Light into Darkness

The Significance of Glowworms and Fireflies in European Culture

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“There (...) were literally thousands of tiny luminous objects that glowed in the black sky like fireflies.”

John Glenn, 1962
Glühwürmchen-Jdyll.

Wisst ihr auch, warum bei Nacht die Funken sprühen? Kenna die geheime Macht, durch die sie glühen? Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen flimmern, Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen schimmern.
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die Funken sprühen?
Könnt ihr die geheime Macht,
durch die sie glühen?
Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen flummre,
Glühwürmchen, Glühwürmchen schimmre.
Questions:

1. Which semantic fields, significations, cognitive and emotive **connotations** are connected with lampyrids?
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1. Which semantic fields, significations, cognitive and emotive connotations are connected with lampyrids?

2. How are these connotations connected with features of lampyrids?
Method:

1

Collecting significations, connotations
connotations
Method:

1
Collecting significations, connotations

2
Semiotics: theory of signs
→ relation between sign and signification
C. S. Peirce (1839-1914): triadic structure of signs
Interpretant
„mental concept“

Sign
„signifier“

Object
„signified“
Interpretant
‟mental concept‟

Sign
‟signifier‟
firefly

Object
‟signified‟
hope in darkness
Interpretant

**Sign**  

**Icon** →  

**Object**

iconic: similarity, resemblance (e.g. picture, painting)
Indexical: causal relation, correlation in space or time
Method:

1
Collecting significations, connotations

2
Semiotics: theory of signs
→ relation between sign and signification

3
Finding features of lampyrids
evoking as iconic or indexical signs
the different connotations
→ „nodes“ in the network of connotations
nodes

- flash
- direction
- mating
- season
- light
building up the connotation network
Silke Silkeborg, Smaragdsoen. Oil on canvas 2009
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

A Midsummer Night’s Dream
(V 1, 23)
William Shakespeare 1596
Fireflies in the Dark
The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin

by Susan Goldman Rubin

New York, 2000
Hand written program for a children´s play in concentration camp of Terezin

Czech children´s book classic „Fireflies“ by Jan Karafiát
„(beings with) small light“

Italian  lucciona
French  luciole
Czech  světluška
Croatian  svitac
Local names and dialect forms:

Portuguese: ~40 variants

Italian: ~480 dialect names
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„Few insects rivalize in popular reputation with the glowworm.“

Jean-Pierre Fabre
Souvenirs entomologiques, 1907
Greek and Roman antiquity:

Distinction of only a dozen of beetle „species“

⇒ among these: firefly
Fireflies indicate time for sowing millet „thanks to Nature's unbelievable kindness.“

Latin panicium: millet

Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus, AD 23 – AD 79)
Fireflies in the agricultural calendar (Northern Italy)

→ mow the meadows

→ wheat gets ripe
local names „paniola“ (Italian pane: bread) and „panicarola“ (Latin panicium: millet)…
summer solstice (June 24) → St. John’s Day

Sunnawendkäferchen (Bavarian), Johanniswürmchen (German), jonvabalai (Lithuanian), szentjánosbogár (Hungarian)...
Glühwürmchen glimmre
~1900
Glühwürmchen-Idyll

Die vier Takte zwischen ♩ ♩ können übersprungen werden.

Tempo di Gavotte.

Paul Lincke.

Copyright 1902 by Apollo-Verlag, Berlin.
Italian **lucciola**: prostitute

Latin **noctiluca**: prostitute

cf. **Lampyris noctiluca**
lights leading to doom

“fox fire”
“will-o-the-wisp”
“elf lights”
...

swamp gas?
When the moon is on the wave,
And the glow-worm in the grass,
And the meteor on the grave,
And the wisp on the morass...

Lord Byron: Manfred (1817)
Elves

Arthur Hughes (1832-1915):
Midsommers Eve
Thomas Walch (early 20th century)
“Events are like fireflies glowing much too short to illuminate the landscape. The history beside the events has to be reconstructed like the surrounding dark landscape.”

Fernand Braudel: History as key to the world (1941/2011)
“Words are like fireflies sparkling in the dark night”

Nikolaj Zabolockij: Fireflies (poem, 1949)
“...human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness.

Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of — the present moment. “

Nadine Gordimer: The Flash of Fireflies (1976)
What is life?

It is the flash of a firefly in the night.
It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime.
It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

attributed to Crowfoot (ca 1830-1890),
chief of the Canadian Blackfoot tribe
„There are no more fireflies“

→ sign for radical change in culture, economy, landscape

Pier Paolo Pasolini:

Articolo delle lucciole

Corriere della Sera, Milano 1974
„There are still some fireflies“

Georges Didi-Hubermann:
Survivance des lucioles
Conclusion
The connotation network of glowworm/firefly in Western culture is extraordinarily rich.
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The connotations lead to essential fields of human experience like hope and doom, agriculture and habitat change, love and sexuality and last but not least to the narrowness of our words, our cognition and even the fleetingness of our life.
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Although, the observer is normally not aware of the full richness of significances, the extraordinary complexity of connotations is an important factor for the fascination produced by fireflies during summer nights.
Lucciola/Firefly/Glühwürmchen...

as name for hotels, restaurants, drinks, candies, nail polish, fashion lines, boats, ships, military operations, spaceships (movies), car rental...
An AT&T Exclusive

WITH FIREFLY TECHNOLOGY

...phone technology etc.
Dominant connotations change during history according to changes of the cultural context.
modern times
Interpretant

Symbolic: convention connects sign with object (e.g. words)

astronaut
Interpretant

Sign \(\rightarrow\) Index \(\rightarrow\) Object

Indexical: causal relation, correlation in space or time
Interpretant

Sign  Index  Object

„St. John´s Beetle“  St. John´s Day

Indexical: causal relation, correlation in space or time
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Interpretant

Sign  Index  →  Object

Indexical: causal relation, correlation in space or time
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Firefly Femme Fatale
(James E. Lloyd 1965)

→ Photuris sp.
Silke Silkeborg, Achenberg. Oil on wood 2013
„Connotation is the entity of all cultural unities that may be put into the play from an intensional definition of a significans.“ (Umberto Eco, 1972/2002)

including cognitive and emotive connotations

connotations of one significans may lead to opposite semantic fields (e.g. luck – doom)
Interpretant

Symbolic: convention connects sign with object (e.g. words)
glowworm
firefly
lampyrid
connotations?