

Report from 'The Language of Satire'

ICLA World Congress, Vienna, 21st – 27th July 2016

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This is a report on the BCLA-sponsored panel on 'The Language of Satire' that convened during the ICLA World Congress in Vienna, 21st-27th July 2016. During the panel's four sessions we got to encounter literary works and films from different locations and times that had satirical elements in common. The generic focus on satire thus served both to mark similarities and underline differences between the texts under discussion. **Antonio Leggieri** opened the panel with a paper on 18th century Chinese jestbooks that offered a close reading of a number of jokes. Part of the comic effect in these jokes is generated through vulgar depictions of the body and mockery of our self-aggrandisement – features also familiar to Western readers. However, Leggieri also showed the extent to which the jokes were based on parodic imitation of canonical Chinese poetry. In such instances the comic effect is dependent on the audience recognising the poetry that the joke makes fun of and must be reconstructed for readers who do not share this cultural background. **Sharmila Majumdar** further underlined the ways in which the language of satire is embedded in specific cultural and political aspects, focusing on West Bengal. Introducing two plays by Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, she highlighted how he fashioned a literary language that combines features of ancient Sanskrit and contemporary, vernacular Bangla. This mixture is further influenced by English literature, which Tagore would have encountered during his studies in Europe. One example of such influence is the use of vulgarity, especially sexual innuendo, to produce comic effects. Since Bangla culture did not stigmatise the body and sex, Majumdar argues that sexual innuendo is foreign to its satirical tradition.

In the second session, **Elisa Kriza** turned to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly the idea that carnival is a state in which the everyday is suspended, to construct a model for comparative satire studies as a form of grotesque realism. Reading postmodern literature as historiographical metafiction, Kriza studied satirical novels by Fazil Iskander and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Both wrote under dictatorial

regimes – 1930s Soviet Union and 1960s Mexico, respectively – and Kriza revealed how these novelists use satirical techniques to satirise and thereby undermine official state ideology. **Anja Gerigk** likewise drew on Bakhtin's discussion of carnival, but placed her emphasis on the relation between the body and the grotesque. Asking how satire and the grotesque can work in tandem, she foregrounded satire's critical and political aspects by using *The Interview* as a case study. The film mocks Kim Jong-un at the same time as it parodies the cold war mentality in which this mockery takes place. Gerigk identified two different types of comedy at stake: a visual grotesque based on jokes about the body and a linguistic grotesque manifested in the discrepancy between what is being said and the manner of saying it. **Georgia Panteli** spoke about the world's most translated non-religious work: Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Here, too, comical-satirical effects are achieved by means of sexual innuendo, particularly with regards to Pinocchio's growing nose. Panteli placed Collodi's long-standing interest in noses in an inter-textual matrix including Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* – a work that continually plays with the classical association between nose and penis. Turning to later adaptations of the Pinocchio story, Panteli showed how the nose-penis association has given rise to Freudian readings and critiques of heteronormativity, but the wooden puppet who wants to be a boy also offers a way to think through the post-human.

The third session began with **Natalya Domina's** paper on Daniil Kharm's, which emphasised the political stakes of his satirical writings. Working with the premise that nonsensical texts can expose a nonsensical regime, Domina foregrounded the role of the satirist in this model: he is someone who cannot be caught because he does not assert anything. Thus, Kharm's is able to 'safely' mock the system by creating a fragmentary world devoid of sense. This senseless world in turn mimics and parodies the senselessness of life under Stalinism – in both cases things happen seemingly for no reason and one cannot ask for explanations. The comedy, if one may still speak of comedy in this case, arises precisely out of the relentless repetition of nonsense. **Elisa Fortunato** spoke of satire in another totalitarian context by offering a close reading of two 1930s translations of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* into Italian. The fascist regime viewed translation as a form

of cultural cannibalism, which would allow Italy to incorporate other cultures. At the same time, the regime passed laws against 'immoral' literature and all publications had to be approved by the state censor. Fortunato was particularly interested in how fascist censorship led to a form of self-censorship by literary practitioners and how the interaction between the two forms of censorship influenced translators' choices. By offering a detailed analysis of two translations, she showed how they softened down the vulgarity of the original text and toned down Swift's social critique. **Laura Fuchs-Eisner** closed the session with a talk on contemporary French satires: Y.B.'s *Allah Superstar* and Frédéric Beigbeder's *Au secours pardon*. Although one is a satire on French racial prejudice against Arabs and the other a satire on the beauty industry, both novels feature images of suicide attacks. In other words, they use the post-9/11 discourse on terrorism as a vehicle for social critique. Fuchs-Eisner was sceptical about the old assumption that satire is didactic and enlightening and instead considered the possibility that satire is more about entertainment than ethics. In the novels in question, the political problem of terrorism turns into a pleasurable reading experience that serves to confirm the audience's worldview – be it in the representation of *banlieue*-residents as victims or in exposing the inhumanity of our society's obsession with beauty.

In the final session, **Ari Linden** brought satire back to Vienna in his paper on the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus. In response to the accusation of befouling his own nest, Kraus rewrote Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds* under the name *Wolkenkuckucksheim*. In both plays a city is founded in the sky, but where Aristophanes' comedy ends in celebration, Kraus's satire ends in war. *Wolkenkuckucksheim* aims to expose the structure of state violence and to throw light on the situation of the disenfranchised – the latter represented by the birds who build the city in the sky but have no say in its running. Linden argued that Kraus's adaptation of Aristophanes is not so violent as is often assumed but that, on the contrary, Kraus makes the drama's central characters and its social critique more nuanced and ambiguous than in the Greek original. **Christian van der Steeg** continued the subject of German 1920s satire in a paper structured around a photograph of the actor Max Pallenberg dressed as Jaroslav Hašek's soldier Švejk. The photograph was taken in the context of Erwin Piscator's production of *The Good*

Soldier Švejk in Berlin. Piscator, like his contemporary Bertolt Brecht, experimented with an anti-bourgeois theatre aesthetic best known under Brecht's phrase 'epic theatre.' Piscator's *The Good Soldier Švejk* is the first epic theatre production and Pallenberg in the role of Švejk is its first superstar as it were. Van der Steeg showed how a photograph of Pallenberg in costume circulated in both the radical and conservative press where it was made to illustrate completely opposing viewpoints. The political function of the photograph reflects epic theatre's own emphasis on politics over aesthetics. Throughout the panel, satire proved a useful lens to open up comparative perspectives, being both wide enough to connect a variety of works and specific enough to interconnect them to one another.