

# Grothendieck at 80, IHES at 50

*Allyn Jackson*

On March 28, 2008, Alexander Grothendieck turned eighty years old. Coincidentally, the day before that date was the kick-off of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques (IHES). The names of Grothendieck and IHES will forever be linked, for he and Jean Dieudonné were the first professors appointed to the institute when it was founded by the businessman Léon Motchane in 1958. Grothendieck was really the one who launched the IHES as a thriving international center for mathematical research. With his abrupt resignation from the institute in 1970 he began a process not only of severing ties to the IHES and the mathematical community but of isolating himself from his friends and family, and indeed from all of human society, as Winfried Scharlau describes in his article “Who is Alexander Grothendieck?” in this issue of the *Notices*. Grothendieck’s life today, spent in self-imposed isolation in a remote village in the Pyrenées, seems especially distant from the IHES in this anniversary year, as the institute celebrates its ever-rising profile as an established meeting point for researchers. Still, Grothendieck’s impact on the IHES, and its impact on him, remain strong to this day.

Much has changed for the IHES in the past half-century. From a tiny two-professor enterprise that in 1958 did not even have its own quarters and that appeared to have a pretty precarious future, the institute has grown into a leading international center for mathematics and theoretical physics with a small but outstanding permanent faculty of six professors—half of them Fields Medalists—and an active visitor program. As befits its status in the world of research, the IHES is marking its sesquicentennial in grand style, with a year-long series of events in Paris, Chicago, New York, Japan, and China. Another part of the celebration is an

---

*Allyn Jackson is senior writer and deputy editor of the Notices. Her email address is axj@ams.org.*

exhibition, called *Les Déchiffreurs* in French and *The Unravelers* in English, which explores the lives and thoughts of people who do fundamental research. The exhibition will open in Paris in September and will travel to New York City in November. An accompanying book, with the same title as the exhibition, has been published in French by Belin, in English by A K Peters, and in Japanese by Springer. In honor of the fiftieth anniversary, mathematician and philanthropist James Simons, together with his wife Marilyn, gave the IHES a 6 million euro (about US\$9 million) challenge gift. In addition, the institute has begun a fundraising campaign with the aim of collecting 20 million euros over the coming five years.

That the kick-off of the IHES anniversary celebration fell on the day before Grothendieck’s eightieth birthday was pure coincidence: The date was dictated by the schedules of the invited speakers, particularly some high French government officials with jam-packed calendars. Unsurprisingly, Grothendieck did not attend, but his presence was keenly felt. Valentin Poénaru, a retired professor at the Université de Paris Orsay and a friend of Grothendieck’s during the 1970s, attended the celebration and said he was struck by the strong presence of the “absent house-ghost” (Poénaru has written a brief memoir about Grothendieck, which also appears in this issue of the *Notices*). Grothendieck’s name arose in many of the private conversations among attendees as well as in the lectures, particularly those by Yuri Manin, David Mumford, and David Ruelle, each of whom spoke extensively about Grothendieck and the importance of his work. His presence will grow yet stronger in this anniversary year, with the decision by the IHES to publish his massive treatise *Récoltes et Semailles*. The entire work has been available for some time on the Internet but has never appeared in published form in the original French (a

Japanese translation was published in the 1990s). It is expected to come out in autumn 2008.

In his *Notices* article, Scharlau carries out a careful examination of what he sees as the probable causes of Grothendieck's withdrawal from the mathematical community. David Ruelle, a retired IHES physics professor who overlapped for some years with Grothendieck, provides his own perspective in his book *The Mathematician's Brain* (Princeton University Press, 2007), which contains a chapter about Grothendieck. Ruelle traces Grothendieck's withdrawal and isolation in part to his having been an outsider in the French system of research. In this system, Ruelle writes, "it is all important whether you are from the Ecole Normale [Supérieure] or the Ecole Polytechnique, in whose lab you were accepted, whether you are at the CNRS [Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique], the academy, a suitable political party, and so on." Being part of such a group means one can count on its help. Ruelle goes on to say:

In the case of Grothendieck, he was nothing (not even having at the time French or any other citizenship). He was nobody's responsibility; he was just an embarrassment.

Understandably, some people would like to blame Grothendieck's exclusion entirely on Grothendieck himself: he went crazy and left mathematics. But this does not fit with the known facts and their chronology. Something shameful has taken place. And the disposal of Grothendieck will remain a disgrace in the history of twentieth-century mathematics.

IHES professor Laurent Lafforgue was appointed to the institute in 2000, long after Grothendieck's departure. He agrees that what happened to Grothendieck was "shameful" but is skeptical that being an outsider in the French system was an important factor. Grothendieck's overwhelming personality crushed some people, Lafforgue said, and his mathematical prowess inspired envy. As a result, many were relieved when Grothendieck started behaving in a radical fashion and thereby furnished a reason for them to turn away from him. But perhaps the crucial factor was Grothendieck's rejection of scientism, the belief that science is above everything else. "Here was one of the greatest scientists of the century appearing to want to question the value of science," Lafforgue wrote in an email message. "This is probably the thing that was the most scandalous for the whole scientific community (not only in France but the world over) and that provoked in this community a reaction of rejection towards him."

Six months to the day before the start of the IHES anniversary celebration, Grothendieck wrote to the institute with a request for books. The IHES sent him the books as quickly as it could. But the exchange of letters between Grothendieck and the IHES administration culminated in his writing a furious "open letter" recounting his view of the exchange, which he took as deeply insulting towards him. He requested that copies of the open letter be sent to all members of the IHES Scientific Council and explicitly states that this letter is public (though he also says he will make no efforts on his own to publicize it). Having seen the open letter, I can say that it conveys an extreme outrage that indicates how difficult it would be to conduct reasonable communication with him.

At the same time, the open letter reveals the vivid personal tie that Grothendieck clearly still feels to the IHES. The letter also reveals an isolated individual who is reaching out in the only way he is able. In one place he speaks of his open letter as being a letter of farewell ("adieu") to a world with which he no longer has anything in common. He ends on a note of apocalyptic foreboding, saying "that the time is near when...this letter, this cry will be known *by all*. In a world of the *living*." This cry does not seem to concern a misunderstanding over his original request for books. Rather, it speaks of anguish in the heart of one of the great mathematicians of modern times.

### Grothendieck in the News

Grothendieck's eightieth birthday inspired several articles in the popular media, including the following:

"In höheren Dimensionen (In higher Dimensions)", by Winfried Scharlau, *Die Zeit*, March 27, 2008.

"Verschollenes Genie (Missing Genius)", *Neues Zürcher Zeitung*, by George Szpiro, April 27, 2008.

"Sensitivity to the Harmony of Things", by Julie Rehmeyer, *Science News Online*, May 9, 2008.

"Autour d'Alexandre Grothendieck" (Around Alexander Grothendieck), a broadcast on Radio France featuring Denis Guedj, Michel Demazure, and Laurent Lafforgue, June 2, 2008.