



## *Conferences*

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### **Packing and Unpacking Utopia, Reality and Heritage** **SIEF Congress in Zagreb 21.-25.6.2015**

As I was packing my suitcase for the SIEF congress in Zagreb, I had no idea how much I would be thinking of suitcases during the next few days. Before the congress, we attendees received an email from the conference administrators with

instructions on what to bring with us. It had been wonderfully sunny and hot in Zagreb for a few weeks, and it was suggested that we pack sunscreen, perhaps a hat and light and airy clothes. There was even a peculiar note: 'Padded bras are a bad idea!'

I packed my bag, left behind the midsummer bonfires of eastern Finland, and arrived in Zagreb right before the opening night of the congress.

The opening ceremony at the Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall started with welcoming speeches from local organisers and representatives from the University of Zagreb, and it continued with both traditional and more modern musical performances by local folklore ensembles Ivan Goran Kovačić and Ethnotine ('Ethno teens').

In the opening keynote speech, 'Living in the Past, Present and the Future: Synchronizing Everyday Life', Professor Emeritus Orvar Löfgren introduced his views on suitcases. Löfgren analysed suitcases as metaphors but also as ordinary objects, as part of our habits and routines of travelling, packing and unpacking. A suitcase is a measurement of what is enough. What is packed? What is not packed? What do we need in different circumstances? In short, what is enough? In addition to toothbrushes, practical clothing and our actual travel plans, we pack dreams of happiness and freedom as well as memories of some other trips. A suitcase is a small, portable utopia, where we pack our fantasies together with continuities. This is what Löfgren described as the thrown-togetherness of objects, bodies, emotions and co-habits in his wider study of travel. It was a clever idea to focus on suitcases on the opening night, when almost everyone in the audience had just packed and unpacked their personal necessities for the trip to the congress.

The theme of this year's congress was 'Utopias, Realities, Heritages: Ethnographies for the 21st century'. The question of utopia and reality is not an easy one when discussing heritage. Is our heritage based on something real, or is it just some kind of materialised utopia? Jasna Čapo, from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, compared in her keynote lecture the practices of Croatian return migrants, both the migrants who return and their descendants who were born in the countries of settlement. The motives for both staying and returning may be based on patriotism or business, but they may also be based on pure accident or just a dream, and in many cases the expectations collapse with reality. The idealised homeland remains a utopia for both returning migrants and transnational generations – and also for those who did not return.

There were approximately 900 participants at the congress, but the overall impression was that everything was quite well organised. There were more than a hundred panels and a great number of fascinating paper presentations, posters, film presentations and keynote lectures at the congress, and in many cases it was hard to choose where to go. I attended panels concerning body, age, museums and digital heritage. Each of these themes had excited the interests of the congress-goers. One of the most memorable topics for me was Robert Glenn Howard's digital folklore research on internet gun forums and all the 'gun porn' and 'gun lore' they contain. Howard is American, from the University of Wisconsin, and especially in the US the case of personal handguns and the often profoundly personal relationships to guns as objects is something worth studying by means of folklore and other fields of cultural studies.

Another aspect to digital technologies was offered by a Swedish ethnologist, Anna Johansson, whose research topic is the music streaming service Spotify. New digital technologies have transformed people's music distribution and consumption, and individual taste and freedom of choice confronts but also blends together with the commercial and institutional power of music services such as Spotify. Streaming services collect information on their users and use this data to suggest new music, bands and genres based on a user's digital habits and profile. Spotify also contains cultural differences based on the particular market area: in Sweden, there is no genre for Christian music, but in America it is one of the most popular genres.

I presented my own paper concerning children's interpretations of clothes and the clothed body based on my fieldwork among 5-7 year old children at the panel 'Body and Age'. Presenters at the panel discussed the results of their ethnographic research on the body in different stages of life – as children, teenagers and older people. There were many papers concerning ageing and older people. Martin Heřmanský from Prague University presented a paper on teenagers, especially on the on bodily practices in contemporary Czech emo subculture. Interestingly, middle-aged

people and adults did not receive any attention. Is age an issue only when one is either very young or very old? However, my own paper was also the only one in the panel concerning children. Small children in particular have remained quite an untouched topic in ethnographic research and even among the studies of different age groups.

Social Scientist Marija Geiger Zeman and Zdenko Zeman from Zagreb University presented a paper concerning the body in narratives of old age and bodily interactions with radio listening in later life. They concentrated on the gendered experiences of ageing faces and bodies based on their fieldwork among older people. In their interviews, they noticed the persistence of double standards with respect to ageing. At the same time that many men may enjoy the status of becoming charming older men, women felt that ageing was only depressing and depowering. I could not help but wonder if there are some cultural differences in relation to ageing. Does it come with only negative effects for women but positive power for men? Is there more equivalency in ageing between the genders in Nordic countries? Talking about Nordic countries, I had an interesting conversation with locals during the coffee break. They were discussing the deep depression and shadows cast by the recent wars in Croatia, and they were worried about how we Scandinavians would view their city. For them, Finland seemed to be a Nordic paradise full of wealth and privilege – which of course is both true and false. Overall, it was an interesting experience to be part of a panel where most of the other participants came from the Universities of Bratislava, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Bucharest – cities and countries whose departments and ways of approaching cultural studies I was not familiar with before.

There are many interesting museums and collections in Zagreb. With my Finnish colleagues,

we visited for example the Museum of Broken Relationships, the winner of the Kenneth Hudson Award for the most innovative museum in Europe. Surprisingly, the exhibition itself was quite traditional and object based, containing a great deal of text, but the conceptual idea of concentrating on stories of broken relationships and the objects relating to the stories is powerful and touching.

During the congress, a new SIEF working group on 'Museums and Material Culture' was founded. It intends to provide a platform for dialogue, co-operation and networking among ethnologists and folklorists with a special interest in museums and material culture. Part of the mission of this working group is to renew the ties between ethnologists in the academy and the museum in an effort to reinvigorate the ethnological study of material culture as well as of the museum as an institution.

As I was packing my suitcase before leaving Zagreb, I thought about the previous hot and sunny days at the university. Unfortunately, now I found myself freezing in pouring rain, with a jacket that was way too light, and with both pairs of my shoes wet. This is just another example of how hard it is to pack one's suitcase wisely. Anyway, after long but rewarding days of travel, of packing and unpacking, I found my suitcase full of new items and ideas, necessities and values, journeys taken and not taken, and images of other journeys to be taken later on.

In 2014, SIEF celebrated its 50th anniversary, and with this congress the society entered the second half of its first century with style. The next SIEF congress will be held in 2017 in Göttingen, Germany.

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