

Lothar Jordan

How Can Comparative Literature and the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme Cooperate?

An Introduction

During the XXI. Congress of the ICLA a joint workshop of the ICLA and the Sub-Committee on Education and Research (SCEaR) of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme (MoW) took place on the 26 of July 2016 in the Audimax of the University of Vienna. The title of this paper takes up the title of the workshop that was chaired by the then-President of the ICLA, Hans Bertens, and myself as chair of the SCEaR.¹

The aim of the workshop was to start exploring the possibilities and perspectives of cooperation between the ICLA, Comparative Literature, and scholars of Comparative Literature on the one hand and on the other the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, especially its Sub-Committee on Education and Research. This is a completely pioneering effort and will remain such at least for some years: UNESCO is, beyond the fame of its acronym, less known in the academic world than one would expect. Like the United Nations or the European Union it may seem to be a remote and obscure institution of international politics and administration. With the exception of Political Sciences and International Law, most of the academic disciplines neither approach the organization nor its single activities systematically. And the Memory of the World Programme only started to work systematically on education and research in 2013 with the creation of the specific sub-committee (SCEaR). In 2015 the General Conference of UNESCO created a normative instrument of international law: *Safeguarding the Memory of the World – UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage including in Digital Form*. Its paragraph 4.4

¹ My thanks go to Hans Bertens and Achim Hölder for the good cooperation. – Connected to the workshop were two key note speeches, the first during the Opening Ceremony of the Congress by UNESCO Assistant Director General Frank La Rue on “Art and Intercultural Dialogue”, the second by Abdulla El Reyes (Abu Dhabi), Chair of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World Programme, on “Perspectives of Cooperation”. Dietrich Schüller (Austrian National Commission for UNESCO) gave an “Address of Welcome”. Besides five presentations and their discussions the workshop included a panel discussion “How to cooperate?” (Hans Bertens, Achim Hölder [ICLA]; Abdulla El Reyes, Jan Bos, and myself [Memory of the World]).

asks member states to encourage “the development of new forms and tools of education and research on documentary heritage and their presence in the public domain.” This task can be applied to the cooperation between MoW and the ICLA. And there is another instrument of international law that is significant for our matters and especially for Comparative Literature, namely the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005) as it provides a legal and ethical frame for the diversity of cultural expressions, including literatures and languages.

It is worth mentioning that the first wide-ranging academic book on Memory of the World was published in 2020.² My contribution has two parts: the first part gives a short introduction to the MoW programme; and here I have chosen examples which seem apt to give some insight into the use of MoW and documentary heritage for Comparative Literature. The second part makes some proposals concerning concrete cooperation between MoW and the ICLA and its members.

1 The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is an autonomous sub-organisation of the United Nations. UNESCO, based in Paris, works in the fields of education, science, culture, and communication and information.³ It was created in 1945 under the impression of the Second World War with the main task to help building peace by international exchange and cooperation in education, culture, and the sciences.

The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme is one of three heritage programmes of UNESCO. The most famous one is World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The third is Intangible Heritage.

The creation of MoW was in line with UNESCO’s interest to safeguard valuable holdings of archives and libraries, like manuscripts and books (and later audiovisual items and digital documents) and the experience of their loss by war, civil war, natural catastrophes, negligence, or other reasons. MoW was created in 1992, but a strong movement towards this programme had already started at the end of the eighties. In 1989 the Senegalese poet and statesman Léopold Sédar Sen-

² Edmondson et al. 2020.

³ Communication and Information is a young sector of the organization, not included in the acronym. This sector works e.g. on knowledge societies, the internet, freedom of the press, preservation of and access to information, and the MoW programme.

ghor – along with others – had pleaded that UNESCO should start formal activities to safeguard “The written word”.⁴ MoW’s aims are:

- To facilitate preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the world’s documentary heritage.
- To assist universal access to documentary heritage.
- To increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage.

MoW’s most prominent feature is a World Register of documents and collections of international (‘global’) significance, currently numbering 427 (November 2022). The MoW Register mirrors the real diversity and richness of the documentary heritage, be they religious, political, or technological and scientific documents – as well as documents of all materials, from papyrus and paper to films and digital documents (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/>).⁵ Of the inscribed literary documents I want to mention just a selection, such as the Rigveda, or the interdisciplinary Ancient Naxi Dongba literature manuscripts (China), La Galigo (Indonesia), the Song of the Nibelungs (Germany), Shota Rustaveli: *The Knight in the Panthers’s Skin* (Georgian national epic), the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Collections, the literary estate of Goethe, Ibsen’s *The Dollhouse*, Leo Tolstoy’s personal library and manuscripts, the photo and film collection, the Christopher Okigbo collection, and the Derek Walcott collection (kept in Trinidad and Tobago).

In addition to the World Register there are Regional (in Asia/Pacific and in Latin America/Caribbean; none in Europe) and some National Registers, too. Beyond its registers the MoW programme carries out or cooperates with conferences, workshops, meetings, publications, etc.⁶

As education and research became more important for the MoW programme, a Sub-Committee on Education and Research (SCEaR)⁷ was created in 2013. It holds an official network of Cooperating Institutions and Corresponding Members, visible on the website of UNESCO. Cooperating institutions can be single institutes, departments, archives, libraries, etc. or whole associations like the ICLA

4 That was the title of his article in the *UNESCO Courier*. Senghor 1989.

5 See also: UNESCO 2012.

6 There is a UNESCO/Jikji Memory of the World Prize since 2004 (30,000 US-\$), sponsored by the Republic of Korea. The purpose of this prize is to commemorate the inscription of the „Buljo jikji simche yojeol“, the oldest existing book of movable metal print in the world, on the Memory of the World Register, and to reward efforts contributing to the preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage as a common heritage of humanity.

7 UNESCO. *International Advisory Committee*.

(International Comparative Literature Association). The Department of Comparative Literature of the University of Vienna was one of the first Cooperating Institutions. Corresponding Members can come from the academic world or from memory institutions.

One of the first Memory of the World Knowledge Centres – which is a specialized archive or library with educational and research activities around it – was created in Macau at the library of the City University in November 2016, and a second one in Beijing at Renmin University in July 2017. Currently (November 2022) there are seven such centres in the world, four in China, three more in South Korea, Ivory Coast and Mexico. These are the first steps towards a network of MoW Knowledge Centres around the world.⁸

Until recently the MoW Programme cooperated – due to its history and tasks – nearly exclusively with memory institutions (archives, libraries, museums) and their international organisations – ICA (International Council on Archives), IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), and ICOM (International Council of Museums). The creation of the SCEaR changed that. The programme gained the conviction that to provide better access to documents included to provide better access to their content. That requires cooperation with different disciplines of the Humanities. This new approach becomes visible in the list of Cooperating Institutions and Corresponding Members, and in the *SCEaR Newsletter* which is open, too, for articles from academic disciplines, e.g. History or Literature.⁹

2 Cooperation between Memory of the World and Comparative Literature

Let us take into account the Mission Statement of MoW SCEaR of UNESCO as well as that of the ICLA. The ICLA Statutes determine the “Objectives of the Association: The International Comparative Literature Association seeks to foster the study of literature undertaken from an international point of view. It attempts to realize this objective through international cooperation.”¹⁰ The “ICLA encourages ex-

⁸ See as a kind of Work Report: *The Memory of the World Knowledge Centres. An Overview* in: *SCEaR Newsletter, Special Issue 2022*. – In Comparative Literature the term ‘knowledge’ was highlighted by Revathi Krishnaswamy: Krishnaswamy 2010.

⁹ See my report on this workshop in the *SCEaR Newsletter* 2016, 6–8.

¹⁰ International Comparative Literature Association. *Statutes*. <http://www.aile-icla.org/statutes/>. (23 January 2023).

change and cooperation among comparatists, both individually and through the collaboration of various national comparative literature associations. To that end the Association promotes literary studies beyond the boundaries of languages and national literary traditions, between cultures and world regions, among disciplines and theoretical orientations, and across genres, historical periods, and media.”¹¹

“The mission of the MoW EaR-SC is: 1) to work out strategies and concepts for institutionalizing education and research on Memory of the World, its registers and the world documentary heritage in a sustainable manner, as well in all forms of institutions of higher learning as in schools, 2) to help developing innovative curricula and research on Memory of the World and/or on documents, especially in an interdisciplinary and international manner and related to the internet [...]”¹² And we should take UNESCO’s ‘language politics’ into account which is integral for MoW, too: “There is a need to both preserve global linguistic diversity as a prerequisite for cultural diversity and to promote multilingualism and translation in order to foster intercultural dialogue.”¹³

So MoW and Comparative Literature have overlaps, namely between the MoW programme itself and/or memory institutions (archives, libraries, museums) and the academic world, as far as literary documents (or documents [‘original sources’] with other content, e.g. photos and films, which is significant for Comparative Literature) are concerned. But there are more commonalities: Both, MoW and Comparative Literature have a global approach, or better yet: a global telos (Memory of the World/World Literature).

2.1 The MoW Registers

The MoW registers (Jan Bos reported about them in our workshop, see his article in this volume), especially its International Register (World Register), offer a variety of possibilities for Comparative Literature: ICLA and its members may help to objectify the nomination and assessment process. This was identified as one field of possible cooperation.

Another aspect is to analyze critically e.g. the criteria – like authenticity – mechanisms, regional, gender etc. distribution of inscribed items. If one sees the MoW Register as a proto-canon (UNESCO’s *official* line is not to see it that way), one touches the complex of World Literature, especially if one understands it as a

¹¹ International Comparative Literature Association. *Mission Statement*. <http://www.aiclc-icla.org/mission-statement/>. (23 January 2023).

¹² UNESCO. *SCEaR: Mission Statement*.

¹³ UNESCO 2009.

kind of canon, too. How far are aesthetic values and criteria of significance universal or global?¹⁴ One could reflect the relation between the global, the regional and the local. One can ask: What is the World in Memory of the World, what is the World in World Literature?

2.2 Access to literary documents: MoW, Comparative Literature, scholarly editing

If we want to improve the international use of documents, we have to come to a new understanding of ‘access’. Access is more than a legal or technical question.¹⁵ One has to open the door not only to the carrier, mostly by means of the internet, but as well to the content. What we really need are best-practice examples of websites that mediate items of the MoW Register to an international audience. The exact range of the target audience depends on the contents. As a general orientation I do not think of the top experts, but of an educated audience like university students, teachers, journalists. For the vast majority of potential users of foreign languages and cultures this means: At least a good selection of inscribed items has to be translated. English will be the main language for international mediation, but depending on the political and cultural situation and specific traditions it could be other languages as well like French, or the languages of neighbouring countries. But to translate well chosen documents is not enough. One has to add more information on the context, depending on the contents of documents. The literary, political, religious, social, etc. context has to be commented upon. Links should lead to more information. The short commentaries of the *World Digital Library* can give a first idea of what we need. But that has to be elaborated profoundly. If made for an audience of other regions it is a daring task to reflect what kind of contextual information such users may need (historical, political, social, religious, etc.). Many things in our own culture seem self-evident, while they are unknown or unclear to others. Mediating items of the MoW Register is a challenging variant of intercultural dialogue. If these items are from literature, the competence of Comparative Literature can be a great help. And the other way around: It will be a challenging task for Comparative Literature to help mediate

¹⁴ See my article: Jordan 2019.

¹⁵ Sandra Bermann speaks about “linguistic accessibility” and “semantic accessibility” in her article: Bermann 2012 (here: p. 175.)

literary texts and documents through the Internet¹⁶ to a worldwide audience. Stakeholders of the work on this new field (Comparative Literature, Digital Humanities, MoW, and Scholarly Editing) could and should come together.¹⁷

2.3 Translations

As we saw in the citation about UNESCO ‘language politics’, the organization gives great attention to translations. The Index Translationum of UNESCO is a well-known database of translations, which aims to provide information, mainly statistical, on the state of current translations in the world. It had a precursor as early as 1932 in the frame of the League of Nations. After World War II the newly created UNESCO took over the project. Aside from the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention (and the other heritage programmes of UNESCO like MoW) the Index Translationum is one of the globally well-known activities of the organization. And for many years UNESCO, together with FIT (Fédération internationale des traducteurs), supports translators and their issues. MoW is following this position, but should be more active in this matter: Improving access to documents for an international audience requires more, and better translations (see above 2.2.).

During the Workshop in Vienna all parties agreed that translation would be a promising field of cooperation. As a result there was a meeting in the museum estate Yasnaya Polyana, the former estate of Leo Tolstoy, in August 2017 between the then-President of the ICLA, Zhang Longxi, the then-President of the ICLCM (International Committee of Literary and Composers’ Museums), Galina Alexeeva, and myself as the Chair of the MoW SCEaR.¹⁸ An important result was that we, with other partners yet to be won over, would work on a “Manifesto for Safeguarding the Memory of Translators and Translations”.¹⁹ Alongside other positive results, we expect in the long run a substantially improved basis for research on translators and translations.

¹⁶ Beebee 2011 comes close to UNESCO’s and MoW’s endeavours to care for safeguard informations in the internet sustainably. But he ends with 2007. See now the PERSIST project of UNESCO/MoW: <https://unescopersist.org/about>. (23 January 2023).

¹⁷ Jordan 2011.

¹⁸ See our Report on the meeting in: *SCEaR Newsletter September 2017/3*, 26.

¹⁹ Jordan 2018, 15, on the planned *Manifesto*. See also: Longxi 2018.

2.4 Lost Memory – Dispersed Memory

Based on the sad experience of destructions of libraries and archives during the Second World War, in other wars and civil wars and by manmade and natural disasters, MoW developed a special feature that reminds of such losses, and looks for ways to describe what has been lost, or even to reconstruct it: Lost Memory.²⁰ Achim Hölter introduces a project by which Comparative Literature could tackle this issue: “Lost Memory: Reconstructing Writers’ Libraries”. Such projects fit very well into and can be inspiring for the activities and projects UNESCO and MoW have started in the very recent years following the tasks given by the *Sendai Framework*. This framework was developed by the United Nations in 2015 for global Disaster Risk Reduction and Management.²¹

Important variants of Lost Memory are e.g. Dispersed Memory, Archives at Risk, and Archival Safe Havens. They are the subjects of David Sutton (“Diasporic Literary Archives”).

2.5 Further

In this Workshop we had time to discuss just a few more matters of joint interest, such as:

- Research on documents, archives, libraries, museums as subjects of literary texts.
- Metaphors of memory.

However, there are many more. Let me take one last example. The title of Liliana Weinberg’s article: “The Oblivion We Will Be [...]”²² follows Columbian writer Héctor Abad Faciolince’s novel: *El olvido que seremos* (2006) – echoing a poem of Borges. The writer’s father had been killed by “Colombian repression” (p. 67), militia or paramilitaries. Weinberg puts this in the frame of literature and human rights. She sees this novel as an endeavour to write against the loss of memory of the victims of violence. When I read her article, I thought of a most impressive

²⁰ See e.g. the inventory: UNESCO. *Lost Memory – Library and Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century*, 1996.

²¹ UNESCO and MoW organized two Political Fora on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management for Sustainable Preservation of Documentary Heritage (Paris 2018 and 2021). Their presentations were collected in the *SCEaR Newsletter 2020, Special Issues 2020/1 and 2020/2*. In the first issue (34–38), I made “A Proposal to Use Documents of Literature for Disaster Sensitization.”

²² Helgesson, Stefan/Vermeulen, Pieter (ed.), 2016, 67.

Colombian initiative, the Archivo de los derechos humanos, memoria histórica y conflicto (del Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica) (“The Archive of human rights, historical memory and conflict”, a part of the National Centre of Historical Memory, Bogota, Colombia). Currently, this digital repository has about 160,000 archival and documentary records available for the consultation of the victims and general society, a public institution specialized in working for victims’ rights as part of a comprehensive process to redress victims and to work for the right to know the truth. Obviously Faciolince’s novel and this archive share the same goals, remembering the victims of violence in Colombia. In a research project one could easily bring together: the novel, the egodocuments of the writer and his family, and the documents of the archive of human rights, historical memory and conflict in Bogota. MoW is especially strong in Latin America in work for the safeguarding of documents and memory of the violation of human rights. Therefore cooperation between Comparative Literature, local or national memory institutions, and Memory of the World would make sense for all these possible partners. And, of course, this Colombian case can be taken as an inspiring example for other countries and parts of the world.

3 Conclusion

One of the main challenges for Comparative Literature is to find concepts that join the idea of World Literature²³ as a unit with the intention to respect the diversity of literatures and languages, and with the equality of significance of literatures from different parts of the world. UNESCO and Memory of the World offer standards, experiences – and problems! – which could be helpful. Jing Tsu: “The revitalization project of world literature comes to the fore, not coincidentally, when an expressed desire for joint humanity appears all the more urgent because of its fading possibility.”²⁴ In general, I see an overlap of the principles, basic idea and ethics of UNESCO and its Memory of the World Programme and those of Comparative Literature. We have tried to show fields of possible cooperation, and possible objects for Comparative Literature education and research on the MoW Programme and documentary heritage. More can be developed, be it in the institutional form of Cooperating Institutions and Corresponding Members, or just in teaching and research, e.g. by Ph.D. and Master theses: These will be pioneering efforts.

²³ See e.g. Damrosch 2003.

²⁴ Jing 2011, (here: p. 161).

Such a link of academic education and research to UNESCO and one of its heritage programmes does not restrict the freedom of the scholar. A critical approach is best apt to help with remediating inconsistencies and weaknesses. On the other hand: A relation to an institution of (hopefully) long endurance can reinforce continuity to a discipline of the Humanities – in addition to the plurality and change of methodologies and matters. Ethical standards like cultural and linguistic diversity and fair regional representation, democratic principles like gender equality and the frame of a clearly defined global network are good preconditions to join respect for diversity with a global perspective. The work on, or the cooperation with, a global heritage programme open new paths and possibilities to scholars and students. Why should global long-term perspectives for education and research show up only on the fields of climate change or other ecological questions?

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