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### **TOWARDS A JUSTIFIED DIGITIZATION OF PHOTOGRAPHICAL HERITAGE: PRESENTING THE PHOTHEREL PROJECT**

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## **Abstract (EN)**

The Photherel (Photographic Heritage e-Learning) project gathers an international group of educators, researchers, archivists and producers of visual media to address the issues surrounding endangered photographic heritage and its digitization. Photherel touches on several domains: visual and media literacy, digital repositories of visual cultural heritage, conservation of endangered visual cultural heritage, distributed course content creation for e-learning, and using a museum / archive in an e-learning context.

The presented paper aims to clarify the rationale behind Photherel, to invite interested parties to join, and to present the state of the art regarding its subject.

Photherel takes into account that the digital image has always a risk to increase, instead of solving them, the problems raised by images:

- a) the basic stance of iconicity and resemblance,
- b) the loss of context,
- c) the monadic structures of images, and
- d) the submission of images to verbal and discursive meanings.

Digitization has become important both in unclosing and in preserving photographic collections. In recent years, the number of digitized photographic archives has increased dramatically, at all political and administrative levels (ranging from “local” or small-scale archives to “national” or even multinational ones). Yet the process of digitization raises a number of issues. How to preserve the context behind an image which belongs to a collection, the cultural story of its setting? (For instance that of a photographic album conserved in a museum.) How to capture the multi-layered narrative of an archive in a digital artefact like you would in a museal reconstruction? How to present a digitized image collection to scholars and to the public? These are issues that cover a common ground between museum professionals and web designers creating a visitor or user experience, be it online in a web site or in a museum exhibition.

Photherel aims at establishing a standard for a better framed, i.e. culturally more diverse and didactically/politically more fruitful use of digitized photographic heritage. The notion of "dissemination" is crucial, it carries a new vision on the notion of conservation, i.e. the question of what it means to 'save' an endangered photographic archive, not by ‘keeping’ the images but by ‘showing’ them to the public in new ways, thus giving them a new lease of life. Photherel will elaborate methodologies for visual literacy teaching and on the justified digitization of photographic heritage collections. Its target groups are: museum professionals

(curators), visual culture researchers, visual literacy teachers, students in museum and cultural studies (MA-level), and museum visitors.

At this moment, the Institute for Cultural Studies at the University of Leuven and the Antwerp Museum of Photography have finished founding Photherel through a pilot project. The project itself is scheduled to start in October 2004 with financial support of the European Commission under the Socrates-Minerva action and with partners from Bucharest and Toulouse. Photographic archive Fratelli Alinari from Florence will act as advisory body.

**Keywords:** eLearning, digitization of photographic heritage, visual literacy, preservation of photographic heritage, digital presentation forms

## **Zusammenfassung (DE)**

Das Photorel (Photographic Heritage e-Learning) Projekt versammelt eine internationale Gruppe von Pädagogen, Forschern, Archivaren und Herstellern von visuellen Medien um sich mit den Problemen, die mit dem gefährdeten fotografischen Erbe und seiner Digitalisierung in Zusammenhang stehen, zu befassen. Photorel ist ein Bereichsübergreifendes Projekt, es behandelt die visuelle und die Medienkompetenz, digitale Speicher von visuellem Erbe, die Erhaltung von gefährdetem visuellem Erbe, die Ausarbeitung von didaktischem Material und den Einsatz von Archiven oder Museen für die Verbreitung.

Das Ziel des Vortrags besteht darin das Grundprinzip hinter Photerel zu verdeutlichen, interessierte Gruppen zur Zusammenarbeit einzuladen und den Stand der Technik zu präsentieren.

Photerel berücksichtigt, dass immer das Risiko besteht, dass das digitale Bild die Probleme, die durch das Bild an sich aufgeworfen werden, vergrößert anstatt sie zu lösen:

- a) Die grundsätzliche Stellung der Ikonizität und Ähnlichkeit
- b) Der Verlust des Kontexts
- c) Die eingliedrigen Strukturen der Bilder
- d) Die Unterwerfung der Bilder unter verbale und diskursive Bedeutungen.

Die Digitalisierung ist, sowohl im Öffnen als auch im Bewahren fotografischer Sammlungen, wichtig geworden. In den vergangenen Jahren hat die Anzahl an digitalisierten Fotoarchiven dramatisch zugenommen, und zwar auf allen politischen und administrativen Ebenen (das reicht vom lokalen oder kleinen Archiv bis hin zu nationalen oder sogar multinationalen

Archiven). Dennoch wirft der Digitalisierungsprozess einige Fragen auf: Wie kann der Kontext eines Bildes, das Teil einer Sammlung ist, erhalten werden (zum Beispiel der eines Fotoalbums, das in einem Museum aufbewahrt wird)? Wie kann eine mehrschichtige Erzählung in einem digitalen Artefakt, vergleichbar mit einer musealen Rekonstruktion, eingefangen werden? Wie kann man eine Sammlung von digitalisierten Bildern Studenten und Wissenschaftlern und wie der Öffentlichkeit präsentieren? Dies sind Fragen, die sowohl Museumsmitarbeiter wie auch Webdesigner betreffen, die eine Besucher- oder Nutzererfahrung gestalten, sei es online oder in einem Ausstellungsraum.

Photorel hat zum Ziel einen Standard für einen besser umrandeten, das heißt einen kulturell facettenreicheren und didaktisch sowie politisch ergiebigeren Einsatz des digitalisierten fotografischen Erbes zu etablieren. Der Begriff der Verbreitung ist dabei entscheidend. Er transportiert eine neue Auffassung bezüglich der Bewahrung, das heißt bezüglich der Frage, was es bedeutet ein gefährdetes Fotoarchiv zu erhalten, und zwar nicht indem die Bilder verwahrt werden sondern indem sie der Öffentlichkeit auf neue Weisen gezeigt werden, was diesen folglich einen neuen Aufschwung gibt.

Photorel wird Methodologien für das Lehren visueller Kompetenz und für die begründete Digitalisierung des fotografischen Erbes ausarbeiten. Seine Zielgruppen sind Museumsmitarbeiter (Kuratoren), Forscher der visuellen Kultur, Lehrende der visuellen Kompetenz, Studenten der Museums- und Kulturwissenschaften (Master-Level) sowie Museumsbesucher.

Das Institut für kulturelle Studien an der Universität Leuven und das Antwerpen Museum für Fotografie haben soeben die Gründung von Photorel mit einem Pilotprojekt abgeschlossen. Das Projekt selber wird planmäßig im Oktober 2004 mit finanzieller Unterstützung der Europäischen Kommission im Rahmen des Socrates-Minerva Programms und mit Partnern aus Bukarest und Toulouse starten. Das fotografische Archiv Fratelli Alinari in Florenz wird als Beratungsorgan fungieren.

**Schlüsselwörter:** eLearning, Digitalisierung von fotografischem Erbe, visuelle Kompetenz, Bewahrung von fotografischem Erbe, digitale Präsentationsformen.

## **Résumé (FR)**

Le projet Photherel (Photographic Heritage e-Learning) réunit un groupe international d'enseignants, chercheurs, archivistes et producteurs de médias visuels qui veulent examiner

sur de nouvelles bases les menaces pesant sur l'héritage photographique culturel, mais aussi les nouvelles perspectives offertes par la numérisation. Le projet Photherel aborde plusieurs domaines : l'apprentissage de la lecture des images, les enjeux de la numérisation, la conservation du patrimoine photographique menacé, l'élaboration de matériaux didactiques A.P.O. pour la dissémination d'un corpus photographiques (muséal ou archivistique).

Cette communication cherche à expliciter les bases intellectuelles et méthodologiques du projet Photherel ainsi qu'à susciter de nouvelles formes de partenariat. Parallèlement, elle offre aussi un état de la question en la matière.

Le projet Photherel part entre autres de l'idée que l'image numérique court toujours le risque d'accroître, au lieu de les atténuer, les problèmes que posent les images : a) le parti pris de l'iconicité et de la ressemblance comme mode premier, voire exclusif de la forme et de la lecture des images, b) la perte du contexte initial, c) l'isolement des images, d) l'inféodation des images à des sens linguistiques et discursifs, c'est-à-dire non visuels.

La numérisation joue un rôle clé dans la conservation et dans la présentation des collections photographiques. Ces dernières années, le nombre d'archives numériques a augmenté de façon spectaculaire et leur importance est devenue très grande à divers niveaux politiques et administratifs, des archives nationales ou internationales aux archives locales ou très spécialisées. Ce processus de numérisation suscite cependant un certain nombre de problèmes. Comment garder ou reconstituer par exemple le contexte matériel d'une image numérique ou l'histoire culturelle de ce qu'elle représente (pensons par exemple à un album de photos conservé dans un musée) ? Comment rendre compte, comme il est possible de le faire dans un contexte muséal, de la temporalité ou de la chronologie complexes d'une collection dans une représentation exclusivement numérique ? Comment procéder pour présenter une collection d'images numérisées à plusieurs types de publics ? Voilà quelques problèmes qui se posent aussi bien aux muséologues qu'aux webdesigners qui cherchent à offrir une certaine expérience, quel que soit le cadre ou le support (ici une exposition traditionnelle, là une visite au musée, par exemple).

Le projet Photherel a l'ambition d'établir une nouvelle méthodologie, plus appropriée à la diversité culturelle de l'Europe, didactiquement mieux ancrée dans les nouveaux médias, politiquement plus enrichissante, pour l'étude et la consultation de l'héritage visuel. Au centre des préoccupations se trouve la notion de "dissémination", qui implique une redéfinition majeure de la notion de conservation : Photherel s'interroge sur le sens et les enjeux du sauvetage de l'héritage photographique menacé, non pas en proposant de nouvelles formes de conservation, mais en inventant de nouvelles formes de présentation.

Le projet Photherel cherche à élaborer de nouvelles méthodologies pour l'enseignement de la lecture et de l'interprétation des images d'une part, et pour l'enseignement des meilleures modes de numérisation des collections photographiques menacées d'autre part. Ses groupes-cible sont :

- professionnels du monde muséologique (directeurs d'exposition) et chercheurs en études visuelles
- professeurs en pédagogie de l'image
- étudiants en muséologie et études culturelles (niveau master)
- adultes en formation continue
- visiteurs de musée

Actuellement, l'Institut d'Etudes Culturelles de l'Université de Leuven et le Musée de la photographie d'Anvers ont déjà posé les premiers jalons du projet, à travers une expérience pilote menée au cours de l'année académique 2003-2004. Le projet proprement dit débutera officiellement en octobre 2004, avec l'aide financière de l'UE (programme Minerva) et en collaboration avec les Universités de Bucarest et de Toulouse-le-Mirail. La société Fratelli Alinari de Florence interviendra comme conseiller scientifique et technique.

**Mots clés:** Numérisation du patrimoine photographique, Apprentissage de la lecture des images, Enjeux de la numérisation, Conservation du patrimoine photographique, Nouvelles modalités de présentation.

*We are drawn to a new medium of representation because we are pattern makers thinking beyond our old tools.* - **Janet Murray**, 2003

## **I. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to explain Photherel's topics and to invite co-operation. Photherel stands for Photographic Heritage eLearning. Photherel is an international project exploring the common ground shared by digitization, preservation and dissemination of endangered photographic heritage. Photherel aims to collect existing know-how and disseminate its findings towards current and future cultural heritage professionals.

After introducing the partners in the network, a critical discourse on the role and the use of digital images levels the field for an overview of the different angles on unclosing digital image collections Photherel will conciliate. In a final paragraph, the elearning aspect of Photherel will be explained.

## **II. Who, What, and Why**

An international and interdisciplinary group of people interested in old photographs and new media are gathered in this project that is due to start October 2004. From Belgium there are the visual studies scholars, and eLearning and digital media developers from the K.U.Leuven, and the preservation and museum professionals from the Antwerp Museum of Photography. From France there are the Open and Distance learning experts from the Université Toulouse-Le Mirail. In Rumania, the scholars from the Center of Excellence in Image Studies of the University of Bucharest have joined the project. Photographic archive Fratelli Alinari from Florence will support the consortium with its advice.

The Maerlant Center ([www.maerlant.be](http://www.maerlant.be)) and the Institute for Cultural Studies ([www.culturalstudies.be](http://www.culturalstudies.be)) from the University of Leuven are heading Photherel. The Institute for Cultural Studies is a research and education unit linked to the Arts Faculty of the University of Leuven. The Institute is situated on the crossroads of theoretical reflection on cultural phenomena and the diverse practices of cultural mediation. The Institute's intellectual aim is to study the relations between the arts, media, and society at large. Its approach is interdisciplinary. New Media, the semiotics of the digital archive, citymarketing and cultural communication are but a few of its current research interests.

Since 1999, Maerlant Center has been developing digital publications on historical topics for educational use and for a broad public. Maerlant also makes websites for organizations and projects in the cultural heritage field and teaches web project planning and design to post-graduate students at the Arts Faculty. It is currently listed on the Minerva web site as one of the few Belgian competence centres regarding digitization.

Photherel will start out with a year of intensive debate, research and publications of the partners through their common website. During this year, every country involved will host a master class on a key topic. After this kick-off year, the shortly to be founded Center for the Study of Photography at the University of Leuven will continue to build on the foundation laid by Photherel.

### **III. Looking at digital images through the visual scholar's eyes**

The problem with images is that despite all claims on the specificity of visual culture and the endless play of multiple meanings of pictures they are often too much considered *answers*, and not enough as *questions*, and that the knowledge and meaning they help to articulate tends to be reduced to an illustrative role, *enhancing* the verbal meaning attached to them instead of contesting this simple meaning by the complexity of the discursive networks they are part of. Which are the mechanisms that can be found underneath such a 'rhetorical streamlining' of the image? (Baetens, 2003) First, images continue to be seen primarily as 'iconic', which implies that the focus of their reading is mainly put on their relationship with what they represent, not on the specific properties of their own material structure. Second, the image loses its material and cultural context, which is generally stripped off when images start circulating, and this loss of context is repeated at each new appearance. Third, the image is isolated from the larger whole (set, series or sequence) it belongs to, in order to make it freely movable from one context to another (this is one of the aspects of the broader problem of *denarrativization* of images). Fourth, the image is given a new discursive context, which is seen as either explaining the image (this is what happens with a caption, for instance, or with a story we imagine in order to stop the intolerable muteness of a picture) or explained by it (this is when we use images as proofs of what we want to say).

In old-fashioned historiography, for instance, images only appear in order to stress by other means what has already been said elsewhere, but more slowly and painstakingly by the text. Yet this rhetorical function shapes also their rationale in other fields of science, even outside

the humanities. As argued by the sociologist Bruno Latour, the role of an image is even less to show than to contribute to the network a scientific argument tries to build: pictures, figures, and references, help to build a system of mutually dependent elements whose role is to increase the difficulties for those willing to contradict or to refuse it. (cf. Latour, *Science in Action*). In such a perspective, the main function of the image is not to tell something, but to produce indirectly a connotation of veridicality. In this sense, the information value of an image resides in part in its contribution to "evidentiality". Not to be confounded with reference, the relation which an image holds to what is accepted "evidence" in a social usage network epitomizes its function and is telltale about the realm it mirrors to the outside. Understanding images is really looking --like Alice-- "through the looking glass". The fact that in some cases the image is the very starting point of the analysis, as it is the case in disciplines such as art history or film studies, does not affect this logic of networking. As noticed by James Elkins, many scholars in these fields feel bizarrely comfortable with the absence of images in their texts (cf. Elkins, *Visual studies*).

Contemporary visual studies are well aware of these problems, hence the emphasis put on the *reconstruction* of contexts (not just the original one, but the whole chain of contexts, cf. Marnie Sandweiss, *Print the legend: study of photography not "on" but "in" history*); hence also the reinsertion of images in specifically visual networks (sets, series, sequences); hence the interest for images as tools for *opening up* existing networks (cf. Barbara Stafford, *Practices of looking*); hence finally the focus on the material opacity of images (cf. Elkins, *Visual Studies*). The common feature of these studies is anti-logocentric, since contexts are discussed in terms of syntactic and semantic "density" (cf. Nelson Goodman, whose work help to conceptualize the gap between 'words' and 'images') and of intermedia or multimedia environments (an image is not just the equivalent of a word or a meaning, but the center of a cultural practice).

Yet it is precisely this movement in favor of a less text-centered approach that is hindered by the *digital* character of the images. Digital images share with photographic images the *myth* of truthfulness. Despite the suspicion raised by the general use of photographic manipulation, the indexical property of photographs remains unchallenged: we all know that photographic images are different from the things themselves, yet we believe that they are more 'true' than other types of visual representation. Digital images too, since they are not hand-made but produced by machines just like photographs, tend to be considered real (as if a machine has

not been made and handled by man, but this is of course where the mythological aspect of digitization intervenes). And the problem with ‘real’ images, or rather images of the real is that their meaning goes without saying: if the meaning of such an image is not clear, this lack of clarity is situated not at the level of its own visual features, but at the level of what the images represent (its subject, which belongs to ‘reality’). The fact that in our culture, analogical photography has been replaced by digital photography can only reinforce the ‘transfer’ of the myth of indexicality from one field to another. We all know that digital images are different from the things themselves, yet we believe that they are more ‘true’ than other types of visual representation. The technical perfections allowed by digital imaging, which on the one hand allows us to remediate very easily the imperfections of the visual files and while discovering on the other types of images which one had only dreamt of before, have permitted a degree of visual realism that remediates (in the double sense of the word investigated by Bolter and Grusin) traditional photography. We should be aware of this fallacy of reproduction.

For all these reasons, one can understand why digital images confront us once again with the very features of our traditional use of images. Digital images lose easily their material and cultural context. Second, digital images are isolated from the environment they belong to. Third, digital images are given a new context, which is seen as either explaining the image or explained by it. In comparison with non-digital images, these characteristics are even accentuated: digital images are more free-floating, more isolated, more re-networked than traditional images. Astonishing as this may be, the explosion of pictures in postmodern culture is not as such a threat to logocentrism, for the accelerated mobility of visual monads only increases the need for a verbal re-anchoring. Neither is it a danger to the basic iconic status of images, which continue to be measured in terms of ‘resemblance’ with the object of representation (the fact that this object is often completely made up by digital simulation does not alter that basic stance).

The most disturbing factor remains however the seamless confusion of ‘original’ and ‘copy’. In spite of all postmodern meditations on the simulacrum, the very ease with which our societies are massively accepting the shift towards digital images clearly means that we do not experience this transformation as a loss. In an era in which so many ‘responsible citizens’ are terrified by the implosion of the canon, the erosion of cultural memory, and the disappearance of any historical awareness, our enthusiasm to embrace digitization can only mean that we are

caught in a logic of linear remediation, not in a logic of radical confrontation. The questions we ask about digitization are typical of our traditional cultural blindness to images, which we reduce to 'illustrated meanings'. This is the reason why our questions on digital images do not really question our preconceived ideas on what images are. These questions are either technical (What does it cost to digitize? How to improve the technical standards? Etc.) or typically iconic (How to tell a digital image based on something 'real' and a digital image created by pure 'simulation'? What about the ethics of digitization? Etc.), and both types of questions demonstrate that in spite of what we say and think on the subject digitization is hardly an issue, for it does not transform our most fundamental views on images. The many discussions on the lack of 'indexicality' in digital imaging does in fact only reinforce the 'iconicity' of images, i.e. the importance of reading images in relationship with an object ('real' or 'fictitious') they represent. Digital images are still what images used to be in the pre-digital era: iconic (they are look-alikes of something else), monadic (they can stand on their own), and explainable by words (their meaning coincides with what can tell about them).

Yet digitization can also be an opportunity to rethink our relationship towards images in general. Their easy manipulation can raise suspicion on issues of resemblance (which is to be seen as the result of a construction, not as the effect of a reduplication) and copying (we should get rid of the myth that a digital image, however 'perfect' we manage to make it', can never be 'as such' a complete substitute for any other image). The multimedia screens on which they appear should call our attention to the impossibility of separating the images from their use, their context, their intertext(s). The sheer number of images that circulate and the difficulties of selecting ought to prevent us from seeing images as monadic items. And finally, the permanent reuse of images is useful to make us understand how people create meanings by weaving images in new discursive webs.

Digital visual archives are both an illustration of these problems and a perfect opportunity to start solving them. Too often, archives overestimate the power of the images to 'make sense'. Considerations on meaning and use, history and complexity of the listed images are insufficiently present and thematized, as if the mere presentation of the material and the old-fashioned dream of completeness had to give an answer to the questions of the users. The basic problem of most archives is that they presuppose either a well-informed user, i.e. a user sharing the same knowledge, convictions, and tastes of the maker of the visual archive, or a completely ignorant --mute-- user, i.e. a user incapable of reading images and in permanent

need of a strong authorial voice dictating the meaning of what is to be seen. Yet digital visual archives open also many possibilities for new ways of constructing new relationships with images, at a great distance of the one-to-one relationship of 1 image/1 caption and closer to the visual and intertextual webs users weave with the help of, amongst other things, images.

#### **IV. Unifying digitization stakeholders around access**

Photherel straddles different professional fields: museums, academia, and teaching. In all these fields methods, standards, and policies about digitization and the use of digital images have been developed. A large body of work already exists on the multi-faceted issues involved in the digitized photograph.

When it comes to policy on digital archives, Canada has been a forerunner in developing methodologies. A digitization project starts with defining goals and assessing where an organization stands. The Canadian government provides cultural heritage institutions among many other things with a maturity model, an auto-evaluation tool to map the road to follow to a desired level of digitization. (Information Management Capacity Check (IMCC)). In the USA the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage (NINCH) needs mentioning. European archivists who deal with digital archives can turn to the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA, <http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/>), or Electronic Resource Preservation and Access Network (ERPANET, <http://www.erpanet.org/>). More often than not it is the cultural heritage sector taking the lead in developing policies for ensuring long-term storage, maintenance, migration and access to digital materials.

It is not the aim of Photherel to add yet another "new" solution, be it hardware or software, pilot or best practice to the existing knowledge pools. Instead it aims to synthesise the state of the art, cherry-pick the most useful achievements and adapt them to its specific point of view, for a differentiated audience. Photherel's angle on digitising photographic heritage is the access or presentation side of the matter. What that means will become clear in the following.

#### **Digitization and preservation beyond conservation**

Unclosing and preserving photographic heritage has become closely entwined with digitizing. Old photographs are of the most fragile and unstable heritage there exists. 19th century pictures are fading away irreversibly. Conservation of the material "carrier" can at this point in time only slow down deterioration. If photographic prints are not copied at

some point, their images will be lost for future generations. Nowadays, digitization has conquered a strong foothold in preservation. An important organization to name in that effect is SEPIA: Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access (<http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/sepia/>). Digitization allows to make sustainable copies and in the same movement to unclose visual archives for scholars and the broad public alike. Scanning photographs forms only a tiny part of the job.

The different professions involved all have different priorities, needs and interests. When it comes to developing a digitization policy, they need to work together: archivists, IT professionals, museum professionals and educators.

Archivists, with their unique long-term vision, know that in order to succeed in the long run, a digitization effort has to be embedded in an institution's preservation policy. The archivist's biggest concern is the safety of a collection and the sustainability of the preservation strategy chosen. A preservation policy goes well beyond conservation (Clarke & Frey, 2003). Preservation entails the care for collections as a whole, the protection of the material object from its environment (disaster prevention, cold storage, minimizing handling damage), selecting which photographs get priority (the most in-demand, the most mouldy) and conservation to halt deterioration as far as possible. Ideally, the scanners are only ignited after months of planning: digitising a photographic collection brings issues of prioritising, handling and scanning, outsourcing, imaging, image protection, copyright issues, storage issues and issues of retrieval and presentation. The aim of preservation should be to render the original object accessible to successive communities of, now and in the future. What to think then, of Corbis' preservation policy for the Bettmann archive, 17 million photographs stored below zero in a mine? Corbis had only digitized a few percentages of the images when they decided the images would deteriorate before the scanning could be finished (Boxer, 2001).

The selection of priorities for digitization happens for material reasons, but also, inescapably so, for political reasons. In countries from the former Eastern bloc, for instance, recent communist historical archives are being passively destroyed. In any case, the absence of what is not digitized is much stronger than the absence of what is not being shown, for instance in the rooms of a museum. (Bijker & Peperkamp, 2002; Hocks & Kendrick, 2003).

Every object in an archive derives meaning even from its archival history and its contexts of use. For researchers, it is important that the data accompanying the image file reveals as much about the object's use and archival history as possible. Researchers need to be able to trace the

linkages of a digital object, in order to reach an acceptable level of trust. Trust is a central notion in the archival history, digitized archives may not brake the chain of derived trustworthiness. Our perception of digital objects is clouded by what Clifford Lynch identifies as an undeserved aura of "pervasive deceit" (Lynch, 2000). In the end, researchers will always want to see the original object, not just the image. But for teachers in Visual Studies, the image of a photograph can be of tremendous use if considerations on meaning and use, history and complexity of the listed images are insufficiently present and thematized.

A lot of work has been done in the way of connecting to a digital object the necessary data to identify and authenticate it. One of the most important joined efforts in the documentalist world of the last few years has been the development of standards in technology and metadata. The Dublin Core prescribes the minimal metadata needed for the interchange of digital documents. SEPIADES is an extension of Dublin Core for the description of photographs (SEPIA, 2003).

Designed to become widespread, standards are meant to offer the best guarantee for the longevity of a digital document because they ensure that the data will be readable and interchangeable. It seems to be common belief --or superstition-- that interchangeability and interoperability open a window to innumerable interconnected databases that might, once, represent all human knowledge, or all cultural heritage for that matter. More often than not, current professional digitization efforts aim to create a "use-neutral" image database, where digital images are created using the most high-end technology and methodology so as to keep the possibility of future, yet unknown uses open.

However, can such a far-sighted approach really guarantee longevity? We argue that access, publication and presentation in a near future really decide an image's life span. Image retrieval from a database and the way search results are presented are of key importance.

### **The access angle**

The user interface is not a superficial attribute of an image database. If a digital repository fails to provide good access to digitized photo's, one might have buried the collection underground like the Bettmann archive. A preservation policy too much involved in conservation and not explicitly geared towards unclosing a collection might very well fail in the long run. The current digital carriers are less persistent than paper. There is no digital equivalent of the shoebox full of photographs found in the attic. Digitization and a preservation policy aimed towards access go hand in hand. Photherel wants to educate future

and current cultural heritage professionals to contribute to the design of excellent computer interfaces of digital image repositories.

Beside archivists there are other professionals involved when it comes to the unclosing of a photographic collection in a museum of photography or a historical museum: curators, exhibition builders, educators connected to a museum and even PR people. If a digitization project is well planned, it ought to offer solutions also to this group and their clientele. More than the archivist, these people have an interest in the presentation layer of a digital archive, they know the power of perception and the value of a great interface --in the sense of a common ground or a place where two worlds meet-- that is usable, attractively designed and offers engaging interactive possibilities.

One possible goal of a digitization project is exploiting the market value of a collection through reproduction. This approach exists for example in the Belgian Flemish Reproduction Fund (Reproductiefonds, <http://www.reproductiefonds.be/>) that is being set up. Photherel will also explore the different manifestations of this form of economical unclosing of a collection.

On the level of the interface of image collections there has been great work done, mixing view-based and text-based retrieval methods and in the development of interfaces showing semantic interconnections of documents. For instance the firm SecondStory ([www.secondstory.com](http://www.secondstory.com)) has created wonderful connections between digital object repositories, exhibitions and contextual information. XML applications with a "rich" visual interface are being implemented and offer great results. Fuzzy logic search mechanisms coupled with a constructivist approach to the information design of a site can allow users to browse through a collection by making free associations. It is also important to find ways of embedding a digitized cultural heritage repository in the larger Web.

In programming, there exist methodologies that put user's needs and goals central: user-centred design, which calls for a multi-disciplinary team and a reiterative programming process. In such a user-centred approach in digitization there is not only the back-end user (the documentalist) but also the different front-end users to keep in mind: the public who will want to look up images, but also and importantly: the museum professionals who deal with selection, display and communication. Photherel aims to offer its public an anthology of best practices and the theoretical background needed to analyse them and design their own approaches. Photherel will provide its audience with an evaluation grid for digital image repositories.

Since the web has gone from mainly text-based, hypertextual information space, towards more sophisticated platform for multimedia and complex interactions, the term "user experience" has been used widely. The idea behind "user experience" is that websites are not just platforms for content, but mediators of complex interactions that need to be designed to optimize efficiency in satisfying both the site's objectives and the user's needs. Parallel in the museum world, the user or visitor experience is also of key importance for exhibition designers. The exhibition rooms of a museum are only an interface of the larger museum holdings. Museum professionals know how to build a narrative in a navigate-able space through showing and telling. What is shown (re-) surfaces in the memory of the audience, what is not shown fades away. The web can act as an extension of the museum's walls, showing past and present exhibitions and their linkage to un-shown digitized objects. This way, the narrative presented in an exhibition, is perpetuated and quilted into a multi-layered narrative web.

From their point of view exhibition builders can contribute greatly to the design for a user interface of an on-line image collection. Photherel hopes to reap the benefit from cross-pollinating these different types of know-how.

Although standards and investments in a sustainable technology are crucial for the preservation of an image, all these efforts amount to nothing if there is no proper unclosing and dissemination strategy in place to keep an image collection in the public eye and create or revive an interest for this heritage.

The best guarantee for an image collection's survival might well be its ability to find its way to an audience, and probably new audiences, new discussions and new uses. Not conservation, but dissemination can save an endangered collection. Photherel is a plea to share know-how on how to digitally reconstruct the cultural construct that a collection or an archive really is. A plea for more and better attempts to represent collections as the multi-layered, open-ended, narratives they really are.

For conservational reasons, it is often necessary to separate the photographs from the albums or boxes they were kept in by their owners. A well-designed interface could connect the photographs to their original album and add information about the way these albums were used and what is known about the people in the pictures, or about the people who took the pictures. An archive is a multi-layered narrative and digital archives have to strive to capture as many meanings and connections as possible.

## The 'el' in Photherel

The Web is an important ally for the museum education professional. Image-rich open and distance learning and eLearning exists in many ways, shapes and forms. For the younger students in history, the Maerlant Center developed a strategy of looking at a iconographic historical source that retraces the steps historians make in applying their historical method. Using a pedagogic approach called constructivism, one can construct a digital collection with its contextual information to form an intellectual scaffolding for the learner to build her own experience-based understanding of a subject.

For a more 'mature' learning public, in a visual studies setting, media on a theoretical level cannot be understood separated from the whole cultural practice surrounding it. Modelling or "translating" old media like a photograph album into new media fosters a better media literacy.

Photherel is an eLearning project, it aims to educate university students and in-service cultural professionals about digitizing photographs and more importantly in the possibilities of New Media to uncloset photograph collections. Computer literacy and visual literacy will go hand in hand. On the one hand, students will get insight in the theoretical issues concerning digital images, the planning of a digitization project, how to handle images, how to make a selection, how to reach the best digital output, how to describe the images in metadata and what measures ought to be taken for the preservation of the originals and their digital counterparts. On the other hand, students will learn the possibilities of digital media for representation of photographic heritage and reconstruction of photograph collections. They will study best practices in the field and design their own solutions for the online dissemination of photographs.

**Justified digitization of image collections, we argue, is digitization informed by the myriad of theoretical, practical and political issues surrounding the matter, targeted at uncloset a collection for a differentiated audience.**

People interested in learning more about this project, or who want to contribute by attending a colloquium, publishing an article or joining its network, are kindly requested to contact one of the authors of this paper:

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