Of Mice and Vermin: Animals as Absent Referent in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

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There are no mice in *Maus*. Likewise, there are no cats or dogs or pigs or frogs. Of course, virtually every page of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust is covered with drawings of animals. But unlike René Magritte’s famous image of a pipe, these animal images are not, with very few exceptions, intended to signify what they appear to be. The entire metaphorical foundation on which *Maus* is based relies on the ability of the reader to see past the mice and cat heads on the bodies of the main characters and mentally translate them into the faces of Jews and Germans. As a necessary consequence, the mice and cats are lost in the translation; the real animals signified by simple drawings of large ears, snouts, and whiskers become virtually invisible, at least to most readers. Some have taken offense at Spiegelman’s decision to represent people as animals -- claiming that it is an insult to the victims of the Holocaust and even that it perpetuates the same racist and anti-Semitic beliefs that led to Hitler’s Final Solution. What is interesting to me is that the animals themselves are as absent from this debate as they are from *Maus* itself. While much has been made of what these metaphorical human/animal hybrids reveal about the way different groups of people look at one another, to my knowledge, no one has examined what reader response to the animal imagery of *Maus* reveals about human attitudes toward animals.

Lost in the Metaphor

Depicting Jews as mice evokes the timidity and weakness associated with these animals, emphasizing the identity of Jews as victims in the Holocaust. It also forces the reader to share the Nazi perception of Jews as not quite human. The German newspaper article quoted at the beginning of *Maus II* makes it clear that Nazis saw mice and Jews alike as “dirty and filth-covered vermin” (Spiegelman, 1986:30). In the Nazi propaganda film “Der Ewige Jude” (“The Eternal Jew”), hordes of rats are shown gnawing their way into sacks of grain and climbing out of sewers, while the narrator remarks, “Just as the rat is the lowest of animals, the Jew is the lowest of human beings” (Patterson, 2002:46). In an interview published in the October 1991 issue of *The Comics Journal*, Art Spiegelman revealed that, while rejecting the Nazis’ opinion of
Jews, he seemed to share their view of mice. Addressing a complaint by fellow comic innovator Harvey Pekar about some of the animal characterizations he chose to use in *Maus*, Spiegelman said: “I’m unhappy that so many readers thought it was okay to use vermin for Jews but not pigs for Poles” (Bolhafner, 1991).

Of course, Jews are not vermin. But then, neither are mice or rats. “Vermin” is a socially constructed term, not a scientific one. It is applied to any animal humans have no use for, or worse yet, against whom humans must compete for resources. Labeling animals as vermin is the first step in justifying their eradication. Spiegelman’s visual mouse metaphor serves to expose the lie behind the artificial genetic hierarchy that Aryan anti-Semitism sought to establish within the human race. At the same time, however, it seems to take at face value the artificial hierarchy that virtually all cultures throughout history have established between humans and other species.1

Near the end of *Maus I*, Vladek calms Anja by telling her that the rats she hears moving about the dark basement in which they are hiding are really mice (Fig. 1). Is this meant to be reassuring because they themselves are mice, while rats, no matter how similar, still represent a menacing Other? If so, this would mirror the Aryan view that European Jews, despite their outward similarity to other Europeans, still posed an inherent threat to non-Jews. More likely, however, the entirely human Vladek is just acknowledging the human-invented hierarchy that designates mice, although still considered “vermin,” as less loathsome and frightening than their larger rodent cousins. This culturally constructed view is reinforced

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by the almost demonic appearance of the rat in this panel -- one of the rare animal images in the story meant to represent an actual animal -- which mirrors the racist caricatures of Jews that were a staple of Nazi propaganda art (Fig. 2) (Keen, 1991:61).

Glass Menagerie

In The Sexual Politics of Meat, feminist literary theorist Carol J. Adams explores similar ways in which language is used to objectify both women and animals. She coined the term absent referent to describe a subject whose identity becomes lost in a one-sided metaphorical comparison meant to illustrate the condition of another:

The absent referent is both there and not there. It is there through inference, but its meaningfulness reflects only upon what it refers to because the originating, literal, experience that contributes the meaning is not there. We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence (Adams, 1990:42).

This is exactly what the metaphor of Maus accomplishes. The reader quickly comes to understand that this is not a story about anthropomorphic animals, but about humans symbolized by animals. Obviously, the reader sees the animal heads on the page, and is most likely aware of the cultural or historical relevance of portraying Jews as mice and Germans as cats (or Americans as dogs and the French as frogs). However, there is no instance in Maus where the animal metaphor is meant to be taken at face value; rather than representing other species, the mouse and cat heads are meant to be transparent, serving as windows into human -- not animal -- nature. As Speigelman explained in The Comics Journal:

Ultimately what the book’s about is the commonality of human beings. It’s crazy to divide things down along nationalistic or racial or religious lines. And that’s the whole point, isn’t it? These metaphors, which are meant to self-destruct in my book -- and I think they do self-destruct --still have a residual force that allows them to work as metaphors… (Bolhafner, 1991).

But what Spiegelman’s metaphor also shows, perhaps unintentionally, is the commonality humans share with animals. While the Nazis shaved the heads of prisoners in the death camps in part to take away their individual identities, Spiegelman achieves the same effect with his prisoners by putting mouse heads on them. Just as racists will often complain that members of other ethnic groups all look alike to them, human eyes often perceive individual members of other species as indistinguishable from one another. Substituting mice heads for human ones also accomplishes another goal of the Nazis -- to
get the death camp guards to look at their charges as animals, effectively converting them from subjects of possible sympathy to objects of disdain. However, while treating someone “like an animal” is almost universally understood to suggest the worst possible treatment imaginable for a human, the converse implications for animals are seldom considered. In the cover and frontispiece of *Maus II*, the row upon row of mice staring back at the reader mysteriously vanish, transformed by the magic of the metaphor into the absent referent (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. Maus II, frontispiece (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)](image)

The invisibility of animals in *Maus* reflects their invisibility in our society. From pets, to urban wildlife, to exotic animals in circuses and zoos, the non-human beings that surround most people in their every day lives barely register on their consciousness. If they do, it is almost always from the human perspective: as companions, as nuisances, as amusements. As individual sentient beings with their own concerns and desires, animals remain invisible to what Mark Twain described as humanity’s “dull perceptions” (Twain, 2000:384). In *Maus*, the story of Vladek Spiegelman reflects the consequences animals face because of that invisibility.
Where’s the Beef?

As reward for the English lesson Vladek has agreed to give him, a pig-headed Polish kapo in Auschwitz presents Vladek with a table full of food, which is clearly shown to include a large sausage (Fig. 4). Later, Vladek offers a Polish farmer a gold watch in exchange for more sausage (and some eggs). Even though the Poles are meant to be interpreted as humans and not animals, I still find it startling that Spiegelman serves the reader these visual images of pigs providing their own flesh as food for others without the slightest hint of irony. This is most likely because animals have long ago been reduced to the status of absent referent when it comes to society’s eating habits. Whether by visual abstraction, which renders a pig into a sausage link, or verbal abstraction, which renders a pig into “pork,” people seek to avoid any reminder that their food once had a face or, more disturbing yet, feelings. Even at a pig roast, where the body being eaten retains the name and general appearance it had in life, most diners maintain their jovial demeanor undisturbed by any awareness of their meat as a once living creature; they order “baby back ribs” without giving a thought to the young animal from whom their meal was carved or the mother from whom he was taken.

The presence of this absent referent was dramatically restored for Jewish feminist artist Judy Chicago. While at Auschwitz during a pilgrimage made as part of her research for a series of pieces collectively called the “Holocaust Project,” she observed:

I had learned that during the Industrial Revolution pigs were the first “things” on the assembly line. I began to wonder about the ethical distinction between processing pigs and doing the same thing to people defined as pigs. Many would argue that moral considerations do not have to be extended to animals, but that is just what the Nazis said about Jews (Chicago, 1993:58).
This view was shared by Theodor Adorno, a Jewish philosopher who escaped the Holocaust by fleeing his German homeland. After the war, he remarked that “Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they’re only animals” (Patterson, 2002:73).

Although the Nazis had to build new facilities to accommodate the industrialized slaughter of humans, their existing system of transport required no modifications. As prisoners are being transferred from Auschwitz to Dachau, Vladek notes that they are being herded into cattle cars (Fig. 5). While these trains were serving essentially the same purpose during the Holocaust that they had before it, the horses and cows that were their usual passengers are evoked by Vladek only to imply how unbearable this mode of travel was for humans. In fact, both humans and animals shared essentially the same experience -- from the use of clubs to drive the living cargo on board, to the trampling, heat prostration, starvation, and dehydration that resulted from the stiflingly cramped quarters in the cars. And the same fate awaited them all, whether animal or human, at the end of the line.

Chickens, however, occupy a unique position in Maus, in that, unlike pigs and cows, they are not reduced to the status of absent referent. When Vladek and his fellow prisoner, Shivek, come to a German farmhouse after having finally been released by the Nazis, Shivek is actually shown killing the chicken the two men plan to eat for dinner -- although the dying bird is mostly shielded from the reader’s view by Shivek’s body (Fig. 6). However, while chickens are not used metaphorically in Maus to reflect the treatment of humans, certain images of Jewish prisoners that appear in the story do reflect the treatment of chickens.

The rows of bunk beds shown in the prison barracks at Auschwitz, into which prisoners were crammed (until as Vladek put it, there “was room hardly to move”) (Fig. 7), are remarkably reminiscent of the battery cages used on modern factory farms to confine egg-laying hens (Fig. 8). An average of eight hens -- and sometimes more -- are kept in each of these wire cages, which are approximately the size of a file drawer. Huge sheds on these facilities commonly hold as many as 100,000 chickens in rows upon rows of cages usually stacked three or four tiers high (Shapiro, 2004). The overcrowded conditions in the
cages drive the chickens to aggressively peck at each other -- much like the prisoners Vladek describes who fell to the floor of cramped boxcars and began stabbing the ankles of those standing around them in order to avoid being trampled (Fig. 9).  

![Fig. 7. Maus II, p.30 (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)](image)

Hide in Plain Sight

While perhaps the most obscene artifacts of the Holocaust -- the soap, lampshades, and other gruesome byproducts rendered from human corpses -- are not mentioned in Maus, they are represented metaphorically by animal-derived objects like shoes and the fur coat that Vladek brings to Anja when they are reunited after the war (Fig. 10). Neither Vladek nor Art (the
The shoes he repairs are, of course, made of leather (Fig. 11). The connection between shoes and the animals they are made from certainly went unnoticed by Yiddish poet Moyshe Shulshtayn, whose poem “We Are the Shoes” describes the suffering witnessed, but seemingly escaped, by the discarded footwear of Jews killed in the death camps. This poem is on display in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., next to an actual pile of such shoes (emphasis added):

We are the shoes, we are the last witnesses.
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers,
From Prague, Paris and Amsterdam,
And because we are only made of fabric and leather
And not of blood and flesh, each one of us avoided the hellfire (Patterson, 2002:156).

Here, as in Maus, artistic license has abstracted the living “blood and flesh” cows slaughtered to provide the material for these shoes into the ultimate absent referent.

**Blinded By Science**

Spiegelman’s use of the mouse metaphor is particularly appropriate when Vladek describes being presented to Josef Mengele (Fig. 12). Depicting the victims of history’s most infamous conductor of human experimentation as the most common victims of animal experimentation is either a stroke of artistic genius on the part of Spiegelman, or simply a revealing coincidence. (While it was most likely the latter case, it is worth noting that Spiegelman developed...
Maus from his three page story of the same name, which first appeared in a 1972 anti-vivisection benefit comic (Marks, 1995). Contrary to erroneous claims that Hitler abolished animal experimentation in Germany (like the false claim that he was a vegetarian), the practice continued unabated under the Third Reich (Kalechofsky, 2004). In fact, the poison gas used to kill mentally and physically challenged hospital patients deemed “unfit” for Aryan society was first tested on mice and rats (Patterson, 2002:105). Similarly, the effectiveness of the gas chamber at the death camp in Mauthausen, Austria was tested on rats before its doors were opened to human prisoners (Patterson, 2002:253).

The depiction of Jews as mice reflects the Nazi view of both as disposable tools to be expended in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. According to a prisoner doctor at Auschwitz, Mengele treated Jews “like laboratory animals,” seeing them as “really biologically inferior in his eyes” (Patterson, 2002:47). Today, modern biomedical researchers defend the paradox that while animals are similar enough to us that the results of experiments on them can be meaningfully extrapolated to humans, they are different enough from humans that we need not concern ourselves about the pain and suffering these experiments inflict on them. While Mengele saw both animals and humans as equally acceptable test subjects, some of his Jewish victims came to see both as equally unacceptable. At the age of twelve, Marc Berkowitz and his twin sister were subjected to experimental spinal surgery under the supervision of Dr. Mengele. As a result, the adult Berkowitz now opposes the use of animals in biomedical research (Patterson, 2002:141).

Master Race

After Vladek expresses his outrage over Françoise having given a ride to an African-American hitchhiker -- or a “shvartser,” as Vladek calls him -- Françoise expresses her own disbelief over Vladek’s apparent racism. She angrily points out that his attitude toward “blacks” is the same one the Nazis held toward Jews (Fig. 13). Once again, despite the fact that this line is delivered by a mouse to a mouse, it probably does not occur to most readers that the common human perception of animals is also essentially a racist one -- the belief that the human race is inherently superior to the “rat race” (or the “dog race” or the “cow race” or the “pig race,” etc.). In her foreword to Marjorie

The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men (Spiegel, 1988:14).

In response to Françoise’s rebuke, Vladek replies with obvious annoyance and disgust that there is no comparison between “the shvartzers and the Jews” (Fig. 14). This, of course, is the same sentiment held by many people about comparisons between humans and animals, despite the scientific fact that we belong to the same taxonomic Kingdom. The symbolic imagery of *Maus* should make this obvious to the reader, but it instead seems to emphasize the differences between humans and other animals rather than the similarities. Certainly, Vladek does not seem to see any literal resemblance when he describes prisoners at Dachau fighting “like wild animals” over spilt soup (Fig. 15). To be more accurate, humans are domesticated animals (though we generally prefer the term “civilized”) who are sometimes driven wild by conditions of extreme deprivation or cruelty -- or both, as was the case at Dachau. Another instance when Vladek seems unable to reconcile his human and animal nature is when he compares the sight of a Nazi soldier shooting a prisoner to that of a childhood neighbor shooting a dog, and expresses amazement over the similarity between the two victims’ death throes (Fig. 16). Given that both dogs and humans are warm-blooded mammals equipped with the ability to feel fear and pain, it only stands to reason that their suffering would be nearly identical.

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While a strict reading of *Maus*’ animal metaphor could interpret this as Art’s disbelief that a Jew could feel affection for a Nazi, this is almost certainly not what the author intended. Despite the deep emotional bond millions of people form with their animal companions, Art seems astounded by the notion of someone feeling the same sentimental attachment to a cat that he feels should rightly be reserved for members of one’s own species. The fact that Spiegelman felt he needed to comment on this also implies that he expects his readers to share this point of view.

A later scene is perhaps even more telling of Art’s attitude towards other species. After listening to Vladek describe the horrors of the gas chamber at Auschwitz, Françoise and Art sit out on the porch to relax. Françoise remarks that “It’s so peaceful here at night, it’s almost impossible to believe Auschwitz ever happened” (Fig. 18). In response, having endured numerous insect bites...
in the few minutes they have been outside, Art jumps up and unleashes a cloud of insecticide, exclaiming, “But these damn bugs are eating me alive!” (Fig. 19). The next panel, the last one of the chapter, which shows Art and Françoise getting up to go back inside, is constructed in such a way as to draw the reader’s attention to the dead and dying insects around them (Fig. 20). What the reader makes of this probably depends on what part of Françoise’s comments he or she thinks Art’s “but” was meant to address.

The obvious answer would be that he meant “It’s so peaceful here at night, but these bugs are eating me alive!” The more ominous meaning would be “It’s almost impossible to believe Auschwitz ever happened, but these bugs are eating me alive!” Taken this way, Art could be seen as having the same view of these insects that the Nazis had of Jews. Hitler described Jews as “the spider that slowly sucks the people’s blood…the parasite in the body of other peoples, the eternal leech” (Patterson 2002:45). Feeling that the Jews were “eating [him] alive,” Hitler, like Art, felt he had no choice but to become their exterminator. As the reader was informed just three pages earlier, Zyklon B was created as a pesticide -- and “pest,” like “vermin,” is a subjective term, not a scientific one.

Fig. 18. *Maus II*, p.74 (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)

Fig. 19. *Maus II*, p.74 (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)

Fig. 20. *Maus II*, p.74 (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)
While Art’s claim of self-defense certainly has more merit than Hitler’s, the last panel of the chapter reinforces the impression that his metaphorical “Final Solution” was motivated by an Aryan-like sense of superiority rather than necessity. He gets up and leaves immediately after gassing these “damn bugs,” as though he had already decided to depart before killing them. If this is the case, killing them served no practical purpose (it certainly would not make an appreciable dent in the local insect population). Having already come up with a peaceful resolution to the situation -- retreating to his territory and leaving the mosquitoes to theirs -- he still felt compelled to exercise a parting show of force, presumably to demonstrate his power over these inferior beings.

**Eternal Treblinka**

Near the conclusion of Pavel’s therapy session with Art, the psychiatrist laments the cruelties that have continued to plague the world since the Holocaust. He reasons that perhaps a “newer, bigger Holocaust” would finally motivate humanity to stop the cycle of violence (Fig. 21). Even his own affection for dogs and cats does not allow him to perceive the suffering that animals endure at the hands of humans as comparable, even metaphorically, to the suffering of humans during the Holocaust. If judging solely in terms of sheer numbers, the comparison is indeed imbalanced. It is estimated that the Nazis systematically exterminated at least 15 million people across Europe from 1938-1945 (Jews represented from 6-7 million of the total number of victims) (Wikipedia, 2004). Each year, in the United States alone, approximately 10 billion animals are slaughtered for food12 (USDA, 2002:41-43), 7 million are killed for their fur (Fox, 2001), 115 million are killed by hunters (The Fund, 2004), from 17 to 70 million animals are killed in laboratories13 (Orlans, 1994:218) and, despite the special place dogs and cats supposedly hold in the hearts of Americans, nearly four million companion animals are euthanized in shelters (HSUS, 2004). In addition, thousands more animals -- from rodeo bulls (SHARK, 2004) to circus elephants (PETA, 2004) -- are subjected to physical abuse such as beatings and electric shocks in order to get them to perform unnatural acts for human amusement.

In *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, author Charles Patterson relates the speech of Dr. Helmut Kaplan, an Austrian animal rights activist, given during a protest outside a pharmaceutical company in Frankfurt, Germany:

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Ladies and Gentlemen! You all know what the Auschwitz lie is. It’s the assertion that the concentration camps never existed. But what you perhaps do not know is that the concentration camps still exist! We are standing directly in front of one, an animal concentration camp. The assertion that the concentration camps closed after the Second World War is the second Auschwitz lie! (Patterson, 2002:220-221).

While some readers have taken offense at the entirely symbolic analogy between animals and humans in *Maus*, applying the analogy of the Holocaust to the institutionalized mistreatment of animals by humans -- no matter how egregious the example of abuse -- induces even greater hostility from most people. Those who have a direct connection to the Holocaust are often particularly sensitive about attempts to use it as a point of comparison to the experiences of others. In a 1989 article published in *The Village Voice*, Art Spiegelman acknowledged that “Gypsies, homosexuals, Poles, political dissidents, mental patients, and even some criminals” were systematically killed by the Nazis, “but in the perverted universe of the death camps the Jews had a special place as the most Unter of Untermenschen [“subhumans”]. And we Jews have been very protective of Our Holocaust, because the rest of the world has been rather disinclined to care very deeply about it or us” (Spiegelman, 1989). Of course, the world has shown even less concern for animals, who in most people’s eyes are the only true subhumans. What these people fail to recognize is that “subhuman” is yet another nonscientific term used to designate the lowest members of a culturally constructed hierarchy among species that places *homo sapiens* at the top.

This may be because the history of humanity’s relationship with other animals has naturally been told entirely from the human perspective. Pavel suggests to Art that it may be impossible for the reality of the Holocaust to ever be completely understood since the voices of those who were killed in the death camps have been forever silenced, and their experiences are lost to the world (Fig. 22). Animals -- whether living or dead -- are likewise unable to share their experiences of the world with humans. Anne Muller, who lost many members of her extended family in the Holocaust, described how her personal history led her to see this connection:

![Fig. 22. Maus II, p.45 (©Art Spiegelman and Pantheon Books)](image)

When you grow up learning how your family was killed by a government and by people who thought they were worthless, or worse, and who had absolute power over them and exercised it with brutal force, taking everything, taking even their lives, you can’t help but feel deeply for
those in that predicament. Animals are weak, they have no voice, they can’t help each other or themselves. We were like that too (Patterson, 2002:140).

There have even been Holocaust survivors who saw violence against animals and violence against humans as part of the same continuum. Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz was a German pacifist sent to Dachau by the Nazis because of his political beliefs. He was there during the same period as Vladek Spiegelman, and like him, almost died of typhus. While a prisoner, Kupfer-Koberwitz kept a secret diary of his experiences, which he retrieved and later published after the war. In it, he explained not only the reasons why he was a vegetarian, but how he saw the treatment of animals as being directly related to events like the Holocaust:

I believe as long as man tortures and kills animals, he will torture and kill humans as well -- and wars will be waged -- for killing must be practiced and learned on a small scale. We should try to overcome our own small thoughtless cruelty, to avoid it, to abolish it (Patterson, 2002:220).

Putting aside comparisons of the victims, there is a flaw in the analogy between society’s current treatment of animals and the Holocaust when it comes to the intentions behind them. The Nazis believed that if they could kill enough Jews and other “undesirables,” then eventually none would be left alive in Europe and the death camps would be shut down. The utilization of animals as commodities, on the other hand, is designed to be never-ending. In *The Lives of Animals* by South African writer and Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee, the main character explains that, unlike the Nazis’ Final Solution, the institutionalized use of animals “is an enterprise without end, self regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them” (Coetzee, 1999:119).15

Another Nobel laureate who saw this distinction between the Holocaust and humanity’s treatment of animals was Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose mother and younger brother, along with many other relatives, were killed by the Nazis after he had escaped his native Poland. Throughout his distinguished literary career, Singer often used his writing to condemn the countless atrocities he saw in the world, whether directed toward people or animals. He was especially intolerant of what he considered humanity’s arrogance toward other species and the perpetual cruelty that it caused. To end this paper, I have chosen a passage from his short story “The Letter Writer” as a particularly appropriate way to restore the animal absent referent to the present, and put the mice back in *Maus*:

In his thoughts, Herman spoke a eulogy for the mouse who had shared a portion of her life with him and who, because of him, had left this earth. “What do they know -- all these scholars, all these philosophers, all the leaders of the world -- about such as you? They have convinced themselves
that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka” (Singer, 1982:271).

Endnotes

1 In the same Comics Journal interview (Bolhafner, 1991), Spiegelman claims that the word “vermin” is “German for mouse or rat.” This is a strange assertion given that the title of his book is Maus. Equally similar to its English equivalent, the German word for rat is ratte. In the several online German-English dictionaries I consulted, the term “vermin” only appeared in German as part of other words that generally convey a meaning of reduction, decrease, or abatement. The German word most commonly given as synonymous with “vermin” is ungeziefer. In fact, this is the original German word translated as “vermin” in the tirade against Mickey Mouse that appears in the front of Maus II (see <www.netzeitung.de/entertainment/people/262048.html>). Sometimes translated as ”bug,” this is also the word used by Jewish author Franz Kafka, in his short story The Metamorphosis, to describe the creature into which Gregor Samsa is transformed (see <www.nv.cc.va.us/home/vpoulakis/translation/Kafkatr1.htm>). Other German words given for “vermin” include abschaum (“dregs” or “scum”), brut (“brood,” “offspring,” or “spawn”), gesindel or pack (both of which are translated as “mob,” “riffraff,” or “rabble”). Although Spiegelman may define mice and rats as vermin, the German language does not.

2 The complete quote is, “It is just like man’s vanity and impertinence to call an animal dumb because it is dumb to his dull perceptions.”

3 Adding to the irony is the fact that pigs are among those animals deemed temeiah (“unclean” or “spiritually impure”) according to kosher law; yet another example of human cultural values identifying certain animals as “vermin.”

4 Similarly, in the language of the absent referent cows become “beef,” baby cows become “veal,” turkeys and chickens become “poultry,” and sheep become “mutton.”
While not always babies in the technical sense, most animals slaughtered for food die at a very young age. On factory farms, pigs are usually taken from their mothers when they are 2-3 weeks old and then confined to crowded stalls until they are heavy enough to be slaughtered at about 6 months of age (see <www.factoryfarming.com/pork.htm>). The natural lifespan of a pig is 10-15 years.

In his memoirs, Henry Ford revealed that he got his inspiration for the automobile assembly line during a visit to a Chicago slaughterhouse. Several scholars have conjectured that the efficient design of the Nazi death camps was in turn inspired by Ford’s automobile factories. (While this connection has not been proven, it is clear that the Holocaust would not have unfolded as it did without Ford’s ideological and financial influence. In addition to being an innovative industrialist, Ford was also an ardent anti-Semite. For years, his newspaper, The Dearborn Independent, ran a series of articles claiming to reveal an organized Jewish plot to control the world. Ford eventually published these articles in his book, The International Jew, which became a bestseller in Nazi Germany. It so inspired Adolf Hitler that he kept a large portrait of Ford in his office, and singled him out in Mein Kampf as the only American trying to thwart the “Jewish conspiracy.” There is also evidence (though not conclusive) that Ford provided funding to the Nazis. In any case, throughout the war he operated a factory in Germany that utilized slave prison labor to produce vehicles for the Nazi army.) (Patterson, 2002, 71-79).

To prevent chickens from similarly injuring their cage mates, as each newborn female chick comes down a conveyer belt, a worker shears off the tips of their beaks with a hot metal blade. (Because male chicks will never lay eggs or grow as large as the “broiler chickens” bred for human consumption, workers immediately toss them into large trash bags as they sort them from the females. Once the bags are full of still living chicks, workers throw them into dumpsters.)

This underground comic book, Funny Aminals #1, was edited by Terry Zwigoff, who went on to direct the films Crumb and Ghost World. In 2001, Zwigoff offered a dinner with him as the grand prize in the First Annual Animal Rights Film Festival held by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (see <www.peta.org/news/NewsItem.asp?id=386>).

Despite the fact that the Nazis did make some reforms to laws on animal experimentation, they by no means abolished the practice. As Roberta Kalechofsky explains in “Nazis and Animal Research”:

Furthermore, a law passed by the Weimar government in 1931 required that all experiments on human beings be first conducted on animals. Such a requirement exists in the United States as in many countries that practice animal research. In other words, animal research is often a legal justification for experimentation on humans, as it functioned in Nazi Germany. The 1931 law in Germany was never abrogated. Nazi doctors dutifully submitted written statements when they requested “human material” for experiments which
carried the legal notification that such experiments had been first conducted on animals. The first request for “test persons” was made by Dr. Sigmund Rascher to Himmler on May 15, 1941, “for two or three professional criminals” for “High-Altitude Research.” It states that human beings were needed “because these experiments cannot be conducted with monkeys, as has been tried....”

Another possibility is that Spiegelman is merely making it clear to the reader that this is a picture of an actual cat and not, according to the sign system in place, a picture of a German. I find this unlikely for a number of reasons. The cat in the picture is drawn in a distinctly different style than that of the metaphorical cat-Germans that appear throughout the book (for example, the cat is sporting a paw rather than a hand). Also, at the level of narrative symbolism being employed in this chapter, a German would be depicted with a cat mask rather than a cat head (like the German reporter that appears on the preceding page). Even if Spiegelman did not feel these visual clues were enough to clear up any possible confusion over the true species of the cat, the narration could have accomplished this without the exclamatory “Really!” Lastly, if the picture of the cat were not intended to make some point, and its presence was so potentially distracting that its meaning had to be clarified by a caption, there would have been little reason to include it in the panel at all.

Art (and presumably Spiegelman) also seems unaware of the historical significance behind a Holocaust survivor’s devotion to dogs and cats. On February 15, 1942, the Nazi government issued the Decree Prohibiting Jews from the Keeping of Pets. This put German Jews in the position of having to turn their beloved animal companions over to the Gestapo, or sneak them off to a veterinarian to be humanely euthanized (Patterson 2002:124).

This figure excludes fish, crustaceans, and other aquatic animals killed for human consumption, of which the USDA keeps no records.

The federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA) requires laboratories to report the number of animals used in experiments, but mysteriously excludes mice, rats, and birds from its definition of animal. This totally excuses researchers from the requirement to keep any records on the number of these animals used in experiments, or to observe any of the minimal standards on care, handling, housing, or pain management but forth by the AWA. Since rats and mice (and to a lesser extent birds) are the subjects used in 80-90 percent of all animal experiments, this accounts for the wide range in estimates of the number of animals killed.

While searching the Internet, I came upon a Web site (<dactylmanor.org/scarred/sfl2003-7-10.htm>) on which was posted an editorial suggesting that people who “had the gall” to compare the systematic extermination of animals with the Holocaust should read Maus (among other books) in order to learn how “offensive” such a comparison is. This is a perfect example of how the
implications Spiegelman’s metaphor has for animals escapes the attention and sensitivities of most readers.

While J.M. Coetzee is not directly connected to the Holocaust, the Nobel jury explained that “a fundamental theme in Coetzee’s novels involves the values and conduct resulting from South Africa’s apartheid system, which, in his view, could arise anywhere.”

References


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