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Intersemiotic Bestiary

Translating *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios*

Abstract: The phenomenon of intersemiotic translation from literature (source-sign) to graphic illustration (target-sign) is well known and has been exhaustively analyzed. Jakobson (2000: 114) defines the phenomenon as “*transmutation*/ or interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”. This paper presents an intersemiotic translation of *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios* by Jorge Luis Borges, more specifically the chapter that describes a bestiary of Chinese fauna. Written in collaboration with Margarita Guerrero, *El libro* was first published in 1957 with the title *Manual de Zoología Fantástica*; later it was expanded and republished with the title *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios* (“The Book of Imaginary Beings”). In this paper, we identify some formal aspects of the literary source-sign to be considered most relevant. Afterwards, we submit those aspects to graphic recreations directed by the construction of fantastic characters in the aesthetic domain of pixel art.

Keywords: adaptation; Borges; Chinese fauna; illustration; intersemiotic translation; pixel art

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1 Introduction

The phenomenon of intersemiotic translation from literature (source-sign) to graphic illustration (target-sign) is well known and has been exhaustively analyzed (cf. e.g. Inge, 2008; Berthold, 1993). Jakobson defines intersemiotic translation (IT) as “*transmutation* or interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson, 2000: 114). This paper presents the graphic intersemiotic translation of *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios* written by Jorge Luis Borges, more specifically, the chapter dedicated to Chinese fauna.

Jorge Luis Borges nourished great encyclopedic curiosity for ancient and medieval bestiaries. Works such as *History of the Animals* by Aristotle, *Natural*

History by Pline, and *Etimologias* by San Isidoro de Sevilla fascinated the Argentine writer because of its cataloging accuracy and the metaphoric implications of their fantastic creatures (Tornero, 2007: 83). The bestiaries are imbued with an oneiric sense, in which reality is mixed with fiction. In this paper, we present and describe a graphic intersemiotic translation of *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios* by Jorge Luis Borges, more specifically, a part of the bestiary focusing on Chinese fauna, which describes the creatures.

2 *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios*

El libro is an “extravagant compendium, erudite and with sense of humor” (Borges, 2007). Written in collaboration with Margarita Guerrero, it was originally published in 1957 under the title *Manual de Zoología Fantástica* and was expanded and republished under the title *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios* in 2011. It is based on ancient bestiaries such as the *Physiologus*, whose authorship is attributed to San Epifanio, Pliny’s *Natural History* and Aristotle’s *History of the Animals* (see Tornero, 2007: 83; Schulz-Cruz, 1992: 247). Its inspiration lies in ancient sources and belongs to the works about zooliterature of the twentieth century, a genre of expressive production in Latin America, as Maria Esther Maciel claims “Borges zoological entries, while coming from past centuries’ literature, convert themselves into a pioneer text to a whole new tradition of fantastic bestiaries, emerged in the Latin-American context of the second half of the twentieth century” (Maciel, 2006: 52).

The Borgian bestiary approaches reality without the features of the “radical strangeness of the so-called New World existent in the ancient works” (Maciel, 2006: 53). Borges in fact “rescues from the oblivion illustrious monsters, rewriting them from our present, endowing them of a new and fragile life, that one of the time of our reading” (Molloy, 1999: 239). Thus the book is filled with humor, and irony, making its reading fluid – a presumptive desire by the author, who recommends its reading as “one who plays with the changing forms revealed by a kaleidoscope” (Borges, 2007: 10). The vision of the European colonizers is manipulated in the modern bestiaries that use it as a source of inspiration especially by Latin American authors. These authors’ views, according to Maciel (2006: 54) “catches in the strangeness before exotic of the Latin American monsters the familiar element, in a recognition of what was repressed by the process of colonial domestication throughout all those centuries”.

The ironic and humorous atmosphere results from the fact that, in several occasions, one does not know for certain whether it is examining something real or imaginary – including the sources quoted by the author. He ironically reveals “the limits of the encyclopedic accounts as attempts of exhaustive mapping of the complex and endless variety of the animal world” (Maciel, 2006: 53). In the comments that follow the descriptions, Borges appeals to several sources, such as the entry on the *Hochigan*: “Descartes refiere que los monos podrían hablar si quisieran, pero que han resuelto guardarse silencio, para que no los obliguen a trabajar. Los bosquimanos de África del Sur creen que hubo un tiempo en que todos los animales podían hablar” (Borges, 1979: 65).

In addition to the sources quoted above, we find other elements that are meant to emphasize the dialectic movement, creating verisimilitude and humorous doubts in the reader. It often involves the physical space – i.e. the habitat of the creatures – presented as a picturesque, unknown and remote environment. The environment of a fantastic creature cannot be ordinary. In the description of the *Crocotas e Leucrocotas*, we have a clear example of this technique: “Habita en Etiopía (donde asimismo hay toros salvajes, armados de cuernos movibles)” (Borges, 1979: 60). Also in the description of the *Catoblepa*, the same picturesque location appears: “Plinio (VIII, 32) cuenta que en los confines de Etiopía, no lejos de las fuentes del Nilo, habita el *catoblepas*” (Borges, 1979: 17). To avoid the “fantastic exaggeration”, the information is parsimoniously selected, and is shown combined with real information. In that case, Ethiopia and the Nile River are environments that are indeed distant to Latin American inhabitants.

3 The creatures of the book

There are fifteen creatures that can be found in Chinese culture and folklore in the chapter dedicated to Chinese fauna. Each creature is described in one paragraph. Their names are also mentioned, their physical characteristics are described, as well as their eating habits, their habitat, and their physiological traits; in some cases the legend of the appearance of the creature and beliefs related to it follows: “El *hsing-t'ien* es un ser acéfalo que, habiendo combatido contra los dioses, fue decapitado y quedó para siempre sin cabeza. Tiene los ojos en el pecho y su ombligo es su boca. Brinca y salta en los descampados, blandiendo su escudo y su hacha” (Borges, 1979: 41) and “El *hui* de las montañas parece un perro con cara de hombre. Es muy buen saltador y se

mueve con la rapidez de una flecha; por ello se considera que su aparición presagia tifones. Se ríe burlonamente cuando ve al hombre” (Borges, 1979: 41).

Most of the creatures are depicted as hybridizations, i.e. a combination of animals and humans or animals themselves, and aggregate physiological properties and hybrid habits: “El *chiang-liang* tiene cabeza de tigre, cara de hombre, cuatro vasos, largas extremidades, y una culebra entre los dientes” (Borges, 1979: 41). That characteristic can be found in the whole book and refers itself directly to the ancient Bestiary: “The monsters, that come from mythology or religious texts from folklore or literature, violate the laws of nature. They combine human and animal characteristics, or better yet, for many of them the characteristics of different animals, such as the griffin or the dragon” (Dell, 2010: 7).

These creatures were graphically translated, their inspiration deriving from video games that are considered to be “retro”, i.e. fashionable in the recent past. Before examining the creatures themselves, we briefly discuss such games.

4 Intersemiotic translation based on retro games

Video games currently considered to be *retro* were the main source of reference for the development of the images discussed in this paper. The first video game was *Spacewar*, created in 1961 by two students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Steve Russell and Alan Kotok (Pinheiro, 2006). In 1966, the first console was created for television, *Odyssey*, a creation of Ralph Bauer, that later inspired the developing of *Atari*, the first video game of the *arcade* modality.

The construction of the characters simulates the visual aspects of a vintage game (see Figures 1 and 2) and was created with image-editor software Photoshop CS 4. When Photoshop’s desktop is considerably expanded, the actual pixels of the image are visible, as when an A4-sized image is expanded 3200%. That resource is combined with the use of the *pencil* tool, which draws pixel by pixel. Today it is possible to notice a returning trend of the retro games aesthetic in several spheres: animation, illustration and also in games themselves. Some examples are the 8-bit animation videos about famous movies, such as *The Shining*, *Batman*, *Blade Runner*, *Iron Man*, *Godzilla* among others, by the channel *Cinefix*, available on YouTube; the pixel art illustrations created by Eboy Studio, a corporation by Kai Vermehr, Steffen Sauerteig and



Figure 1: Image of the Sonic the Hedgehog Mega Drive game¹



Figure 2: Image of the Super Mario World game²



Figure 3: Illustration by Eboy Studio³

1 Available at: <http://www.vizzed.com/vizzedboard/retro/user_screenshots/saves44/449826/GENESIS--Sonic%20the%20Hedgehog%20Jul4%2018_13.png>. Accessed 19/06/2015.

2 Available at: <http://www.wallpaperup.com/30926/Super_Mario_World_Retro_Games.html> Accessed 19/06/2015.



Figure 4: IOS platform game Crossy Road⁴

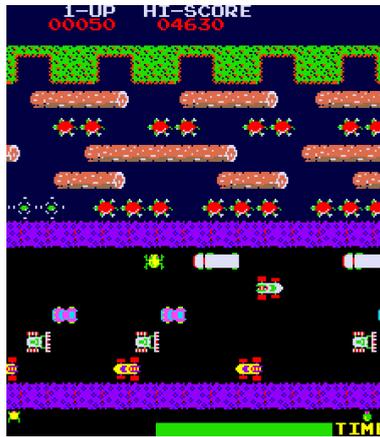


Figure 5: Screenshot of the classic retro game Frogger⁵

Sven Smital, who have Adidas, Amazon, Adobe and Nike as clients (see Figure 3); the recently launched game for Xbox, *Scott Pilgrim*, and the successful games in the IOS platform, *Timberman*, *Flappy Bird*, *Crossy Road* (see Figure 4), inspired in the classic retro game *Frogger* (see Figure 5), and *Endless Doves*.

3 Available at: <<http://hello.eboy.com/eboy/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/DEN-PioneerNavi-35s.png>>. Accessed 19/06/2015.

4 Available at: <gmcdn.gamezebo.netdnacdn.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/11/crossyroad_samecars.jpg>. Accessed 19/06/2015.

5 Available at: <<http://www.flashgames555.com/pictures/arcade/Frogger-Classic.jpg>>. Accessed 19/06/2015.

5 Source-sign and target-sign: some relevant properties

In Table 1 we set out what we consider to be the most relevant properties of the translated source-sign and its respective target-sign.

Table 1: Properties of the source-sign and target-sign compared

Source-sign	Target-sign
The work of Borges pays tribute to a classic medieval genre (Bestiary), as faithful as it can be to the structures of the original encyclopedias (revisits old works). Borges quotes real and fictitious sources (ancient and modern) in the creatures' descriptions to create the feeling of an ambiguous relation holding between reality and fiction.	The pixel art images are a way to revisit old works, mediated by the aesthetic of the first video games graphics. The general ambiance of games, in which the player is led to an immersion, has an affinity with the ambiguous reality-fiction relationship of the Borgian bestiary.
The Borgian bestiary “rescues from oblivion illustrious monsters, rewriting them in our present” (Molloy, 1999: 239)	The use of contemporary software to build retro-like images recreates the Borgian strategy to connect past and present.
Ironic and humorous aspects, creating an unpretentious atmosphere.	The vivid colors relate to retro video games, which have an entertaining function, just like the Borgian bestiary.

6 Intersemiotic translation of the bestiary

In Table 2 we present side-by-side the verbal descriptions of the Chinese bestiary by Borges (the source-signs) along with their intersemiotic translation equivalents, that is, their respective pixel images (the target-signs).

Table 2: Borges' verbal descriptions and respective pixel representations**Source sign**

The *Chiang-liang* has a tiger's head, a man's face, long limbs, four hooves, and a snake between its teeth. (Borges, 1974: 66)

El *chiang-liang* tiene cabeza de tigre, cara de hombre, cuatro vasos, largas extremidades, y una culebra entre los dientes. (Borges, 1979: 41)

In the region to the west of the Red Water dwells the beast known as the *Ch'ou-t'i*, which has a head both front and back. (Borges, 1974: 66)

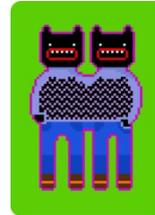
En la región al oeste del Agua Roja habita el animal llamado *ch'ou-t'i* que tiene una cabeza de cada lado. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The denizens of *Ch'uan-T'ou* have human heads, the wings of a bat, and a bird's beak. They feed exclusively on raw fish. (Borges, 1974: 66)

Los habitantes de *Ch'uan-T'ou* tienen cabeza humana, alas de murciélago y pico de pájaro. Se alimentan exclusivamente de pescado crudo. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Hsing-t'ien* is a being that was decapitated for having fought against the gods, and so it has remained forever headless. Its eyes are in its chest and its navel is its mouth. It hops up and down and jumps about in clearings and other open places, and brandishes a shield and axe. (Borges, 1974: 66)

El *hsing-t'ien* es un ser acéfalo que, habiendo combatido contra los dioses, fue decapitado y

Target sign**Figure 6:** Chiang-liang**Figure 7:** Ch'ou-t'i**Figure 8:** Inhabitants of Ch'uan-T'ou**Figure 9:** Hsing-t'ien

Source sign

quedó para siempre sin cabeza. Tiene los ojos en el pecho y su ombligo es su boca. Brinca y salta en los descampados, blandiendo su escudo y su hacha. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Hua-fish*, or flying snakefish, appears to be a fish but has the wings of a bird. Its appearance forebodes a period of drought. (Borges, 1974:66)

El pez *hua* o pez serpiente voladora, parece un pez, pero tiene alas de pájaro. Su aparición presagia la sequía. (Borges, 1979: 41)

In the Country of Long Arms, the hands of the inhabitants dangle to the ground. They live by catching fish at the edge of the sea. (Borges, 1974: 66)

Los habitantes del *país de los brazos largos* tocan el suelo con las manos. Se mantienen atrapando peces en la orilla del mar. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Ocean Men* have human heads and arms, and the body and tail of a fish. They come to the surface in stormy weather. (Borges, 1974: 67)

Los *hombres marinos* tienen cabeza y brazos de hombre, y cuerpo y cola de pez. Emergen a la superficie de las Aguas Fuertes. (Borges, 1979: 41)

Target sign

Figure 10: Pez hua



Figure 11: Inhabitants of “país de los brazos largos”



Figure 12: Hombres marinos

Source sign

The mountain Hui looks like a dog with a human head. It is a fine jumper and moves with the swiftness of an arrow; this is why its appearance is held to foretell the coming of typhoons. On beholding a man, the Hui laughs mockingly. (Borges, 1974: 66)

El *hui* de las montañas parece un perro con cara de hombre. Es muy buen saltador y se mueve con la rapidez de una flecha; por ello se considera que su aparición presagia tifones. Se ríe burlescamente cuando ve al hombre. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Musical Serpent* has a serpent's head and four wings. It makes sounds like those of the Musical Stone. (Borges, 1974: 67)

La *serpiente musical* tiene cabeza de serpiente y cuatro alas. Hace un ruido como el de la piedra musical. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The Ping-feng, which lives in the country of Magical Water, resembles a black pig with a head at each end. (Borges, 1974: 67)

El *ping-feng*, que habita en el país del Agua Mágica, parece un cerdo negro, pero tiene una cabeza en cada extremo. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Hsing-hsing* are like apes. They have white faces and pointed ears. They walk upright, like men, and climb trees. (Borges, 1974: 66)

Los *hsing-hsing* son como monos. Tienen caras blancas y orejas puntiagudas. Caminan erectos como hombres, y trepan a los árboles. (Borges, 1979: 41)

Target sign

Figure 13: Hui de las montañas



Figure 14: Serpiente musical



Figure 15: Ping-feng



Figure 16: Hsing-hsing

Source sign

The *Hsiao* is similar to the owl but has a man's face, an ape's body, and a dog's tail. Its presence foretells prolonged drought. (Borges, 1974: 66)

El *hsiao* es como la lechuza, pero tiene cara de hombre, cuerpo de mono y cola de perro. Su aparición presagia rigurosas sequías. (Borges, 1979: 41)

The *Celestial Horse* is like a white dog with a black head. It has fleshy wings and can fly. (Borges, 1974: 66)

El *caballo celestial* parece un perro blanco con cabeza negra. Tiene alas carnosas y puede volar. (Borges, 1979: 41)

In the region of the Queer Arm, people have a single arm and three eyes. They are exceptionally skilful and build flying chariots in which they travel on the winds. (Borges, 1974: 66)

En la región *del brazo raro*, las personas tienen un brazo y tres ojos. Son notablemente hábiles y fabrican carruajes voladores, en los que viajan por el Vento. (Borges, 1979: 41)

Target sign

Figure 17: Hsiao

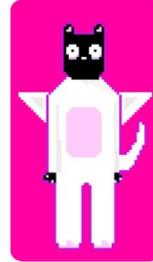


Figure 18: Caballo celestial

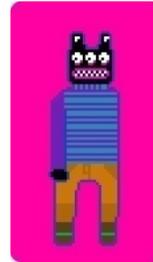


Figure 19: Inhabitants of
región del brazo raro

Source sign

The *Ti-Chiang* is a supernatural bird dwelling in the Mountains of the Sky. Its color is bright red, it has six feet and four wings, but has neither face nor eyes. (Borges, 1974: 67)

El *ti-chiang* es un pájaro sobrenatural que habita en las Montañas Celestiales. Es del color bermejo, tiene seis patas y cuatro alas, pero no tiene ni cara ni ojos. (Borges, 1979: 41)

Target sign

Figure 20:Ti-chiang

7 Conclusion

Intersemiotic translation (IT) is a phenomenon of interest to many fields of research such as general semiotics, comparative literature, translation studies, interarts and intermediality studies, to name but a few. Since Jakobson's (1959) definition of intersemiotic translation, the term's meaning has broadened and now designates relations between systems of different natures; it is no longer restricted to the interpretation of verbal signs (Queiroz & Aguiar, 2015; Aguiar & Queiroz, 2013, 2009; Cluver, 1997: 43; Gorfée, 2007; Plaza, 1987). Consequently, this process can be observed in several semiotic phenomena, including literature, cinema, comics, poetry, dance, music, theater, sculpture, painting, video, and so on.

In this work we have presented just such a modern-day intersemiotic translation by focusing on the verbal descriptions of the Chinese fauna bestiary from the book *El libro de los Seres Imaginarios* by Jorge Luis Borges. We identified some formal aspects of the literary source-signs considered to be most relevant and used such aspects in a graphic translation of the creatures in the aesthetic domain of pixel art games.

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Bionotes

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