

Presidential Address, 17th June, 2014

The 26th International Congress of FILLM,
Ningbo, China

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

For two years now, my colleagues and I on the FILLM Committee have been looking forward to being here in Ningbo, and now that the time has finally come we feel enormous pleasure and excitement. On behalf of FILLM I should immediately like to thank all those individuals and bodies who have paved the way for the University of Nottingham Ningbo to host FILLM's 26th International Congress: Professor Nick Miles, Provost and Pro-Vice Chancellor at the Ningbo campus; the Research Committee; the Faculty of Arts and Education; the School of English, in particular Fiona Fu, a very busy Faculty officer attached to the School of English who I know has been helping in all sorts of ways; and the FILLM Congress organising committee, in particular Dr Matthew Beedham, Daryl Johnson and Dr Simon Harrison; plus Rebecca Jin from the Events Office. Last, but by no means least: Professor Geoff Hall, for masterminding the entire event with unflagging enthusiasm, and with his unflappable ability to see what would be the most practical and enjoyable way of arranging absolutely anything at all. To one and all, a very big thank you for your vision, generosity, and sheer hard work. My colleagues and I on the FILLM Committee do not see how the 26th Congress can be anything but a wonderful success.

Next, it is a very great pleasure to welcome, on behalf of FILLM, our Plenary Speakers and to congratulate Geoff and his team on securing their services. It will be very interesting indeed to hear what they have to say, and we very much hope they will enjoy their time among us.

And I should like to offer an equally warm welcome to every single Congress participant. Some of you, I know, have been to FILLM Congresses in the past, and it's very encouraging that you have wanted to come back again. Others of you are new to FILLM, and some of you have scholarly interests, and/or come from parts of the world, which have so far not been very fully represented at FILLM Congresses. I hope each and every participant will feel

that this Congress in Ningbo has been enjoyable and worthwhile, and will decide to get further involved in FILLM's work and mission.

In fact one reason why my colleagues and I on the FILLM Committee are so excited at the moment is that the Congress is taking place at an important moment in FILLM's history, and we hope that something of this excitement will be communicated to everyone here in Ningbo.

FILLM was originally founded in Oslo in 1928 as the *Commission Internationale d'Histoire Littéraire Moderne* and was subsequently reorganized as FILLM – Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes -- in 1951, when it was affiliated to UNESCO as the world's ceiling organization for international language and literature associations of varying size, function, and constitution. (It is these associations who are FILLM's members – our members are not individual scholars.) From 1951 onwards, FILLM was active on two main fronts. For one thing, it arranged congresses and other gatherings, and published scholarship as well, in an effort to promote understanding and cooperation between scholars in many different areas of teaching and research and from many different parts of the world. Secondly, it also acted as a link in UNESCO's chain of patronage, channelling funds to our member associations with which they were able to organize their own conferences and other activities.

Over the past 30 years or so, however, indeed ever since I myself was first elected to the FILLM Committee at the Novi Sad Congress in 1990, FILLM has faced increasing difficulties on both these fronts. On the one hand, discussions between scholars in different subject disciplines from all over the world will inevitably take place at a fairly high level of generality. Back in the middle of the twentieth century there were still many scholars all over the world who enthusiastically rose to this challenge. Scholars back then were often polymaths. But by the end of the twentieth century it was very difficult, especially for young scholars, to get funding to attend generalist conferences. Everybody had to specialize on some more or less narrow area. Everybody had to be "professional". On the other hand, especially during the past ten or fifteen years UNESCO has been going through a very difficult time financially and has developed new priorities which have not favoured the aims of FILLM. In addition the organization at the level immediately above FILLM in the UNESCO pyramid has been paralyzed by internal divisions. The net result is that FILLM no longer receives funding to distribute to its member associations, even though we have still been paying FILLM's own affiliation fees to UNESCO.

As a result of this combination of difficulties, four years ago the FILLM Committee seriously discussed the possibility of closing FILLM down. In 2011, however, at the Congress in Halden, Norway, the Committee decided that the world's need for an organization such as FILLM was greater than ever and that the organization should most definitely carry on. The consensus was that the

only thing needed was that FILLM should adapt to the radically changed circumstances in which it was now operating. We are no longer living in the year 1928, or even in the year 1951. On the contrary the world, and not least the world of scholarship, is a vastly different place now. In 2012 the Committee met again and put many of the necessary changes in place. Here in Ningbo in 2014, the positive results of those changes can already be seen, and at the Committee's meeting yesterday further important steps were taken. The long and the short of it is that FILLM can now look forward to a whole new lease of life, still true to its historic role, yet greatly expanding its outreach and range of activities in ways appropriate to the needs and possibilities of a whole new age.

I expect all this sounds rather abstract. So please allow me, if you will, to be a bit more detailed. For a start, we have now revised our Constitution so that it gives a clearer and more up-to-date idea of FILLM's mission. FILLM seeks to develop and encourage the scholarly study of languages and literatures. This aim is pursued through forms of international scholarly cooperation which bring together detailed research on particular topics with themes and approaches of global relevance and general application. In practical terms, FILLM aims to organize the triennial International Congress and other scholarly gatherings, to publish works of scholarship, to draw attention to outstanding achievement in linguistic and literary scholarship from all over the world, to lobby for the international maintenance and improvement of education and research in the field of languages and literatures, and to maintain a website as a news and discussion forum for scholars in the field of languages and literatures worldwide.

The hallmark of the Federation as I see it lies in the synergies it seeks to promote between specialist knowledge and what we might call humanizing general perspectives. And its characteristic way of doing this is by encouraging communication. If I were to sum up FILLM's goal in five words, the phrase I would choose is "Communication, communication, and more communication." Communication between scholars of many different backgrounds all over the world. And communication between scholars and non-scholars, and especially non-scholars who hold the purse-strings of governmental and university funding. Education and research in languages and literature has got to be understandable in all directions, as it were. People thinking about it from any angle have got to be able to see why it is humanly interesting and important. Not that FILLM is opposed to professionalist specialization as such. On the contrary, the kind of broad perspectives which FILLM seeks to promote will be utterly worthless unless they are solidly unpinned by the professionalist kind of detailed knowledge. But within society as a whole professionalist specialization does call for a humanizing counterweight. FILLM is an international body which tries to ensure that education and scholarship in the field of languages and literatures do not lose touch with human realities the world over. And it does this by trying to encourage the most inclusive kind of dialogue.

As of 2012 FILLM's overall strategy is to further increase its outreach, impact and usefulness. It seeks to realize this strategy through four main lines of tactical approach:

Tactic 1. Legitimizing the scholarly study of languages and literatures

In a time when funding for research and education in languages and literatures is under serious threat, FILLM is concerned to promote dialogue between scholars with many different backgrounds. This is seen as the best way to promote the development of a shared frame of reference, which will in turn make it easier to legitimate the discipline in the eyes of those who hold governmental and university purse-strings. Drawing strength and authority from this active internal discussion, the FILLM will be playing an increasingly important role in lobbying the relevant bodies and individuals on behalf of particular programmes of research and education which are at risk. As a way of gathering information on this front and consolidating efforts of protest, the FILLM is making its own website a channel for news about threatened cuts and closures.

Tactic 2. Publishing drive

The FILLM is aiming to encourage the publication of works of linguistic and literary scholarship in which detailed cutting-edge research is related to issues of major global concern, and which can therefore interest a very broad audience. This goal can be seen as another aspect of the drive to legitimate the discipline, in that it tends to discourage narrow provincialism or de-humanizing overspecialization. With this in view, FILLM is now launching its own book series, *FILLM Studies in Languages and Literatures*, with the leading international publisher of books in the field of linguistic and literary scholarship, John Benjamins of Amsterdam and Philadelphia. The first volumes will come out in 2015, and will deal with topics such as Polish literature and world literature, English-language novels about terrorism in India, locational criticism, and the terms "major" and "minor" as used about languages and literatures – this last volume being a selection of papers from the Halden Congress of 2011.

Tactic 3. Membership drive

As a way of keeping pace with developments in the world of contemporary scholarship, FILLM has amended its Constitution so as to recognize that many of the most important international associations for literary and linguistic scholarship are smaller and more specialized than was traditionally the case. Especially since the synergies between their kind of specialization and the FILLM's traditionally "generalist" perspective could be especially fruitful, the FILLM is now actively inviting them to consider

the benefits of membership. Similarly, many of the most dynamic associations nowadays are devoted to some particular approach to language or literatures, or to some particular subdivision of the field -- the Romantics, for instance, or even just a single literary author. Our invitations are being directed to associations developing international links from all quarters of the globe. The most recent recruits responding to our membership drive have been the International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa and the International Association for Dialogue Analysis. It has been a great pleasure to welcome them, and I am glad to note that their members are already contributing very actively to FILLM's work. We look forward to many more new member associations of widely different types and operating in many different parts of the world.

Tactic 4. Communicational policy

The FILLM sees communication as the key to everything it is hoping to achieve, and has accordingly updated its communicational policy so as to take greater advantage of the digital media. Another of our amendments to the Constitution established the post of Communications Officer, and Adam Borch, the FILLM Webmaster, has recently completely overhauled the Federation's webpage, which now has its own facebook and blog pages, and which will soon have its own web newsletter and increasingly become a site for electronic scholarly exchanges, including organized conferences and symposia.

So much for our main strategy and four main tactics. And at our meeting yesterday, we discussed ways in which FILLM can move even further towards a more collaborative and democratic ethos. We have already corrected what used to be FILLM's anti-European bias in the criteria of eligibility for membership; from now on, associations based in several European countries can become member associations of FILLM just like associations based in several countries in other particular regions of the world. And we have also corrected what used to be a pro-European bias in the election of President and other Committee members and in the choice of Congress venues. On all these fronts FILLM is from now on geographically egalitarian. But we can do still more. We must actively contribute to the discussion of the relationships between UNESCO and the various levels of its pyramid, helping to ensure the restoration of meaningful and responsible collaboration. More generally, we think that the time has come to consolidate FILLM's reputation through the sheer quality and fruitfulness of the synergetic dialogues and collaborative ventures that it helps to set in motion. FILLM must be a truly international and egalitarian forum and workplace, within which participation is its own reward, and which is positively

encouraging especially to young scholars, and to scholars based in countries where funding and resources are in especially short supply.

To expand on this last point somewhat, that is why the Committee has now decided on a more realistic and constructive kind of budget. Over the past ten or fifteen years several Member Associations have withdrawn from FILLM. The associations concerned have included two of the largest, MLA and MHRA, and also some smaller associations. When Member Associations withdraw, they all – even the largest and, one would think, most wealthy – give as one of their reasons that they are in financial difficulties and find it hard to pay FILLM's membership fees. And in our efforts to recruit new Member Associations it is precisely the question of fees that has often been the sticking point. In particular, many of the new and smaller type of association devoted to some particular, more specialized linguistic or literary interest – just the type of professionalist association which we ought to be bringing into dialogue with FILLM's traditionally broad and general perspectives! – literally cannot pay, because they have no membership fees of their own, no budget, no treasurer. Instead, their mode of existence and collaboration is almost entirely through electronic media. It is against this background that the Committee yesterday decided:¹

1. That FILLM levy no membership subscription from Member Associations which do not levy a membership fee from their own members;
2. That the membership subscription levied by FILLM from Member Associations which levy a membership fee from their own members be set at a flat-rate of €80:00 per year – to cover our main costs, which nowadays are such lower than they used to be thanks to the development of communications technology;
3. That in informing Member Associations of the new fee policy, FILLM also explain the reasoning behind it, drawing particular attention to the emphasis now being placed on democratic collaboration, inclusive dialogue, and modern communication technology.

I personally am enormously pleased about this. From now on, bona fide associations will be able to join FILLM regardless of their own financial position.

The fact that under this new budgetary regime FILLM will have much less money coming in from fees does not mean that *all* our future scholarly interchanges will be electronic. The agreement between FILLM and the

¹ Note from the editor: the changes to the fee structure will be communicated to FILLM's member associations shortly.

University of Nottingham Ningbo already point the way ahead, in that UNN has financed this Congress with the registrations and with other local funding.

In other ways, too, the University of Nottingham Ningbo is setting an admirable example. Take the topics of the parallel sessions listed in the call for papers: 1. Local and Global Perspectives; 2. Digital technologies and literature of the future; 3. Language, Literature, Film; 4. Human and Environmental Issues; 5. Communicational ethics: Language, literature, translation; 6. Education and Internationalisation; 7. Chinese language and literature in international contexts. All of these are quintessentially FILLM topics: topics of broad and urgent international relevance, which will give scholars from many different geographical and disciplinary backgrounds a chance to compare notes, drawing on their detailed expertise.

And what better place than Ningbo to discuss such matters? This is the first time that FILLM has had a Congress in China, which we feel is a very natural and important consolidation of FILLM's international mission. And this wonderful city, with 5000 years of wisdom to its credit, itself has a very long tradition of globalizing internationalism -- think only of its ancient importance for the silk road trade and links with Japan, an importance which has still very vibrantly continued into the present time, when Ningbo now has one of the largest ports in the entire world. Ningbo, too, is a place where commerce has not been the only thing occupying the minds of its inhabitants. It has one of the oldest libraries in the world, and for century after century it has attracted and welcomed scholars and poets. In which same spirit of hospitality towards learning and the arts it is now welcoming us today.

So I'm almost ending where I began. We are very fortunate indeed to be here. Once again, hearty thanks to our generous hosts. But in closing, I'd actually like to peep into the future. I have tried to give you a very honest and transparent account of FILLM and its recent history. And I hope that you are beginning to see why my colleagues and I on the Committee believe that FILLM's mission in the new millennium is more important than ever, and also that it is a mission which is do-able. Above all, I hope that all of you will begin to participate in our activities on an ever more regular basis. In particular, I hope that as a result of this week's gathering many new scholarly associations, both in this part of the world and elsewhere, will become lively proactive members of our Federation. To all of you I should like to say, please enjoy yourselves here in Ningbo, and then, if you haven't already done so, please visit our website for a start. Please don't forget that our 2017 Congress will be in Delhi, and our 2020 Congress in Vienna. And do please do spread the word about all of FILLM's important and exciting work whenever you can. Why not give us a thumbs-up on our lively Facebook page, for instance?

At any rate, here's my own thumbs up to all of you here in Ningbo. Let's have some quality time together! Thank you.