

# Inventions at the Borders of History

Re-significance of Media Technologies From Latin America

Research project developed at the Media Arts and Technology program,  
University of California Santa Barbara.

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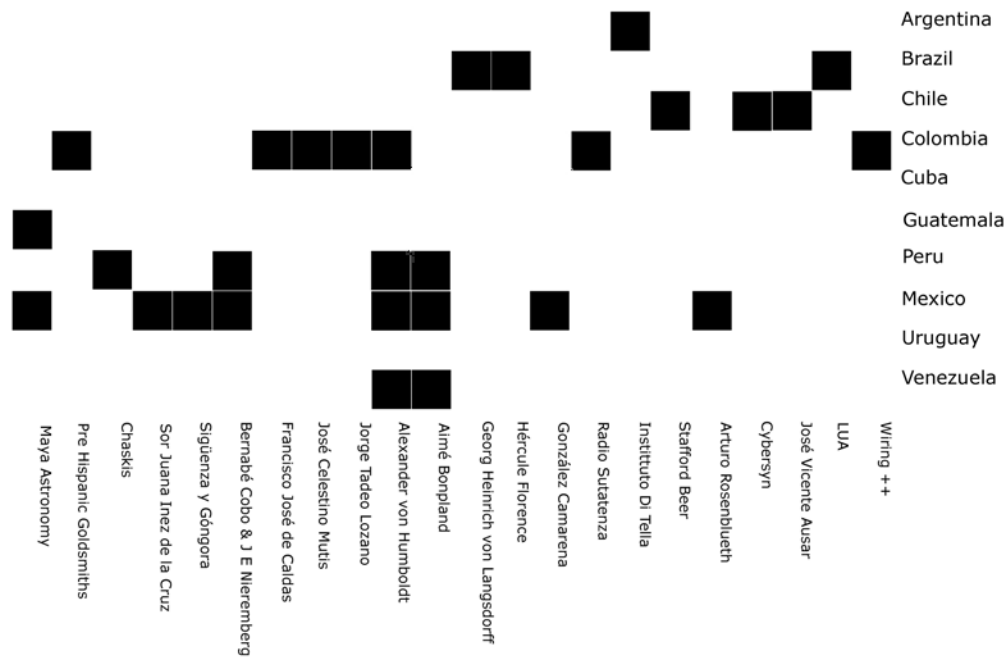
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“Inventions at the Borders of History, Re-significance of Media Technologies From Latin America” explores the emergence of influential sonic, visual and computational technologies such as photography, color television and computer music in Latin America in parallel with the development of mainstream technologies in the US and Europe. It investigates the reasons why and the way in which Latin American researchers developed technologies that remain widely unknown today. To do so this research establishes a close dialog with the discourse of media history and media archaeology, focusing on the invention process proposing a re-significance of the technologies studied on the basis of a theoretical and experimental approach.

This research started as a mapping exercise inspired by the cartographic proposal found in the conclusions to the book “Deep Time of the Media”. There Zielinski includes a series of abstract visual representations of geographical places like St. Petersburg, Riga, or Budapest exposing the clustering of stories relevant for a media archaeology. By focusing on those particular locations, he thereby suggests a “shift of geographical attention: From the North to the South from the West to the East”. Captivated by this intellectual proposal, I asked myself what could be the place of

Latin America in this cartography. This question challenged my former understanding and knowledge about the history of media, arts and technology in general and in particular about the role of Latin America in this history. The Latin American continent seemed to be invisible in the foundational processes of contemporary media. Putting in action the mapping exercise and bearing in mind what has been produced out of the well-known centers, I decided to visualize relevant potential case studies of the history of media, technology and art in Latin America. The eclectic collection that first emerged showed that the proposed field could be much larger and complex than anything I might have anticipated, since I was confronted in this first approach with more than eighty possible case studies.



Visualization 1 (Processing). Possible Case Studies of Media and Technology History in Latin America.

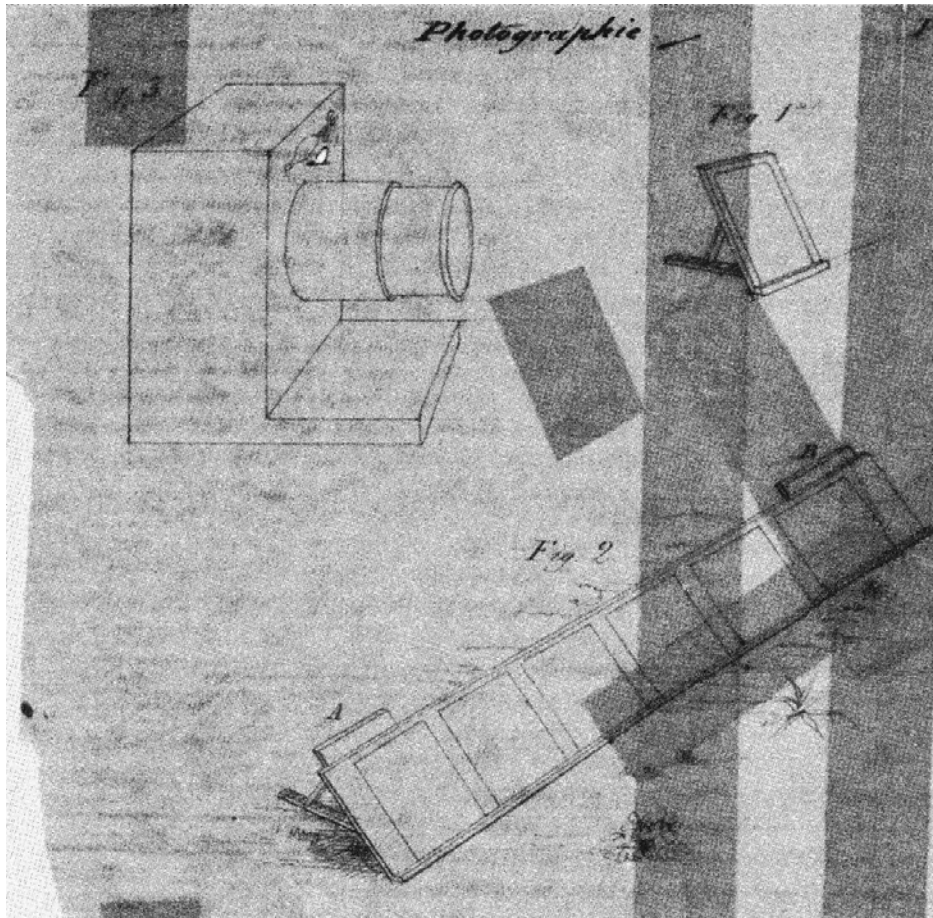
Andrés Burbano, 2009.

Until now historians have paid little attention to the processes of invention that constitute the core of this research and time has conspired to hide facts and artifacts. Except for some brilliant exceptions, there is no academic literature in English about these topics, indeed even in Spanish and Portuguese there is only a limited amount of academic literature about these topics and the representation that time to time local mass media makes of them tends to distort what the processes were really like, representing the inventors in a way that follows the tired pattern of isolated misunderstood geniuses that nowadays should be celebrated as local heroes. If there is a lack of academic literature or an insufficient amount of literature on the topic, we can infer that a theoretical framework to describe the problem is almost inexistent as well. Of all the three study cases that constitute the core of the research project we can count with only one scholarly book dedicated to the topic, the book "Hercules Florence: The Isolated Invention of Photography in Brazil" by professor Boris Kososy. However it is important to mention that despite the fact that the book was published in Portuguese in the seventies and had a second edition in the eighties, it was not printed again in Portuguese until 2006. It has been translated into Spanish, but there is no English translation.

At this moment I find useful to introduce the case studies one by one:

Case study 1: In 1839 in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Frenchman Hercule Florence publishes a curious letter, written in a bittersweet style, in the "A Phenix" newspaper. The letter is a reply to the announcement of the invention of the so-called Daguerreotype in France. In the letter Florence exposes two of his inventions, the second one is the result of his experiments on printing with light, or what he calls "Photographia". Florence claims that although he invented this procedure several years before the findings in Europe lately reported he is not going to dispute the invention in France with anybody else because "many people can have the same idea" and especially because "the results he got never satisfied him completely due to the limitations that he experienced while working on it." This letter is the Rosetta Stone that will allow

us to decipher what happened with Florence's invention of a photographic technique and why his efforts to draw attention to his work were unsuccessful.

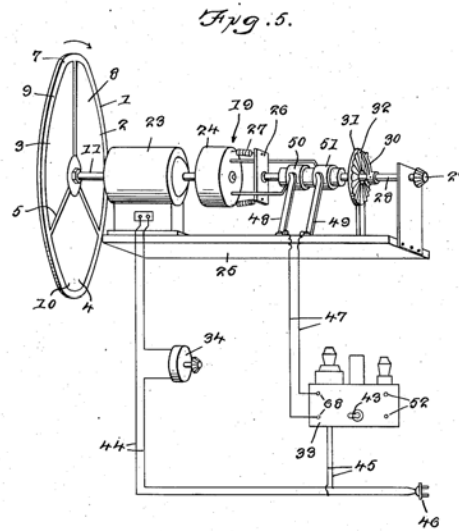


*"Photographie", drawing of Florence's photographic equipment around 1833, Hercules Florence, 1837.*

Case Study 2: In Mexico City in 1941, Guillermo González Camarena receives an official letter in response to his previous request to the Mexican Secretary of Communication and Public Affairs kindly asking for monetary help to obtain a patent in the United States for his "Chromoscopic Adapter for Color Television," an inexpensive set with two adapters for camera and television set that makes it possible to transform both into color television devices. The letter that he receives explains that unfortunately the Mexican government has no funds to support this kind of initiative. Thanks to a long and unique fundraising process Guillermo González Camarena would be able to receive the patent 2296019 for his color

television system in the United States in September 15 of 1942. This was the first of several patents that the Mexican engineer obtained and it is a testimony of his early technical and creative work on electro mechanical color television. This happened almost at the same time that the Hungarian inventor Peter Goldmak obtained a patent for a similar invention in the United States. Goldmark's invention was implemented by the CBS in the early years of color television broadcast in the United States.

Sept. 15, 1942. G. G. CAMARENA 2,296,019  
CHROMOSCOPIC ADAPTER FOR TELEVISION EQUIPMENT  
Filed Aug. 14, 1941 3 Sheets-Sheet 2



INVENTOR.  
Guillermo G. Camarena  
BY  
Victor J. Evans & Co.  
ATTORNEYS

Chromoscopic Adapter for Television Equipment. U.S. Patent by Guillermo González Camarena, 1941.

Case Study 3: In Santiago de Chile in 1980 José Vicente Asuar published in the Chilean Music Journal a paper entitled A System to Make Music with a Micro Computer. In that paper he describes in detail and in precise academic language the construction, implementation, development and results of “Computer Digital Analog Asuar COMDASUAR”, a microcomputer built by him in 1978 with the main purpose of composing music. Of course this task included writing the software in machine language and putting together all the necessary hardware. Asuar built the microcomputer after the acquisition of "the first truly usable microprocessor", the Intel 8080. In fact the construction of this computer is the result of almost ten years of previous experience working with other computers, like the PDP-8, to compose music. The Intel 8080 was the microprocessor used in the influential Altair 8080, the machine that started the fever for the personal computers in the United States, Bill Gates developed the first version of his BASIC for the Altair 8080.



*Long Play "Así Habló el Computador" made using Analog Digital Computer Asuar: COMDASUAR.  
Santiago de Chile, José Vicente Asuar, 1979.*

“Inventions at the Borders of History, Re-significance of Media Technologies From Latin America” is an exploration of a territory conceptually similar to an archipelago where topics look relatively far away, the task to navigate the common waters is challenging and there are plenty of risks. However what this dissertation proposes is that the islands in the archipelago (case studies) can be seen as instances of the same phenomena: Early processes of invention of media technologies.

The aforementioned media technologies have been forgotten and do not have a place in the canonical histories of their own fields: the case of Hercules Florence is barely mentioned in photography, the case of González-Camarena has no place in the history of color television and the role of José Vicente Asuar as one of the inventors of personal computers to process sound is left untouched. One might infer from this that these histories have no transcendence, and there is a high risk that if we fail to draw attention to the subject important information and details about these technologies will be lost. The idea is to resist the general conception that a technological process in Latin America has no place or lacks interest.

The experience I wanted to share with the reader is the one that I underwent as my research progressed, namely an experience of surprise at what I encountered as I explored unknown routes that opened up for me a highly significant constellation of phenomena in the complex history of the invention of media technologies in Latin America. I also wanted to show that this experience of “surprise” is also heavily loaded with ideological implications.

I believe that the renewal of discourses about Latin America can gain a lot from an engagement with the question concerning technology. This text is a modest attempt to articulate some thoughts around media and technology and about their role in a discourse that could challenge the modernity/colonialism, defining coloniality as “the dark side of the modern project”. As is the case with discourses connected with the history of science, an important ingredient in the proposition of new

perspectives for the study of Latin America in recent decades, I think that a reflection about the role of technology and media technology may allow us to find novel ways of negotiating and reframing inherited discursive assumptions.



*Experimental approach: Direct exposition, paper with gold chloride and negatives printed with Pictorico OHP, Bogota. Andrés Burbano, 2012.*



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Burbano, originally from Colombia, explores the interactions of science, art and technology in various capacities: as a researcher, as an individual artist and in collaborations with other artists and designers. Burbano's work ranges from documentary video (in both science and art), sound and telecommunication art to the exploration of algorithmic cinematic narratives. The broad spectrum of his work illustrates the importance, indeed, the prevalence, of interdisciplinary collaborative work in the field of media art. Andres Burbano holds a PhD in Media Arts and Technology from the University of California Santa Barbara and currently is Assistant Professor at the Design and Architecture School at Universidad de los Andes.