

Digitization and culture

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“So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.”

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p 11

1. Introduction

In this article about digitization and literature, we will reflect upon our experiences in teacher education and literature education. We will make an inventory of what we have learnt along the road, the last few years. It was all about learning, but about unlearning as well. The digitization seemed to cause a daily revolution, questioning at the same time things that were only natural the day before. It has become a cliché to compare this revolution with the advent of the art of printing. Digitization, too, has become a hype with great expectations surrounding the computer: the liberation and the general democratization are announced in a mystic jargon or language taken straight from advertising. Especially the expectations around hyperfiction – new forms of literature – were running high. Even though this last development is progressing at a slower pace, it remains a fact that all the other developments have become part of our everyday reality, with examples like e-mail, web sites, word processing, computer games, etc. These digital developments have their influences on education in general and literature education in particular as well. In spite of the fact that the perspectives on education and literature have been and are problematized more and more within the older media and institutions. The renewal may very well come from the computer, cultural studies had already announced the crisis of the book culture anyway.

We focus on literature education, because there a lot of obvious things related to the traditional cultural exchange are questioned. These questions deal not just with the literary canon itself, but also with the decline of the reading culture, the end of the book,

and – for some – the end of western civilisation, the end of a humanism we knew from the Enlightenment. Or put differently: the arrival of a post-humanism or trans-humanism where the book and the humanistic canon are replaced by the computer screen and cyber culture. And people by cyborgs (for an overview, see Badmington 2000). For some this post-humanism is good news, liberating even, whereas for others it's indicative of a fundamental crisis in our civilisation.

By means of example one could consult George Steiner about this as he is one of the most frequently quoted authors among the cultural defeatists. In Steiner's world view and cultural vision (1967, 1977) civilisation comes into existence through language; man breaks the silence around him by speaking and writing. Humanity is at its best precisely in that language, and the very best is to be found in the literary culture. A possible loss or threat of literature implies therefore a direct crisis of human culture. Still, Steiner is not naïve, he knows history. He has his criticism on the established civilisation media (the book, literature, music) as well: indeed they seem not to have been able to avoid the atrocities of the Second World War. Even with Steiner the defence of the humanist tradition has its doubts about the Glad Tidings of that tradition. And this applies to a lot of post-modern, post-colonial or post-structuralist theories. Accusing the media in general or the digitization in particular as the sole accessories responsible for the crisis in the elitist (book) culture is therefore unquestionably not acceptable. In a later phase Steiner will even correct himself: 'It has taken too long before I understood that the volatile, the fragmentary, the derisive, the self-ironical are the principal ontological modes of modernity; before I realised that the interactions between high and low culture, in particular film and television – currently the most influential instruments of the common feeling and possibly of the creative person – have largely replaced the monumental pantheon' (Steiner 1997:182). Cyber culture could be added to that last enumeration as well. In Steiner's story one can read about the defence of, the doubt about and finally the correction on the elite culture. And this brings us back to the classroom and literature education, where teachers and teacher educators experience these theoretical insights on a daily basis.

As said before, we present our insights from the teacher education department, but we hope that the perspectives can be interesting for anyone who is dealing with transfer of culture. Teachers today are confronted with major shifts within their subject – literature. And this not only applies to secondary education; slowly but steadily the media generation is entering university and higher education as well. In any case, we believe that the digital developments can be better understood in a broader historical debate about cultural literacy, where the position of literature education and literary science – as cultural studies – should be reconsidered. We can run, but we cannot hide. Running away is exactly what is happening in the back-to-basics movement, which in a nostalgic mood refers back to an ideal time. Back-to-basics argues for a restoration of the shared knowledge – the literary canon, the national history (Bloom 1987, Hirsch 1987). A recurring phenomenon in our culture, as we could read in *The Man Without Qualities*. Ulrich gets lots of requests he typifies as follows: 'One of them I've headed Back to—! It's amazing how many people tell us that the world was better of in earlier times [...]' (Musil 1996:258). Back to Religion, the Natural Order, Tradition, and so on.

In between nostalgia (about the book) and hype (about the computer) there is a need for pragmatics that capitalize on changes related to the post-modern world we live in. Or to put it less philosophically and more sociologically: a world in which digitization,

globalisation and a new economy result in fundamental changes (Castells 1996). What kind of literacies and what insights does cultural delivery require? Apart from advancing a few theoretical remarks, in what follows we will devote attention to a few practical examples – in the form of vignettes – we have developed for education over the years. It deals with a problematization of educational contents that time and again were related to digital media. After all, more and more it became apparent that nearly all problematizations in the end also have to do with the digital revolution.

Can we offer solutions? What we suggest is that ready-made solutions are difficult to realize, but that we must try to live with contradictions anyway: ‘to recognize the existence of such conflicts and try to foreground whatever may be instructive in them within the curriculum itself’ (Graff 1987: 252). In a post-modern curriculum the conflicts do not disappear, which eventually leads Graff to suggest teaching the conflict itself, and to thematize the problems in the curriculum.

2. Media, culture and education

Let us start off with a patency: *books* are central to literature education. Indeed, this fixation on the book culture typifies the entire *school* as we know it today. No matter where we enter a classroom in the western world today, there is a fair chance that we will be confronted with identical *formats*: pupils learn to read and to write in the national standard language, learn the national history and the national literature (the *canon*) from schoolbooks and anthologies. In short, pupils are told a history, and it is suggested that it is *their* history. Schoolbooks have spread these shared histories. Besides this, there is also a fair chance that people will complain about the *kids today* and that the *media* will be to blame: film, television, computers, etc are to blame for lots of ailments (ranging from ‘violent’ behaviour to indifference). In this short typification with which we were confronted during the past years, we have italicized the concepts we will deal with now. In the first part (2.1) we will discuss the influence of the book on the construction of school and nation and we will illustrate the theory with a number of digital educational practices. In a second part (2.2) we will discuss the criticism on the canon and respectively illustrate the new role of the teacher (2.3) who is confronted with digital youth cultures (2.4). In a last part we will describe some perspectives on digital art (2.5).

2.1 Book + School = Nation

Some scientists have made us aware the last few years of how diverse media have constructed specific literacies. The transition from an oral to a written tradition, the transition from writing to printing, and the transitions towards visual media have had a profound impact on our knowledge, our memory, our cognition and the spaces or institutions in which we produce and consume culture. These transitions occur slowly, so it is probably better to talk about evolution rather than revolution (Havelock 1963, McLuhan 1964, Ong 1982).

Which were the consequences printing had in store for our subject – language and literature? Books aim at a general audience and this poses demands in terms of a common language. The art of printing benefits from a standard language and consequently also from the construction of a nation. Books and nations seem to support each other. In the case of functional literacy, people first and foremost think of being

able to read and write. In the case of cultural literacy, this is usually literature. The art of printing split apart the word, the image and the sound. This is literally visible in the institutions, which carry the architectural pride and form the icons of the national culture: images in museums, music in concert halls, books in libraries. Books and journals create disciplines, schoolbooks create school subjects. This implies choices in terms of the overviews; after all knowledge is not merely transferred, but also transformed. Books are a kind of invisible technology that determines how we think, what we know and which institutions we construct around it. In short, books created the cultural literacy of which it is claimed today that it is in a deep crisis: youngsters no longer know their (national) history, they do not read (the canon) anymore and they can no longer speak or spell flawlessly (in the standard language). The singular literacy and identity which were among others constructed by books are indeed being replaced more and more frequently by multiple literacies (because of media and digitization, among others) and identities (because of globalisation, among others). Precisely because of these multiple perspectives national identities are increasingly more often described as ‘imaginary communities’ (Anderson 1983).

Or like the Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich wrote: ‘A shprakh iz a diyalekt mit an armey un a flot’. A language is a dialect having an army and a navy. And this of course by extension applies to a nation which seeks to unify itself around this language as well.

How do we cope with these national constructions in education? Creating an identity these days is after all very often a delicate matter. At the end of the eighties we were involved in several educational, research and development projects in which at one time the European perspective had to be constructed, and at other times the importance of the Flemish and Dutch literature had to be stressed. In any case, we are being confronted with philosophical and practical problems; for instance the insight that Europe is ‘merely a culture among cultures’ (Lemaire 1990:68). Exactly this European vision teaches us what Musil already wrote in the beginning of the past century: ‘German children were simply learned to despise the wars sacred to Austrian children, and were taught to believe that French children, whose forebears were all decadent lechers, would turn tail by the thousands at the approach of a German soldier with a big beard. Exactly the same ideas, with the roles reversed and other desirable adjustments, were taught to French, English, and Russian children, who also had often been on the winning side.’ (Musil 1996:13). How does one teach about nations and Europe as a construction? This question also has to do with globalisation, multiculturalism and mediatization. Digitization plays an important role as well, among others because new networks come into existence, in which identities are being constructed outside of the physical boundaries of the nation: The Virtual Community (Rheingold 2000). The booklore that nations are constructions and that diverse myths are constructed to legitimize all this seems to have found a technology in the hypertext structure, in which the construction can be problematized.

Vignette: nation and myth

In the nineties we created a website around the debate about globalisation and national identity, and the implications for language, media and education incorporated herein: *Nederlands in het Werelddorp* (Dutch in the global village)¹. Precisely through the construction of the hypertext we were able to reconstruct the complexity of the debate graphically. National identity as a construction, as a concept which has been and still is constructed. Particularly interesting was our experience with the forum debate among

the teachers trainees, in which identity was not put forward as a rigid concept, but rather as something still in the process of formation. At the same time we created the website *Scholê: Digital Literacy*ⁱⁱ, in which a number of keywords were presented online, based on the insight that thinking about the nation can no longer be done without insight in the role of the internet, or in the words of Mark Poster (1995) 'post-modern virtualities': 'In some ways the Internet undermines the territoriality of the nation state: messages in cyberspace are not easily delimited in Newtonian space, rendering borders ineffective'. Quite exemplary for our students, we studied how national myths are constructed through fiction and history. As a case study we opted for *The Lion of Flanders* by Hendrik Conscience. As research we made an anthology of fragments dealing with the various ways in which this text was treated in various literary anthologies. As such we thematized the problem of the construction of identity in the novel. As a second research we charted how the story of *The Lion of Flanders* was told in the mass media (TV, comic strips, films, etc) (Mottart 1997).

In a next phase the teacher trainees presented a series of (on-line) lessons focusing on similar myths in different countries and languages: the stories about Jeanne d'Arc (a hero both for left and right wing parties), the image of Scottish identity (ranging from happy to cruel), the English landscape (from nature to construction), and so on (Soetaert, Top & Eeckhout 1996; Mottart & Verdoodt 1998)ⁱⁱⁱ. In a later phase we combined this approach with a series of lessons about travelling: *Make Your World*^{iv}, in which identities and especially prejudices were analysed. Once again a striking fact is for such an approach hypermedia turn out to be an excellent vehicle. Related to this, the system of webquests (Dodge 1995) was an interesting experiment. A webquest is an assignment where pupils have to collect specific information on the web and mould it into a product. The analysis is done via specific assignments which at the same time can be described as perspectives on the subject (e.g. focus on the subject from the perspective of 'scientist', 'historian', 'designer' and so on). Learning to work with perspectives seems to tie up with the structure of *hypertext*, or in this case the webquest.

2.2 Canon

Previously we have established how books tell stories, and therefore construct myths. A typical invention of the art of printing is no doubt the literary anthology, in which texts are selected that establish the canon for a fairly long time. The anthology expresses the wish of the editor: a conveniently arranged overview which can be printed once and sold for a long time. The anthology expresses the power of the anthologist and the editor: they are the mediators of the symbolic capital or the elitist knowledge. Precisely the self-evident quality of the literary canon was questioned by a series of criticisms (for the Dutch-speaking region see Soetaert & Van Peer 1993). The criticisms came for instance from labour and working-class cultures, with feminist and multicultural corrections and a multimedial expansion.

There is not only the selection of the texts; we are also dealing with methodological shifts: from author-oriented over text-oriented towards reader-oriented approaches. All these perspectives found their ways into education. Especially the reader-oriented approach, which could be combined with a plea for pupil-oriented education, formed a direct threat for the literary canon. Participation in *how* one reads necessarily leads to participation in *what* one reads. Giving pupils a voice implies a demand for attention for genres and media which play an important role in their culture. Even in the traditional academic world the attention for literature was widened, encompassing attention for

popular culture, film, video, television, music, recreation, life styles, and so on. Important in this respect is the influence of the new discipline or anti-discipline: cultural studies. More and more literature studies is turning into a form of cultural studies. More and more it becomes clear that cultural studies cannot just ignore media: 'In conclusion it is proposed to transform literary studies from (purely) textual studies to media studies which analyze literary phenomena in the context of other media competing for the attention of mass audiences' (Schmidt 1992: 191). Cultural studies was inspired by an attack on the 'elite' culture and devoted attention to 'popular' culture. 'Culture is ordinary,' reflected Williams (1958). In any case it is all about a movement towards multiple cultures instead of one culture, towards multiple literacies (multiliteracies) rather than one literacy (New London Group 1996).

All of this ties up with developments in the language and literature education. In the sixties of the past century a criticism arose against the two icons of language education: grammar and literature. The entire system of language education was after all inspired by example of the classic languages: learning the language (grammar, vocabulary) in order to be able to read the canon. More and more the critical question arose if knowledge of *the* literature could possibly be *the* final target of language education (for an overview, see Soetaert 2000). In short, he who studies the literary canon needs to ask critical questions about how this canon came into being. Gerald Graff has argued that taking in literature into the curriculum is a story of conflict, which was hardly ever discussed in the literature curriculum. He suggests introducing students to a basic question focusing on the canon: 'how do we institutionalize the conflict of interpretations and overviews itself' (Graff 1987: 259)? In what follows we will give an example of such a debate as an element of the curriculum and we will check what role can be played by digitization.

Vignette: canon

Within the framework of a project at Ghent University we have presented a number of European classic texts (*Antigone*, *Don Quichote*,...) in a learning environment. One of these texts – Robinson Crusoe, by Daniel Defoe (1719) – turned out to be extremely suitable to question the canon (Soetaert, R. & A. Mottart 1999). On the one hand this novel is a milestone in the history of literature, on the other hand we are dealing with a novel which has been pilloried (from a multicultural, feminist and ecological perspective, for instance). The study of *Robinson Crusoe* implies a confrontation with the value of the canon. After all we are dealing with a myth in Western culture about which Michel Tournier, one of the adapters with *Vendredi* (1967) wrote that similar myths need to be questioned continuously. Our collection of texts and references developed into a network in which word, sound and image meet. The *anthology* inevitably became multimedial and could therefore better be presented in a hypermedia environment in which clickable links offered different perspectives. According to some the possibilities of hypermedia correspond to post-modern and post-structuralist thinking: the intertextuality (Kristeva), the 'readerly' versus the 'writerly' text (Roland Barthes), the 'polyvocality' (Bakhtin), the deconstruction (Derrida), the ideological corrections (post-colonialism), and so on. The older transmission model of knowledge transfer no longer seems fit seen from these perspectives. What kinds of learning environments come into existence then?

Education and the contact zone

As a theoretical perspective we introduced the concept of the *contact zone* which we found linked up with the philosophy of our *Robinson Crusoe* environment. The *contact zone* was described by Mary Louise Pratt (1991) as a space in which ‘cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’ (1991: 34). Bizzell (1994) thinks that a reform of our subject area ‘language and literature’ can be enriched by such a perspective: after all in a *contact zone* the dominant culture is confronted with other perspectives. She not only hopes for a ‘clash’ but besides this also for a ‘productive dialogue with one another’ (Bizzell 1994: 165).

Again we can ascertain that the utopian perspective of the *contact zone* links up with the utopian perspective promised in the *hypertext/hypermedia* and the internet. Important to remember in the *contact zone* is that it is a utopia, and that it will probably just stay that as well. That access to the debate still is not guaranteed for everyone (and as a result has more chances of excluding people than any other medium today) and that – once in cyberspace – not everybody has the same rights since here, too, rhetorical skills are important. A new *technical educated* elite arises – a new symbolic capital. Let’s again lay Musil’s wisdom to heart. Even though it deals with newspapers, the quote also seems to apply to the new media: ‘For some reason newspapers are not the laboratories and experimental stations of the mind that they could be, to the public’s great benefit, but usually only its warehouses and stock exchanges’ (Musil 1996: 352).

2.3 Lecturers

What is the changing role of the teacher in the *contact zone* and *cyberspace*, or in this post-modern and digital world at large? First and foremost teachers experience language and literature how their subject domain and education in general is being challenged from the outside to redefine itself. For that matter, the subject domain is seeking to redefine itself as well. In short, we can notice that coming from the disciplines there is a movement from *literature* towards *culture*, while the professional market demands practical language and computer skills. If we take our professional responsibilities seriously, we will have to think about our subject domain and rethink how we can reconcile both trends (see Bérubé 1998). In other words, how the cultural perspective can enrich the digitization, and how digitization changes the culture. Not just *what* we teach is changing because of the internet; also *how* we teach is changing. People who use the internet create possibilities to connect various activities and various with each other.

A remarkable shift has to do with the fact that the boundary between research and education can blur. *Hypertext* environments often invite students to contribute through assignments which could be typified as a kind of research. The teacher-as-researcher which has been pleaded for a long time already gets a new chance on the internet. We asked our students to search the internet for critics’ arguments about novels, films, CDs, and so on; we asked students to look for representations of teachers in fiction; we asked them to look for comments about literacy in the media – such collections are an ideal basis for debate and insight into the different perspectives, they are the *contact zones* we were talking about earlier (see the course management system Claroline)^v. Very closely linked up with this is the thought that today’s teacher is inevitably forced to do research on the changing culture. The teacher becomes an anthropologist: ‘The educator as

anthropologist must work to understand which cultural materials are relevant to intellectual development. Then he or she needs to understand which trends are taking place in our culture. Meaningful intervention must take the form of working with these trends' (Papert 1980: 32). On-line education and research create possibilities to set up own research projects – including own questions – and to link these to other research. The relation theory-practice plays an important role in the digital environment. The most distinguished cultural scientists who have thought about the internet refer to their own educational practices, and describe this education as a form of research (Landow 1990, Bolter 1991, Lanham 1993).

And so we have arrived at a next possible role change: the teacher as designer. All the past arguments inevitably lead us to the conclusion that the teacher will create more and more learning environments (in which the teacher will then function as a *coach* or a *facilitator*). This last principle links up with the New London Group (1996) which also introduced the concept of 'design' to link up with recent developments of new forms of literacies. Education is described as a composition of processes and environments. The concept design implies the idea that 'learning and productivity are the results of the designs (structures) of the complex systems of people, environments, technology, beliefs, and texts' (New London Group 1996: 73). Other than the traditional learning environments – the school – enter the picture here as well: libraries, museums, television, newspapers, and so on (see also our [Dutch] website *The Museum and youth in the digital age*)^{vi}. Where are after all the borders between these institutions? After all, they are all being confronted with digitization and digital youth cultures. We will talk about these youngsters in the next section.

2.4 Youth

The audience in the classrooms has changed dramatically as well. We are more and more often confronted with the fact that media in general and digital media in particular play a central role in the formation of social and cultural identities. In any case: *cyberspace* is as natural to the digital generation as the book, the film and television are to past generations. We can also witness this shift in the relationships between older and younger generations. An anthropological insight emerges here: in a society where sudden and complex changes occur, the young very often teach their parents. Indeed it seems so that youngsters teach themselves these new skills with greater ease than the older people, and also fill in the future genres and literacies differently from what the elders had foreseen: 'Children are at the epicenter of the information revolution, ground zero of the digital world [...]' (Jon Katz 1996, in: Sefton-Green 1998: 1). In a time where changes are coming at us at a very fast pace, it seems to be an advantage if these are not hindered or paralysed by prejudice or tradition (see De Kerckhove 1997: vii). In the youth cultures 'border zones' (Giroux 1994) arise with a 'peer-based borderland Discourse' (Gee 1996: 162). These spaces are situated outside the traditional institutions and media (school and book) but still they are places where people learn. 'Border youth' includes a feeling of fragmentation of the world view, a crisis of the representations in the media, a loss of faith in the Great Stories, and so on. Cyberspace seems like the post-modern place par excellence: 'For many youths, meaning is en route, the media has become a substitute for experience, and what constitutes understanding is grounded in a decentered and diasporic world of difference, displacement, and exchanges' (Giroux 1994).

While some literature scientists are inclined to devote their attention to e-literature (see the experiments by Moulthrop, Joyce's and others), many more scientists believe that we ought to devote our attention to what is going on in youth cultures in general and *computer games* in particular. As such, Gee and other tone down the alarming reports about the decline of the literacy of the *back-to-basics* movement in which traditional methods (e.g. lecturing, learning by heart) and contents (e.g. the literary canon) are central. Gee (2003) finds: 'This might be an ideal recipe for the future Babbitts of the world, but it won't produce the kind of agile, analytical minds that will lead the high tech global age'. So where do youngsters learn this new literacy, then? According to Gee *computer games* are the new learning environments where they learn more than in certain schools: 'Learning isn't about memorizing isolated facts. It's about connecting and manipulating them' (Gee 2003). In short, Gee tries to convince us that we can serve our apprenticeship with the designers of computer games, which are announced as a kind of learning machines of the future. We should probably tone this down a bit as well, but we think it is essential nevertheless to have a profound look at what is going on with digitization in youth cultures and art. Or: how youngsters and artists *play* with and in the media. In what follows we will briefly address the role of digital art as a source of insight in these developments.

2.5 Art

It is complex to indicate exactly what we mean by digital art, but to us it seems an inevitable and necessary development that a lot of art is becoming digital. A while ago we were following the work of the Flemish digital artist Samyn, whose message seems to be: like all media, the new media need their own language and grammar, their own aesthetics. And to learn these, one should unlearn as well. Samyn described the *unlearning* as the fetishism of certain artists: the scent of oil paint in the visual arts or the extolled aroma of books and ink. These artists make their appearance as researchers of mediatisation: how do we live and/or survive in *cyberspace*? Or Samyn put it: 'I try to help Alice survive in Wonderland. Indeed, Alice reads, or perhaps better, looks in a book and wonders "what is the use of a book (...) without pictures or conversations?"' (Soetaert 2001). Samyn's work can be read as a variation to that question: what is the use of the *web* if all we can find is texts and pictures that we would have found in other media all the same? One can also wonder what the art of printing would amount to without literature. In other words, the question suggests itself what the internet would be without art^{vii}.

In this respect we find that all traditional institutions like schools, libraries, museums, and so on are going through an identity crisis. This crisis has a lot to do with the functions these institutions can have. It is also about functions that are perceived as contradictory, e.g. to conserve and study on the one hand, and to explain and dialogue on the other hand, because merely 'showing' has lost all its innocence. In any case we can not ignore the call to turn all museums into 'cultural accelerators' (De Kerckhove 1997:128). The recent *Documenta 11* was not seen as an art exhibition, for instance, but rather as a constellation of time and space in which the possibilities of art were put on display. Intendant Okwui Enwezor (in De Morgen, 8 June 2002) puts it this way: 'It is not possible anymore to show one dominant choice of one person. [...] Many bridges have to be crossed, many texts lifted out, many oeuvres awakened, and there is still a lot to rescue and restore'. What we learnt from this *Documenta* is that cultural studies and education ask questions about the literacy and the media of the future. And that the *Documenta* curators describe their environments as the *contact zones* that link up with

the new kind of curriculum we have pleaded for: ‘a radical questioning of the categories of the ‘fine arts’ and the anthropological foundations of Western culture, through a subversion of the traditional hierarchies and the divisions of knowledge’ (Catherine David, quoted in Strauven 1997: 25).

In *The Electronic Word* Richard Lanham (1993) writes that within the written culture – which started with the Greeks – there is a belief that we can look through a text instead of at it. The digital screen confronts us with the custom-made work, the rhetoric of what we see, in short: the design. There is no *web art* without technological know-how. Another difference which is blurring: the difference between technology and art. We have witnessed the most interesting educational and research projects in those places where philosophers, technologists and artists work together, exactly because the questions that arise from digitization can no longer be answered by one single discipline. By means of conclusion, we will consider what the consequences are for cultural studies in what follows.

3. Conclusion

Art, education, culture, schools, museums, universities and so on all seem to be looking for an identity, for new qualities. On the one hand as the result of a crisis of the traditional identities and institutions, on the other hand as the result of the rise of digitization. Where do we get the new insights for a theory and practice of digitization? Which disciplines can describe, guide and interpret the digital developments?

While we are finishing this article, we clicked on an e-mail sent to the American CultStud-list. Lachlan Brown formulates a suggestion: ‘I always thought that a more balanced interdisciplinary, cultural, approach is necessary combining modes of approach from sociology, government, education, the sciences of computing and IT, as well as design studies, culture, mediation and communication studies, philosophy and of course literary studies and art, as well as some useful analyses from lens and digital media studies’.

In all these disciplines (and there are more) you will find publications and conferences in which the digital revolution is centralised. In all these disciplines, people have been pleading for interdisciplinarity for a long time but it seems that precisely because of the digitization such an interdisciplinary perspective becomes ever more indispensable. Yet again a blurring of boundaries hits us through digitization: the blurring of the boundaries between scientific disciplines. At the same time we find that every discipline inevitably has its specific qualities and is, in fact, some sort of an ‘imaginary community’ with an own tradition and past. And has a specific vision on digitization. Inevitably most people look through coloured glasses – the glasses of the older media – at what is happening in and around the new media. This applies to theory as well as to the first practices: in this phase the *web design* and *interface* mimic the art of printing and the whole infrastructure surrounding it. At this moment a war is going on between the disciplines that consider the digital revolution as their heritage, or in any case as their research domain. This heritage is also claimed by the book culture in general, or the literature studies in particular. Not entirely unjustified, as we have indicated before. From a literary perspective it is claimed that some avant-garde texts were the first *hypertexts*. From a literary studies point of view it has been established that the post-modern and post-structuralist insights more or less come to life in the *hypertext*.

Hypertext, hypermedia, and so on appear as a way of thinking here, as a paradigm and a philosophy (See Landow 2003). But the digitization is a technology, a practice as well. A fascinating question for the future would be: how will theory and practice be in proportion to one another?

At this moment the theory seems far too imbedded in the book. This book wisdom is interesting in itself, but it loses credibility and meaningfulness every day if it does not consequently take part in the digital culture. The academic world is open to reasoning, but not quite enough to new practices. The academic world is trapped in an educational and publicational tradition which extricates itself from *cyberspace*. The most interesting ideas about the digital world originate from interdisciplinary environments in which technologists cooperate with artists, where practices are developed that support these theories, and vice versa. As Bolter notices: academics from the social sciences theorise about the new media, but they are inclined ‘to keep the two (use and theory) separate’ (Bolter 2003: 15). In short, ‘Our culture’s practical engagement with such digital forms as the World Wide Web may compel us to rethink the relationship of media theory and practice in the humanities’ (Bolter 2003: 16). There is a need for applied cultural studies, which study and practice the grammar of *hypertext, hypermedia, cyberspace*, and so on. We have called this grammar ‘design’. Looking for an overall concept to bring together the problems with which we are confronted and the disciplines that study them, ‘rhetoric’ seems a good choice to us.

For a long time, rhetoric was compared to a magic box with which we could persuade and tempt other people. To describe rhetoric as ornamentation implies that one would suggest that there is such a thing as an honest language with unambiguous messages. From a post-modern perspective we have become aware that our language and truths are always connected with a context. In other words, that everything is about rhetorics. We believe that the digitization confronts us more than ever with the *rhetorical turn*. We have learnt this via books as well as via the screen (not to mention life itself). We think it is exactly because of this that quite some interesting writers had trouble with the form through which to express themselves. Once again we would like to quote Musil, who wrote in his diary: ‘[...] the mistake with this book is that it is a book. That it has a cover, a back and page numbering. One should put some pages out of it on display, behind glass plates, and swap them from time to time. Then people would see what it is’ (translated from a quote in Offermans 1988: 55). Or perhaps: what it *merely* is. A technology, a tool with which we create culture and meaning. When technology changes, this has its consequences for the culture and meanings. One can expect from modern cultural studies that reflection on these changes is high on the agenda.

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ⁱ In cooperation with Luc Top: <http://simsim.ugent.be/courses/NL2000/>

ⁱⁱ In cooperation with Rob van Kranenburg:
<http://simsim.ugent.be/staff/rob/DigitalLiteracy/diggenderlevel2.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://simsim.ugent.be/courses/milieu>

^{iv} <http://memling.ugent.be/reizen>

^v <https://claroline.ugent.be>

^{vi} <http://memling.ugent.be/museum>

vii <http://simsim.ugent.be/courses/MnW/wonderland.htm>
Michaël Samyn's work: <http://entropy8zuper.org/>