

PHOTO-LIT

The Belgian photonovel: the local reuse of a European cultural practice

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SUMMARY

CONTEXT

The photonovel, a form of visual narrative with staged photographs, generally printed in magazine format, was the dominant popular form in postwar pre-television Europe. At the crossroads of film-novel, comics, melodrama, and serialized romance, its presence and impact were unequalled, and its adaptations and reappropriations in later periods remain an exceptional example of the dynamics of creativity and heritage, where they instantiate the visual turn in the transformations of reading and writing today.

The Belgian contribution to the photonovel, which has been important and very diverse, but completely overlooked by the existing scholarship, which focuses on the Italian as well as the French production, and the existing material hosted, yet hardly catalogued, by Belgian archives and libraries as well as in private collections has never been explored, contrary to the well-studied domain of comics and graphic novels. To avoid any misunderstanding: by “Belgian production”, we understand “made in Belgium”, that is: produced for Belgian publishers and published in Belgium.

A large portion of the relevant Belgian collections are at the premises of KBR (Royal Library). The corpus covers both the period 1947-1965 (before the legal deposit) and 1966-today (since the introduction of the legal deposit). The PHOTO-LIT project involves the digitization of this production, as exhaustively as possible, and its storage and publication on the Belgica website of the KBR, as well as the elaboration of new digitization protocols for this kind of never described forms of popular culture in print.

OBJECTIVES

The fundamental aim of this research has been to disclose, digitize and study this material, while developing new protocols for the sustainable digitization as well as valorization and dissemination of this material for contemporary and future audiences.

Its three major objectives are:

- the cultural-historical description of the medium, taking into account its material and editorial singularities as well as the specific features of the of the photonovel in Belgium.
- the digitization of the material as hosted by the KBR in its own archives.
- the development of new and sustainable digitization and archiving procedures that can be used as a laboratory for further work on popular culture in print.

The PHOTO-LIT research is ground-breaking for the following reasons:

- The production of a scientifically researched and sustainable portal site on the Belgian photonovel is a unique achievement in the field of popular visual storytelling in print and can serve as a model for other, European initiatives.
- The photonovel remains a blank space in the cultural history of Belgium as well as Europe: a genre overwhelmingly present yet wholly ignored or actively discarded by researchers.
- A cross-medial practice *avant la lettre*, it allows us to revise our current ideas of convergence culture, still strongly relying on the belief in the gap between predigital and digital culture.
- The photonovel makes possible an original account of the cultural integration of Europe in the first periods of the European integration, due to the active policy of translation and mutual readaptation throughout the various countries of the European Economic Community.
- A unique opportunity to launch a pioneering project in the field of modern and contemporary print matter, moreover in the often overlooked domain of popular and mass media culture.

METHODOLOGY

For the cultural-historical part of the project, PHOTO-LIT has relied on a two-level methodology.

On the one hand, a general, overarching framework, namely “comparative textual media” (CTM), as presented in Hayles and Pressman (*Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)., which could be seen as a theoretical and practical deepening of the case-studies approach defended in Anne Burdick, Joanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Pressner, and Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012)

On the other hand, a set of more specialized methodologies, which were meant to complement and help customize the general findings inspired by CTM. These methodologies mainly involved: remediation theory, “second birth” medium theory, intermediality theory, narratology and art history.

For the archival part of the project, PHOTO-LIT has relied on hands-on exploration of the collections at the KBR premises. Since no catalog descriptions were available, it has proven both necessary and extremely revealing to visit the shelves of all the female magazines of the period and to literally unearth the treasures that were hidden inside.

For the properly digitization aspects (scanning, storing, metadata protocols, implementation of international standards, management and clearing of copyright issues, reuse of orphan works), PHOTO-LIT has relied on the expertise and competence of the digitization unit of the KBR, which has used the project to develop new techniques and standards for the cataloging, archiving, publishing, and disseminating of a corpus that had never been treated by the library services and that can serve as a model for European collaboration.

SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

PHOTO-LIT has first of all managed to identify and digitize the almost complete list (more than six hundred works) of Belgian photonovels. The result of this work is an impressive database that is now hosted on the website of the KBR:

<https://belgica.kbr.be/BELGICA/photonovels.aspx>

Free access: 117 works

Limited access: 483 works

This pioneering research has also given birth to a new protocol for the sustainable digitization according international standards of popular literature in print that had never been described or archived until now. It has also produced an in-depth study of the history and the specific features of this production, very different from the standards elaborated in France and Italy.

Second, the project has also succeeded in describing and interpreting the history of the medium from different point of views: aesthetic, narrative, editorial, technical. It has disclosed the connections and correspondences between the Francophone and the Flemish production and the collaboration and translation policies between them. Finally, it also proved capable of identifying the specific features of the Belgian production, in comparison with the French and Italian models: the later appearance of the photonovel and its long run (longer than the French photonovel); the presence of bilingualism; the absence of magazines entirely dedicated to (complete) photonovels, preferring the format of the women's weekly; the seamless coexistence of original and imported photonovels; suspenseful and humoristic traits of many of the photonovels made by Belgians such as Richard Olivier (though without becoming satire); the uniqueness of Serra's "chic" photonovels, characterized by a higher budget, a clear involvement from the editors of the magazine and an effort to target a middle-class audience; the presence of French freelance technicians in the teams creating photonovels who brought to Belgium their own expertise in the field; and the link with the world of comics, seen especially when considering Jean-Michel Charlier or Jacques Van Melkebeke, active also in the field of photonovels.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND INVOLVEMENT IN BELGIAN POLICY

PHOTO-LIT has been a pioneering and game-changing project in two regards.

First of all, it has given the opportunity to elaborate a series of protocols (digitization, workflow, international standards, IPR, metadata) that can be implemented on a large scale for similar projects and that have strengthened the position of the KBR as a key international player in this field.

A new Brain project ("ARTPRESSE"), under the supervision of KBR and also involving the two other PHOTO-LIT partners (KU Leuven and Liège Université), will build on the expertise of this project. It is a strong proof that the framework elaborated by PHOTO-LIT is *sustainable* and *scalable*, while at the same time perfectly apt to strengthen scientific collaboration between a wide range of Belgian partners.

Second, PHOTO-LIT has also disclosed the richness of a type of cultural heritage that had remained totally undisclosed until now. As shown by the success of the dissemination and valorization initiatives of the project, there exist a strong interest for this kind of world (popular visual culture and mass magazine culture).

From this point of view, it can be strongly recommended to define this kind of research and dissemination policy as one of the key orientations of the new KBR, both on the level of the disclosure and digitization of its own collections as on the level of the transformations of the library as a research center as well as a venue for new forms of dialogue with the larger audience, national and international.

KEYWORDS:

Belgium, cultural history, digitization, magazine, photonovel, popular culture, visual narrative