyona Ivanova (Mental Health Research Center, Russia / Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, Russia)) develops tools for the cross-cultural study of gelotophobia.

At the end of the congress, as if summing up the results of a fifty-year study of humour and laughter, Professor Willibald Ruch (University of Zurich, Switzerland) spoke, and voiced the important problem of the lack of understanding between representatives of different disciplines engaged in humorous research. The basis for such an understanding, in his opinion, can be a single vocabulary. During the discussion after Professor Ruch's speech, it was decided to gradually prepare such an interdisciplinary dictionary for researchers of laughter and humour.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the high level of the event was also supported by the co-organizers who invested their efforts and funds, Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (Saint Petersburg, Russia), Laboratory of Gelological Studies of Sociological institute (Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg, Russia), Mental Health Research Centre (Moscow, Russia), Non-governmental organization «Odessa Humanities Tradition» (Odessa, Ukraine), The Museum-Estate of P.E. Scherbov (Leningrad Region, Russia), Museum Agency of the Leningrad Region (Leningrad Region, Russia), St Petersburg State Clown–Mime-Theatre «Mimigrants» (Saint Petersburg, Russia), Netherlands Institute in Saint-Petersburg (Saint Petersburg, Russia). Simultaneous translation was provided by graduates of The School of Conference Interpreting & Translation (SCIT) at Herzen University.

The next congress is scheduled for early May 2023.

Bionote

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