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Mediation as connection and objection

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This paper engages with the notion of *mediation* as the simultaneous process of establishing a connection and making an objection. The paper highlights the mediations which are carried out by three portable technologies during visitor's encounters with a modern museum of natural history located in Svendborg, Fyn, and it discusses the implications for the exhibition design.

To mediate is to associate, to communicate between two parties, and - inspired by the work of philosopher and cultural theorist Michel Serres and philosopher of technology Bruno Latour – the term mediation can be expanded as the simultaneous establishing of a connection and the distortion which also takes place in the connection. Mediation is not a simple transportation of meaning, unaltered, through a mute and passive intermediary. It is invention, distortion and even to a certain degree betrayal. Mediation – the making of relations – has transformative aspects; the mediator changes what it mediates. With the connection also emerge displacement, drift and invention. The mediator both connects and objects (Latour 2005).

At the museum of natural history, Naturama, connections between visitors and the museum exhibition are facilitated by exercise pamphlets, mobile phone cameras and animal costumes. These three portable technologies establish relations; with them associations between visitors and the exhibition emerge and characteristic versions of both the museum visitor and the museum exhibition are enacted. Visitors with exercise pamphlets conjure an exhibition which assumes the form of text; information is stashed in compartments and visitors dig it out and move it from computers and posters to the empty stomachs of pamphlets. Visitors with mobile phone cameras conjure an exhibition which assumes the form of visual image; beauty is collected in digital images and deposited in jeans pockets. Visitors with animal costumes conjure an exhibition which assumes the form of a site for embodied, imagined and dramatized encounters; visitors snarl, growl and hunt.

Exercise pamphlets, mobile phone cameras and dress-up costumes link visitors with the exhibition, but they simultaneously shape the relation in their own specific direction. In this sense the portable technologies make an objection to the exhibition. Each portable technology mediates a characteristic mode of visiting; a characteristic pattern of activity and interaction. The exhibition is enacted in three related – but not congruent versions. Portable technologies stitch together a version of the exhibition which fits them. They fixate and hold the exhibition, and they transform and distort it; in this sense they are betrayers who deceive the exhibition.

But the exhibition itself is a betrayer. The exhibition is neither God nor the Queen, but also a mediator and thus a broker and a cheat. The exhibition is devised to communicate science, to mediate between natural

history and the public, but the exhibition does so in accordance with its own desires. Science is transformed as it is communicated, it is manipulated into place, molded into specific forms (Macdonald 2005). And thus, both the exhibition and the portable technologies are messengers, designated – designed – to communicate, and they are disloyal delegates who translate the message so it best fits their own tongue. Metaphorically, we might say that the exhibition archangel is flanked by multiple other angels; seraphs and cherubs. They all bear messages, mediate between worlds, and their overlapping interactions are what Serres calls “the intercommunication of message-bearing systems” (Serres 1993, translated 1995). The singularity of one order is dispersed into a disorderly multiplicity. Angels are capable of order, procession and homogeneity, but they are themselves also diffusion and disorder. They embody distribution, hubbub and turbulent comings and goings. The exhibition archangel, facilitated and disturbed by a swarm of other messengers, communicates the Science of nature to visitors.

An exhibition is a design which is conceived to communicate in specific ways, to achieve specific goals in relation to visitors. Museums – and other leisure, tourist or experience sites – create a material landscape and a constellation of objects and mediating technologies which have the job of delivering messages - education, entertainment, information and inspiration. These sites are designed as spaces which attempt to create specific kinds of experience, but what kind of experience is created – how the design is enacted – is a case of negotiation which takes place as the design is used. Design is enacted in practice and evolves in practice. A design – any design – is continuously worked and reworked, negotiated and renegotiated by users. (Boztepe 2009; Ehn 1993, Ehn & Kyng 1991). Building on this insight from design studies and engaging with the notion of mediation shows how the museum exhibition is subjected to continuous negotiation. The exhibition becomes a point of connection and objection; it becomes an intersection, a gathering where multiple hybrid users mingle, where mediations intersect, and – inspired by the words of Serres – where there is bustle, commotion, clamor and hubbub.