

# Notes on a Bestiary

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FOR THE FOREST CURRICULUM

d tigers in turn was an enigmatic of the weretiger. According to these  
ring from house to house in search  
eretigers, who would return in  
enied them charity. As Boomgaard  
ertain people seem to go hand  
guilt and fear toward poor people.”<sup>30</sup>  
of hate, resentment, and guilt  
n the paranoia-infested years of  
leill, the “reciprocity between food  
history is matched by parallel  
white corpuscles in a human body  
against infection” by the ingestion  
able to be digested by the white  
turn digest whatever they find nour-  
ommunism can be viewed as a  
ind, with the aim of maximum repli-  
ion of the market system, thus takes  
allel to that of the human body

o a kind of intense hypochondria  
like all pathological phenomena,  
turn can be split into three phases.  
inct that is inhibited from devel-  
ge. The second is repression proper,  
onflict with the “conscious system”  
The third and most important phase  
d the subsequent “irruption, of  
Malaya-wide paranoia, no doubt,  
nist tactic if arrested—to never  
paranoid state, this strategy of  
almost everyone equally suspect.

“The bestiary forms a core part of the proposition of the Forest Curriculum, which attempts to assemble a critique of the planetarity of the Anthropocene discourse, and produce an alternative framework, rooted in the naturecultures of *zomia*. Proposed by Willem van Schendel and built upon by James C. Scott, Zomia is a zone that coincides with the forested regions that lie in the altitudes above 300 m, occurring at the edges of nation- states; a vast region that enfolds borderlands and contested regions including Northeastern India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the borders between Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as the Isan heartland, and stretching into the Cordillieras of the Philippines and the tropical jungles of the Malay peninsula. As has been noted, the tropical state has always been seasonal, shrinking and growing with the movement of people and communities with the coming of the rains, or the faint passage of winter. And, borders have always been embodied, and contingent on shifting relationships to states. Well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and indeed today, zomia has been used by those resisting state control, making kin with the swamps, leaves, mosquitos, ghosts of the forest to ward off the state and its agents. Zomia has been the zone of operation of indigenous communities, such as the Hmong, the Tripura, the Aytas as well as communists, in Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, and Buddhist monks.”<sup>1</sup>

The attempt to create a bestiary, therefore, is a move against imperialist modes of categorization, of the encyclopedic, through the production of data, always oriented towards a future ‘pressing-into-service’. To list, always becomes an acting of *enlisiting*, through which “man” (here, the hegemonic usually male body of the upper class-caste, dominant ethnic, capitalist) *conscripts* “nature”. The creation of the bestiary becomes, then, an attempt not to catalogue, but assemble, these non-human agencies from across *zomian* terrains, and in doing so produce new intimacies, and predations, beyond the human. As Matteo Pasquinelli writes, “Instead of rendering the contemporary age with concepts still influenced by the technological environment or Enlightenment dialectics, the bestiaries of the Middle Ages can better assist with facing the uncanny animality unleashed through us.”<sup>2</sup> Zomian cosmologies, much akin to

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V)  
of Siam, the great modernizer met a cult of เสือสมิง —  
Suea Saming — during his official visit to Chantaburi  
Reappears in ‘Tropical Malady’ — the weretiger  
as lover, as other-as-self, as forest  
Then to wear the forest, or to be worn by it,  
not as uniform mechanized by it  
To become more than one — an innumerability  
that cannot be disclosed

animal that has capacity for language, for semiotics, for knowing, defining and interacting with each other and with its own self. In such a milieu, the relation between animals and humans takes a social relation, of defining each other by kin and kith. It is here that one resides both in the realm of language, of learning interacting and rationalizing, but also in the realm of affects, of intimacies, bodily contacts, and predatory attunements. Animals here too move through longue duree histories, not interrupting, but turning, enfolding all the forces it passes through with. Zomian animals therefore produce a mutative, dynamic almost historical relationship with those who enter the equation. The bestiary then is never complete. It only seeks to tell us, indicate, or imply, that which is intriguing about animals, and the qualities they embody or bring to our perceptible conciosness. The bestiary then becomes an act of narration, rather than the performance of capture and containment, measurement and tabulation. As morphing, multi-species bodies, the bestiary presents these animals both as concept beings, and as modes of narration itself. The bestiary locates storytelling as central to this project, proposing a site of converging intensities, where fabulation (The entanglement of myth and history) is at its ripest. The bestiary seeks to entangle myths and facts, bodily affects and plastic materialities, weaving a tale whose monstrosity cannot be documented otherwise. The bestiary is then a “wealth of unexpected juxtapositions” that explore how and unlike human animals are, and how they cast light human and animal interactions.

The narrative of ‘হাবুর পসিমা’ — ‘Haru’s-Aunt’ — of rural Bengal, which includes an encounter with a colonial officer attempting to document the number of tigers in a district, whose efforts become befuddled at this point of encounter

The weretiger’s enfolding capacity — to shift the coordinates of becoming-intimate to trails of predation — leaping scales and passing in and out of the never-quite-human world of the forest.

If animism entails the holding of the human soul within an animal corporeal garb, then transformation of the animal entails the transformation of the body while the soul remains intact. 2 or 3 Tigers entails a similar process but through cinematic technics of animation: a play around animus, the animal, and animation, between movement, mutation, and life.

I  
Amerindian philosophies, while starting off with a similar binary seeks to complicate, and in turn, invert it.<sup>3</sup> Zomian thinking posits that while culture is universally shared by animals and humans alike, or the fact of acculturation per se, nature, is governed as a social system by those who partake in it. Predation, is not merely the hunt for food, but one of exterminating other animals who were once kith and kin. If western thought, via its evolutionary philosophy bases animality as a primordial condition, one that has to be tamed or reasoned out with humanity, in Zomian animisms it is humanity which is the shared condition amongst all living creatures alike, each animal possessing a human soul garbed in different animal clothing. It is each

1 Abhijan Toto and Pujita Guha, “Forest Curriculum: Introduction,” unpublished curatorial note, New Delhi and Bangkok, 2018.  
2 Matteo Pasquinelli, “The Diseases of the Empire” in *Animal Spirits*, (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2008), 29.  
3 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies,” *Common Knowledge* 10.3 (Fall 2004): 463–468.

Unlike their Philippine counterpart, the กระสือ —Krasue, a floating head dragging her heart and entrails behind her—never grew wings. The Manananggal, who instead splits at the waist, appears always in this space of enfolding. The bats wings, so central to their depiction in later cinematic traditions,<sup>1</sup> and which go unrecorded in Juan de Plasecnia’s volume,<sup>2</sup> perhaps then are an enfolding of Catholic intentions that come back to haunt.

Rending at the waist, or dragging her entrails behind her in rooted flight—she makes power gritty, filthy flesh, slipping also into filth-as-menstrual blood—gliding between potency and weakness.

Transition, therefore, not as interim. The Manananggal [re(?)-appears] In Manila in 1997, shifting cartographies of the soft body of the “sick man,”<sup>3</sup> relatively untouched by the plague that struck down mid-flight the tigers that roamed around her. Death, perhaps again, from above. Krasues, after all, were born from learning imperfectly a foreign spell , the snaking tongue becoming snagged in the short, sharp barbs and thorns of words.

1 Pepeng Agimat (1973); Darna Kuno...? (1979); Shake, Rattle and Roll (1984); Impaktita (1984); Darna (1991); Shake, Rattle and Roll IV (1992); Takot ka aba sa Dilim (1996); Manananggal in Manila (1997); Agimat: Anting Anting ni Lolo (2002); Ang Panama (2006); Ang Manananggal sa Unit 23B (2016)

2 Juan de Plasencia, Customs of the Tagalogs (1598)

3 In the years leading up to the 1997 financial crisis, the Philippines was termed the “sick man” of Asia.

4 Bin Bunluerit, Tamnan Krause (2002).

Artistic research, thus, a mode of encountering, and becoming encountered by, these non-human agencies – here, we bring our attention to the *tikbalangs* (half horse, half-human impish guardians of the forest), *manannaggals* (forested witches embodying a rhizomatic condition), and weretigers (interstitial beings who are sometimes human, sometimes tiger, living between the hearth and the forest ) as three possible points of entry. The vignettes appearing as marginalia here are the margins of texts by Pujita Guha on the *tikbalangs* as they appear in Lav Diaz’s film *Hele Sa Hiwagang Hapis* (2016), Ho Tzu Nyen on the weretiger in his video art project *2 or 3 Tigers* (2016), and Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho on the *manannaggals* in their digital collage project *Manannaggal has appeared in Yiwu* (2018). Before we turn to each of the animals, we would like to point out a peculiar thing on our bestiary. That is, either by coincidence or by design, all our beasts are between humans and their animal/plant selves (half-humans half-horse, half-human half-tigers, and half-human, half rhizome). Therefore, while we turn to their cinematic bodies, we ought to ask why do these bodies appear as such? For a human becoming a horse, or a horse becoming a human, neither the human nor the horse is imitating the other. They only but gradually extract from each body a series of body gestures: ways in which the body connects to the world. How it eats, sleeps, walks rests and roams the world. What he comes up with is neither a man nor a human, a monster, a freak, an excess. These bodies appear in tension, held between a state where it diagrams from two seemingly physically disparate animals.

Manananggal has appeared  
She feels a rootedness  
trashiness and tawdry  
choices, which sucks,

## II

And yet, this tension has to be resolved, the monster’s monstrosity tamed. For the *Tikbalangs*, Diaz represents them in the human form, alluding to the half-horse half human form only in flashes, when alluding to its monstrous excesses. For the weretigers, the bodily tension swirls between the human and the tiger, becoming one and the other continuously, never quite remaining one. For the *Mananaggals* their bodies itself decrepitate, rhizomatically distributing itself to all the other bodies where it can suck blood or viscera from. Crucially, the creation of this bestiary is not the search for other chthonic creatures, suddenly awakened—we do intend to search for a Zomian Cthulu. Rather, this opening up of networks or agencies allows us to become aware of the ways these agencies are always already entangled with acting up histories on the human scale.<sup>4</sup> A scale makes meaning-making possible, but on the other, a particular scale-framing also evades certain larger, invisible unsaid, possibly structural truths that bolster up our experiences. With the bestiary, therefore, such a scalar question comes to the fore, and specifically the need to discard the methodological reliance on a single scale to explain complex historical-ecological issues. The bestiary defies any particular scale of representation. It is, as Timothy Clark argues, more of an “emergent scale effect,” a “certain indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions insignificant in themselves” but those which come together to form a “new, imponderable physical event,” rewriting the basic natural cycles of the planet.<sup>5</sup> This bestiary would thus like to ponder upon it conceives of a planetary imagination of (im)perceptible changes across epochs, mutating material conditions, and scales beyond individual experience. Works, like any finite piece of writing, cannot ‘encompass a topic that seems to entail thinking of almost everything at once’, comprising a whole that is both unimaginably vast, and concurrently amorphous, invisible in this scope. The bestiary, therefore, is not only one of scalar entanglement—of forces operating at multiple levels—but also of reading the syndrome at that very level itself. Methodologically, reading or representing the idea would then involve a simultaneous zooming in/out through multiple sliders, riding through networked planes, possibly all at once; experiencing a catatonia of one’s own. The bestiary, thus, is the end of a secure overview, a secure location from which events could be mapped. There are “no sort of unitary of easily perceived object” anymore but the “correlate” of numerous observations, theories and feelings.<sup>6</sup>

4 A scale (from the Latin word *scala*, for rungs of the ladder) usually “enables a calibrated and useful extrapolation between dimensions of space or time.” Thus a cartographic scale describes the ratio of the space on the earth to its representation on the map, usually implying a “calculable shift in resolution” and an exploration of detail. A certain scale makes apparent the “fundamental structure of any imaginable experience,” or of any model. A geological scale would be definable by hours, the planet by square centimeters, and finding out the routes of a city on a world physical map.

5 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 71.

6 Ibid.

## III

Perhaps, then, it is in cinema that the bestiary came to find its seemingly truest correlate, performing like in front of a mirror. Cinema mobilized a machinic, visual operation built on the play of scales—between long shots and close ups that encompassed the beast from all its multiple perspectives. It is in cinema therefore that the word scale acquired a double connotation—of the thick bodily protrusions of the beast on the one hand, and the magnification of these very bodily forms that the cinematic apparatus allows on the other. Everytime a beast occupied the screen, one was transported back to the mythic moment of the first Lumière brothers screening where, by dint of sheer magnification the moving train was made into a monster, the audience terrified by this abject presence of the beastly body. If cinema, a modern technological apparatus par excellence, was born out of an interaction with animals (Edward Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope studies of animal motion), then it is also in cinema that animals in the bestiary also came to acquire the valence of horror—magnified and monstrous, heretofore unknowable, unspeakable, visceral, yet untouchable. It is only with the anthropocentric becoming of cinema, its insistence on human scales, faces and worldviews, that everything outside its perimeter began to acquire an uncanny volubility. The trouble (which is to say, the definitive ‘otherization’ of beasts) came about because, humans and beasts often did not view each other as subjects of the same plane. The *beasts* presumed that they own a similar sense of subjectivity as humans do, i.e. they saw this world of the cinematic image as a world to be inhabited by humans and non-humans alike. But beasts also often realised that since these humans did not accept them as persons, they could only have a laugh at their own expense: assume the monstrous imagination they had been bestowed with. It is somewhere in the annals of horror cinema, then, that the beasts were self-consciously tinkering, having a laugh at modernity’s inability to own up to an other, its inability to co-habit with an animist perspectival thinking that renders animals as humane, inalienable creatures from a different time and space.

Texts excerpted from:

- Pujita Guha, “A Century of Dying,” MPhil thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, 2017.
- Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, “Manananggal has appeared in Yiwu,” Southeast of Now 2.1 (March 2018): 183–200.
- Ho Tzu Nyen, “Every Cat in History is I” in 2 or 3 Tigers, eds. Anselm Franke and Hyunjun Kim (Berlin: HKW, 2018), [https://www.hkw.de/de/tigers\\_publication/every\\_cat\\_in\\_history\\_is\\_i\\_ho\\_tzu\\_nyen/every\\_cat\\_in\\_history\\_is\\_i\\_ho\\_tzu\\_nyen.php](https://www.hkw.de/de/tigers_publication/every_cat_in_history_is_i_ho_tzu_nyen/every_cat_in_history_is_i_ho_tzu_nyen.php).

As in in European colonialism, horses came to be associated with military might during this period. Diaz takes to this popular image – Aguinaldo’s men are on horses, as are the Spanish ones. Therefore, if at all nature is a cultural artifact – then horses are evil, conjoined to a colonial imagination. The three Tikbalangs are only but the next step – they don Spanish clothing, talk to the army captain in his suite at Intramuros, dissuade Gregoria from her search, act as Spanish stooges, and present facets of what could be the archetypically evil. The cunning, the morally evil and the sinister is what defines the male, the female and the androgynous Tikbalangs respectively. And yet, in this animist universe, the horse, and, by extension the horse-demon, do not represent evil. They only bear spirits from this human realm who are evil. In this ‘multi-naturalist’ universe nature is not a static object out there: it is not a fixed, mute object. It expresses and ingests forces acting upon it, enfolds history upon itself. It assimilates that history which it has been subjected to.<sup>26</sup> The horse which in itself is a martial symbol, mostly closely identified with the Spaniards is ingested into the animist myth as a horse-demon, their close association with the colonial forces in the film amply bearing testament to their palpably demonic quality. and deflecting their own anxieties onto others, something that witches in allegorical narratives never have access to. Tikbalangs are persons:

The Tikbalang is described as a as a tall, bony humanoid creature with the head of a horse. With its disproportionately long limbs, its knees reach above its head when it squats down.

The Tikbalangs are the enfolding of the colonial-white violence into the popular folk format of the local populace.

As the shape-shifting trickster of the forest, it embodies the forest’s non-navigability, its sinuous trails, its confounding viscosity. The forest as a space of /for and as a space for trickery, fabrication, and tricksters.

Taming the tikbalang, then, is a history of taming the forest, cleansing it of its disparities and irregularities, transforming it into the regulated space of monocultural plantation.

Despite cinema’s early conjunction with the horse, the horse’s material presence becomes too much to handle for Manila’s elite who view the Tikbalangs as necessary outsiders. The horses seek to inhabit a liminal space borne between a horse and a human interaction—cinema. Trouble specifically arises because despite a shared interest for horses and motion through a technological medium, humans and Tikbalangs do not view each other as subjects of the same plane: the latter viewing the former as monsters from an etherland.