

A Fragmented Mirror: The European and North American Perspective on the *Memory of the World*

Jan Bos (IFLA / National Library of the Netherlands)

Let me start by saying that there is no such thing as a “European and North American perspective on the *Memory of the World*”. As you all know, Europe and North America together consist of many different countries, many different languages, many different cultures and all these people have very little in common – and certainly not a shared perspective on the Memory of the World programme. And I must admit from the very start that I am not aware of all activities concerning the Memory of the World in e.g. Portugal and Finland, in Russia and Canada etcetera. So my first reason to speak about ‘a fragmented mirror’ is because it reflects my fragmented knowledge of everything that is going on in this respect in all these different countries.

A second reason is that in five minutes I can only present fragments of all the developments. That is why I will mainly focus on the Memory of the World Register, and not elaborate on other elements of the Memory of the World programme. So I won’t speak on e.g. intangible cultural heritage. Immensely important as it may be, I’m sorry to say it is not a real hot topic in Europe and North America.

In my part of the world the last ten, fifteen years have shown a quite remarkable come-back of interest in history in general and of cultural history in particular, not only among scholars, but also among the general public. There is a substantial growth in books and websites, but also in television programmes (docu-drama’s and other sorts of ‘info-tainment’) on historical subjects. Maybe this is a reaction to the individualistic ‘here and now-culture’ of the nineteen seventies and eighties, maybe it is due to the recent change of the millennium - I don’t know and I won’t do any philosophy on that. But it is remarkable that competitions to select the ‘Man of the Millennium’ got a lot of public attention and it is also remarkable that the men who were elected were not recent statesmen or war heroes, but men of great cultural significance, living many centuries ago. In a worldwide competition it was Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of the art of printing in the Western world, and in England it was a poet and playwright by the name of William Shakespeare (and not Sir Winston Churchill, not Admiral Nelson, not even James Cook). This is remarkable and encouraging.

These elections also fit into the maybe less recent but at the moment very visible tendency to ‘canonize’ the world. European and North American bookshops are full of books like ‘*1000 movies you must have seen*’, ‘*500 places to visit*’, ‘*1001 Masterpieces of art*’ etc. Obviously people like to know which are the “best” movies, the “most famous” paintings, the “most important” books, the “best things ever and worldwide”. The Memory of the World Register is such a list: a list of the most significant documentary cultural heritage ever and worldwide. But alas! You won’t find a book on the Memory of the World in Western bookshops, you won’t see a television series on all the items on the Register. In several countries the Memory of the World is practically unknown.

I have done two very small (and very unprofessional) surveys on the brand awareness of the Memory of the World programme. One survey was among my closest colleagues in the National Library of the Netherlands. All of them work with old books every day, all of them have a great cultural and historical interest and almost all have an academic education, usually in book history or related fields. Only two out of thirty of these colleagues had ever heard about the Memory of the World programme before I told them about it. Two out of thirty – and these are dedicated specialist old book librarians! If even they don’t know, I have to deduce that the programme is virtually unknown in the Netherlands. How come? I don’t know. But it would certainly help if the programme would get attention at our library schools, archive schools and book history courses.

I did a similar survey among librarians who are on the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts listserv. There are over sixty librarians on this list, mostly curators, from many countries in Europe and other parts of the world and they all are very much internationally oriented. I asked them if in their country the Memory of the World programme

- a. was well known among the general public, or
- b. was only well known among the culturally interested public, or
- c. was only well known to specialist librarians and archivists, or
- d. was (almost) completely unknown.

I received 35 responses from European and North American colleagues. The answers differed quite a lot. In no country the programme is known to the general public, ‘the man in the street’. Eleven people responded that in their country it was well known among the culturally interested public. This is particularly the case in Germany, Sweden and the Russian Federation. It must be stated, however, that people who had been involved in MoW activities

themselves, tended to have a more optimistic view about its reputation than others from the same country. Nevertheless, the situation in these countries is far better than in e.g. the United Kingdom and in the United States, where, like the Netherlands, the programme is even unknown to many specialist librarians and archivists.

I received one very interesting suggestion from Germany regarding documents that are not very special as such, but represent or symbolise certain events which have been of great importance to the world, e.g. September 11 or the first human steps on the moon. It was suggested to draw up a list of these “Events in the Memory of the World” and then search for documents which may be regarded as testimonials of these events. So the starting point would be the event, not the documents. It is an interesting suggestion...

The additional comments I received were mainly on the visibility (or rather invisibility) of the programme. There were also some remarks like “Why this and not that?": “Why Beethoven and not Bach?” Or “Why are there so few inscriptions from my country?” But the general policy of the MoW Register was never questioned.

This survey has been much too small to draw definite conclusions, but looking at the responses from the different countries, there seems to be a clear relationship between an active national Memory of the World committee and the level of visibility of the programme in that country. So the visibility mirrors the efforts of the respective national Memory of the World committee - and that is another reason to speak of a fragmented mirror, when talking about the European and North American perspective. By the way: there is one more mirror of an active national Memory of the World committee and that is the number of successful nominations for the Register: all countries with a high number of items on the Register have active national committees.

I would like to add a few words about preservation and conservation activities and digitization programmes in relation to the Memory of the World. Preservation and digitization of documentary heritage are *the issues* in the European and North American library world at the moment. The safeguarding of digital information is being addressed by huge programmes like The European Library (TEL) and the European Digital Library (EDL). Especially in Western Europe the attention is shifting from preservation and digitization of individual items (often national highlights) to mass preservation and digitization. See the quick and dirty Google Books programme, but also the more reliable American Memory project or Early English Books Online. And recently it became known that all German incunabula will be digitized in a

very sophisticated way. But in some Eastern European countries preservation and digitization are quite often still restricted to individual items or collections. It is clear that in some cases the inscription on the MoW Register has substantially supported or enhanced the preservation and digitization of these items.

Last year, in 2007, LIBER (the Association of European Research Libraries) issued a statement on their commitment to special collections. The first two paragraphs read:

Most academic and research libraries in Europe hold collections of rare and special materials, which may be variously defined. These encompass a wide range of documentary formats and other media, including historic and modern books, manuscripts and archives, music and maps, ephemera, photographs and sound recordings, and digital archives. As primary sources, or significant accumulations of materials relating to particular topics, they are essential for research across a range of disciplines. They have artistic, historic or research importance beyond their purely textual content that justifies their preservation as artefacts whatever surrogates may be available. They provide important evidence for our material, intellectual and cultural heritage and reflect our human diversity.

Members of the Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER), in common with other academic and research libraries internationally, recognise the value and the particular obligations that the stewardship of these special collections represents. We collect, preserve and provide access to them on behalf of our parent institutions and the needs of international learning and scholarship. We regard these collections and our commitment to them as crucial to the fulfilment of our institutional mission.

This statement was endorsed by the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section at its meeting in Durban, South Africa, in August 2007. In 2006 the American Library Association had already adopted a similar statement. So in spite of all the other tasks and obligations for modern libraries, the willingness to safeguard, preserve and present the international documentary heritage is very much alive.

To conclude: there is a lot of interest in history, in canons, in historical documents; there are huge preservation and digitization programmes in preparation or in progress and the significance of documentary heritage is widely recognised. Let's seize the momentum! Let's make the Memory of the World programme more visible!