

Art History and Multimedia: An ArteFactual Approach

David R. Marshall

Department of Fine Arts (Art History and Cinema Studies)

The University of Melbourne

david_marshall@mac.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

This paper discusses a cluster of small projects based on the belief that multimedia in the humanities will be most effective when it becomes a flexible and responsive means of expression integrated with the working patterns of scholars in the humanities, which are centred on the practice of writing. Multimedia in the humanities today tends to employ massive resources to produce something visually impressive, but conceptually crude and inflexible. The projects described employ the 'QuickBooks' process as outlined in Fritze and Marshall (1995). An oral report will be presented on an exercise whereby students in the subject 'The Connoisseurship of Italian Landscape Painting' could produce their own multimedia projects as part of their course work. The paper below describes an experiment in using multimedia techniques to create a new genre of writing in art history. It presents a different model from the more familiar deconstructionist one developed by hypertext theorists, and may be described as 'ArteFactual'. Rather than being based on a reading of hypermedia as a technological expression of the 'death of the author', a phenomenon central to postmodern culture according to deconstructionism, it is based on the principle that the multimedia artefact should have the completeness and integrity expected in traditional models of the work of art, and should aspire to a certain timelessness in its construction which insulates it from the shifting sands of technological change. A navigation model called 'flexible branching' will be presented as a means of achieving these ends, together with a demonstration example called *Claude Lorrain's 'Landscape with the Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli'*.

Keywords

art history, multimedia

1. Art Historians Jumping Ship

New technologies have not been embraced with much enthusiasm in the humanities. Some are interested in multimedia, computer games, and other digital media from a critical perspective, as manifestations of contemporary mass culture. Information generated by traditional humanities methodologies is being repackaged as CD-ROMs. Some are interested in interactive responses as a tool for teaching. But few in the humanities actually write or make new discoveries or products using these new technologies. The reason is not hard to find: never have the humanities felt less close to science and technology than today. Science and technology are usually presented as the villains of the piece, as instruments of western patriarchal imperialist colonialist power. Even art historians, who, being concerned with images, might be expected to be more responsive to new imaging technologies, rarely make much use of them outside the quasi-scientific area of conservation, other than as the equivalent of a slide or photograph.

As Barbara Stafford puts it, in her *Artful science. Enlightenment entertainment and the eclipse of visual education*: 'Some art historians, in their haste to embrace structuralist and poststructuralist

interpretive strategies as a way of improving our lowly status, vis-à-vis the rest of the humanities and social studies, attempt to turn the visual arts into a 'language' whose grammar and syntax must be 'read'. At the moment when ocular expertise is most needed by scholars working in traditionally non-representational fields such as mathematics, law, medicine, book history—all about to be transformed by the image revolution—is our profession jumping ship?' (Stafford, 1994, p. 287).

Quite so. But then it is arguable whether Stafford makes much use of 'ocular expertise' herself, as distinct from methods of critical analysis of texts not uninfluenced by poststructuralism. But the point is well worth making, especially if we take it further and see it in the context of her wider argument which is concerned with the 'ocular' nature of eighteenth-century culture. Stafford's 'ocular' culture is a kind of play which does not lead to structured results. It is, she argues, associated with the aristocracy and the feminine, and was more or less suppressed with the triumph of bourgeois, masculinist scientific culture in the nineteenth century. She draws an analogy between the polemic of 'neoclassical' opposition to 'rococo' playfulness and the contemporary polemic of 'contentless' computer games and TV culture versus the 'old' verbal culture. The wheel, for Stafford, has come full circle, so that we can understand the contemporary situation by looking at that of the eighteenth century.

Stafford's framework potentially legitimises the use of new imaging technologies to legitimise a more 'ocular' approach to art history today. Where it might be particularly relevant is in what is loosely called connoisseurship. Defined at its crudest, connoisseurship is the skill of identifying who painted (or drew) what by eye. Defined more broadly, it is the process of drawing art historical conclusions primarily from the visual evidence. It touches on conservation and technical analysis on the one hand, and becomes unmanageable without the supporting framework of hard facts provided by documentary research on the other.

The trouble with connoisseurship is that, for those who 'embrace structuralist and poststructuralist interpretive strategies as a way of improving our lowly status vis-à-vis the rest of the humanities and social studies' it appears as narrowly positivistic, preoccupied with the no-longer-important, if not discredited, issue of the identity of the author. In practice connoisseurship today is directed to the bald question 'who dunnit, and when?' Besides, it is sullied by contact with the art market, and lacks conceptual subtlety. Even so, might not connoisseurship provide at least a point of departure for a model of art history to which 'ocular expertise' is central, and which new technologies might permit to develop in new and unexpected directions?

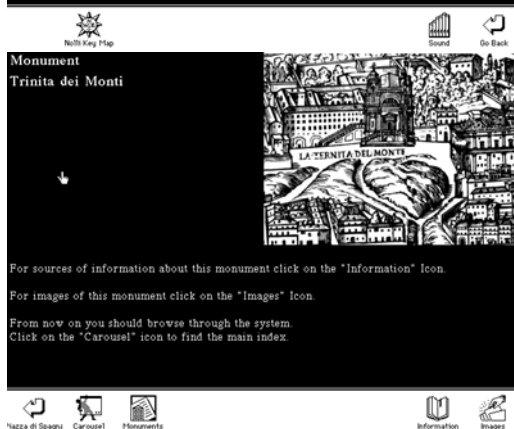
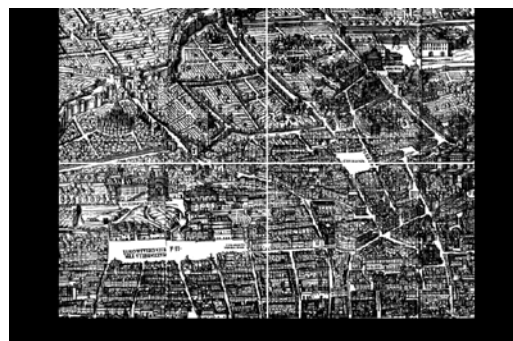
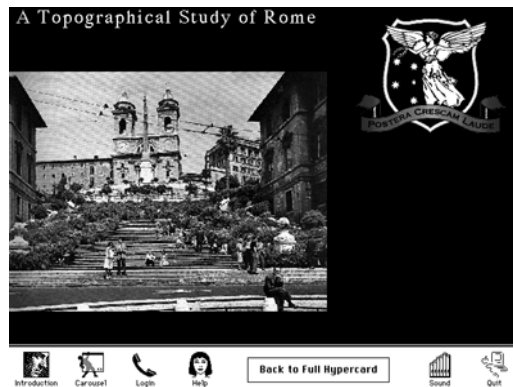
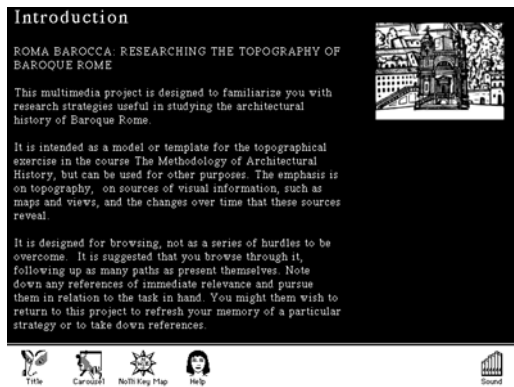
What distinguishes connoisseurship from other facets of art history, and especially literary criticism, is that it works by making connections. It is a process of seeing similarities between works of art. Those similarities, often of extreme visual, if not conceptual, subtlety, are embedded in the works themselves, and need never have been articulated in words before the connoisseur does so. It is primarily a visual process, well adapted to Stafford's 'ocular' culture.

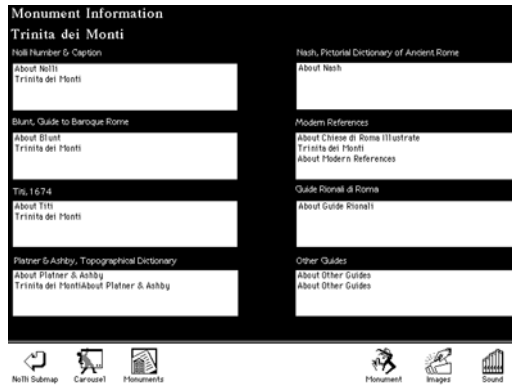
2. Models of Multimedia in the Humanities

Is there a multimedia model which might be employed with profit in the pursuit of a new model of connoisseurship? We might begin the search with what is now the standard model of multimedia publication in the humanities, the multimedia encyclopedia. Microsoft Art Gallery, initially developed for the Micro Gallery in the new wing of the National Gallery, London, is the most widely available example of relevance to art history. Others are being produced with increasing frequency for temporary exhibitions. These essentially consist of the repackaging of information arrived at by other means. One might need to employ writers to rewrite this information into screen-sized bites, but they are essentially external to art historical research itself. One typical recent example was developed for the Bernardo Strozzi exhibition in Genoa in mid 1995. When I played with it, it had plenty of bugs. The structural logic, not immediately apparent, was in fact extremely simple. Essentially it consisted

of three of four different ways of indexing summaries of the entries found in the printed catalogue which accompanied the exhibition. It is a simple structure, and adapts itself to the amount of data available. That is, it is based on a number of cards, which may be two or two thousand.

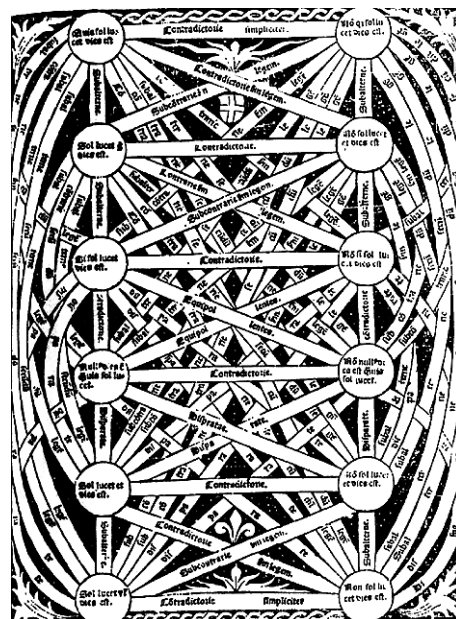
Another more complex example of the encyclopedia model was the sketch of a project which I did with John Swales of the then IMLU (Interactive Multimedia Learning Unit, University of Melbourne) a few years ago. This consisted of bringing together maps, photographs, paintings, information, and bibliographical advice relating to the monuments of Baroque Rome. The problem with this project was less that the navigation was underdeveloped and the concept needed refinement, but that the structure controlled the data, not the other way about. A pattern was imposed at the beginning, which set up various 'boxes', so to speak, which had to be filled. Some I had no trouble filling; for others I had nothing to say. If this project were publisher-driven, that problem could be overcome, and the data found. But it was hardly responsive to my needs as an art historian or as a teacher. It was more of straitjacket than a partner in research or teaching.





3. The Hypermedia Model

To a greater or less degree the theoretical model underlying all these projects is the radial, cross-linked model of hypertext theory illustrated by a 16th century woodcut of *The geometry of the mind*, from Juan de Celaya's *Exposito ... in primum tractatum Summularum Magistri Petri Hispani* (Paris, 1525) which I have taken from the cover of Delany and Landow's (1991) *Hypermedia and literary studies*.



The attraction of this model for literary theory is linked to the fact that it seems to provide a technological analogue for Derrida's ideas about intertextuality and de-centring. Instead of the linear, author-driven traditional text, we have a text with multiple possible paths controlled by the reader. 'Hypertext systems' write Landow and Delany, 'permit the individual reader to choose his or her own centre of investigation and experience' (Landow and Delany, 1991, p. 19). The ultimate hypertext, or rather hypermedia, system is, of course, the Internet.

By definition, then, a hypermedia system is fun for the reader, not the writer. In the case of the Internet there is, emphatically, no author. But does perhaps the structuring of the links, rather than what is linked, provide a role for the author? The author might be a kind of ringmaster, 'writing' a set of hot links to various fragments out there on the net, so that the uniqueness of the author's creation is the selection and rearrangement of these fragments. Some are certainly exploring this path.

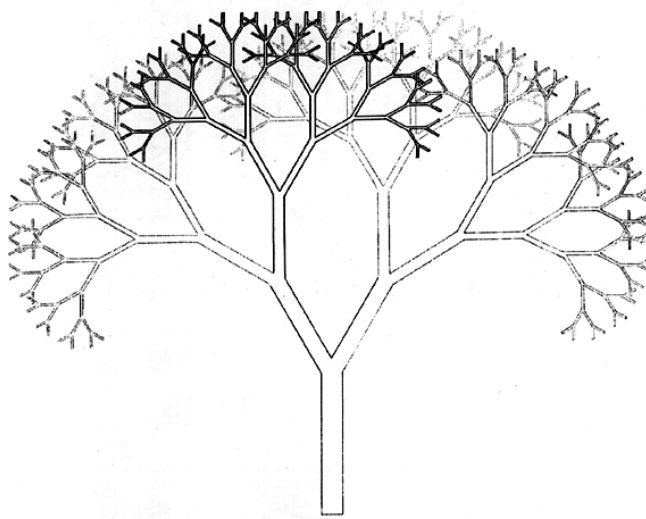
4. The ArtiFactual Approach

Even so, the role of ringmaster is hardly comparable to that of an author. It, accepts, and indeed makes a virtue of, the openness and incompleteness of the Internet. However important the Internet may become, the fact remains that incompleteness is psychologically unsatisfactory. The frustrations of being lost in cyberspace are real enough. To take it as an authorial model is not necessarily a good thing. From an authorial perspective, one wants to define the limits, to work out one's response with reference to the information available at that point, to complete it, set it loose, and go on to something else.

I would therefore like to propose a slightly different model, one which exploits the possibilities of new technology but which restores the prerogative to the author. It does not follow the hypermedia model and glorify the role of the 'reader', or make a virtue of incompleteness. We might call it an 'artifactual' approach, if we had little respect for the English language. If we had none at all we could call it the ArtiFactual approach.

5. Flexible Branching

It employs a structure which I call flexible branching. Instead of a fixed global pattern, which one must then fill up with data, flexible branching is a better fit for the connection-exploration process which is essential to the humanities, and fundamental to connoisseurship. Its model is a tree, such as this one in John Ruskin's *Modern painters* purporting to be by a clerk of works, but probably by Ruskin himself, which shows the growth system of a tree (Durant, 1986). Its fixed structure is a progressive outward branching or ramification, and the cross-links, instead of being free, are limited in number and for the most part pre-defined.



It must be admitted, though, that this model has practical difficulties. When does one stop? What gives it shape? Ruskin's tree has its organic limits—it doesn't ramify for ever. The simple ramification model, potentially, does so. What is there that might give it a 'natural' shape? I want to here propose two conceptual models.

6. The Sonnet

One is the 'sonnet' model. It is so called because it imposes a strict formal framework on the imagery. This framework involves the selection of a finite number of images, corresponding to the 14 lines of

the sonnet. The choice of the number 14 is, presumably, arbitrary; at the same time, it is conditioned by certain quasi-natural limitations. In a sonnet of 28 lines it might be difficult for both poet and audience to grasp the complex pattern of the endings of the lines. Similarly in visual relationships there might be an arbitrary, but at the same time quasi-natural number of images which leads to a satisfactory artefact. This number might be six. Vincent Scully has argued that human beings can only perceive six of any given units at once, without needing to count them (Scully, 1969, p. 52, p. 175, and p. 235, note 14). Hence, as Goalen argues, the eight-column unit created by the plinths of the colonnade of the Altes Museum, Berlin, by Schinkel, is in fact *perceived* as a series, not as a unit (Goalen, 1991, pp. 33-34).

The sonnet model might not therefore be completely arbitrary in this sense. Even so, it is open to the objection that it is historically arbitrary. To select works by a certain artist, or with a certain subject, painted for a certain patron, has some point; to select works based on visual similarity, prior to the establishment of any historical connection, is surely quite arbitrary. But this privileging of verbal, or hard conceptual, data may be construed as an aspect of that 'positivist' or 'masculinist' approach to which Stafford refers. A truly ocular culture would make its selections on visual criteria. And such criteria would not be of the form 'all objects containing something looking like form X', but something much deeper, if less definitive: 'objects with visual affinities with each other'. The pattern would not be a string of strictly defined boxes, but a ring of boxes with lines, not to the centre, but to each other, and of varying thicknesses. The object with no strings, or only a few, does not fit. So our mode of selecting according to a visual culture would involve mixing and matching objects to find a set with a sufficiently complex sense of interconnections that it provides a psychologically satisfying sense of unity. It would be intuitive; feminine, if you like: but if we accept the premises of Stafford, these are the properties of visual knowledge. A selection based on these principles might be, but need not be, arbitrary. A good half of the research project would be in the sorting and selecting so as to correctly intuit the deeper relationships. Numerous combinations would be discarded, intuitively, until a set that works is found. The fact that the number of this set is fixed by the 'sonnet' form would not affect the fundamental unity of the selection. This part of the research process, then, would be ocular, that is, pre-positivist, or neo-pre-positivist; a Baroque *Kunstkammer* as opposed to a scientifically classified nineteenth-century museum.

7. The Fuzzy Tree

The other model is closer to our original tree image. It postulates that the data itself will have its natural limits. It postulates that the world of culture is like a tree, with thick trunks, branches of increasing slenderness, and eventually fuzzy foliage which gradually fades away into nothing. If we follow up our connections without prejudice, we will reach a point where all the connections we are making are at the fuzzy foliage level: each one not much different from the next, and each small and weak. In other words, pursuing the connections will produce diminishing returns, and provided that we have more or less reached the crown of the tree we are justified in losing interest in pursuing connections further.

8. The ArteFactual Approach in Practice

Having reached the limits of speculation, it is now time to come down to earth, and produce the artefact. What I want to show is a model of such an artefact, which conforms to the fuzzy tree rather than the sonnet model. It consists of two QuickBooks: that is, QuickTime movie frames controlled by HyperCard. The first is essentially an index. The second contains the data.

The index is a sequence of screens, one leading from the next. Each screen of the index shows an image of the starting point, with various branches leading off. The first, or root image, is a single painting, the subject of the artefact. In this case it is Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with the Temple of*

the Sibyl at Tivoli in the National Gallery of Victoria. Its first branches are created from the first data screen, which is a verbal description, at the most basic level, of its content. Each of the branches lead to other branches, until there are no further connections. In this example there are three levels of branching, although potentially there is no limit.

Primary Index Go to... More of the Index...

1 Piping Shepherd

2 Cattle

3 Rivulets and Cascades

4 Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli

5 Foliage

6 Hills

7 Sun Hidden Behind Bank

8 Clouds

9

10

Description of Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with the Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli*.

1 CLOSE Click the box you want... Big box for backwards

Index 4 Go to... More of the Index...

1 The Temple Today

2 Jan Breughel in Kassel

3 Willem Van Nieulandt in Warsaw

4 School of Napoletano

5

6

7

8

9

10

The Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli

4 CLOSE Click the box you want... Big box for backwards

Index 4.3 Go to...

1 Gaspar Van Wittel Tivoli View

2 Filippo Napoletano Prague

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

School of Napoletano

5 CLOSE Click the box you want... Big box for backwards

4. The Temple Page 1 of 2

The temple is based on the so-called "Temple of the Sibyl" at Tivoli. It first appears in landscape paintings with Jan Breughel (Kassel), and was painted by Willem Van Nieulandt the Younger, among others.

INDEXES Click on words in blue to follow up the point 4

4.4 Filippo Napoletano (school) Page 4 of 5

A Capriccio Landscape of Tivoli with the Temple of the Sibyl

The temple of the Sibyl is seen more or less as it should be in this position, as is the *Cascata*, or main waterfall. The large plume and the subsidiary cascades refer to the many side cascades in this area.

The town of Tivoli has been suppressed and replaced by the central tree.

The building with hanging vegetation and the hint of a broken arch corresponds to the building with a stump of an arch in van Wittel.

INDEXES Click on words in blue to follow up the point 14

4.4 Filippo Napoletano (school) Page 5 of 5

A Capriccio Landscape of Tivoli with the Temple of the Sibyl

The painting is small and evidently of modest quality. It was attributed to a follower of Bartholomeus Ereenberg, but it looks closer to Napoletano and Wals. It bears a significant relationship to the Prague Napoletano. The dense central mass of foliage is found in both, but in no other early versions of the subject. Both paintings have a flat sheet of water on the left side, and the juxtaposition of the images makes one aware that the water in the Prague picture is the banked up water of the Aniene behind the *cascata*, even if it is not in its correct topographical relationship to the temple.

INDEXES Click on words in blue to follow up the point 15

This scheme has certain advantages. First, it mirrors the following up of footnotes from one publication to another which is one of the main techniques of humanities research. Second, it is quite possible to keep mental track of the whole thing as one writes: higher levels of branching are written as sequential pages, as one naturally wants to write them. Third, provided one researches outwards from one's starting point, the system is complete at all times. There are no empty boxes which must be filled. The artefact may be as simple as two screens or as complex as you like.

So much for the structure. What about the content? One cannot expect a radical departure from the kind of content already found in art historical accounts. The material we have to work with has not changed, only the way we organise and present it. We can describe a work. We can compare it to others. We can compare the image to the site it refers to. We can read the literature on each work. We can ask questions about the work and the artist who produced it and seek to answer them. We can ask

topographical or historical questions of the site and try to find answers. And we can continue outwards as far as we like into the wider culture in which the work is situated, being aware as we do so that the broader the cultural relationships the less relevant they will be to this mode of research and presentation. A visual culture is about things, and relationships between things take priority over investing things with abstract ideas.

In the end, what we have is not so much new discoveries, as a new genre of writing. But this is not negligible. For in art history there are few new discoveries in the sense of new paintings appearing or new documents emerging from the archives; it is the shift in genres of writing about art which make the real changes, and prompt the re-examination of the old data in a new light. This process is often misread as theory establishing itself against the narrowly empirical; in reality it is a process of competing genres of writing. If the kind of approach I have sketched here has any usefulness it lies in the encouragement it gives the art historian to follow up connections without being reined in by a too narrow concept of relevance. In the end, this matters more than the technology or the product: indeed, it may be that the real value of multimedia lies in its usefulness as a tool for visual thinking: one which can construct active visualisations of conceptual structures.

9. References

- Delany, Paul and Landow, George P. (1991, paperback ed. 1994). *Hypermedia and literary studies*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London.
- Durant, Stuart, (1986). *Ornament. A survey of decoration since 1830*, Macdonald, London.
- Fritze, Paul and Marshall, David R. (1995). Using QuickBooks in teaching Art History. *Papers of the Apple University Consortium Conference*, University of Western Australia, Perth, 1995 .
- Goalen, Martin, (1991). Schinkel and Durand: The case of the Altes Museum. In Snodin, Michael (Ed.), *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A universal man*, Yale University Press in association with The Victoria and Albert Museum, New Haven and London.
- Ruskin, John *Modern Painters*, V, 1843-60, reproduced in
Scully, Vincent, (1969). *The earth, the temple, and the Gods*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria (1994). *Artful science. Enlightenment entertainment and the eclipse of visual education*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London.