KU Leuven: ancient tradition and modern technologies



Professor Frederik Truyen is a high-profile University teacher and real gentleman, with perfect politeness and a friendly approach. He is the Head of IT Services at the Institute for Cultural Studies, a research and educational unit linked to the Faculty of Arts at the K.U.Leuven, Belgium. He shared with digitalmeetsculture.net a wide overview about the University activities in the field of digitization.

The Institute for Cultural Studies is involved in projects on digitization of Cultural Heritage. Is it really an unavoidable step for the cultural heritage to meet digital technologies? There are nowadays very big efforts and investments on digitization, are they so necessary as they seem to be?]

The importance of Digitization amounts to access, representation, preservation and is driven by cost considerations. Let's take as an example of the unique glass plate photographs we are working on. Through digitization, it is possible to give access to these precious works to researchers, without the risk of damage or wear. It actually opens them up for study from anywhere, whereas in the past only a limited number of researchers had access, and they needed to be on location.

But the digital image is not just a copy. It is always a representation. This means that we can opt to restore the work as it is on its bearer, but also that we can make more analytical representations, where we e.g. restore the light dynamics or the color depth. Depending on the goal of your representation, you get more options with a digital copy. Most interesting in the EuropeanaPhotography consortium are the different needs of professional Photo houses and Archives. We actually learn a lot from each others' view on the photograph.

Third, we are seeing that in many cases digitization becomes part of a preservation strategy. It is virtually impossible to guarantee the physical integrity of all the works we have in archival deposits. For valuable but less unique or important works, it can be a cheaper option to keep a digital copy than to try to preserve the original. This frees more money for preservation of the physical masterpieces. Of course, it takes time to convince the archival and (art) historic communities that sometimes we have to choose and opt for digital preservation only. The PREMIS model for digital preservation allows you to gather under one ?intellectual entity? different files and representations for one object. For the glass plates, e.g., we also take pictures including the frame and the earlier metadata attached or written on the frame.

This last point shows how digitization also is a part of any archival strategy to reduce cost. Limiting physical access reduces hazards, lowers insurance costs, and allows to optimize storage costs. When tough choices have to be made, the digital copy can be a last resort. It better be state-of-the-art then, making sure the digital copy is not facing obsolescence too fast.

KU Leuven is a very prominent partner in EuropeanaPhotography, what are your contributions to the project?]

In the case of EuropeanaPhotography, KU Leuven will contribute to the quality control by providing expertise and guidelines as to

the criteria on which collections should be selected for incorporation in the database. For this, the fact that the KU Leuven team is embedded in one of the Arts Faculties with the longest European traditions is welcome. Project members are involved in teaching at both the undergraduate and master level of Cultural Studies, Photography, History and the Fine Arts. Expert opinions of colleagues and researchers can be collected first-hand. The ICS works with European top centres in Early Music (Alamire Foundation) and Medieval Art (Illuminare). KU Leuven is also in the possibility, given its involvement in teaching master classes, to assess the usability of the Europeana materials in an educational context.
Apart from its contribution to the quality standards of the selected content, KU Leuven will assist in benchmarking the photographic quality of the digitization, given its expertise in the Alamire Digital Lab, one of Europe's leading digitizing centres for the Fine Arts. KU Leuven will also contribute to the collection, with high-end source images from Archaeology, the Fine Arts and Musicology, as well as collections from the University Archive and Library preciosa collection.
Which other EU projects is KU Leuven carrying on, beside EuropeanaPhotography?
KU Leuven, as a traditional and complete university with about 1500 senior academic staff, is of course involved in a myriad of research projects, in Humanities and Social Sciences as well as Science & Technology and Biomedical Sciences.
This challenging multi-disciplinary context is a fertile ground for the work we do at CS Digital (http://www.culturalstudies.be/digitalculture), bridging the boundaries between Humanities and Technology. Currently we are involved in high-end digitization projects such as **IDEM** (digitization of Early Music Manuscripts) and **RICH** (using Multispectral and 3D photography techniques to digitize Medieval Manuscripts). Besides these efforts, we are also involved in projects on Open and Distance Learning and E-Learning such as NetCU, OER-HE, OCW Europe.



As a teacher, what are your most interesting experiences as for digital technology applied to education?]
For me, that is a quite important question as I was the chairman of the steering committee for E-Learning at the University for about 5 years. E-Learning ? or as we call it ? the ?integrated learning environment? has been a key pedagogical strategy at our University. CS Digital started in 1997 under its former name ?Maerlant Centre? with the aim to bring digital innovation to History teaching. Certainly one of the best experiences in my career was to witness first-hand how students got motivated for the History class by being able to access high-resolution digitized source materials such as historical maps and early illuminated manuscripts on a PC at school.
Today, we are heavily involved in the LACE project, building an international master programme on Literature and Change in Europe. Producing Open Courseware and using an online collaborative envirmonment, students from 7 universities throughout Europe jointly take a course by means of weblectures. Being able to discuss the same content with students from different cultural backgrounds gives a true learning advantage.
Of course, our teaching is always tightly intertwined with research. CS Digital produces the international peer-reviewed Journal on visual narratology and word and image studies, **Image [& Narrative** (http://www.imageandnarrative.be). Image [&] narrative does not focus on a narrowly defined corpus or theoretical framework, but questions the mutual shaping of literary and visual cultures. Beside tackling theoretical issues, it is a platform for reviews of real life examples. The relation between text and illustration ? often in the form of a photo ? has been a recurring theme of research.
Just after we planned the interview, Fred was so kind to post about us in his blog (and we are very proud of it!):
http://fredtruyen.wordpress.com/2012/05/04/digital-meets-culture/