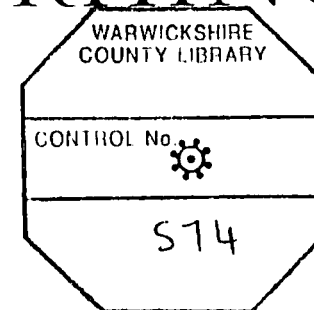


DAVID QUAMMEN



THE
BOILERPLATE
RHINO



NATURE IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NONFICTION

Wild Thoughts from Wild Places

The Song of the Dodo

The Flight of the Iguana

Natural Acts

FICTION

Blood Line

The Soul of Viktor Tronko

The Zolta Configuration

To Walk the Line

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Nature in the eye of the beholder

by

DAVID QUAMMEN

Author of *The Song of the Dodo* and *Wild Thoughts from Wild Places*

One of the most fascinating and thought provoking writers
of natural history. —David Williams, *The Seattle Times*

THE BOILERPLATE RHINO

Nature as Concocted, Nature as Found

The black-footed ferret is now available at Blockbuster Video, yours on a three-evening rental for only two bucks. Also currently in stock are the orangutan, the polar bear, the leopard, the great white shark, the mountain gorilla, the American bison, the duck-billed platypus, and the wombat. The place has its own menagerie. Ignore the shelves labeled DRAMA CLASSICS and COMEDIES and ROMANTIC TEARJERKERS, ignore COPS & ROBBERS and SCHWARZENEGGER and HORROR and SUPER NINTENDO, proceed on toward the back of the store, and there you find it, categorically distinct and conveniently accessible: NATURE. You can pick out a handful of rare and prodigious species, tote them home in your grocery bag or your briefcase. On Tuesdays, take two for the price of one. Obviously I'm talking not about the actual flesh-and-blood creatures but about what passes in our age for the phenomenological equivalent: their images, expertly captured, potently edited, and preserved with the permanence of plastic, which surpasses the permanence of life.

The personnel at Blockbuster will even rent their wares (I have verified this experimentally) to a curmudgeonly Luddite who doesn't own so much as a television, let alone one of those VCR contraptions, and who can therefore only watch *The Mysterious Black-Footed Ferret* in an audiovisual cubicle at his local library, wearing headphones, feeling like a time-spy from the eleventh century. The clerks don't care; they want

cash and two ID cards, but actual television-ownership isn't mandatory. They offer also *The Smile of the Walrus*, from Jacques Cousteau, to warm your den at the touch of a few buttons. They provide *Lions of the African Night*, from National Geographic, to roar at you on command. And, sure, they've got rhinos if you want rhinos. You can go birdwatching in Botswana without suffering the jet lag or the shots. You can get a zoo-visitor experience without even crossing town to the zoo. It's the age of takeout, and now the zoo comes to you, each beast caged tractably in a plastic cassette.

This phenomenon, the mass-marketing of video nature, carries an ambivalent mix of implications. The positive ones are straightforward. People learn a fact or three about those endangered ferrets. People enjoy the sense of spectacle. People witness amazing processes and behaviors that they never otherwise could, and as witnesses they acquire, maybe, a certain vested concern for the preservation of wild places and wild beings. The negative implications are less patent and more complicated. Among them: People are lulled, pandered to, hypnotized, and misled. They learn to take nature for granted, as just another form of human amusement, like C-Span or Monday Night Football. They become spoiled to the small natural wonders in their local woodlands, since the bigger wonders of Malaysia or Peru are served up more vividly on the tube. They accept the video entertainments as substitutes for, not just reflections of, real living leopards or bears or gorillas. Worst of all, they are enticed to believe that nature as they have seen it—concocted expertly from flickering photographic images—represents nature as it exists.

Of course it doesn't. Images can lie, even photographic images. Time is always compressed, context is often concealed or altered or flouted, in a filmic composition. Nature in reality is more diffuse, more tedious, less satisfactorily dramatic, and often more perishable than a video documentary of some marvelous ecosystem or species, plus in reality there's no heart-filling musical score. Drama is artifice—and natural-history drama no less so than other sorts. Nature as commonly found (without the telephoto lenses, without the cutaway nests, without the editing) is *not* very dramatic. The drab truth is that you could stand under the Amazon canopy for a month, with a good set of binoculars,

while the microbes ate your feet, and never catch a single glimpse of copulating monkeys or a snake in the act of swallowing a bird.

Charles Siebert highlighted this truth in a recent issue of *Harper's*. In an essay titled "The Artifice of the Natural," Siebert noted that nature documentaries on television are unnaturally "rapid, focused, and framed," whereas an actual forest is "wide, old, and slow," sublimely indifferent to any human on the lookout for zoological drama. In fact, Siebert argued, the average nature show is actually less like a forest than like a city, "both entities being elaborate human constructs: fast-paced, multi-storied, and artificially lit."

What are the historical roots, Siebert wondered, of the nature-show phenomenon? Where did the mass-market packaging begin? Scanning old tapes at the Museum of Television and Radio, he traced back to the early efforts of Jacques Cousteau, Marlin Perkins, and a few others. Even before the infamously campy Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom*, as it turns out, Perkins had a TV show called *Zoo Parade*. That was in 1955. And still earlier, in the Thirties, Perkins did a radio show about nature from a station in St. Louis—until a mishap one day with an electric eel, which sent a jolt through him and into his microphone and thereby blew out the station's power.

Siebert's historical search could have gone back even further, if he hadn't chosen to limit himself to such electromagnetic media as television, radio, and eels. One of the first mass-market images of nature was produced almost five centuries ago in the medium of wood. It was part of Gutenberg's revolution, not McLuhan's. It came out of Nuremberg, Germany, in the year 1515.

ON MAY 20, 1515, a rhinoceros arrived in the port of Lisbon, as dolefully and terminally displaced as King Kong in New York. Good lord, what is it? people wondered. No such zoological marvel had been seen in Europe within recent memory—possibly, not since the exotic menageries of imperial Rome. The animal had been sent as a gift from Sultan Muzafar II of Gujarat, in western India, to King Manuel I of Portugal. The king, finding himself in no particular need of a live rhinoceros (which, taxonomy aside, he probably considered a white elephant), saw fit to pass along this unwieldy item to Pope Leo X, but in

the course of being shipped onward to Italy it died. Details of its death are sparse and not fully reliable: One account says that the ship sank but that the rhino's corpse was recovered, which sounds somehow more simple than it should. How do you dredge up a drowned rhinoceros from the floor of the ocean? Anyway, instead of a live rhinoceros, the pope received a stuffed (and perhaps soggy) carcass. This was the beast on which the great German artist Albrecht Dürer, up in Nuremberg, based a pen-and-ink drawing that he titled *Rhinoceron*.

Dürer's drawing survives in the British Museum. But that one-of-a-kind artifact isn't what concerns us.

From the drawing, Dürer produced a woodcut, probably executed in pear wood. The carving itself was most likely done by a specialist artisan, a *Formschneyder*, under Dürer's close supervision. From that woodcut block, multiple prints were taken—no one can tell us the exact number, but many—and in this form the image spread across Europe. The dead rhino had intersected with European culture at just the right historical moment to become a pop icon. If it had arrived a hundred years earlier, before Gutenberg's invention and the development of cheap mass-produced paper and the consequent rise of the printing trade, it might have been painted in oils by a medieval allegorist, it might have been memorably drawn in ink or in charcoal, but neither a painted nor a sketched image would have been *published*. Its portrait would have hung in the house of some burgher or in the castle of some prince, precious and singular on its wall, seen by not many eyes. And if the animal had arrived a hundred years later, it would have come too late to inspire one of the prototypic images in the foundational phase of graphic printing. In that case, its likeness would have been just one among hundreds in the published bestiaries of the seventeenth century, exerting no extraordinary force. But instead of being too late or too early, it arrived when it did, perfectly timed to achieve international fame.

Dürer himself never saw the pope's rhinoceros, either while it was alive or as a carcass. He concocted his image secondhand, from a sketch and a description sent to him by letter from Lisbon. Dürer was a consummate draftsman—with a genius hand, a precise eye, and a hungry curiosity toward the natural world that, among Renaissance artists, was second only to Leonardo's. Given his drawing skill and his passion for accuracy, it's only natural to assume that his woodcut would have

looked different, and possibly much different, if he had inspected the rhino personally. Probably he'd have drawn the animal as he saw it, and no doubt he'd have seen it pellucidly. Instead he produced a stunning cartoon, a tendentious bit of surrealism with a presciently modern zing, centuries before the birth of, say, Ralph Steadman.

Having heard that the rhinoceros was plated protectively with panels of stiff skin, he gave it a suit of armor. And not just any armor, but armor closely analogous to what a German knight would have worn in the feudal scuffles of Dürer's own era, complete with a gorget at the throat, a breastplate around the midsection, pauldrons for the shoulders, faulds skirting the thighs, and nicely aligned rivets along the plate edges. He canted back the angle of the horn, making it more dangerous as a weapon for hooking and ripping. He applied arabesques of detail, and no small amount of gnarly menace, to the face. For good measure he added a second horn, smaller, pointing forward from the back of the neck. The lower legs he wrapped in chain mail. As Dürer imagined and portrayed it, the rhinoceros was a magnificent aggressor, surly, invulnerable, built to cause terror wherever it strode: a war rhino. His vision, misleading as it was, may have done much to set the tone of European perceptions of rhinos for the next four hundred years.

At the top of the woodcut, in Gothic lettering, Dürer placed an inscription. "After Christ's birth, the year 1513, on May 1, this animal was brought alive to the great and mighty King Emmanuel at Lisbon in Portugal from India," he wrote. "Its color is that of a freckled toad and it is covered by a hard, thick shell. It is of the same size as an elephant but has shorter legs and is well capable of defending itself. On the tip of its nose is a sharp, strong horn which it hones wherever it finds a stone." He further declared that it's the deadly enemy of elephants, which it tears open at the belly with its horn, and that the rhino itself is impervious to being stabbed by a tusk, thanks to its armor. When an elephant lies disemboweled and helpless, the rhinoceros finishes it off by strangulation, Dürer claimed, though he didn't explain how. Amid all the other items of misinformation, his 1513 date was two years too early.

"They say that the Rhinoceros is fast, cunning, and daring," he added. Dürer's rhinoceros, anyway, was forevermore all of these things, even if the pope's rhinoceros hadn't quite been.

One piece of evidence tells us that Dürer himself intended this

image for mass-market publication: the decision to make it a woodcut, as distinct from a copperplate engraving. Both those techniques had come into use for graphic printing at Dürer's time, and he was a master of both. His father, a Nuremberg goldsmith, had taught him as a boy to inscribe delicate patterns onto metal with a fine-pointed burin, and some of Dürer's mature engravings, such as *Knight, Death, and Devil* and *Melencolia I*, are among the most gracefully spooky images of the German Renaissance. Generally, engraving technique offered the advantage of allowing finer lines and more intricate detail than a woodcut. But an engraving also had to be inked and wiped separately for each print, and its finely incised lines tended to wear out rather soon; woodcut prints, on the other hand, could be run off more quickly, using the production-line capacities of a Gutenberg press, and the coarse but sturdy lines of the woodblock held up throughout many repetitions. When an artist chose the woodcut technique in preference to engraving, that choice implied a willingness to compromise the delicacy of each individual print for the sake of producing more copies. It was a familiar trade-off: popular appeal versus subtlety. A woodcut print was a democratic form of art, in those days, cheap enough to be bought and enjoyed by the folks in the humble cottages. Dürer himself was a man of expensive middle-class tastes, with a good head for business, and large-edition woodcuts were one of the ways he made his money.

His rhino woodcut—the carved block itself, not just the image—far outlived him. At least nine separate editions were eventually run from it, each edition comprising unknowably many prints. By the time of the eighth edition, produced by Dutch printers in the seventeenth century, the block showed a crack that slashed through all four of the rhino's legs, plus wormholes in the neck, eyelid, and horn. That it was still being printed, wormholes and crack and all, suggests the exceptional graphic power of Dürer's image. And that image carried even beyond the nine editions: Dürer himself inserted the same rhino as a decorative touch in a huge composite woodcut, *The Triumphal Arch*, done as a commission for the emperor Maximilian. It was also copied by other artists. One of the knock-off versions appeared, soon after Dürer's death, in Konrad von Gesner's volume *Historia Animalium*. Another close copy showed up in a collection of animal and plant drawings assembled by Ulisse Aldrovandi at the end of the century, and still another in the Reverend

Edward Topsell's *Historie of Foure-footed Beastes*, published in 1607. When Europeans of that era imagined a rhino, either as a real animal or as a fabulous one, they imagined it according to Dürer. Still later, of course, there were not just plagiarizations but many respectful reprints in books about Dürer's life and work, about the art of the woodcut, about artistic representations of nature in general. From the year 1515 until now, it has probably been the single most familiar image of a rhinoceros among people who have seldom if ever laid eyes on the real thing. In fact, its broad popularity tends to overshadow Dürer's whole body of diverse, wonderful work. Toss the name Albrecht Dürer at a person with some interest in art, ask for a memorable example, and that person is likely to mention the boilerplate rhino.

A similar image even appears—fleckingly, in connection with an old text on Chinese folk medicine, including the uses of rhino horn—in a National Geographic documentary titled *The Rhino War*, now available at Blockbuster Video.

DÜRER was fascinated by the natural world, at least as a source of visual images. He created some striking portraits of animals and plants. In most of those cases, he seems to have worked either from live models or from dead specimens, not from imagination or hearsay, and he rendered the real creatures with passionate exactitude. During his first visit to Venice he found things to interest him at the city's fish market, producing a watercolor of a crab so minutely specific that it could stand as a scientific illustration. He also did a splendid lobster. Later he painted a young hare, its eyes bright, its ears erect, its fur textured with such fastidiousness as to anticipate photo-realism, crouching self-consciously as it must have in Dürer's studio. At the height of his powers he did a dead duck, a dead roller (a bird of the family Coraciidae, with iridescent wing feathers of brilliant blue and green), and, still more striking, the wing of a roller, as a disjointed study, sedulously realistic in its treatment of every feather. Even his conventional religious scenes were sometimes festooned with fauna—for instance his *Virgin with a Multitude of Animals*, in which the madonna and child sit surrounded by two owls, two swans, a parrot, a fox, a crab, a frog, and a stag beetle. Not all of his animals, though, were impeccably lifelike. In his early woodcut of Saint Jerome (that's the fellow who, according to pious legend, pulled a thorn

from a lion's paw), Dürer's lion is too small, too skinny, with too tiny a head: it looks like a cocker spaniel with an embarrassing summer haircut. But later in life Dürer saw his first living lion, at a zoo in Belgium, after which his lions were vastly more leonine.

Probably his finest work in this vein is a watercolor-and-gouache painting called *The Great Clump of Turf*, which features dandelions and ribwort and meadow grass and a few other herbs, all seen up close and from ground level as though they're a hummock of sizable trees. At first glance it seems a humdrum, uninteresting image, but more careful inspection reveals that Dürer made these little plants into something profound—a world, an ecosystem—by treating them with profound respect. How exactly did he do it? Well, he used a trick of perspective to give them stature, but that wasn't all. He also paid them the compliment of precision.

IT MIGHT seem incongruous that the same man who painted *The Great Clump of Turf* and the roller's wing and the hare—each one a singular image showing fervent concern for anatomical accuracy—could have also accounted for those nine editions of cartoonish rhino. It seemed incongruous to me, especially after my hour in that library cubicle watching *The Rhino War*, which turns out to be a compelling and clear-sighted film, full of real animals bearing not much resemblance to Albrecht Dürer's notional beast. Matched against those photographic images, Dürer's woodcut looks like fantasy. But hold on, there's another line of sight onto this matter. *The Rhino War* deals only with poaching against the black rhino, *Diceros bicornis*, an African species brought to the verge of extinction by gangs of horn hunters within the past twenty years. Four other rhinoceros species survive elsewhere in the world. Three of those, native to various regions in Asia, are also severely endangered but were beyond the purview of this particular film.

Africa's rhinos have two prominent horns. Dürer's has one. So I consulted a photo in a mammal encyclopedia.

Specifically, I looked at *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the one-horned Indian species, since that's what Muzafar II must have sent from Gujarat to the king of Portugal. Although I had seen *R. unicornis* in the flesh (some years ago, at a reserve in Nepal), I had managed to forget its

appearance. What I found now was a peculiar-looking animal, even by rhinoceros standards. It differed drastically from the two smooth-flanked African species. Its stiffened skin seemed to be gathered in slabs—like a suit of armor, yes, complete with breastplate and pauldrons and faulds—and pocked with dermal protuberances resembling rivets. It was surprisingly similar, by God, to the Dürer image. Considering that Dürer worked from hearsay, it was shockingly similar.

This bit of elementary research obliged me to recognize what I should have already known: that the least accurate aspect of Dürer's woodcut is the inscription. His date is wrong; his dermatology is right. His artwork is reasonably faithful, compared to that business about a toad-colored animal in a "thick shell," big as an elephant, cunning and deadly, honing its horn on a stone. His rhinoceros is better than it reads.

That constitutes a chastening reminder for someone like myself, with a bias in favor of the written page and a sour prejudice against mass-market video: a reminder that, although images can be deceptive, they don't stand convicted alone. Writing is just another form of concoction. Words can lie too. You can trust me on this, probably.