Abstract for Natura Conference “Envisioning Science”

Title: Simulated worlds: models of observation in Chaucer’s dream visions

Abstract: When observers are no longer neutral gatherers of information, but sites of information processing in their own right, knowledge of the internal world of the observer becomes necessary to contextualize their observations. The dream visions in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The House of Fame* demonstrate such a commitment to registering and observing richly visual mental states as worlds in themselves. The narrators discover enclosed spaces within their dreams—walled gardens, forests, and castles—which open expansive yet bounded worlds inside the narrators’ minds devoted to the processing of information and the comprehension of natural law. The dreamers discover microcosms of worlds that enable them to understand the conditions of possibility for observation itself. In these dream visions, what Niklas Luhmann calls the interface between “psychic” and “social” systems—the boundary of interaction between the mind and the external environment—is simplified to a process taking place entirely within the dreaming observer. When Chaucer simulates the world within the mind of a dream vision narrator, what can we learn about the way that observation is formulated in the fourteenth century? I read these dream visions as meditations on the capacity of the mind to spin out worlds from limited stimulus, and the consequences this faculty of the human mind has for understanding the physical world—including, in the works I will examine, instinct versus choice in animal and human reproduction, and the properties of sound and the resulting consequences for the transmission of information.