"All Our Yesterdays"
Europeana and the Phenomenology of Photographic Experience through the Framing of Digitization

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This chapter will, on the one hand describe the project, as it was conceived and is unfolding as a typical Digital Humanities Project, and on the other hand focus not on strictly technical questions but dig deeper into the core humanities topics at hand, such as the impact of digitization and IPR issues. It will talk about selection, digitization, metadata, preservation and dissemination – with special attention given to the exhibition, which is meant to be attractive as a cultural event for a broad public, but at the same time to spread the Europeana message to European citizens, and to function as a somewhat thought-provoking statement, through the radically unconventional way in which the historical photographs are showcased in the exhibition.

The project

While many of the current issues in Digital Humanities involve analytics and quantitative analysis of big data somewhat reminiscent of the "Humanities Computing" of the eighties, we feel that the "Humanities" approach presupposes a relationship with the individual object, its particularity, its uniqueness. This is why many Digital Humanities projects involve digitization.

Very early on, the mixed nature of the project consortium fostered a need to develop and nurture shared and convergent views on content selection criteria, methodologies, workflow & best practices, IPR, dissemination and sustainability. As IPR issues in particular are inextricably linked to photography (the photo is an abstract, intellectual object), this theme has defined our project from the beginning.

As is typically the case in such CIP digitization projects, the complete workflow was broken down into work packages, of which one focused on digitization, others on Indexing and Multilingual support, on metadata transformation and Ingestion, on IPR and sustainability and on dissemination. A specific work package was dedicated to Themes and collections: a unique opportunity for the KU Leuven team and for all content providers, as such a large scale digitization effort would allow us to jointly delve into archival

materials that were hitherto unexplored. This is an example of a context in which institutions hold a clear advantage over individual researchers, to actually discover new relevant materials.

As the richness of the consortium's photographic holdings unveiled, we decided that each project meeting was to involve a fair share of looking at pictures – a highly agreeable shortcut to developing a common understanding about what early photography actually was, and what it is in its current state as an archivalium.

The EuropeanaPhotography Collection: selection process

The partner constellation was always intended to hold a fine equilibrium between low-risk, highly reputed collections, well-guarded by professional companies such as TopFoto, Parisienne etc., and new, smaller collections still to be uncovered - mostly located in the "new Europe", with a special mission for (Bulgarian) NALIS and (Polish) ICIMSS to search for hidden treasures.

Selection criteria were based on:

- The chronology: we aimed at depicting the history of photography and photographic techniques from 1839 to 1939;
- the historical, artistic or social relevance of the work;
- territorial criteria (pictures stemming from the European continent), and images or photos that were important for European history (including landmark pictures from the colonies)
- and of course … the eye of the beholder: above all, we looked for the best, most accomplished images, under the motto "Photography first!"

Photographic Heritage as Memory

We are currently seeing what Jay Winter calls a "memory boom" in history studies, which is closely linked to the renewed interest in Cultural Heritage in general, and marked by the 14-18 Great War commemorations in particular. As pointed out by many critics and scholars, this generates nostalgic, nationalistic and - more broadly - euphemistic visions of history, in which the narrative often takes a new shape in a response to today's values and preoccupations. Messages are therefore often echoes of the present rather than testimonies from the past. Aleida Assman made a very interesting study in types of "memory" that come into play in history and cultural heritage contexts. She promotes a "cultural memory" as the ultimate stage of how the past lives on, when the dynamics of politics and the recuperation by national agendas has gradually faded away.

On the other side of the spectrum, current cultural practices are putting a lot of pressure on historical remembrance practices. More specifically, the world of photography is experiencing the strain from the social media explosion, that turned thousands of people into photographers of their own lives, whether it be through smartphone, or with more sophisticated gadgets such as mini-drones, Go-Pro helmet- or dashcams. The "selfie" is everywhere, and the endless possibilities of the remix-culture obliterate completely the "origin of species" of today's images: it's become impossible to find out whether a picture of Mona Lisa, for example, is still true to the original or has been tampered with in a multitude of ways. In the digital image, there is no "original" to be traced, since the "raw camera" image isn't an

actual participant in the social media sphere. Yes: digital curation does exist, but its "memory"-aspect is - in the current omnipresent internet environment - completely ephemeral.

This world contrasts with the safe environment of libraries and archives, whose main task it is to preserve and warrant the causal link between a document or tangible object and the past it represents. Archives are urged to "be useful" by "opening up their holdings to the public", through projects such as the Google Library or Europeana. One should, however, realize that when archives actually open up their shelves to the public, dramatic changes in their mission occur with a huge impact on their activities.

Just a few examples: some documents stocked in archives contain hate discourse, show abuse, or use a terminology that is socially unacceptable in current times. Suppose that we, in the context of digitizing for EuropeanaPhotography, would stumble upon such photos in an otherwise unsuspicious collection. Are we to omit these pictures from public display? In many cases, I guess we would legally have no other option: archives making material available online become publishers and should comply with the law. The same holds for metadata. Suppose a collection of beautiful pictures from the colonial era contains bluntly racist descriptions. Are we going to polish up the original metadata?

The problem is, that to the researcher who uses a digital database of cultural heritage objects as a surrogate for accessing the original - maybe because the archive doesn't want precious originals to pass through too many hands and imposes "digital view only" - this presents a major issue: he is no longer certain of the completeness of the collection or the correctness of the descriptions. The archive, then, is at odds with its core values.

EuropeanaPhotography decided on a clear project policy to counter such problems: cases in which original metadata were changed, would be clearly marked; the selection of collections, furthermore, was directed towards those well within norms, in order to avoid having to cut up or edit part of the material.

Digitization

The EuropeanaPhotography consortium set out in an early stage to establish common standards and best practices for digitization. Those were published in so-called fact-sheets, available on the project website, dealing with equipment to be used (camera vs. scanner), adequate resolution (up to 100 Megapixel), lighting etc. Topics related to post-processing were tackled as well: removing dust, correcting the light balance and the dynamic range of the image, etc. – procreating a discussion within and outside of the consortium regarding the extent to which esthetic corrections are, in such cases, acceptable. Since a huge gap between the practices at photo agencies - who provide images to magazines - and archives - who primarily serve researchers – was assessed, no strict policy was imposed. Then again: photographic quality was always our priority during the selection process - therefore badly damaged images, even of prime historical value, were highly unlikely to qualify for digitization to begin with.

Whenever possible, we chose to digitize from the glass negative, as opposed to start from an original print. This is a very important issue as well, since for an historian and an archivist many reasons could be

listed for preferring the first print over the negative, while from an ICT point of view, the negative is a logical choice.

Digitization of images - a *serialization* in computer science terminology - converts the *information* stored in the analog original into digital data, from which that information can be restored in any form or carrier. It is important to build awareness on what is actually happening here: first of all, the uniqueness of the object is gone, and we enter, with the words of Walter Benjamin, the era of "mechanical reproduction". Secondly, the object is reduced to information, to be rendered in several ways – digitization thus directly creates intermediality.

Reframing

We could use this digital file to try to produce a facsimile of the original object, as true as possible to the original bearer's properties, but this is not what happens in reality: such image reproductions end up in Europeana, for instance, and from there on all over internet; or: they end up in exhibitions such as *All Our Yesterdays*, which featured images printed on high-quality, white cotton paper with full dynamic range at sizes up to 80x 90 cm.

In these cases, a lot happens to the image and to the experience of whomever might be its "consumer". To start with, the "deframing" offers a completely different view: an image can be presented in several cutouts, and simply using a larger scale makes for another "frame" for the viewer to take in. The photo "Lovers lane" by John Topham clearly illustrates this point. The large-size picture as shown in the exhibition, produces a genuinely different experience than in its 8*9 cm printed form.

Next to deframing, a total decontextualisation takes place. No photo albums anymore here…. This aspect is particularly noteworthy in our exhibition, for which images were selected on the basis of subthemes, regardless of techniques used or a specific chronology.

It is our view that this reframing, inherent to the digital world, is not a problem as such but can be an issue when it is not understood or when there is no awareness of what is actually happening. It should not be shunned, however, as the reframing liberates the image from the framework provided by the author, and from the original framing it got chained into. In doing that, opportunities are created to to free the image from any nostalgic, false historicist reframing that might have occurred – and often indeed occurs when photography is considered to be "vintage" (suddenly all old photographs are deemed to have a sepia print look...).

The digitized image allows for a new immediate experience, which is somehow related very directly and accurately to the original photo (not the original experience) since current techniques and information embedded in the image, allow us to reconstitute original conditions and effects very precisely. No surrogate nostalgic "historical" experiences here: when confronted with an original, vintage print and by rendering the light information from the negative, we can create a contemporary image experience. A "tangible past experience", not an experience *of* the past.

Originality

Many things happen when a 5x4 inch contact albumen print becomes a 50x40 (100Mpixel) digitization of a glass plate original. The digitization process de-frames and re-formats the image and its experience. It is "untrue" and "inauthentic" yet accurate and causally linked to the original photo.

This brings us to the question what the "photo" actually is. It is important to understand that strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an "original" photo: every photo is just a representation. The digital object created by digitization allows for creating new representations, but of what? In a photo, we can discern the original photographic experience (the image seen through the lens), the captured light, the negative, its frame, the positive, the print copy. The original print can be reproduced in multiple ways. In the case of digitization, whether it starts from a negative or a print, there is a new object to be taken into account as well: the digital master. In each of the reproduction activities a different scaling or cut-out can occur. From the digital master digital copies can be made, eventually leading to new displays or reprints.

Digitization should always be understood as a remediation. The new digital form of the image allows for yet-to-be-defined new usage contexts, that in the end will lead to new cultural practices.

Information

Several partners in EuropeanaPhotography hold multiple copies of the same image, sometimes negative, sometimes print. In this project, we took the negative as a starting point whenever available (while one could argue that the original print made by the photographer is his one true "photo"...).

Working from the negative, we process the information enclosed in the digital capture (cameras such as Phase one, Leaf or Hasselblad are used, and in many cases post-processing takes place with capture one software). This enables us to recover the optimal light information stored in the original image, to a very high level of fidelity.

Instead of linear rendering we produce enhanced images, that fully exploit the available dynamic range. This results in an image as it has never been seen before, not even by the original photographer. In a way, we disclose what is in the photo. The concept is similar to that of current technology enhancing photos from mass gatherings in such a way that individuals can be traced in the crowd. In our case, enhancement reveals a level of detail and contrast that was unachievable in the vintage print, thereby - evidently - fundamentally altering the viewer's experience.