COLLECTIVIZING THE BARR MODEL

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Abstract

The authors use data from Wikipedia to build a graph visualization of the evolution of artistic styles inspired by Alfred H. Barr’s poster for the 1936 Cubism & Abstract Art exhibition. Drawing from Wikipedia articles about persons and art styles, the authors construct a bi-partite network based on their mutual hyperlinks and assume relationships between styles if their respective articles are bridged by hyperlinks to and from person articles. The resulting visualization extends its model with respect to the number of covered styles, thus embedding it within a larger art-historical perspective as seen through the lens of Wikipedia.

When Alfred Barr designed his famous diagram [1] for the MoMA Cubism & Abstract Art exhibition of 1936, he drew upon his extensive art historical knowledge in order to visualize the evolution of modern art based on the relationships between various modern art movements. Relatively few featured artist names reflect a shift of perception of the developments of the arts away from interactions between individual geniuses to interactions between art collectives. The choice of these “isms” was, however, highly selective: Barr left out a number of movements that did not fit into his evolutionary model [2]. Thus, his diagram was highly acclaimed for its educational value, but also criticized for its selective point of view. The recent growth in availability of publicly available digital resources dedicated to art history makes it possible to address such criticism by again shifting the focus: Away from the interpretation of cultural developments through individuals to their collective interpretation through a large group of people. We assume such groups to represent a bigger variety of cultural viewpoints and expect that their aggregation will lead to results that express extended and sometimes also controversial interpretations of cultural developments. One source of collectively accumulated art historical knowledge is Wikipedia. Although, of course, not comparable to the work of dedicated scholars it has been shown that this collectively edited encyclopedia features accurate factual information to a high degree. Based on previous work [3], we therefore construct a bipartite network of links between Wikipedia articles about artists and about art movements. The underlying idea is that each movement is comprised of its members and that ties between movements are based on individuals acting as bridges between them. Similarly to our approach to use the Getty ULAN for identifying relevant person biographies, we now use the Getty AAT for identifying art movements. We also include art styles from before and after Modernism in order to show the styles featured in Barr’s diagram within a larger art-historical context. Figure 1 shows the resulting network, ranging from gothic art on the left to contemporary art styles on the right, while Fig. 2 shows a close-up on the styles featured in Barr’s diagram. It is interesting to observe that the Wikipedia-based visualization suggests Barr’s separation of geometrical and non-geometrical abstract art to be also rooted in a much longer tradition of parallel developments in architecture, decorative and fine arts, and that some German and Italian styles, let alone terms such as “Entartete Kunst”, have obviously been omitted for political reasons.

Fig. 1. Wikipedia articles about artistic styles connected through mutually referenced/referencing person articles. (© Doron Goldfarb)

Fig. 2. Close-up on modern art styles. (© Doron Goldfarb)

References and Notes

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