

# Baldomera's Bray.

## The Transmediation of a Viral Story

Minns du inte samma trolldryck som förvandlar Shrek  
från trubbigt träsktroll till stilig riddare  
transformerar den enerverande åsnan till en vit hingst  
(Athena Farrokhzad)

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### Abstract

This article examines the transmedial transformation of *The Story of Baldomera*, tracing its evolution from a viral video to a picturebook. The study highlights how the adaptation recontextualizes the original material through the interplay of visual and verbal elements, expanding its narrative to address contemporary environmental concerns and the emotional resonance of human-animal relationships. By introducing themes of climate change and the pandemic's impact on human interaction with nature, the picturebook redefines the story as an ecomedial artifact, reflecting broader cultural changes and ecological anxieties. The analysis further explores intertextual connections to iconic literary representations of donkeys, including Dapple in *Don Quixote* and Platero in *Platero and I*, positioning Baldomera within a tradition that underscores the cultural significance of donkeys. In studying how the transmediation of the video introduces new layers of meaning to the book, this article reflects on the persistence of hierarchical views of animals and explores how children's literature and digital media can both express ecological crises and reimagine human-animal relationships in the digital age.

### Keywords

Transmediality, Picturebook, Children's literature, Animal-Human Relations, Donkeys in Literature

### FRAMING BALDOMERA: INTRODUCING A DONKEY'S TALE

The story of Baldomera and Ismael is significant in a time of multiple global crises. In May 2020, as some countries began to lift restrictions imposed due to Covid-19, a video on YouTube went viral. This video depicts the heartwarming reunion between Ismael, the person behind the camera, and Baldomera, a donkey eagerly rushing towards the lens.

After three months of separation due to the lockdown, Baldomera brays — some might even say she cries—while Ismael's laughter turns to tears as they share an emotional reunion. This video garnered over 50 million views, leading to Ismael and Baldomera's joint interviews with media outlets ranging from local newspapers and radio stations in the small village of El Borge, Málaga, Spain, to major TV channels in countries such as Argentina, Japan, and Pakistan (Antena 3 2020; 101TV Andalucía 2023; Sánchez 2021).



**Image 1.** Screenshot of the video (La burrita Baldomera, 2020). Reproduced by kind permission of authors and publishing house, as all the images in this article.

Several months later, *La burrita Baldomera*, a picturebook that recreates the reunion, was published. The authors, Enrique Ballesteros and Ismael Arias (the same Ismael from the video), collaborated with illustrator Ayesha Rubio to create this unique perspective. The book delves into Baldomera's emotions, tracing the development of their friendship, her feelings during their separation, and her intriguing speculations about Ismael's abrupt absence — linked to themes of climate crisis. All visual and textual quotes are gathered from the original *La burrita Baldomera*. The translation to English is made by the author of this article. The book was translated to English in 2021 as *The Story of Baldomera*.

This article examines the transmedial transformation of a vlog into a picturebook from an ecocritical and posthumanist perspective. It argues that the resulting book, when analysed through the lens of intermedial relations, highlights significant aspects of the representation of human-animal relationships and environmental degradation in children's literature. In an era where children are immersed in a culture filled with media experiences, the article seeks to understand how discourses and concerns about environmental problems emerge in a media product such as *The Story of Baldomera*. Employing a transmedial methodology and grounded in ecocritical and posthumanist concepts, this article analyses the resulting book, focusing on which elements of the narrative are new, which remain unchanged, and the reasons behind these creative choices.

#### CHILDREN'S ANIMAL NARRATIVES: EXPLORING TRANSMEDIATION AND HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS

Other stories, in some ways similar to the Baldomera phenomenon, have been recreated across different media. For instance, the picturebook *The Wonky Donkey* (Smith 2010), gained sudden popularity after a viral video of a grandmother's animated reading captivated viewers (Flood, 2018). This shift—from book to viral video—propelled it to bestseller status, showing how transmediation can expand the impact of a storytelling.

Another example is the story behind both the book *Arthur: The Dog Who Crossed the Jungle to Find a Home* (Lindnord 2017) and the film *Arthur the King* (2024). In the Ecuadorian rainforest, a multisport team encountered a stray dog they named Arthur, who followed them for 700 kilometres. A photo of Arthur with the team captain in a kayak soon went viral, and the story gained global attention.

The circumstances surrounding the creation of *The Story of Baldomera* make an intermedial approach appropriate, as it examines the transformation of the story across media. Unlike *The Wonky Donkey*, the Baldomera book emerged only after the video went viral — meaning the video is not directly part of the narrative. The works about Arthur offer a closer comparison, as they also portray human–non-human relationships and the familiar signs of unconditional appreciation from companion animals.

However, *The Story of Baldomera* is unique in that it is a piece of children's literature and unfolds during the pandemic, with many of the conditions associated with that extraordinary historical moment leaving a profound impact on the book's development.

Intermedial theories, as noted by Ayoe Quist Henkel, have remained relatively underutilized in the realm of children's literature research, even though with the rise of digitalization, young readers are now exposed to diverse combinations of media types like never before (2021).

Intermedial occurrences — that is, the 'participation of two or more media in the signification of a human artifact' (Wolf 1999, p. 37) — are a common phenomenon. For instance, digital literary texts for children often combine writing, images, and sound, incorporating elements like films, animations, and interactive features (Antonio Monroy 2021; Schreurs 2013). Intermedial relationships also include the expansion of storyworlds across media, as seen in franchises like *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* (Ryan 2019). Storyworlds for younger readers include those centred on characters such as *Pippi Longstocking* (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Surmatz 2011) and *Bamse* (Nilsson 2023).

Transmediation, a type of intermedial relationship, involves adapting a narrative across media, with elements from the original either preserved or modified (Elleström 2014). Bruhn et al. (2022), building on Leitch and Hutcheon, outline strategies like compression, updating, superimposition, and correction. The significance lies not only in distinguishing the adjustments made but also in analyzing how these adjustments convey ideas, taking into account the specificities of each medium, their contexts, conventions, production circumstances, and 'broader historical, philosophical, or aesthetic' dimensions (Bruhn et al. 2022, p. 141).

*The Story of Baldomera* is neither a direct adaptation nor part of a franchise; rather, it emerged after widespread sharing on social media. Its transmediation integrates environmental concerns, aligning with what Bruhn (2021) calls 'ecomedial characteristics'—representations that question boundaries between 'human and non-human' and 'culture and nature' (p. 122, 139–140).

This is evident in the reworking of a simple video depicting a reunion between a donkey and a man into a picturebook. Tracing this evolution reveals how ecomedial representation intersects with ecocritical and posthuman concerns. Lykke Guanio-Uluru (2019) notes that since Glotfelty's initial definition of ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, p. xix), the field has expanded to include dimensions of posthuman discourse, as reflected in the work of scholars such as Braidotti (2013), Hayles (2010), Haraway (2008), Descola (2011), Barad (2003), and Wolfe (2010). Greg Garrard (2012) presents a more comprehensive definition of ecocriticism that involves exploring the relationship between humans and non-humans throughout human cultural history, proposing a critical analysis

of the concept of 'human' itself, as also explained by Guanio-Uluru (2019).

Posthuman theory has become increasingly relevant in children's literature, particularly in stories featuring anthropomorphized animals like *The Story of Baldomera*, that — as Cunningham et al. (2021) note — belong to a long global storytelling tradition. Key contributions to posthuman research in this field include Victoria Flanagan's *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction* (2014), Amy Ratelle's *Animality and Children's Literature and Film* (2015), and Zoe Jaques' *Children's Literature and the Posthuman* (2015).

According to Cunningham et al., portrayals of animals as moral exemplars or villains trace back to Aesop's fables, many of which feature donkeys. The earliest academic discussions emerged in ancient Greece, but anthropomorphism became a hallmark of children's literature by the mid-1700s. During the Enlightenment–Romantic transition, animal stories flourished, influenced by Rousseau's view of the child's innate connection to nature and Locke's ideas promoting kindness to animals. In the late twentieth century, the trend expanded with the diversification of children's literature, as new animal-centred tales emerged. Such books remain widely popular in the twenty-first century (Cunningham et al. 2021).

*The Story of Baldomera* continues this tradition, featuring an anthropomorphized donkey to address environmental degradation and human–non-human relations through transmedial transformation. As Jaques argues, posthuman theory, developed in response to the anthropocentric nature of humanism, challenges established notions of human superiority. Animal-centred stories, therefore, have the potential to radically destabilize such hierarchies of being, though they often simultaneously reinforce hegemonic ways of thinking about human dominance (2015).

### **VIRAL BONDS: HUMAN-DONKEY CONNECTION IN A PANDEMIC VISUAL WORLD**

Before delving into the book, it is pertinent to describe and comment on the qualities of the source video—its content and its extensive remediation — as it initiates the transmediation process. Uploaded to YouTube in 2020, the video belongs to the 'vlog' genre, a blend of 'video' and 'blog'. This format, common on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, enhances the sense of authenticity tied to social media, offering a more immersive experience than traditional blog (Jensen et al. 2022).

The video first appeared as a Facebook post on Ismael Arias's personal account, announcing his plan to visit Baldomera after a long separation due to the pandemic (Sánchez 2020). Later uploaded to YouTube at friends' request, it quickly drew thousands of comments and underwent various remediations by users and news outlets (Sánchez 2020).

Although Ismael is not seen during the 1:30-minute recording, his voice provides narrative continuity. The video diverges slightly from standard

vlog conventions, which typically feature the vlogger's face and address the audience (Jensen et al., 2022). Still, the combination of his off-camera voice and point-of-view shots generates the intimacy and authenticity typical of vlogs. Captured on a mobile phone with shaky footage, the video centres on their moving reunion. Ismael's quivering voice, calling Baldomera, suggests tears as he strokes her. The donkey responds with intense braying, which experts confirm can signal emotional expression in donkeys (Sánchez 2021). The video thus captures the deep affection between Ismael and Baldomera after their long separation.

In interviews, Ismael revealed his initial anxiety before the visit, fearing Baldomera might not recognize him. His fears were dispelled by her unmistakable reaction, which moved him to tears. Their brief but powerful interaction reflects a long-standing bond. Baldomera, originally from a sanctuary in Mijas, Andalucía, was adopted to accompany Ismael's father in rural retirement. Over the years, Ismael and Baldomera developed a close relationship, spending summers and weekends together. During Spain's lockdowns, care duties fell to Ismael's brother, who lived nearby.

Given the international media attention the vlog received, its images gained symbolic weight and prompt reflection on human-animal relationships. What captivates most is not Ismael's emotions—expected in such reunions — but rather Baldomera's engagement and apparent shared sentiment. Their connection underscores the depth of human–donkey bonds and recalls their coevolutionary history.

The viral spread of Baldomera's video exemplifies how digital culture reinforces the role of animals as sources of solace and companionship in times of crisis. This specific bond between Ismael and Baldomera resonates with broader social practices involving animals, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Lupton (2022), animals gained increasing prominence in digital visual media during the first two years of the crisis, offering distraction, relief from loneliness, and a way for people to connect with 'nature' while confined at home.

Many users shared animal content on social platforms to uplift others, engaging in reciprocal exchanges of animal media for emotional support. In this context, Baldomera's story not only reflects a deeply personal reunion but also aligns with a collective cultural phenomenon in which animals were seen as therapeutic resources for human mental health and wellness.

### **DONKEYS IN CULTURAL HISTORY: BEYOND THE VIRAL MOMENT WORLD**

The emotional resonance of the video of Baldomera is not only rooted in the pandemic context or the medium of the vlog. It also draws on deep cultural perceptions of donkeys as companions and labourers with rich symbolic histories. Donkeys have played pivotal roles in human societies, from supporting the Roman Empire's northward expansion to

transporting goods along the Silk Road. This 6,000 km trade route, connecting Egypt to China, facilitated unplanned breeding and contributed to the genetic diversity of donkeys today. Donkeys continue to hold significance across various cultures: symbolically, as seen in the sonic landscapes and religious practices of the Willowra community as a labor force, as in Chinese agriculture, and as companions, exemplified by the story of Ismael and Baldomera (Vaarzon-Morel 2021).

Despite improvements in their living conditions and transitions into new roles, donkeys remain enmeshed within the hierarchical, anthropocentric logic that positions humans as the dominant species. This dynamic is made visible in the vlog by the presence of a fence that physically separates Baldomera and Ismael. The fence underscores the complexities of their companion relationship: Baldomera's life is confined, yet she enjoys a richer existence beyond the labour roles historically assigned to her species. Their emotional reunion signifies a bond that transcends utilitarianism; they matter deeply to one another.

Yet, while Baldomera's circumstances may seem improved compared to those of her ancestors, she remains confined by domestication, fulfilling roles within human narratives — including her video appearance and the subsequent interviews. This raises critical questions about the ethics of representation and domestication. Many thinkers argue that the domestication of animals represents a historical tragedy, reducing sentient beings to tools or commodities within human culture (Haraway 2008; Malamud 2012). Malamud critiques how visual culture exerts hegemonic control over our understanding of animals, often erasing their true essence. Haraway, by contrast, does not seek to uncover an essential 'truth' about animals but instead emphasizes the ongoing, historically situated interrelationships between humans and animals (2008).

Ismael's account of his reunion with Baldomera offers insights into their attunement and mutual affectivity, resonating with Haraway's suggestion to focus on practices where humans and animals become closely connected. In an interview following the video's virality, Ismael recounted:

When I arrived, I called her, and it was strange because whenever she sees me, she brays from wherever she is. But on this occasion, she was completely silent. I thought she didn't remember me anymore. Then she ran toward me, giving me kisses and caresses with her muzzle, and I couldn't hold back my tears. At that moment, she brayed in a way she never had before; it seemed she empathized with me and cried with joy to see me (Hoy, Ismael Fernández 'Amigo de la burrita Baldomera' 2023).

Ismael's recollection highlights Baldomera's usual behaviour while illuminating the broader theme of interspecies understanding. Usually, Baldomera responds to Ismael's voice even across the vast expanse of her enclosure, as seen in the video. This time, however, she remained silent before braying in

an unusual way, which Ismael interpreted as a response to his emotions. Research confirms that donkeys possess significant empathic sensitivity in their interactions with humans and other species. For instance, donkeys often assist children on the autism spectrum and adolescents with psychological challenges (Panzer et al. 2020). Such bonds take time to develop and vary greatly between individuals, as sanctuary staff have observed while preparing rescued donkeys for therapy roles or adoption.

Haraway suggests that, rather than viewing domesticated animals simply as objects of human control, we should observe the interspecies collaborations and affective entanglements that characterize these relationships. The vlog captures the closeness and affection between Ismael and Baldomera while also revealing the structures of power and control that underpin their bond. In Lupton's terms, the video reflects how animals gained prominence as therapeutic figures during the pandemic, aligning with broader digital cultures of emotional support (2023). Malamud critiques how animals in visual culture are often reduced to objects that serve human desires — whether for entertainment, scientific inquiry, or emotional comfort. This reduction strips animals of their dignity, autonomy, and physical integrity, becoming mere tools for commodification (2012). They are paradoxically both highly visible as spectacles and yet invisible as individual beings (Lupton 2023).

As a media product, the video simultaneously comments on mutual enrichment and the possibilities of interspecies connections. At the same time, it reminds us that these mediated interactions are more suggested or imagined than directly experienced by their audiences. They also unfold within a world struggling with ecological crisis, with several species disappearing or threatened with extinction daily, further complicating the ethics of representing animals in digital and visual cultures.

## BALDOMERA REIMAGINED: FROM VIRAL VIDEO TO PICTUREBOOK

While the original video of Ismael and Baldomera went viral, resonating particularly with adults navigating the emotional toll of pandemic isolation, the story undergoes a transformation through transmediation. It transitions from the ephemeral realm of social media to the more enduring medium of picturebooks. In *The Story of Baldomera*, the narrative extends beyond the moment depicted in the video, reimagined within the immersive and visually evocative format of a picturebook.

*The Story of Baldomera* belongs to the qualified media type of picturebooks, a prominent genre within children's literature. Unlike traditional illustrated books, where images primarily reinforce the text, picturebooks rely on a more intricate interplay between visual and verbal modes. In these works, images and text collaborate not simply to mirror each other but to create meaning in complementary or even divergent ways (Colomer 2010; Durán 2000; Nikolajeva and Scott 2000).

Most picturebooks target young readers and assume the presence of an adult co-reader. In this sense, they adopt a dual address, communicating simultaneously with children and adults (Bullen & Nichols 2011; Haglund & Nauwerck 2024).

*The Story of Baldomera* is a large-format picturebook (15.88 x 23 cm), typically classified for early childhood. The text occupies a small portion of each page, while illustrations dominate the two-page spreads, contributing significantly to the narrative. The integration of image and text provides a platform for the visual mode to expand upon and interact with the written content.

The illustrations convey both the spatial context of the story and the emotional states of the characters. The opening pages depict the rural landscape around Baldomera: open spaces with hills, birds flying overhead, and a few trees near a body of water, possibly the sea. Most scenes occur during daylight, except for one spread where dark blue hues signify nighttime, accompanied by text stating that 'every evening they come back to the farm' (Ballesteros et al. 2020 [no pagination]). A window in the background suggests that Ismael sleeps indoors, but it is unclear whether Baldomera sleeps in the house, the stable, or outside. This ambiguity — presented in the book's only nocturnal scene — draws attention to the spatial and symbolic boundaries, between human and nonhuman characters, exposing the tension between the anthropomorphized portrayal of Baldomera as a close companion and her positioning as an animal other.

As Baldomera speculates about Ismael's absence, the illustrations play a key narrative role by depicting a series of imagined scenarios. These visual sequences reflect her emotional uncertainty and move the story beyond the written text. For example, she imagines Ismael adrift on a melting iceberg or lying ill in a hospital.

The illustrations also convey emotions, through subtle adjustments to the eyes and gestures of the characters. Emotions are expressed through fine details in the characters' gestures: the movement of Baldomera's ears or Ismael's arms, for example, effectively convey their feelings and interactions.

Beyond the images, the picturebook's visual modality includes paratextual elements — most notably a QR code on the back cover linking to the viral video. This creates an intermedial bridge between the two media products. While the video is brief and emotionally direct, the affordances of the picturebook — defined as the possibilities and limitations intrinsic to this medium (Bruhn and Schirmacher 2022) — invite a different kind of reader engagement. Readers are encouraged to fill interpretive gaps between text and images, fostering a deeper connection to the narrative.

The intermedial relationship expressed through the QR code connects age groups. Although the original vlog primarily spoke to an adult audience — attuned to the emotional impact of the pandemic and its hardships — the picturebook is designed for younger readers, anticipating an adult co-reader. The QR code helps capture the adult's attention. While

children may engage with it or ask for help scanning it, the linked content primarily appeals to adults, who are more likely to appreciate the broader context of the video's reception and pandemic backdrop. As Wall (1991) notes, books must first attract and persuade adults to be published, marketed, and purchased.

Bullen and Nichols (2011) point out that picturebooks are crafted for shared reading, bridging both audiences. Nikolajeva sees that contemporary picturebook creators are acutely aware of this dual audience and skilfully design their works to provide meaningful experiences tailored to both adults and children (2003). Consequently, while the QR-linked video may be viewed alongside the book, its content is likely to be more meaningful to adults. Children may react emotionally to the reunion, but the video's deeper significance — linked to isolation, separation, and resilience — is more accessible to adults. Its real-life context speaks to adult sensibilities, especially in how it portrays empathy, responsibility, and endurance during a crisis.

The text on each page occupies a relatively small portion of the spread in relation to the overall page size, which is quite large. These characteristics encourage slower, more deliberate observation, inviting readers to 'take the time to carefully observe more than meets the eye at first glance' (Tishman, 2018). This pacing allows for deeper engagement with the narrative, enabling readers to construct complex meanings from the story (Pantaleo 2020). It also offers an opportunity to reflect on the interplay between words and pictures across the expansive pages.

When the story transitions to book format, it presents a significantly more elaborate narrative than the video. The book expands on the beginning of Baldomera and Ismael's friendship, her experiences during their separation, and her speculations about Ismael's sudden absence. The transmediation strategy here is one of expansion (Bruhn et al. 2022), incorporating new material into the story. Examining the type of material added and its purpose illustrates its significance in representing human-animal relationships and addressing themes of environmental degradation in children's literature.

The fictional narrative introduces further details — how the characters met and what happens during their time apart. This expansion is shaped by aesthetic choices that address environmental concerns, steering the transmediation process toward an ecomedial direction.

One meaningful influence is the publishing house, NubeOcho, which released *The Story of Baldomera*. The publisher explicitly promotes values such as equality, environmental sustainability, and animal protection (Rocha 2020). Furthermore, the author has echoed these in several interviews, emphasizing his intention to convey societal themes such as diversity, emotional resilience, environmental stewardship, and, above all, empathy (Arcos 2021). The expansion facilitated through transmediation imbues the picturebook with a clear ecomedial direction, driven by these intentional themes.



While the intentions of both author and publisher are crucial to understanding what is retained and what is new in *The Story of Baldomera*, other aesthetic aspects — such as illustrations and the story's intertextual relationships the story draws upon — are equally significant. These will be explored in the following sections.

### THE STORY OF BALDOMERA: VISUAL PASTORAL AND THE ANIMAL IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the aesthetics of *The Story of Baldomera*, the visual elements of the picturebook contribute to the narrative of human-animal relationships and environmental concerns. The visual style contains intertextual connections that inform the transmediation process. Visual style is particularly significant because the deliberate artistic choices used to convey ideas profoundly influence the reader's interpretation and overall understanding of the narrative (Kiefer 2005).

The illustrations adopt a horizontal composition, emphasizing width and lateral movement. This aligns with how humans naturally view wide scenes and is often associated with calmness, echoing the human field of vision (Peterson 2012). For instance, in the initial pages (see image 2), a rural landscape on a sunny day is presented. The pastoral aesthetic spans across the double spread, vividly depicting a donkey at the centre, accompanied by seagulls. Smooth lines and vibrant colours further enhance the peacefulness of the scene. Ecocritics often refer to pastoral aesthetics as idealized representations of rural life and nature, portraying them as peaceful, harmonious, and free from the complexities of modern civilization (Gifford 1999; Garrard 2011).



Image 2

Similarly, in the following pages, which depict where Ismael and Baldomera spend their time together, the human character is shown barefoot, seated peacefully beside Baldomera, chewing on a sprig of herbs while gazing at the horizon. This reinforces the timeless pastoral motif, with Ismael embodying a shepherd-like figure immersed in contemplation.



Image 3

Ecocritical research centred on the pastoral shows how expressions of this genre often extol the idea of a quiet and harmonious nature (Garrard, 2011). This sentiment is echoed in *The Story of Baldomera* through the stylistic elements of its illustrations (see image 3). Nature is portrayed as enduring and unwavering, fitting within what Garrard identifies as a specific category of the broader pastoral tradition—the ‘sentimental pastoral’, where the depiction emphasizes serene and harmonious coexistence (Garrard 2011, p. 42). This reinforces the notion of an idyllic and undisturbed rural landscape, sharply contrasting with the complexities of urban life (Garrard 2011).

The presence of this pristine image of nature within *The Story of Baldomera* is unsurprising, given the deep-rooted tradition of pastoral literature in Spain. Gómez, for example, comments on the eclogues of Garcilaso de la Vega — a key figure in this genre — stating that ‘generally, the bucolic shepherd merges with nature through storytelling and singing. [...] A perfect harmony is created between the bucolic shepherd and the surrounding nature [...]’ (Gómez 1993, p. 174).

This inclination toward pastoral themes in the book emerges through the transmediation process, drawing from features that are not the most prominent in the original video. One such feature is the brief panning shot at the beginning of the video, which shows the search for Baldomera amidst a rural landscape of hills. The story integrates these features, embedding them into the pastoral aesthetics. Through this process, the narrative undergoes a re-signification toward pastoral themes, where the traits connecting Baldomera to the natural landscape are accentuated and reinterpreted.

Still, there is some variation in the visual motif that alters the pastoral dynamics to a certain degree. In the following example, the gaze of the donkey takes centre stage in the foreground, with the ears pricked up in a display of happiness (see image 4).



Image 4

This gaze aligns with that of Ismael, positioned in the background. A small but significant artistic detail is that both figures are depicted with closed eyes, rendered in the same manner, sharing the same gesture. The image removes the human from a position of privilege; here, the animal is foregrounded, while the human is somewhat marginalized. This shift places Baldomera's experience at the centre of the narrative, subtly altering the sentimental pastoral by suggesting that nature is not solely there to please the human shepherd.

However, a serious challenge to 'the ideological separation of the human, animal, and natural' and 'the blurring of boundaries [...] between humans and animals' (Jacques) remains incomplete. The shared gesture depicted in the image is distinctly explained: 'Sometimes Ismael would go [...] to work, but when he came back, he would hug Baldomera even tighter. Every time Ismael returned, she felt as if a cloud of butterflies [...] surrounded her.' Baldomera's happiness reveals little about donkeys but mirrors a profoundly human desire: the longing to be expected and joyfully received by significant others, such as pets, children, friends, etc.

Furthermore, the image and text together reinforce a hierarchical power dynamic in which the animal's subjectivity resonates with that of a child — an imagined child reluctantly accepting being left by a parent but ultimately rewarded with affection upon their return. It is worth noting that one of the dedicatory notes at the beginning is from one of the authors to his son: 'So he does not ever have to wait for me' (Ballesteros et al. 2020 [no pagination]).

Several scholars of children's literature have pointed out that children have long been 'aligned' with animals and vice versa (Jaques 2015; Nikolajeva, 2009). Animals are often expected 'to respect commands while offering that much-lauded prize of unconditional love' (Jaques 2015, p.74). Animal subjects reflect the complex and conflicted role animals play in the human imagination — as both 'us' (since humans are, after all, animals too) and 'other' (with the human often defined in contrast to the animal, much like children are positioned as incomplete beings, their humanness a project to be realized) (Jaques 2015).

The subsequent pages focus on Baldomera's sadness and isolation as the donkey contemplates the absence of her human companion. Through this narrative moment, a paradoxical representation of the

animal emerges: both part of nature that requires protection and yet external to the human experience, existing as the 'other'. The animal is portrayed as enduring a suffering comparable to that of humans, once again measuring its experience against the human standard and thereby diminishing its inherent animality. This perspective is absent in the original source video but arises through the process of transmedial transformation.

Other ecomedial aspects in *The Story of Baldomera* include the potential explanations for Ismael's absence as imagined by the donkey. Baldomera's theories are depicted through her imagination and conveyed by a heterodiegetic narrator in the textual mode, while the accompanying illustration excludes the donkey and centres on the human character. This narrative strategy, though seemingly presenting Baldomera's thoughts, anthropomorphizes the animal. What results is a rational reflection akin to that of a human coping with a challenging situation — specifically, climate change, pollution, and the broader environmental crisis. This portrayal aligns more closely with the conventions of classical fables, where animal characters embody moral lessons and reflect human behaviour or characteristics (Cunningham et al. 2021).

#### CLIMATE AND CONFINEMENT: TRANSMEDIATING ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES IN THE STORY OF BALDOMERA

With the shift in focus from simply depicting the donkey's life to exploring her imagination, the transmedial transformation of the vlog into an ecomedial product—such as the picturebook—is solidified through the introduction of climate change and its consequences as a central theme. These climate-crisis-related events, using Leitch's terminology, represent *updating strategies* in the transmediation process, as they are not part of the original vlog. Such strategies contemporize the story by incorporating elements of the present context, making it relevant to current global concerns.

In *The Story of Baldomera*, these contemporizing elements — Baldomera's imagined environmental reasons for Ismael's absence — are linked to the historical context of the video's creation and spread. Confined indoors, people turned to the internet for entertainment. The video's popularity unfolded in waves across different countries, coinciding with the gradual easing of restrictions. For example, while the video initially went viral in Spain, it gained widespread attention in Argentina six months later, aligning with the Argentinian timeline of relaxed restrictions between November and May. This pattern of viral sharing as people began to venture outdoors points towards the public's inclination to relate to the emotional experiences of the protagonists, resonating with their own sense of longing during the pandemic.

During confinement, expressions of longing for what was vaguely termed 'nature,' were commonplace, encompassing everything from forests to other green spaces such as parks or any outdoor areas (Arts et al. 2022). Simultaneously, moments of

optimism regarding environmental issues began to surface, often mediated through news outlets. For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, widely shared reports highlighted the significant decline in air and road traffic, which led to a remarkable reduction in pollution levels (Mckoy 2022). Additionally, there were numerous instances of water bodies regaining their clarity and animals venturing into spaces once dominated by human activity, offering a glimpse of what a less human-centred world might look like (Grandoni 2023).

These collective longings and hopes, highly mediated and remediated, influenced the ecomedial transition of the vlog into the picturebook. Although these climate-related events were not directly depicted in the source video, they are expressions of a specific historical moment and thus emerge in the picturebook. For instance, Baldomera reflects on Ismael's absence, initially imagining that he might be stuck in a massive traffic jam surrounded by pollution. However, she later realizes that 'traffic jams had been absent for a while, almost since Ismael disappeared,' simultaneously denouncing the contamination caused by vehicles and alluding to the quiet streets that became common during the pandemic.



Image 5

The image depicts a traffic jam, with Ismael driving a car surrounded by a thick, gray cloud of gases, and a few lifeless, sad trees in the background (see image 5). Another example appears in Baldomera's thoughts: '[m]aybe he is sick at the hospital due to pollution from factories.' However, she then muses, '[f]actories have not produced any smoke for a while,' once again highlighting issues of contamination while simultaneously referencing the temporary reduction in pollution during the early part of the pandemic (Ballesteros et al. 2020 [no pagination]).

## FROM PLATERO TO BALDOMERA: ECHOES OF DONKEY NARRATIVE

In addition to allusions to the specific context surrounding the video and the visual pastoral intertextuality, another significant aspect influencing the transmediation of *The Story of Baldomera* is its literary intertextual connection to other fictional donkeys throughout history.

Donkeys occupy an important place in Western culture. According to Jill Bough's historical analysis

of their representations in literature, these animals have been portrayed with a range of characteristics, including 'stupidity or simplicity, gentleness or strength, humility or humour, stubbornness or endurance, loyalty or laziness' (Bough 2010). As a literary trope, the donkey has endured for centuries, offering diverse and often contradictory meanings.

Donkeys also play a notable role in children's literature. One well-known example is the transformation of Pinocchio into a donkey as punishment for shirking his duties and indulging in frivolity. Although Bough does not address this directly, Jaques observes that, in this narrative, the boy must become an animal before evolving into a human: 'Animals do not function here to destabilize the lines betwixt-and-between the human and the other, but to situate animals as lowly beings when compared to man' (Jaques 2015, pp. 91–92). Jaques further notes that Pinocchio's journey to becoming human involves a hierarchy where the lowest form is the cyborg (the wooden toy), followed by the animal (the donkey), with the highest and most valued form being the human (Pinocchio as a boy).

In Spanish culture, however, donkeys hold a historically significant and valued role, even if derogatory connotations persist. One notable literary donkey is Dapple, Sancho Panza's beloved companion in *Don Quixote*. As Bough highlights, Dapple reflects Sancho's character — humble, steadfast, and reliable (Bough 2010).

Another key reference is *Platero and I*, a classic of Spanish children's literature by Juan Ramón Jiménez, published in 1914. This work is the second most widely published book in the Spanish language after *Don Quixote*. In it, a homodiegetic narrator poetically recounts the life of Platero, his inseparable friend during childhood and youth. According to Bough, Platero is portrayed as an equal, offering a modern perspective on the interconnections between humans and animals. In its fictional and allegorical setting, the work echoes discussions about human superiority and the often undervalued status of donkeys. Jiménez's Platero serves as both a companion and a confidant, engaging in profound philosophical dialogues (Bough 2010).

Platero's presence is clearly felt in *The Story of Baldomera*, particularly through the shared motif of white butterflies in both narratives. The paratext of *The Story of Baldomera* includes an epigraph from Jiménez's novel, where white butterflies are explicitly mentioned. In *The Story of Baldomera*, they appear both in the illustrations and as paratextual elements in the book's front matter. Similarly, in *Platero and I*, white butterflies are a recurring symbol, representing life and the natural unfolding of beauty. This intertextual connection highlights *The Story of Baldomera* as a work deeply embedded in a cultural and literary tradition that holds a significant place in children's literature.



## ENTANGLED NARRATIVES: TRANSMEDIATION AND THE LIVES WE SHARE

Analyzing the transmediation of the video of Baldomera into *The Story of Baldomera* reveals how this narrative evolves to engage audiences across generational, cultural, and media boundaries. The transformation from video to picturebook demonstrates the capacity of stories to be reimagined through intertextual and transmedial processes, weaving together local cultural heritage, global environmental concerns, and the enduring complexities of human-animal relationships.

One notable difference between the original video and its transmediation lies in the depiction of the fence that separates Baldomera from Ismael. In the video, it acts as both a physical barrier and a metaphor for the limits of companionship and the 'place of the animal'. It highlights Baldomera's dual reality: she is confined yet freed from traditional labour roles. In contrast, the book omits the fence entirely, offering an aspirational vision of animal freedom and subtly questioning hierarchical human dominance. This visual and narrative choice reimagines a more equitable coexistence.

Another meaningful divergence is the absence of braying in the book. Given how central Baldomera's braying was to the video's virality, it is striking that she is rendered voiceless in the picturebook. Her subjectivity is instead projected through thoughts articulated by an external narrator, with no auditory cues. This absence serves as a reminder of the impossibility of fully owning or understanding the animal experience, emphasizing the inherent otherness of non-human perspectives.

The relationship between Baldomera and Ismael reflects Donna Haraway's concept of entanglement in the 'contact zone', where human and animal lives intersect, creating shared spaces of mutual recognition and influence. Haraway's notion that living with animals transforms both parties is hinted at in the video, as Baldomera and Ismael respond to each other's emotions with reciprocity.

However, these portrayals are not without complexity. The transmedial story, particularly in its book form, occasionally reinforces a hierarchical view of animals by framing Baldomera's experiences as an emotional reflection of human concerns. This is especially apparent in the anthropomorphized depiction of Baldomera's longing, which aligns more closely with human desires and emotions than with a genuinely non-human perspective. This tension mirrors broader tendencies in children's literature, where animals frequently serve as proxies for humanist ideals that place humans in the centre of narratives as Jaques has observed (2015).

Athena Farrokhzad's image of donkeys as the 'proletarians of the animal world' in *Donkey Days* (2022) echoes through Baldomera's story, invoking the long history of labour and burden carried by these animals (2022, p.10). Donkeys have served humanity for millennia, bearing burdens both literal and symbolic. While Baldomera's narrative acknowledges this enduring history, it also gestures toward a

different future — one where donkeys and other species are not exploited. This perspective, however, is complicated by the paradox of commercialization as Baldomera also becomes a commodity in her own story. Her likeness appears in promotional materials, and her narrative is intrinsically tied to the viral nature of the original video, raising questions about how genuine advocacy can coexist with commodification.

The inclusion of environmental themes in the book underscores its role as an ecomedial artifact, shaped by the historical moment of its creation. The pandemic's impact on human interaction with nature — quieter streets, cleaner skies, and a collective longing for outdoor spaces — emerges in Baldomera's reflections. Her imaginative musings on traffic jams and pollution evoke the temporary environmental reprieve during lockdowns, highlighting both the fragility and possibility of meaningful change. This adaptation demonstrates how mediated stories about animals can serve as mirrors for broader ecological concerns. Through Baldomera, the book critiques humanity's environmental impact while celebrating moments of hope and renewal. The result is a narrative that invites readers to reflect on their role in the interconnected web of life.

The transmediation of *The Story of Baldomera* is more than just an adaptation; it is a reinterpretation that deepens and broadens its source material. In a world increasingly shaped by diverse media and cultural interconnections, *The Story of Baldomera* illustrates how stories can transcend their origins to explore shared experiences and cultivate new ways of understanding the interconnected lives of humans and other beings.

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