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Article abstract

This article explores one of the latest branches in the evolution of the bestiary genre in contemporary Hispanic literature, (di)simulating bestiaries. The bestiary, a literary genre that proliferated during the medieval period, drew attention with its illustrations and illuminations, as well as the allegories it featured, fulfilling a didactic, Christian function. Although new Hispanic bestiaries published in the past two decades respect the form of the bestiary, that is to say, the presentation of the message with a title, image, and short text, they also offer increasingly creative interpretations that play with the content of the genre. This article explores a subcategory of bestiaries, which through their content pose as other genres for ludic literary purposes. The present study focuses on *Animalia exstinta*, written by Esteban Seimandi, illustrated by Hugo Horita, and designed by Juan Cruz Bazterrica. Using Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and simulation, as well as surface and symptomatic reading, the article analyzes how *Animalia exstinta* simulates an environmental manifesto from fragments of contemporary Argentine culture and nostalgia.

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(Di)Simulation of the Bestiary Genre in *Animalia exstinta* by Esteban Seimandi, Hugo Horita, and Juan Cruz Bazterrica

*Este artículo explora una de las últimas ramas de la evolución del género del bestiario en la literatura hispánica contemporánea, los bestiarios (di)simuladores. El bestiario, género literario que se proliferó durante la época medieval, se destacaba por sus ilustraciones e iluminaciones, así como las alegorías que cumplían una función didáctica y cristiana. Si bien los nuevos bestiarios hispánicos publicados durante las últimas dos décadas respetan la forma del bestiario, es decir, la presentación del mensaje con título, imagen y breve texto, ofrecen también interpretaciones cada vez más creativas que juegan con el contenido del género. Este artículo explora un subgrupo de bestiarios, los cuales a través de su contenido se hacen pasar por otros géneros con fines lúdicos. Este estudio se enfoca en *Animalia exstinta*, escrito por Esteban Seimandi, ilustrado por Hugo Horita y diseñado por Juan Cruz Bazterrica. Utilizando los conceptos de simulacro y simulación de Jean Baudrillard, junto con lecturas superficiales y sintomáticas, el artículo analiza cómo *Animalia exstinta* simula un manifiesto medioambiental a partir de fragmentos culturales y nostálgicos de la Argentina contemporánea.*

Palabras clave: *lectura superficial, lectura sintomática, Baudrillard, ecocrítica, literatura contemporánea argentina*

*This article explores one of the latest branches in the evolution of the bestiary genre in contemporary Hispanic literature, (di)simulating bestiaries. The bestiary, a literary genre that proliferated during the medieval period, drew attention with its illustrations and illuminations, as well as the allegories it featured, fulfilling a didactic, Christian function. Although new Hispanic bestiaries published in the past two decades respect the form of the bestiary, that is to say, the presentation of the message with a title, image, and short text, they also offer increasingly creative interpretations that play with the content of the genre. This article explores a subcategory of bestiaries, which through their content pose as other genres for ludic literary purposes. The present study focuses on *Animalia exstinta*, written by Esteban Seimandi, illustrated by Hugo Horita, and designed by Juan Cruz Bazterrica. Using Jean*

Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and simulation, as well as surface and symptomatic reading, the article analyzes how Animalia exstinta simulates an environmental manifesto from fragments of contemporary Argentine culture and nostalgia.

Keywords: *surface reading, symptomatic reading, Baudrillard, simulation, contemporary Argentine literature*

The bestiary, a genre traditionally associated with medieval European society, is enjoying a resurgence in contemporary Hispanic literature. Inspired largely by the experimental bestiaries of Jorge Luis Borges, Juan José Arreola, Nicolás Guillén, Pablo Neruda, and Augusto Monterroso, dozens of authors have taken up the bestiary in the last two decades. Each parody of the genre expands the possibilities and defining characteristics of the bestiary, building on, and distancing it from its European, Christian roots. Some works, like Gabo Ferro's *200 años de monstruos y maravillas argentinas* (2015) and Carlos Ferrándiz's *Bestiario médico* (2000), replace animals with humans, leading to ecocritical discussions on pre-assumed hierarchies between the two, while others, like Norma Muñoz Ledo's *Bestiario de seres fantásticos mexicanos* (2016) and René Avilés Fabila's *Bestiario de seres prodigiosos* (2001), have a combative flare and employ the bestiary to undermine the official rhetoric of governmental and religious institutions. This new generation of bestiaries can be recognized by their form, intact despite the centuries the genre spans. Their content, however, now reflects new contexts. The present article examines a bestiary from this resurgence titled *Animalia exstinta* (2010), written by Esteban Seimandi, illustrated by Hugo Horita, and designed by Juan Cruz Bazterrica. The work is among the most radical of the new generations' interpretations because it manipulates the reader's suspension of disbelief. Through imaginary animals built from fragments of contemporary Argentine culture and nostalgia, *Animalia exstinta* dissimulates its status as bestiary, disguising itself as an environmentally conscious text instead.

To best analyze the play implicit in *Animalia exstinta*, a brief history of the bestiary genre is necessary. The medieval bestiary can be traced back to the anonymous work *Physiologus*, which originated in the second century A.D (Hassig 6). The entries featured in *Physiologus* were a blend of Indian, Hebrew, and Egyptian myths combined with Greek and Roman mythology, and infused Christian dogma, meant to indoctrinate readers through animal allegory (Curley ix). *Physiologus* offered the reader a catalogue of short texts on various beasts, trees, and even rocks. Different meanings were projected onto each animal in the belief that truth could be distilled from the dynamics

and peculiarities of nature, as during the medieval period it was believed that nature – beasts and birds in particular – were lessons by God for the instruction of human beings (Hassig xv). Laden with allegory, each animal was part of a hermeneutic that offered a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven, which was invisible but for the flashes that could be revealed through the cunning of a fox or the zeal of the bee.

Though pinpointing when *Physiologus* became a bestiary proves difficult, it is generally accepted to have been when a significant number of new chapters emerged, as well as when the material was combined with other sources. The conversion of *Physiologus* into a bestiary is better described as an evolution rather than a metamorphosis since, additions aside, much of *Physiologus* is featured intact in its medieval form.¹ The two works most combined with *Physiologus* were St. Ambrose's *Hexameron* (c. 370 A.D.) and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (c. 700 A.D.) (Barber 3). Though all bestiaries can be traced back to the three texts, the most immediate source for a bestiary was the authority of a previously written one, and the process was dependent on compilers, editors, and scribes. Although the vernacular translations of the bestiary boasted near-biblical status into the fifteenth century, the allegorical beast was phased out in favour of more scientific portrayals of nature.

Bestiaries, unlike *Physiologus*, were often decorated or had space for illustrations, particularly those translated into various languages from Latin (McCulloch 70). The illustrations also served as mnemotechnic devices to aid the retention of Christian dogma by the laity, particularly illiterate women and children (Rowland 14). The image of a lion, for example, could better instil fear of God in a child, as opposed to text or oral storytelling. We will shortly explore how *Animalia* employs images in ways that radically depart from that of its medieval counterparts.

Animalia's categorization as a (di)simulating bestiary stems from Jean Baudrillard's terms, simulation and dissimulation, which he defined as follows: "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 3). The (di)simulating label thus recognizes both processes and invites the reader to vacillate between them while reading the work's entries. Baudrillard further defines simulation as the generation of copies without an original and the process' consequential production of the simulacrum (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). *Animalia* is thus beyond imitation, duplication, or parody, for simulation is ultimately "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits and its

vicissitudes" (*Simulacra and Simulation 2*). In other words, simulacrum has long detached from the "real", and taken on its own dimensions, untethered to any previous reality. This culminates in a hyperreality, a blurring of any lines between fiction and the real, a world of signs without referents, present in the curated lives we present on social media, merchandise facing, or sensationalized news. *Animalia* signals the real yet relies on the most minimal injections of reality necessary to uphold its simulacrum, its hyperreal existence.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, *Animalia* belongs to a larger bestiary resurgence which can be traced back to literary experimentations during the Latin American avant-garde and Boom periods. The trickery at play in *Animalia* can be seen, in less extreme form, in some of those canonical Hispanic bestiaries. Borges complicates truth and fiction in *Manual de zoología fantástica* (1957) and *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967). He deliberately misquotes and misattributes sources. He tweaks his fictions just so, making his book an unreliable source for cultural referents. In *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* (1969), Augusto Monterroso readily deceives his readers with a little-known term for "cannibal," a detail that, when discovered, turns the epilogue to *La oveja negra* on its head. The mischievous elements in these bestiaries become the defining characteristic of works comprising (di)simulating bestiaries, *Animalia* among them.

Bestiaries comprising the (di)simuladores category simulate other genres, consequently blurring divisions between fiction and non-fiction; *Animalia extinta* disguises its bestiary as a pseudo environmental manifesto. To boast credibility, the bestiary borrows from pseudo-scientific discourse obscure enough to cause readers' second guesses. Here, it is worth recalling that although non-intentional, *Physiologus* and its derivatives are commonly classified as pseudo-scientific works. Despite the confusion spurred by the work's cut in tradition brought about by the denial of the genre, form persists. Thus, a casual flip through the work proves the best way of categorizing it, as anything longer than a glance will raise too many questions. The work's genre will thus seem to fluctuate depending on what and how much attention one pays to its various aspects.

Animalia parodies an ecological manifesto, a documentation on lost animal species. It employs ecological discourse to lend its claims an air of moral seriousness and superiority. The prologue reads:

La ecología es un tema serio. Nos preocupa la desaparición en el mundo de una especie, animal o vegetal, cada cuarenta minutos. Más aún el hecho de que el perro pekinés no se sienta particularmente amenazado, a diferencia de lo que les sucedió a las vitrolitas de Corrientes o a los escarabajos samurai, no contrarresta las

presentes circunstancias, que reclaman por sí mismas una concienzuda e inmediata intervención de las autoridades mundiales.

No es este un texto apologético de las organizaciones ecologistas existentes, las cuales, aun cuando tienen cabida en los medios masivos de comunicación, padecen de la indiferencia del público.

Es, en verdad, una tarea de rescate moral y estético porque es inmoral privilegiar intereses particulares y mercantilistas por sobre el patrimonio natural de la humanidad pero, antes que eso, es antiestético.

Las viñetas que se presentan a continuación, con todo el talento del plumín del artista, reflejan triste y pálidamente el esplendor de estos seres perdidos para siempre. El más destructivo de los mamíferos, el hombre, es a la vez causa y remedio de este mal. Que la naturaleza nos ilumine para que, en un futuro cercano, documentos como este sean innecesarios. (Seimandi 7)

This message appeals to the hypersensitivity that characterizes our time, and to the human desire to hide one's ignorance. Lest the reader be accused of indifference and ignorance before Mother Nature, they must vigorously nod along with the author's claims. As stated, the *vitrolitas de Corrientes'* extinction is a serious matter – the reader *should* feel guilt over a plausible connection between ecological loss and their pet's lifestyle. The reader's ignorance of the *vitrolitas'* existence only furthers their sense of inadequacy before the prologue's indoctrination. Of course, the reader is not familiar with the creature because it never existed. However, the prologue's tone causes hesitation, a fear of revealing further ignorance. The reader's unfamiliarity with various animals and their destruction are the root of the ecological disasters presented in the work. The prologue needs to instill doubt, guilt, and ignorance into the reader, because they might otherwise see the work as it is: a fake, a phony, a simulation. Here, hyper-morality dissimulates an absence of morality. Seimandi's quest must be nobler than our own as readers, it must be on a pedestal or not be at all. He must keep up the charade because otherwise we might utter: "the emperor has no clothes."

A sliver of the work's intentions is revealed when it presents the problem of extinction as a problem of aesthetics. Perhaps, the reader's guilt should not lie with their inability to prevent certain species' disappearance. Rather, the reader should take issue with the net beauty left in the world because of the protection of certain animals (short-snouted, foreign Pekingese dogs) and the destruction of others (the local *vitrolita de Corrientes*). As mentioned, this moral stance crumbles once minimal research reveals that the animal never existed. The author's moral superiority derives from the same fabrication of which he accuses the Pekingese breeder: Seimandi and Horita also design boutique animals. They perhaps long for the same recognition as the toy dog's breeders, but because

they can't afford centuries of experimentation, they must accelerate the process. Thus, Seimandi places the creatures in the past and emphasizes humanity's role in their disappearance. He constructs a moral platform from which to preach and gambles on minimal questioning so that he might uphold the illusion. With this, the bestiary dives into its creatures.

Animalia is divided into five sections, reminiscent of medieval bestiaries, each introduced by a brief paragraph.² The first section presents birds (*aves*) as metaphors for human freedom and vessels for spirituality. Seimandi insists that because we cannot fly like birds, envy ensued, leading to their disappearance. Fish (*pisces*) are then listed, deemed by the (fictional) philologist, architect, and *bon vivant* Carlos Mendes da Mosqueira to be psychic creatures because they swim in the depths of the subconscious. Insects (*insecta*) are the third group, distinguished by their ability for survival despite humans' creation of atomic bombs and insecticides. The author points out that these insects do not always survive our massacres, as was the case of the last *escarabajo serengeti*. The fourth category consists of reptiles and amphibians (*reptilia et amphibia*), animals condemned in the book of *Genesis*. Seimandi states that although crawling might suggest a submissive, humiliating existence, reptiles once dominated Earth and are our closest link to Jurassic prehistory. We finally encounter mammals (*mammalia*), the last class to emerge on Earth. Seimandi laments that boasting the biggest brains and hearts has not however deterred humans from destruction. Scientific names accompany the respective beasts, and work along the prologue and subsection introductions to feed the reader a curated reality. In most cases, the terminology forgoes Latin in favor of a Latin-like form of English in recognition of the lingua franca of contemporary society. Creatures like *Patito feo* (*cairina uglys*), *Cocodrilo somnifero* (*Crocodylus valiumae*), *Gatoporliebre* (*Felis pseudolepus*) exemplify this. The shift from a classical language to a modern one winks to the larger play taking place.

Under the first category, we discover our *vitrolita de Corrientes* (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1 (Seimandi 10)

Corrientes es una provincia del nordeste argentino. Su clima subtropical, sus espejos de agua, sus arrozales y sus montes conforman el hábitat de una profusa fauna. El yacaré, el dorado y el mayor de los roedores, el carpincho, son los símbolos que orgullosamente ostenta esta provincia mesopotámica. En otras épocas, esta lista incluía a la vitrolita de Corrientes, una vistosa variedad de tucán al cual su plumaje, marrón y dorado, y su pico de inusual tamaño, que funcionaba como embudo para atrapar insectos al vuelo, lo convertían en uno de los pájaros más llamativos del mundo. Su característico canto, ronco y entrecortado, podía escucharse a kilómetros de distancia. Los lugareños la cazaban para utilizar su pico como audífono. Esta costumbre, sumada a la tala de los montes donde habitaba, contribuyó a que se la declarara especie extinta en 1969. (Seimandi 11)

The entry invites several possible interpretations. We can either engage with the text's surface, with its intentions as reality constructed via simulacrum (surface reading) or with its unexpressed truths (symptomatic reading). I will digress for a few lines to discuss the surface/symptomatic reading dichotomy, as the former concept is often overlooked in literary criticism. Symptomatic reading understands meaning to be hidden and repressed, in need of analysis and disclosure by an interpreter (Best and Marcus 1). It speaks to the oppositions present/absent, manifest/latent, and surface/depth (Best and Marcus 4). As seen with allegorical beasts of the medieval bestiary, symptomatic reading boasts a long tradition. Frederic Jameson is among the most influential contemporary advocates of symptomatic reading in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). In this work, Jameson depicts the literary critic as author as able to extract or provide meaning via a method "according to which our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretation through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular

interpretive master code" (9, 10). Jameson's master code is Marxist ideology, which functions as a connecting thread between all texts, offering solutions to historical class struggles: "It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity" (Jameson 20). This method of reading and interpreting advocates the critic as author, making them responsible for infusing meaning where there is none, and extracting significance when the text proves hermetic, always running the risk of altogether altering the work.

Surface reading, as the name suggests, does not seek to penetrate the text's depth. In a special issue of *Representations* (2009) devoted to surface reading, editors Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus define the surface as "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (9). Because this depthlessness prompts the idea of a "shallow" analysis, surface reading is often stigmatized or dismissed as a weak methodology. Furthering the challenge issued to those who employ the methodology, Anne Anlin Cheng in her article "Skins, Tattoos and Susceptibility" argues that the "philosophic history that perceives the visual as deceptive [and] an epistemological history that thrives on a hermeneutics of suspicion" that characterize contemporary critical practices must be overcome to read surface as something beyond mere cover (99).

Despite these issues, surface reading has gained momentum in contemporary academia, as it allows for a less stilted reading than its symptomatic alternative. It is an invitation to accept the text, to defer to it instead of attempting to master it, as well as a way of practicing critical description, locating existing patterns across texts and cultivating literal meaning. Sharon Marcus's "just reading", for example, reads "without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation" (75). By doing this, she returns the Victorian female friendship to its central point in narrative, often rendered invisible by symptomatic readings of female friendship as veiled lesbian relationships (Marcus 76). Samuel Otter also exemplifies surface reading in his article "An Aesthetics in All Things," where he pauses on the language of the *Moby Dick* chapter "The Line" and revels in the syntax, morphology, and even punctuation of the chapter, delving into what meaning the form holds at its most evident level. Susan Sontag, an advocate for surface reading before the movement had such name, called interpretation "the revenge of intellect upon art" (4). She urged

a return – however impossible – to art before theory, art before the stripping of the sensuous: “The function of criticism,” she stated, “should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*” (10). Because bestiaries are so replete with tradition and spirit, surface reading allows for appreciation without suffocation. An open, unassuming approach often reveals more than trapping the animals in various frameworks.

Though the opposing methodologies can and do overlap, the (dis)simulating qualities of these works require that I make an often-tacit approach focal. Whether (dis)simulation succeeds or fails is – both in these readings and in general – dependent on our interaction with the material. While not passive, surface reading chooses to spread across a flat plane. It does not wrestle meaning from a source, making it a more suitable candidate for the alternate reality created by (dis)simulation. A symptomatic reading will break the spell of (dis)simulation and yield the nuts and bolts of its mechanism. I will thus interpret the *vitrolita* with both approaches, playing the role of reader and critic.

Let’s first cling to the *vitrolita*’s gold and brown feathers, and not ruffle them in hopes of Oedipal confessions. Let’s take the text at (sur)face value – as simulation. Seimandi succinctly tells a tragic story that leads to a reflection on our reckless human behavior. Because of direct human action and indirect neglect, the *vitrolita* is now extinct and the province of Corrientes, a Mesopotamic paradise infused with pastoral subtext, is deprived of a characteristic creature. The word *ostentar* (flaunt, boast), raises the stakes of the *vitrolita*’s extinction, as Seimandi presents flora and fauna as central to Corrientes’ value. Though, clearly, the *vitrolita* is a fictitious being, no part of the text suggests deceit, and, aside from an unusual number of poetic flourishes, it reads like an encyclopedia entry. The text betrays no hints of being fictitious nor misleading. Though surface reading certainly does not suggest that we take fiction as reality, the content and form of the *vitrolita*’s description asks for fidelity to the text, not a suspension of disbelief. There are no mentions of incredible events, as animals used for human purposes and the destruction of habitats are, unfortunately, all too common. Choosing to remain on the surface is thus choosing to read *Animalia* as nothing more than a catalogue of exquisite extinct beasts.

The use of conjugation in the entry reinforces its various temporal aspects. All information regarding the province of Corrientes is written in the simple present, an ambiguous tense that in this case spans both present and past. Like in English, the present, when not inflected with the gerund ending *-ing*, can refer to past, present, future, or habitual actions.³ Present

tense is thus used to indicate that Corrientes was, is, and continues to be, despite the changes its landscape may suffer under human influence. The imperfect, undefined tense of past events, describes the *vitrolita* exclusively. A sole use of the preterit tense appears in the entry, reserved here to emphasize the *vitrolita's* 1969 disappearance. The perfect tense signals finality, denying the reader any hope of ever encountering the beautiful, bizarre bird.

The presence of the diminutive morpheme *-ita* and its effect on the reader also demand reflection. Argentine dialect is less prone to the use of the diminutive than Colombian, Mexican, or Puerto Rican dialects, making the use of the suffix *-ita* a significant choice. We know that the *vitrolita* was a variety of toucan, and its beak is of unusual size – likely meaning large – so we can infer that the use of the diminutive is not because of the bird's size. Discarding linguistic idiosyncrasy and physical description, then, and once again, acknowledging the verb “ostentar,” the *vitrolita's* diminutive suffix must be born out of a familiarity, protectiveness, or even affection for the birds by locals. The diminutive suffix is a manipulation that endears us to an unknown bird, strengthening Seimandi and Horita's pseudo-environmental cause.

As warned in the prologue of the work, a surface reading plays with a simulation of morality and a dissimulation of aesthetic interests. The symptomatic reading finds a departure point in the entry's epigraph: “Cantá conmigo este chamamé / Cantá fuerte, chamigo pará. La acordeona suena a piporé / y la vitrolita te vaa acompañá” (11). The four lines of a *chamamé* song “La vitrolita” by Isaco Fillol deceive the naive reader and wink at the informed one, as neither song nor singer ever existed. In fact, the only “truth” in the reference lies in its paratextual footnote, where the author explains that *chamamé* is a musical genre similar to the polka, originating in the Northern provinces of Argentina.

As we have seen, the surface reading requires a naive reader, or at the very least a reader willing to play along. It requires a reader unfamiliar with birds, wildlife status, the provincial regions of Argentina, *chamamé*, and, as we will see in the following analysis, commercial gramophone brands. The work depends on both readers – “naive” and “informed” here must bear no negative connotations. An informed reader – in this instance one familiar with cultural referents from early to mid-twentieth century Argentina – will experience a different book than a reader from a different country or generation. To succeed in its multifaceted goal, *Animalia* must suspend its material between the reader who will believe the (dis)simulation, and the reader who will understand the elements at play.

The “informed” and symptomatic interpretation departs from a nostalgic and humorous re-imagining of an obsolete object, a common thread in the entries of *Animalia*. Foreshadowed by the chamamé lines, the name *vitrolita* is reminiscent of the Victrola gramophones.⁴ This connection is furthered by the *vitrolita*’s scientific name, “*ramphastos victor*,” which alludes to both its kinship with the toucan and the creator of the gramophones, and the fact that *vitrolita*’s beaks were used as hearing aids. Victrola gramophones came on the market in 1906, produced by the Victor Talking Machine Company, and they were the first successful mass-marketed phonographs (Coleman xix-xx). The *vitrolita*’s brown and gold plumage matches the colours of the phonograph, as the company’s premium models featured fine woods and gold trim. The allusion to the Victrola brand is consistent with the Seimandi’s quest for aesthetics: the Victrola was the first of its kind to hide its turntable and amplifying horn (its machinery) in favour of beauty. The most expensive models, for instance, were designed to “harmonize with beautiful furniture,” made by placing the horn in Pooley Furniture Company of Philadelphia fine wood cabinets (Barnum 40).

The (dis)simulating bestiary opens with a creature inspired by one of the earliest simulation machines brought into the home. Musicians recorded on gramophone disks by playing into horns that would channel sound into a diaphragm. The diaphragm transferred sound vibrations into a needle that inscribed the sound into a record topped with a layer of wax. The record was treated to fix the recording, and the reverse process ensured playback (“How Do Gramophones Work?”). Although simulation is, according to Baudrillard, a characteristic of post-modernity, the modern gramophone demonstrates an early process of reality’s disappearance, thus foreshadowing the second half of the twentieth century. The words of the machine’s manual, “Reproduction, perfect in every detail, is made at will through the medium of the needle, the sound box and the amplifier” (“How Do Gramophones Work?”), recall Baudrillard’s statement on the simulacrum which he deems “Not unreal ... but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard 6). With Victrola records, we have copies of an original encased in permanent repetition, or, in the words of Walter Benjamin, a technical reproduction, which

enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room. (221)

Although the sound of a phonograph recording pales in comparison with contemporary technology and destroys the authenticity of the piece (Benjamin 3), its advent was an undeniable democratization of a privilege denied to many. The phonograph reproduced the voice of the opera singer or the orchestra and served as a warning that reality is merely that which can be simulated and copied. It could be reset, replayed, rewound, its volume turned up or down. It was not the opera but better, as its referents were liquidated and Baudrillard's uninterrupted circuit was created. A 1915 *Literary Digest* ad of Enrico Caruso, Italian operatic tenor and the first voice to be recorded for commercial purposes of the Victor Company, underlined the impending blurring of reality (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 (Barnum 79)

The ad reads “Both are Caruso”, yet, neither the depiction of a record nor the image of the famed tenor is “Caruso” in the literal sense. The ad’s guarantee, “It actually is Caruso – his own magnificent voice, with all the wonderful power and beauty of tone that make him the greatest of all tenors,” caters to the hyperreality Baudrillard ascribes to postmodernity.

Not only does the disc claim to be the real Caruso, but it also claims Caruso is the greatest of all tenors, multiplying the marvel of the reproduction, making the opera no match for a wax disc.

Although the two different readings, *vitrolita* as reality and *vitrolita* as simulation, can remain parallel, indifferent to each other, their overlap is an intriguing possibility. The surreal image functions as a hinge attaching fiction and reality, sustaining or prohibiting our belief of Seimandi's words.

We must return to the concept of the simulacrum to better understand the role of the images in a surface reading of the work. Baudrillard presents Disneyland as the ultimate simulacrum, a place that exists with the purpose of making one believe that the surrounding America is real (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). Disneyland, with its miniature countries, promise of magic, and endless fun, is hyperreal in that it proposes to be better than any real place. It is neither a real nor fake place, but rather a "deterrence machine that rejuvenates the fictions of the real in other camps" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 13). Like Baudrillard's Disneyland, the images in *Animalia* disguise the simulacrum taking place in the text. The images – impossible in their fantastical when compared to the sober tone of the text – are surely loose interpretations of the animal's description. This simulation depends on the perceived relationship between text and image. We can consider the images deterrents only if we assume an *a priori* hierarchy of text over image. *Animalia* relies on being perceived as an illustrated text, and not as annotated images. In other words, it needs us to assume that the illustrator took inspiration from, and ran with, the words of the writer, not the other way around. The relationship Disneyland > America,⁵ where Disneyland is more fantastic and thus lends credibility to America, finds a parallel with Images > Text of *Animalia*. In this case, a symptomatic reading of the disconnect between the text's tone and the image's surrealist depiction could encourage the reader to remain on the text's surface.

Paradoxically, if we wish to delve deeper into latent elements of the text, we must look to the surface of the bird. Aside from the suggestive colouring of the *vitrolita*, the illustration shows a fusion between the biological and mechanical. This choice leads us to identify steampunk, a subgenre of science fiction, as a major aesthetic and philosophical influence in *Animalia*, as both point to a relationship between humans and technology. Steampunk artists tinker with contemporary objects to make them simulate Victorian machinery. Steampunk calls for "cross pollination between historical times, materials, and markers" (Forlini 77). Through these methods and practices, they look to challenge current design and to call into question the value of things (Forlini 72-73). Rebecca Onion calls steampunk "creative

anachronism,” further specifying: “Steampunk, in some sense, stands outside of chronological periodisations of modes of thought – such as ‘modern’, ‘anti-modern’, or ‘postmodern’ – and defies categorisation within the ideologies of previous technology-based social movements” (142). Seimandi echoed this sentiment in an interview: “Hoy lo que define el espíritu de nuestros tiempos es el remix ... producir algo sobre algo ya producido, no trabajar nunca con la hoja en blanco” (*Selfinterview*). This treatment of time and referents is evident in *Animalia*’s postmodern blend of modern elements: the gramophone, a modern object, is subject to postmodern criticism through the re-purposing of its parts. Initially foreshadowing of the simulations to come during the late second half of the twentieth century, the gramophone becomes a new entity altogether when remixed with a bird and placed in a medieval genre in a contemporary Hispanic context. Many of the work’s other images take this same approach. (Fig. 3; Fig. 4)

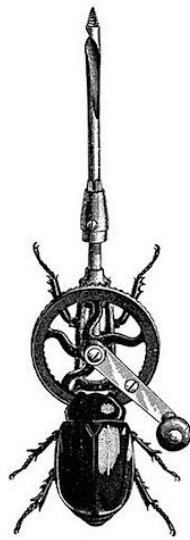


Fig. 3: Bicho taladro (Seimandi 40)

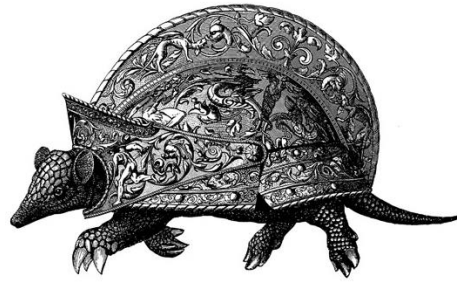


Fig. 4: Armadillo labrado (Seimandi 66)

The creation of a mythology from the visual is also common to both steampunk art and *Animalia*. Steampunk art prioritizes aesthetics over function, as a piece need not be functional, but must be skillfully put together. The 2008 Steampunk Show manifesto claims that its artists are: “Marrying narrative and nostalgia to design and technology, they imagine the triumphs of the past overriding the failures of the present to create from the ruins and detritus a dazzling future-perfect.” In this creation exists the potential for a strange simulation that seeks to not only act as reality, but also to do so by incorporating a past that never occurred. The notion of a “future-perfect,” a “would be” firmly rooted in a parallel past also inspires *Animalia*’s entries, as evident in the work’s aesthetic motor, which merges past technologies with believable creatures. Although we previously entertained the notion of a vertical hierarchy in which text presided over image, this is not the case with Seimandi’s project. Horita’s images were the departure point for Seimandi’s mythologies, making *Animalia* a collection of annotated images after all: “cuando veo una imagen que me conmueve, siento que corté camino, que ya tengo media historia contada. Nunca uso imágenes para ilustrar mis textos. Lo que siempre hago es el proceso inverso. Utilizo imágenes para empezar a escribir. Los libros con Hugo Horita son ilustraciones contadas no libros ilustrados” (Seimandi and Bazterrica). With the awareness that Seimandi’s text is based on image, and that its compromise with beauty is greater than that with reality or morality, we can thus see steampunk’s aesthetic and philosophical influences make for anachronistic symptomatic readings.

Aside from reaffirming the aesthetic mission of the bestiary, Seimandi’s confession also challenges my analysis of the text. As mentioned earlier, the simulation in *Animalia exstinta* relies on a presupposed hierarchy of text above image. Should we, as W.J.T. Mitchell proposes in *Picture Theory*, remove the slash to turn “image/text” into “imagetext” to rightfully describe

the phenomena between arts in *Animalia Extinta*, this analysis would be impossible. “Imagetext” designates a composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (Mitchell 89). Although there is no question that the entries are comprised of this composite, this unity is veiled, and the ludic, simulating characteristics of the work thrive. That Seimandi and Horita neglect to inform the reader of the process behind the bestiary leads to a consequential understanding of the bestiary as traditional, as illustrated text.

While the *vitrolita* hints at nostalgia better suited to a universal collective unconscious, the *trucha mascardi* hones it to a specific audience,⁶ intensifying its effects (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 (Seimandi 29)

La *trucha mascardi* era una variedad autóctona de los lagos patagónicos. Fue descubierta en 1945 por Alfredo Mascardi Combs, un biólogo chileno radicado en la Argentina. Mascardi Combs describió la notoria aleta ventral del pez como un peine. Cometió un error conceptual al considerarla, no una aleta, sino como “espinas que salen del vientre, tal vez como elemento de defensa”. La migración de estas truchas en la temporada de desove constituía un espectáculo digno de verse. Los cardúmenes se movían en formaciones notoriamente uniformes que marcaban una perfecta raya en el agua, aun en medio de remolinos.

Su carácter batallador la convirtió en una presa codiciada por los pescadores deportivos, y fue capturada sin que mediara control alguno por parte de las autoridades argentinas. Fue declarada especie protegida en 1964. En 2000, en la cena anual de la Fundación Fauna Acuática Patagónica, luego de comer los últimos ejemplares existentes, la comisión directiva confirmó su carácter de especie extinta. (29)

The *trucha* is a more likely creature to prompt the “informed” reader’s nostalgia, as it is the namesake of three separate yet interrelated Argentine cultural referents. Lake Mascardi, located in the Nahuel Huapi National Park, in the Argentine province of Río Negro, is our first referent, as we are

told the trout is autochthonous to the Patagonia. The lake, a popular destination for sport fishing, is both easily navigated and contains a large variety of trout. Lake Mascardi is, in turn, named after the Italian Jesuit Nicolás Mascardi, who established his mission near Lake Nahuel Huapi around the second half of the seventeenth century. Like Alfredo Mascardi Combs, Nicolás Mascardi moved from Chile to Argentina, where he was martyred in 1673 by the First Nations he sought to convert (Biedma 281). Finally, the Mascardi firm is among the biggest plastic manufacturers in Argentina, specializing in household products including hair combs. Founded in 1975 in the city of Ezeiza, Buenos Aires, the Mascardi brand is a quotidian aspect of Argentine life.

The nostalgia for a creature that never existed and the cultural referents it evokes owes its persuasiveness to the simulacrum at play in the entry. Baudrillard identifies the final phase of the simulating image as having no relation to any reality whatsoever, and self-encompassing as its own pure simulacrum (Seimandi 6). The consequence of this final detachment gives way to a multiplicity of imagined, past referents:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence. (6, 7)

Considering this, a question emerges: In the case of the *trucha*, what disenfranchised reality is this nostalgia feeding from? As we will examine shortly, the referents of the Mascardi trout no longer hold the nostalgic connotations they once did. Because this reality is not what it was, the *trucha mascardi* embodies nostalgia by offering a parallel origin story to many Argentines' memories. Simulation need not have a genuine original to reproduce itself, and can thus morph, amassing memories, offering us more poignant ruminations than any one of our past thoughts ever could.

Animalia's introduction to fish foreshadowed their ability to swim in the subconscious, and its *trucha* relishes in the deconstruction and reassignment of nostalgia. The undoing of reality may be the mere realization that the companies present during the target reader's childhood are, after all, companies. Despite being one of three leading Argentine plastic manufacturers, the fall of the internal market and increase in imports in 2016 caused Mascardi's sales to drop by 60% that year, significantly more

than the sector's average. Consequently, Roberto Reid, founder and owner of the company, dismissed 43 of the 130 workers. The decision led to a strike by the remaining workers. Reid claimed that his intention was to continue producing, and downsizing was a necessary step (Ensinck). The articles that covered this story in 2016 were read by Argentine citizens who might have grown up in the 70s, 80s, or 90s. The adult, confronted with this story, might then process that the same comb his or her mother used to groom them for school no longer holds the magic it once did. Now, it belongs to the same complex capitalist dynamics as the rest of their complicated adult lives.

A similar process unfolds with the lake linked to the trout. Lake Mascardi is both a national and an international tourist destination. Like the combs, it holds positive connotations for those who have vacationed there: rest, relaxation, time spent with family, proximity to nature, and outdoor activities. The nostalgia attached to an uncomplicated time is heightened by the shattering of its idyllic reality, as Lake Mascardi is one of the stages on which Mapuche resistance has been taking place in the past years. In November 2017, the Mapuche lof Lafken Winkful Mapu announced that they had recuperated territory in Nahuel Huapi National Park (DeBariloche). This prompted a negotiation between the Argentine national government and the Mapuche community, which resulted in the decision to peacefully displace the Mapuche community to another territory, outside the park (Dinatale). Contrary to the agreement, the displacement was violently carried out by 300 federal agents of the Agrupación Albatros, a unit of special security forces belonging to the Argentine Navy Prefectures. A Mapuche woman described the operation thus: "no ingresaron de manera pacífica. Todo comenzó a las 4:30 de la mañana cuando empezamos a sentir tiros. Nos despertaron a balazos limpios. Empezaron a maltratarnos y nos defendimos como pudimos. Pero no teníamos armas ni nada y había niños. Disparaban sin fijarse a quién y a los chicos les tiraron gases lacrimógenos" ("El testimonio"). Rafael Nahuel, a 22-year-old Mapuche man was shot and killed by the armed members of the Agrupación Albatros. However, official discourse has aimed to make both sides of the battle seem evenly matched, and to discredit Mapuche witnesses ("El gobierno"). Ramón Chiocon, doctor to the wounded protesters, assured: "Los heridos y el muerto están del lado de los mapuches. Hubo balas de un solo lugar" ("Habló el médico"). Despite the death of an unarmed man, Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich insisted: "Llevamos adelante una acción legal y legítima, totalmente enmarcada en la ley" ("El gobierno").

The murder of Rafael Nahuel sparked mass protests. Among the enraged, workers of Nahuel Huapi pointed to the relationship between environmental preservation, biodiversity, respect for all human life, and

acknowledgement of the dark history of beautiful national parks. “Las áreas protegidas son lugares privilegiados para el ejercicio del derecho a un ambiente sano, destinadas a la conservación de la biodiversidad ... Cuando estos mismos territorios se vuelven escenario en el que se violan derechos fundamentales de las personas se invalida su legítimo propósito’, manifestaron y agregaron: ‘No hay conservación de la biodiversidad posible en territorios regados de sangre’” (“Trabajadores de parque”). The Nahuel Huapi’s workers’ statement recalls the paradoxical eating of the last samples of the *trucha* by the Fundación Fauna Acuática Patagónica and questions the history of the park itself, reminding those against the Mapuches that the qualifier “national” is only the result of usurpation and genocide. This links us to our final, “original” referent, Nicolás Mascardi himself. Because enough time has passed between his attempt in the seventeenth century to annihilate the same Mapuches that today protest at Lake Mascardi – or, at the very least, their customs, faith, culture, and way of life, this referent is the weakest and, non-coincidentally, the least evident in the entry.

The events and reactions described, particularly the murder of Rafael Nahuel and Nicolás Mascardi’s mission, exemplify the opposite realities that can occupy a physical or figurative space, complicating single-faceted imaginings of the lake as something exclusively positive. All three referents of the *trucha mascardi* are, either by the maturation of a person or of a society, complicated by the permeation of reality into nostalgia. The once paradisiacal reality of Lake Mascardi now encompasses the crimes and atrocities that have recently taken place, simultaneously recalling to the crimes and atrocities of a less recent past. We can then ask ourselves: why does the simulation of the *trucha mascardi* become an attractive vessel for nostalgia? To think Lake Mascardi as a purely nostalgic place would be an “Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared” (Baudrillard 7). Here true, lived experience can be understood as subjective truth, personal lived experience, individual memories, all leading to a resurrection of the non-literal, the non-real. In other words, a fully nostalgic outlook on Lake Mascardi based on personal enjoyment and memories would mean flattening out the experience of indigenous people and the unjustifiable death of a young man. The appeal of the *trucha mascardi* thus becomes clear: it is a target to which different origins and myths can be attributed, once the reality of Mascardi-related referents cannot be what they were unless one pursues a valiant effort in cognitive dissonance. It allows a reader familiar with all referents to indulge in nostalgic ruminations, a non-existent

hyperreality that is not complicated by history's unsavory events and tragedies.

To readily offer up the trout's nostalgic, deterrent charms, Seimandi and Horita once again depend on the reader's assumption that the image is a loose interpretation of the text. Seimandi's paratext in this entry also reveal an increasing comfort with deceit as the bestiary progresses. Whereas we found truth in the *vitrolita's chamamé* footnote, here the sources serve only pseudo-academic purposes: "Alfredo Mascardi Combs, *Notas sobre la trucha patagónica de vientre espinado*, Santiago de Chile, Editorial Científica Cogno-Cimientos, 1947, p. 23." The footnote is confidently deceitful, and as the entries progress, this phenomenon becomes common practice (under a different entry, "Pulpo a la gallega," we find Francisco Carreño César, *Cocina simple de mariscos difíciles*, Murcia, Editorial Pescadores, 1951, p. 134). This points to the simulation's strengthening throughout *Animalia*, as the entries detach from reality altogether, certain that the reader will not verify its content.

As a final reflecting note on the bestiary's aesthetic mission, the form of the entry must be acknowledged. Seimandi's stunning description of the fish school's movement mirrors that of a comb through hair ("Los cardúmenes se movían en formaciones notoriamente uniformes que marcaban una perfecta raya en el agua, aun en medio de remolinos" [29].) The *trucha's* innate uniform swimming leaves satisfying straight trailings in its wake. Unlike the medieval fox, that once failed to hide its deceitful nature in its crooked walk, the *trucha*, pure simulacrum, glides effortlessly through the waters of a new era. That these trout can comb through whirlpools (cowlicks) tells of their ability to smooth knotty memories and reattribute them to themselves, where they will prove less problematic. Seimandi paints the fish in our minds, inviting our imaginations to see the crisp white line of scalp revealed by a comb moving through wet hair, a beautiful promise of nostalgia protected.

Through a blend of object and animal, simulation of environmental documentation, and a moralistic tone, *Animalia extinta* dissimulates its place in the evolution of the bestiary. The work and its mix of fiction and reality relies on two different readers to come alive: a reader to believe its simulation and a reader to appreciate the simulacrum. The hyperreality which *Animalia extinta* creates allows for a rewiring of nostalgia, removing the problematic aspects of certain referents and allowing subjective lived experience to override objectivity. The disconnect of referent and nostalgia from reality adds to the work's appeal for those who have come to realize that nostalgia based on the real can mean pain and injustice for another entity or group of beings. The innovation of the bestiary hinges on assumed

hierarchies between text and image, an assumption that Seimandi and Horita exploit and put to work in service of the simulacrum.

The push and pull between surface and symptomatic reading, the naive and informed reader, and simulation and dissimulation in this bestiary is constant. The former terms (surface, naive, simulation) rely on a suspension of disbelief unlike other bestiaries before them. They require a treatment that does not ask of us to disregard the nonexistence of certain creatures, but rather of entire disciplines, cultural referents, and ultimately a literary genre. These elements require a specific approach to reading *Animalia* and depend on an agreement between author and reader to let the entries unfold on a plane informed by the real, but far from it. Whatever name and connotation the dimension may take (according to Baudrillard it is hyperreality, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari it is virtual reality, and so on), it holds that the (di)simuladores rely on a plane with a greater potential for variation and possibility. The boundaries, limits, and categories that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to “actual” reality, the ties to substance that Baudrillard links to hyperreality, all these preconditions need to disappear to allow collective unconscious, objects, the real, obsolete objects, remains, and fantasy, among other materials, to mix freely, allowing a flourishing of referents and information carriers. Because, as the myth goes, all great criminals wish to be caught and thus recognized, the latter terms exist. Symptomatic, informed, and dissimulation all pull towards an acknowledgment of the games ongoing, so that the artistic value of the words and images in both bestiaries may be recognized.

The simulation in this bestiary is a pertinent success, a timely re-imagining of a re-emerging genre. In a lecture on Baudrillard, Rick Roderick identifies the fad of constant change as capable of producing an ecstasy not of the sublime, but rather a more visceral, direct ecstasy that leads to the hyperreal feelings we demand as a society. The quick dosages we demand of everything nowadays – news, interaction, love – must be succinct and effective if we are to come back to them at all. The combination of flash fiction and attractive images make the bestiary a compromise between what our attention deficit-riddled times demand and literature with a strong aesthetic dimension.

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NOTES

- 1 In “‘The English Bestiary,’ The Continental ‘Physiologus,’ and the intersections between them,” Sarah Kay rightfully delineates the fragmented nature of the

- bestiary tradition. Anglophone scholars call a bestiary what continental ones refer to as manifestations of the *Physiologus* (Kay 118). Although this affects manuscript recognition and categorization, the inconsistencies in the medieval aspect of the phenomenon bear little consequences for the scope of this article.
- 2 Most medieval bestiaries varied in their categorization of animals. Among the most common separations, especially in traditional French bestiaries, was a grouping of Birds, Beasts, Fish, and Serpents (McCulloch 47).
 - 3 E.g., The revolution breaks out on May 18th, 1810/ My name is Martha/ See you tomorrow/ I swim once a week.
 - 4 From here on, the terms phonograph and gramophone will be used interchangeably, as for our purposes, the difference of disk versus cylinder for music storage is irrelevant.
 - 5 Disney > America meaning that Disney, as bigger and better, deters the disbelief in America itself.
 - 6 The specificity of the audience and the ludic nature of the entry are both linked to the term *trucha*. In colloquial Argentine vocabulary, *trucha* means fake. If, for instance, an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry is *trucho*, it means to pass off as a brand name that it is not.

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