**Wellcome Collection Reading Room: Reflect Reading**

*By Marcel Knochelmann, London, October 2015 / 925 words*

“Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media.” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 1). Niklas Luhmann once deciphered mass media as the lens through which a society learns about the world, its history, present, and – by combination – its future. Luhmann’s theory is an inspiring, but also frightening perspective on mass media. Can this perspective be translated into a space in which media is devoured? And furthermore, can a person’s view on the world be directly extended by the person’s physical environment? The Wellcome Collection Reading Room (from here on WCRR) attempts to.

It’s a hybrid of library, gallery, and public living room. A place where books (still a major mass medium) are not sorted by classic fields of study, nor by the name of its author. Visitors are invited to leave notes on bookmarks, or whole stories on sketch papers (a very physical form of social reading). Everyone shall see who was there, and what they felt. In addition, there are surprising encounters: visitors can try on a straightjacket, conduct a Rorschach test, or play medical board games.

Most of all, the WCRR is a place where a visitor can read about the discovery of shin bones in a facsimile of a 19th century anatomy book – and when he looks up he sees the rusty saw with which legs were amputated in those very days. Literally, it’s a space that functions as an extension of the medium book. An inspiring place, and surely frightening now and then. But what is its actual purpose?

**Reading expands the experience horizon**

While reading, you are allowed to leave the present and dive into another world, experience unknown characters and places. Or at least, with non-fiction, you are about to learn something, to discover unknown facts. (Even though the facts of a 19th century anatomy book might be outdated today, the fact that they were new then are new to the reader today – that is why context matters.) This process supports Luhmann. When someone reads
about a tree and sees one afterwards, he knows it is a tree, because he read about it. Or someone else read about it and explained it to him.

The WCRR fosters this very process with connecting the environment with the content of the books. It is not always a direct link. It is rather the atmosphere of each section (e.g. Breath, Pain, Lives, Faith, Alchemy) that encourages the reader to re-think the content, to see the context of the content’s purpose. Thereby the object book steps back behind the experience – when you only want to read, you better get into the library next door. This reading room is not about reading. It is far too distracting for that.

Marshall McLuhan (2010) delivers an explanation for that. When he described media as the extension of man he referred to the book as the extension of the eye.¹ In this context, the WCRR is the extension of reading as a process. That is the major difference between an ordinary library reading room and the WCRR: It is about the reading process, not about the read content. But where does the process lead to?

**Lure the visitor into a creative state of mind**

The Wellcome Library which is located in the same building claims to be one of the “world’s major resources for the study of medical history” (Wellcome Library, 2015). At first sight, that seem to be a sufficient definition for the WCRR, too. But, surprisingly, it’s not about history. Despite the huge amount of objects about medical history, the WCRR comprises both historical relevant and today’s cutting-edge resources. Particularly worth mentioning is the virtual anatomy table: a large touch screen that enables the visitor to explore the human body – its muscles, skeleton, blood vessels, or skin – in 3D. Experiencing this in a room full of historical tools is indeed an inspiring combination: How far has the human race leaped forward by exploring and innovating!

One could suspect now that medicine in general is the main topic. But that is wrong, too. Due to its emphasis on connecting, the WCRR’s main topic cannot be found in the objects alone. One has to consider the subject, too. The main topic of the WCRR is the visitor.

That is not only recognisable through the many engaging activities offered in the room. It is visible on a meta level: When searching for the purpose of the WCRR, one will never

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¹ In McLuhan’s terminology, media refers to much more than the common sense of media.
find a suitable one but the attempt to create space for inspiration, to open the view, to lure the visitor into a creative state of mind. A purpose can even be to leave the visitor with a certain disquiet.

**The Wellcome Collection Reflection Room**

Coming back to the introductory question: Can a person’s view on the world be directly extended by the person’s physical environment? Maybe not in the sense of Luhmann’s mass media theory. We cannot know more than we have encountered through mass media. But the attempt of the WCRR turns the lens of mass media the other way around: it helps to reflect what we know, and why. The visitor of the WCRR has the opportunity to explore himself, and his very own trains of thoughts. It should hence be called Wellcome Collection Reflection Room. But many people would presumably shy away from such a proud name.

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