

The Institute for World Literature's Summer Session in Lisbon 2015

A Report by Vera Kostial

Being a graduate student in Comparative Literature from the University of Goettingen, I had the chance to participate in the fifth session of the Institute for World Literature this summer. Founded by the Department of Comparative Literature of Harvard University, the IWL holds a summer school every year in a different university around the world. This year, the place to be from the 22nd of June to the 16th of July was the University of Lisbon, and a group of one hundred and fifty-eight participants and thirteen seminar leaders gathered there to discuss crucial questions regarding Comparative and World Literature Studies. The participants were graduate students, Ph.D. students and faculty members from all over the world, and the seminar leaders and additional guest speakers included distinguished scholars such as Franco Moretti from Stanford University, Jale Parla from Istanbul Bilgi University, Thomas Claviez from the University of Bern, and David Damrosch from Harvard University, founder and director of the IWL.

The program consisted of seminars, two of which every participant attended for two weeks each, affinity groups, (guest) lectures, panel discussions, and informal voluntary outings as a supplement to the ambitious course program. I took part in David Damrosch's seminar on 'Grounds for Comparison', during which we elaborated on the basic questions of what Comparative Studies can and should be: What, in the first place, can be compared? The texts we worked with consisted of theoretical texts by Marcel Detienne and Emily Apter among others, and literary examples reaching from Shakespeare's sonnets to Korean web poetry. In the second seminar I attended, Gisèle Sapiro's 'How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not?)', we worked with sociological approaches to literature. Focussing on the subject of translation, the theories discussed covered Bourdieu's 'literary field', Casanova's 'World Republic of Letters', and many more.

Besides the enthusiasm and commitment of the seminar leaders, what I appreciated most during the courses was sharing thoughts with participants from so many different nations, each of them bringing a different academic, cultural and personal background into the discussion, giving it a richness that can hardly be overestimated. Apart from their courses, the seminar leaders offered office hours to give the participants the possibility to share the project they are currently working on, to discuss syllabi or any other question related to their research.

One of the most important program parts were the so-called affinity groups. Organized according to subject areas such as - in case of my group - 'World Literature and Circulation', the participants met in small groups. Every one presented his or her current work – a dissertation project, a website,... – and got feedback from the other group members. A concept that sounds simple on the one hand and difficult on the other hand, considering the variety and specificity of topics presented, turned out to be an extremely valuable platform for discussion. The feedback from scholars not specifically having worked on the topic presented provided valuable and helpful comments for further work, and in some cases, plans for future collaboration came into being.

Lectures and plenary discussions brought together all the participants and presented a variety of topics all connected to the concept of world literature, such as Franco Moretti's talk about patterns in language. As a last point, the outings and the free time to explore Lisbon with the other participants were a great opportunity to make new friends from all over the world and to share and reflect on our experiences. To me, the IWL created a unique atmosphere - the Summer School provided four exciting weeks of applied World Literature Studies. Personally, I have received valuable ideas and suggestions for my M.A. thesis, as well as further-reaching thoughts and ideas about literature, Comparative Studies, and views of the world out of different 'windows' - to leave this report's last word to David Damrosch.