

The Motif's Address. Or: Writing Resemblance

Abstract

In the digital domain techniques of marking and interlinking of image details had to be invented once again. What Aby Warburg did with pins and woolen threads – expressing pictorial relationships explicitly – now has been taken to the internet. Will this affect iconography?

Discourse on images in the age of the internet

Dear colleagues!

All of the speakers that appear at this conference deal with structure and with order on image collections. I will do so as well, focussing on a topographical order of images. I will come back to the notion of meaning that Martin Warnke has introduced to our assembly and there will be an outlook to the changes to this concept of meaning, taking into account recent technology, that I am sure Maximilian Schich will treat in still much more detail later.

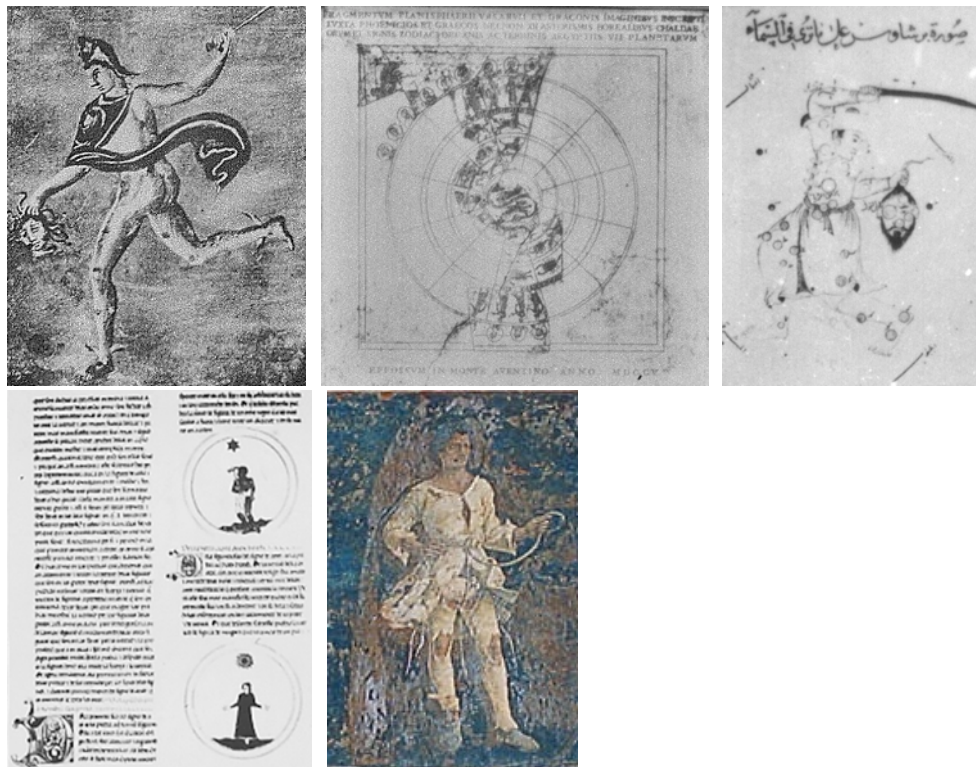
But let me first take up Lisa Dieckmann's presentation! She already has mentioned that we work together on the project Meta-Image, where prometheus provides for an amazing image archive along with approximately 10.000 experts as users. Humboldt University in Berlin and my group at Leuphana University in Lüneburg add ideas and technology for human discourse on those images.

When Aby Warburg structured his material he used his famous frames on which he put photographs of images.



In his writings he referred to these images as is possible with text and figures, describing what is to be seen in detail and in its wholeness. I guess that he prepared his publications with these frames, easily using pins and woolen threads to work out the chain of pictorial evidence, e. g. to exemplify how image details cling together, as they do in his famous Schifanoja-paper¹:

¹ Warburg, Aby: Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara. in: Wuttke, Dieter (Hrsg.): Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen. Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1980, S. 173–198.



The meaning of the last figure, the solution to an image riddle, is constituted by his ingeniously far-fetched interlinkage of images, the journey of the *Pathosgeste* through space and time Warburg became famous for.

But life was not only always easier in the times before the computer. It did not cause any difficulties to draw woolen connections from one item to the other, an exercise that is remarkably difficult to do in the internet. But the sheer materiality of photographs and frames caused problems of their own. To quote Aby Warburg:

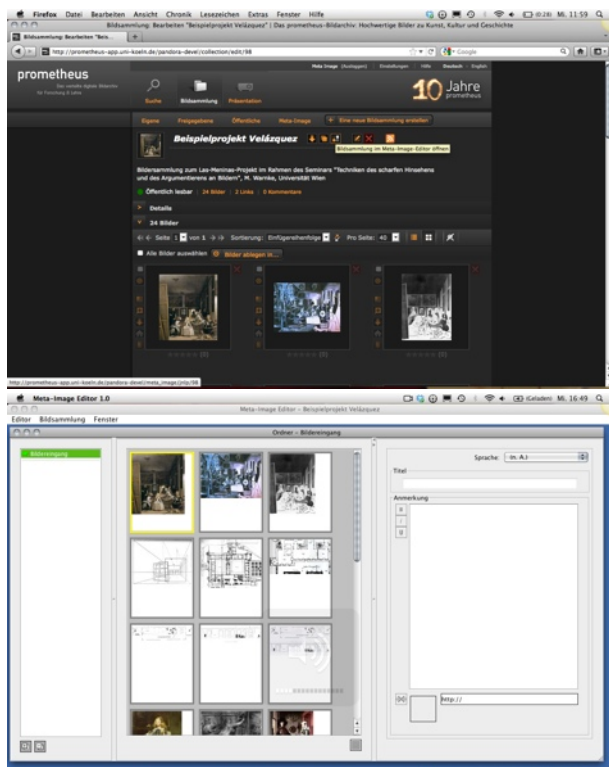
„The regrouping of the photo-plates is tedious. ... mass displacement within the photo plates. ... Pushing around frames with Freund. ... Difficulty: the placement of Duccio. ... The arrangement of plates in the hall causes unforeseen inner difficulties. ... Begun to cut out all the gods. ...”²

These hindrances are relatively easy to overcome in the digital domain, so solving the pointing-and-addressing-problem, reinventing a digital pin and thread, could and should lead to a situation, where we once again could work like Warburg. In case we are smart enough to do so, as is almost needless to add.

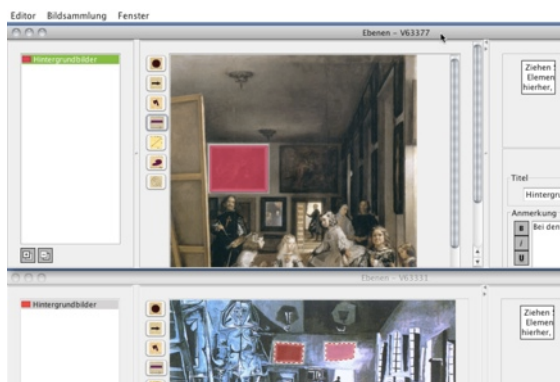
What had to be invented anew was the hypertextual link, known in text culture as footnote and as cross reference, but for the image. We did.

Having chosen images from the prometheus collection

² Quoted in Peter van Huisstede, „Der Mnemosyne-Atlas. Ein Laboratorium der Bildgeschichte,” in Aby Warburg, *Ekstatische Nympe . . . trauernder Flußgott; Portrait eines Gelehrten*, ed. Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 1955), 130–171. Translation by the author.



we then can work on this corpus by marking image details, in a sophisticated manner, zoomable, independant of the resolution, and interlinking them within the Meta-Image-editor.

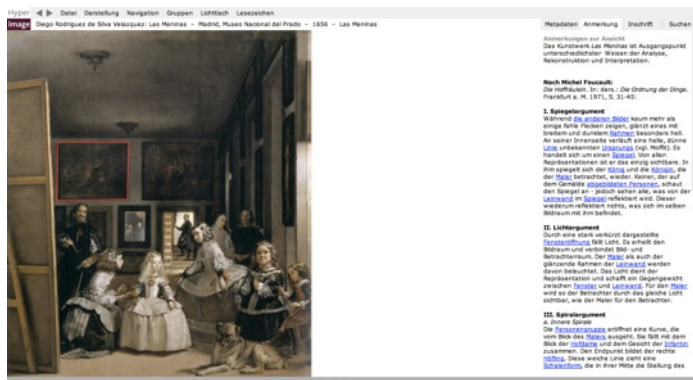


Movie MI_Linking

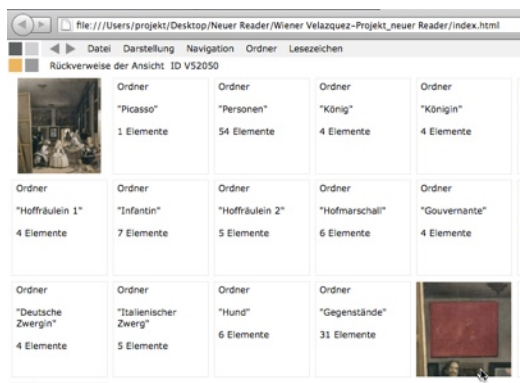
Instead of a woolen thread, a pointer, originating from the first image detail, indicates the connection to the second. What is done physically by poking the photographs with sharp needles and connecting them with a thread has to be accomplished by hand with the computer. Someone has to indicate manually the place and the form of the two motifs of interest and has to connect them by a drag-and-drop operation. All the internal book-keeping of addresses and pointers and polygons is done by the computer. The pointer, the hyperlink, replaces the woolen thread, and there is no limit to knitting a net of connections, independent of spacial or temporal resources. Images, their details, text, web addresses and groups of all of that can be interlinked and enriched by metadata.

This structure is then used in two ways: it is firstly brought to the attention of people in a human readable form via the web and secondly is exploited by the machine to compile indexes of various sorts. The readable version is prepared by the machine, it is immediately publishable on any

web server or to be inspected locally, using web technology. The link between the two image details on the Velasques and the Picasso is a hyperlink that is executed as any other hyperlink in the World Wide Web: by simply clicking at it:



The indexes mentioned consist, at the moment, of lists of all incoming and of all outgoing links.

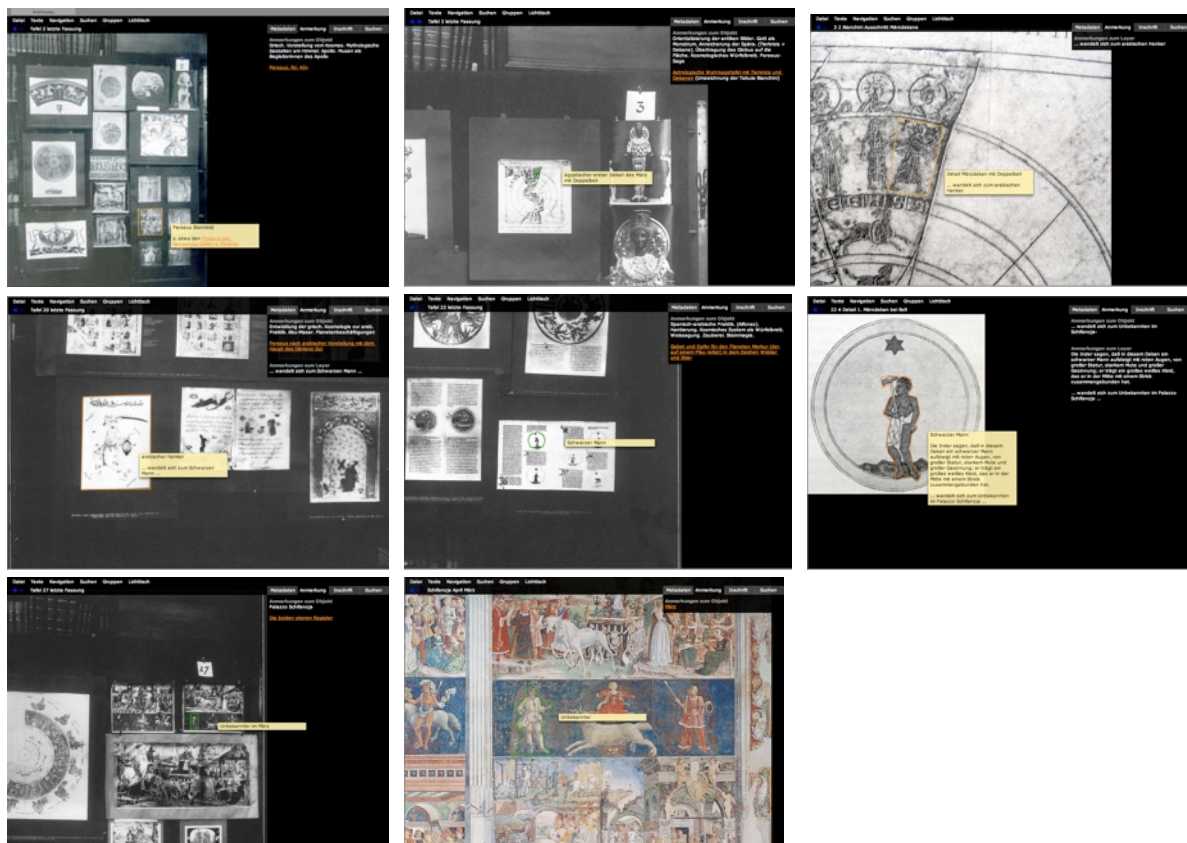


MI_Rückverweise

Please note: the resemblances have to be observed by the human intellect. No computer would be capable of doing so.

Following the argument Warburg did on the Schifanoja fresco would result in this chain of image details:

Mnemosyne lokal



Monographic examples

First I show you the rather didactic example about Velasques Meninas. It is a student's work from a seminar I did at Vienna University last year: Foucault's introduction to The Order of Things:

Meninas

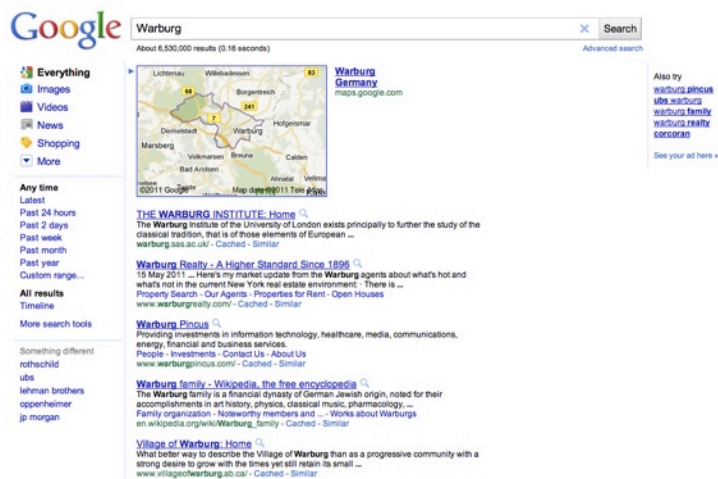
We learned this technique of image interlinking from a personal docuverse, the Ensembles by Anna Oppermann. As a contemporary of the early steps of the internet, she invented a kind of web as her personal artistic means. I show you excerpts from one work, the one installed in the Kunsthalle Hamburg:

AO Kunsthalle

What is the meaning of all of that? What is the meaning of a particular image within this image docuverse?

Meaning as (collective) observation and selection

What happens, if the image corpus is not fixed, if interlinking becomes a collective activity? The answer to this is waiting in the net: meaning is being created by linking. The meaning of a term in the World Wide Web is the place where it resides within its net of references:



Niklas Luhman told us about his *Zettelkasten*, which was to him what the World Wide Web is for us: "Every note is an element that gains its qualities only by virtue of the net of reference and cross-reference in the system."³ For him, the note was the node. And "[c]ontrary to the structure of updatable references, the importance of what is noted concretely is small."⁴ This was, following Philippe-Alain Michaud, not very far from Warburgs methodology: "The enigmatic formula 'Iconology of the interspace' Warburg used in his diary – an iconology that did not concern the meaning of the figures [...] but the manyfold relations that they took on in a complex, autonomous dispositive that could not be reduced to the order of the discourse – suggests that he thought of Mnemosyne being topographic from the beginning."⁵

Since the references are explicit in the Web, a machine can extract this meaning as a ranked index of terms. The top ranks of that kind of index itself is being used much more frequent than the less well ranked ones, reinforcing them as defining items. By that recursive and self-amplifying mechanism, meaning is constituted.

This resonates very well with the term „meaning“, „Sinn“, that Niklas Luhman introduced into his theory. Meaning is the medium in which selections are made, events becoming actual instead of remaining virtual, triggering new selections to actualize virtualities. And emergence of meaning takes place in a similar fashion in language. And Susanne Schumacher will show us her very clever methods of knitting image linkages with words, too. Think of the net of actual and virtual personal selections as being laid out explicitly and you arrive at something similar to the World Wide Web with its interlinked documents.

³ Niklas Luhmann, "Biographie, Attitüden, Zettelkasten," in Niklas Luhmann—Short Cuts, ed. Peter Gente, et al. (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2000). Translation by the author.

⁴ Niklas Luhmann, "Kommunikation mit Zettelkästen: Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in Öffentliche Meinung und sozialer Wandel, ed. Horst Baier et al. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981), 227. Translation by the author.

⁵ Philippe-Alain Michaud, »Zwischenreich. Mnemosyne, ou l'expressivité sans sujet«, in: Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, Nr. 70, Winter 1999-2000, S. 42-61. <http://trivium.revues.org/index373.html> Abs. 2. 8.11.2009. Transl. mw.

So with explicitly interlinked image detail references, a new way of constituting meaning becomes possible. By analyzing the web of references, it should be possible to get meaning that is personally and socially constructed and machine readable.

Actually, this is not fundamentally different from the constitution of meaning in a society. Also traditionally, the more important scholars had a bigger influence on the the definition of terms. By that, they became even more influential. But one difference will bring about new structures: what and who the most import and thus most influencial nodes of a net are, evolves and emerges from the net itself.

Iconology could turn into a social emergent phenomenon.

By analysis of the web of pictorial references it will be possible to find out, what the manyfold meanings of an image are, dynamically changing from person to person, from time to time, from place to place, or in its broadest sense, as the common meaning the masses gives to objects.

In case our technology really is adopted in a broad manner, we would be able to tell you first results, say within one year. Our application for funding a third and last year of Meta-Image exactly goes into the direction of this kind of network analysis. Surprises are guaranteed.