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The “Variantologia Latina” panel explores the deep roots of media history in Latin America, inquiring into phenomena which anticipate the concepts of network, photography and scientific tools before the 20th century.

Variantologia Latina

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The southern part of the two Americas was baptised Latin America in early modern times. By importing academic Europe's Esperanto, Latin thus became the label to characterise South American culture. This culture was defined from the perspective of the Latin-Christian civilisation. Active in the centre of this intellectual colonising process were the elite troupes of the Vatican, i.e. the congregation of the Jesuits. They were sent away from Rome by the pope in order to universalise the world in a single faith. Even the great GWF Hegel still understood South America's identity solely in relation to Christian Europe. "Variantologia Latina" as an experiment is working in an opposite direction. It proceeds from the assumption, that the different countries and regions of South America have developed their own knowledge and technology cultures as well as their own forms of linguistic expressions, their own music, machines and technical images long before and parallel to colonisation. The archaeology of South American media could carve out these developments from the deep-time developments of history and have them unfold within a new context. ISEA2010 RUHR is set to be the place for breaking the first ground.

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Interpreting New World Nature: Nieremberg's *Historia Naturæ* as a Palimpsest of Fantastic Literature

Revisions to our understanding of the Scientific Revolution in the history of science over the last several years, have prompted greater interest in subjects related to transcendental philosophy, colonial spaces, teratology and religious corporations such as the Jesuits. The Society of Jesus, since the time of its inception, exhibited a strong vocation for the accumulation of knowledge. A vast corpus of works written by Jesuits suggests their curricular diversity: theology, historiography, natural philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. In their schools, intellectual activity was heightened by newfound knowledge of cosmography and nature coming from the overseas missions. This information on remote regions and their inhabitants prompted the creation of a vast number of books on natural history.

The figure and work of the Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, professor of Holy Scripture and of natural history at the Imperial Jesuit College of Madrid, takes on an important role within the process of reevaluating Early Modern science. His more important scientific work *Historia Naturæ, Maxime Peregrinæ* (1635), compiles in encyclopedic form all knowledge about nature in New World regions that had remained dispersed in various manuscripts and printed works. [Fig. 1] Nieremberg's sources were in part derived from reports sent by Jesuits missionaries, as well as Spanish chronicles of the 16th century. He compiles this vast encyclopedia combining sources as the work of Francisco Hernández, Nicolás Monardes, Jean de Lery, Pierre larric, Giovanni Maffei, José de Acosta, Fernandez de Oviedo, André Thevet, etc. A piece of literature difficult to categorize, *Historia Naturæ* is a hybrid encompassing novelties, rarities and shocking natural occurrence, and it can be situated half way between the symbolic and allegoric natural history of Renaissance humanism and the morphological and taxonomical discipline

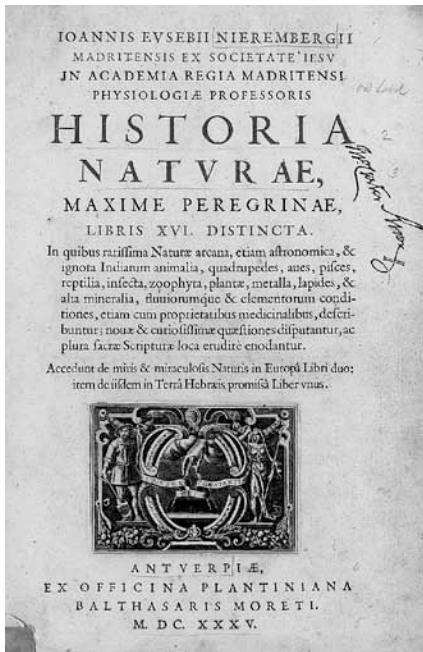


Fig. 1: Title page of *Historia Naturæ, Maxime Peregrinæ*. Antwerp: ex officina Plantiniana Balthasaris Moreti, 1635. Photo: Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

that will impose itself during the Enlightenment. *Historia Naturæ* follows the model of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in its division of plant and animal kingdoms, and in the inclusion of legends and stories to illustrate the peculiarities and rarities of nature. From this point of view we also find ourselves with what seems like a palimpsest or anthology of fantastic literature.

Nieremberg's book describes and classifies the flora and fauna of the New World, especially that of the Mexican region and the Andes of Peru, and includes information regarding the customs and rituals of the Aztecs and the Incas. Importantly, within his meticulous descriptions of nature Nieremberg preserves the indigenous names of plants and animals, in Nahuatl and Quechua and other indigenous languages. *Historia Naturæ* discusses a wide variety of phenomena and curiosities, particularly those of the New World. The accounts, chronicles, and reports of nature that were his authoritative sources, offered him a catalog of curiosities to sustain the most fantastic theories. Though operating at the center of the Jesuit world, Nieremberg manifests a tradition that is in great measure neoplatonic and inclined to the rationalization of fantastic events. Nieremberg forms what could be termed an aesthetic-theological theory of nature. He studies it as a harmonious entity of strange beauty, full of symbols through which one can understand or intuit the unseen work of the Creator. By explaining and justifying the existence of natural phenomena and curiosities, Nieremberg postulates an interpretation of nature in which even the existence of monsters and

miracles springs from a divine order and harmony. Nature is a sacred book where God has encoded his mysteries and wisdom. Nieremberg's task then is to interpret God's enigmas and derive from them a lesson consistent with Christian dogma.

In his dedication to the Archduke of Olivares, Nieremberg indicates the key to comprehending and reading his work: "I will make an interpretation of nature," an affirmation that defines the intellectual and cultural criteria of his natural history. Along with the systematic description of the natural world, he's interested in finding a hidden meaning to the flora and fauna he describes. The order of nature pertains to a sphere of knowledge that is inaccessible to him. But, his particular expertise as a scholar gives him the tools to literally read, interpret, and comment on the curiosities of nature.

Scarcely studied, *Historia Naturæ* has been labeled fantastic and unscientific, criticisms that miss the purpose and meaning of the book. It is above all else an exegesis of nature within the traditions of biblical commentaries and emblematic interpretation, similar in purpose to Nieremberg's works on biblical exegesis. Considering this fact helps to understand the work without the scientific prejudice of our times, and opens up the possibility of reading it for its imaginative and symbolic aspects.

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Novohispanic Imaginary

Light, Shadow and Diagrams

This text is set forth in consideration with a task we have already begun to engage in Mexico, whereby some of us researchers deem necessary to engage a genealogy of the relations between (relatively) contemporary art and media, alongside a reading through the prism of media theory that articulates an archeological notion of these elements. It appears increasingly necessary to bring about a first action of inscription for this mode of thought, structuring a program that covers not only the 20th century or current times, but one that reaches back in time to substantially inquire the formation of art-technique-science relations in the Novohispanic imaginary and as concerns the birth of a “criollo” historic consciousness.

Taking entanglement as a starting point, there are two texts crucial to the development of this proposal: *Deep Time of the Media, Towards an Archeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means* (Siegfried Zielinski), and *La luz imaginaria, Epistolario de Athanasius Kircher con los novohispanos* (Ignacio Osorio Romero) [*The Imaginary Light, Correspondence between Athanasius Kircher and the Novohispanics*]. As the result of a parallel reading, we were struck by a link that goes beyond a “confrontation of historical times” or what could be considered the influence of one line of thought on a diverse context.

Studies in cybernetics, nanotechnology and robotics became entangled with arduous (and dry, at first) readings regarding the astronomical science, that radical visionary proposal of the first studies in modern science of the Mexican baroque period, as put forth in the work of Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora (17th century). Another such entanglement occurred in relation to the notion of light and shadow as is manifest in the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; mainly in her classic “*Primer Sueño*” [*First Dream*], where all the attention seems to reside in the explicit associations and connections rooted in the neologism “*to kircherize*”. In attempting to contextualize this type of interpretation, we found these texts to be woven out of the tense postcolonial

gaze and its stance towards science, politics and Novohispanic religion, as well as from a line of the history of mentalities, where this type of recurrence tends to present a much more ideological tenor.

Except for a few elaborations from History of Science (the work of Elias Trabulse is of utter importance for this research), an approach that questions the notions of apparatus, machine, innovation and communication is practically inexistent within said context. Despite the importance placed during the 17th century (by Sigüenza y Góngora) and later, during the 18th century on the *time calculating machines* of "Ancient Mexico," most of the remaining texts centralize on "mentioning" the influence the ideas of Athanasius Kircher had on Novohispanics; or well, in developing absolutely instrumental genealogies of the "reproduction" of magic lanterns and other precinematic spectacles. Yet the repercussion is rather more complex than the reaches of said expositions. One clear example of this could be inquired as follows: Why do these studies center on the struggle for ideological emancipation, leaving aside the dynamic element, the "mechanic" potentiality, of the calendar wheels perceived as *diagrams*?

The critical vision that an interest in media theory generates does not abide in the instruments as such, but in the parallelisms. It is to be found in the trace of constellations based on the points of inflection that opened a phenomenon of visibility (or exposed its opposites: forget and obscuration) in a "Criollo" production centered on questioning the concept of invention. These points of inflection emanate from the relationship between art and science, specifically from the transformation of world-visions that emerged mainly through astronomy, the study of comets and eclipses, and the (military-commercial) obsession with the specific localization of the "Valley of Mexico." Analyzing certain key characters and their production of knowledge as signs of diversification, questions the discourse of the "distance between the centers of modernist effervescence." This route of inquiry will surely take us to another locus of production of meaning; one which is, alas, not that of *appropriationism*.