

# Cockroaches, Cows and "Canines of the Hebrew Faith": Exploring Animal Imagery in Graphic Novels about Genocide

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## Abstract.

Graphic novels about genocide feature a surprisingly rich array of animal imagery. While there has been substantial analysis of the anthropomorphic animals in *Maus*, the roles and functions of non-anthropomorphised animals have received scant attention. In this article, I conduct a comparative analysis of ten graphic novels about genocide to identify and elucidate the archetypal functions of non-anthropomorphised animals. These animals can play a symbolic role, providing insight into the human condition. More commonly, they provide crucial emotional cues to the reader. Animal imagery can be a powerful technique for creating an affective context, communicating both simple and complex emotions in an effective and efficient way. This may explain the prevalence of animal imagery in graphic novels about genocide.

## Keywords.

genocide, animal, graphic novel, Holocaust, Rwanda

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# Cockroaches, Cows and “Canines of the Hebrew Faith”: Exploring Animal Imagery in Graphic Novels about Genocide

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## Introduction

On the banks on the Danube in Budapest, two elegantly dressed friends meet for coffee.<sup>1</sup> A small child and her small dog interact playfully in the foreground. Yet the discussion underway belies the seemingly idyllic scene. It is 1944 and Esther has just received an order to hand over her daughter’s beloved dog to the Nazis, as Jews are no longer permitted to own pets. Esther and Eva joke as to what Hitler will do with all these “Jewish dogs,” or “canines of the Hebrew faith.”<sup>2</sup> The joke quickly wears thin, however, as Esther and her young daughter Lisa struggle to survive the Holocaust. The graphic novel depicting their tale, *We Are On Our Own*, is one of many about genocide in which scenes containing animals play an important role. In this article, I seek to explore the purposes and impact of such animal imagery. To date, analysis on this topic has primarily focused on the anthropomorphised animal, epitomised in Art Spiegelman’s ground-breaking *Maus*.<sup>3</sup> Following a brief review of this scholarship, I take a different approach, conducting the first comparative analysis of the role of non-anthropomorphised animals in graphic novels about genocide. The results reveal several archetypal ways in which animals are portrayed. At times, animals are used as a prop, to provide direct insight into the human condition. Predominantly, however, they play a more complex role, providing crucial emotional cues to the reader. The identification and analysis of these pictorial tropes helps build a deeper understanding of the role of animal imagery in contributing to the emotive power of graphic novels about genocide.

## *Maus*, and the Anthropomorphised Animal

In the graphic novel, the role of the animal has been interpreted as one that provides insight into *human* identity.<sup>4</sup> Very often animal characters represent (human) stereotypes, such as the fierce lion, loyal dog or timid mouse, although occasionally such stereotypes are inverted such that the animal plays a role opposite to that expected.<sup>5</sup> As Michael Chaney has remarked, the appearance of the animal in graphic novels “almost always accompanies the strategic and parodic veiling of the human.”<sup>6</sup> This is nowhere more so than in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, where at times the characters literally hold their animal masks.<sup>7</sup> In 1986, the publication of the first volume of this Holocaust graphic novel, *Maus I, A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, and the subsequent publication of *Maus II, A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991), accorded a new space and legitimacy to graphic novels about genocide.<sup>8</sup> *Maus*, recounting the tale of Spiegelman’s father’s experiences in Auschwitz, yet unsettling the reader through the illustration of its characters as mice, cats and pigs, won the Pulitzer Prize and identified the graphic novel as a powerful medium for the exploration of extreme violence. Perhaps unintentionally, it also created a precedent for the surprisingly important role of animal imagery in this sub-genre. Yet *Maus* was not the first use of animal imagery to depict genocide within this format. French Jewish illustrator Horst Rosenthal produced a graphic booklet during the Holocaust that became one of Spiegelman’s sources of inspiration. *Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp* described daily life in the camp, portraying Mickey Mouse as a prisoner. The images of this playful, curious and smiling character contrast vividly with the textual descriptions of life in the camp. As Pnina Rosenberg has remarked, “Apparently, only a fictional character could

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Katin, *We Are On Our Own: A Memoir by Miriam Katin* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Chaney, “Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel,” *College Literature* 38, no. 3 (2011), 130.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Schafter, “Anthropomorphism in Graphic Novels,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature*, January 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*.

even begin to cope with such a bitter reality.”<sup>9</sup> The transformative impact of *Maus* within this sub-genre, however, is widely recognised.

The use of the animal metaphor in *Maus* has been the focus of much analysis. Spiegelman himself expresses ambivalence towards his approach within the narrative, simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the metaphor.<sup>10</sup> For many, the anthropomorphisation is a technique that achieves a powerful literary outcome. “More than a few readers have described [*Maus*] as the most compelling of any [Holocaust] depiction, perhaps because only the caricatured quality of comic art is equal to the seeming unreality of an experience beyond all reason,” remarked historian Paul Buhle.<sup>11</sup> The aesthetic presentation introduces structure and agency that creates a distance from the real, a distance that provides necessary space for the reader.<sup>12</sup> This antirealist depiction of the characters invites readers to “mobilize imagination ... to think, and to *see* the best they can.”<sup>13</sup> Spiegelman himself has compared the animal heads he depicted to “a white screen the reader can project on.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet there are also real risks associated with the animal in the graphic novel about genocide. Animal metaphors potentially invoke the dehumanisation of the targeted group – the Tutsi minority in Rwanda termed snakes and cockroaches; the Jews in Nazi Europe as rats and dogs. Robert Eaglestone has suggested such representations impact not only how the Holocaust is represented, but how it is explained: “*Maus*, which its biological, animal metaphor, leads us to presume simply that Germans (cats) always prey on Jews (mice) and that this is inevitable and unavoidable.”<sup>15</sup> Chaney, moreover, has suggested that animal metaphorisation of perpetrators absolves them of their human responsibility for their crimes.<sup>16</sup> The audacity of *Maus* has given rise to considerable debate about the limits of representation. It has also opened the way for subsequent graphic novels about genocide to employ anthropomorphic techniques, such as Stassen’s *Deogratias*. Yet in many respects, this focus on anthropomorphisation within animal imagery in graphic novels about genocide has contributed to a dearth of analysis of the role of the non-anthropomorphised animal. It to this topic I now turn.

### Animal Imagery, Graphic Novels and Genocide

This article seeks to analyse the purpose, and role, of animal imagery in graphic novels about genocide. It focuses upon the depiction of animals *as animals*; that is, it is neither an analysis of the anthropomorphisation of animals nor the animalization of people. Rather, it considers how the depiction of animals *as such* contributes to this sub-genre. Animal imagery is common, yet (to my knowledge) there has been not yet been a comparative analysis of this pictorial device. This reflects the broader scarcity of critical analysis in this field.<sup>17</sup> The imagery of non-anthropomorphised animals can be considered from a posthumanist critical theoretical perspective. Posthumanist

<sup>9</sup> Pnina Rosenberg, “Mickey Mouse in Gurs – Humour, Irony and Criticism in Works of Art Produced in the Gurs Internment Camp,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 275. Another graphic booklet produced during the Holocaust also used animal imagery, namely Edmond-François Calvo, Victor Dancette, and Jacques Zimmermann, *La bête est morte! La guerre mondiale chez les animaux!* (Paris: Éditions GP, 1946).

<sup>10</sup> Laurike in ‘t Veld, “Introducing the Rwandan Genocide from a Distance: American Noir and the Animal Metaphor in 99 Days,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 2 (2015), 147.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Buhle, “Of Mice and Menschen: Jewish Comics Come of Age,” *Tikkun* 7, no. 2 (1992), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (1992-93), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Katalin Orbán, “Trauma and Visuality: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*,” *Representations* 97, no. 1 (2007), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Art Spiegelman et al., “Mightier Than the Sorehead,” *Nation* 258, no. 2 (1994), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Eaglestone, “Madness or Modernity?: The Holocaust in Two Anglo-American Comics,” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 3 (2002), 319, 328.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Chaney, “The Animal Witness of the Rwandan Genocide,” in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. Michael Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 96.

<sup>17</sup> Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, “Editorial: History in the Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 255; Gonshak, *Beyond Maus*, 56; Jade Munslow Ong, “‘I’m Only a Dog!’: The Rwandan Genocide, Dehumanization and the Graphic Novel,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 2 (2016), 212.

critical thought provides “a frame for affirmative ethics and politics.”<sup>18</sup> For the graphic novelists whose work is analysed herein, there is a logic to moving beyond a focus on humanism and anthropocentrism, when the narratives they depict catalogue the immeasurably disastrous results of human actions and ideals. An ethical refusal of binary thinking, which subtly challenges the self-other distinction through creative processes that embrace the ‘other,’ or animal, as symbolic of the human condition, can be interpreted as a collective, instinctive response to the abhorrence of genocide. The familiar concept of the ‘human’ is lost in the inhumane, and perhaps humanity can only be regained through transcending an anthropocentric focus. Yet, concurrently, these are also and always fundamentally human tales.

Despite their growing number, graphic novels attempting to portray the experience of genocide remain marginalised and viewed as a somewhat experimental format.<sup>19</sup> The subject matter is one often perceived as at the limits of representation. The unconventional format can be interpreted as provocative in overlaying an additional challenge to mainstream notions of historical representation. Traditional historiographical notions of representations of history have been challenged in recent decades, but the privileging of text over images “has remained relatively unquestioned.”<sup>20</sup> Images have been regarded as too ambiguous, too emotive, too distant from their subject matter.<sup>21</sup> In films and graphic novels alike, images are challenged by notions of ‘realism’ and ‘authenticity.’ In the graphic novel in particular, they compress the elements of a sequence of events within frozen panels, distorting time and space.<sup>22</sup> Yet there are also opportunities for alternative conceptualisations that embrace the strengths of image-based formats.<sup>23</sup> The emotive nature of film and graphic novel depictions of genocide, for example, can be perceived as promoting viewer engagement rather than detracting from parochial notions of the primacy of ‘objectivity.’ Images can tell a tale of their own, imbuing a complex and multilayered scene with a richness that words alone cannot. Moreover, as I argue below, the use of animal imagery in graphic novels gives the author the power to communicate with a subtlety and emotive command not otherwise readily available.

To explore the role and purpose of animal imagery, ten graphic novels that feature such imagery were selected for analysis. These include seven about the Holocaust: *We Are On Our Own*, *Letting it Go*, *Hidden*, *The Search*, *A Family Secret*, *Auschwitz*, and *The Property*.<sup>24</sup> Three graphic novels are about the Rwandan genocide: *Deogratias*, *Smile Through the Tears*, and *100 Days in the Land of the Thousand Hills*.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of this relatively large sample for a qualitative analysis is twofold. First, a larger sample size facilitates the identification of patterns and commonalities in the way in which animals are depicted. Second, through choosing a broad range of graphic novels, it is anticipated that identified patterns are likely to be representative of the genre. For this reason, the sample includes graphic novels depicting different genocides, graphic novels aimed at children and adults, and graphic novels that adopt both journalistic and more creative narrative

<sup>18</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” in *Critical Posthumanism: Planetary Futures*, ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand Paranjape (India: Springer, 2016), 23.

<sup>19</sup> Deborah Mayersen, “One Hundred Days of Horror: Portraying Genocide in Rwanda,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (2015), 359.

<sup>20</sup> Jan Baetens, “History Against the Grain? On the Relationship between Visual Aesthetics and Historical Interpretation in the Contemporary Spanish Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 346.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 345–346.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Walker, “Pistols! Murder! Treason!” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2003), 146; Hirsch, *Family Pictures*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Baetens, *History Against the Grain?*, 346.

<sup>24</sup> Pascal Croci, *Auschwitz* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003); Loïc Dauvillier, Marc Lizano, and Greg Salsedo, *Hidden* (New York: First Second, 2014); Eric Heuvel, *A Family Secret* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007); Eric Heuvel, Ruud van der Rol and Lies Schippers, *The Search* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007); Miriam Katin, *Letting it Go* (New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013); Katin, *We Are On Our Own*; Rutu Modan, *The Property* (New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Rupert Bazambanza, *Smile Through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide* (Montreal: Les Éditions Images, 2006); International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), *100 Days in the Land of The Thousand Hills* (Arusha: ICTR, 2011); Jean-Philippe Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (New York: First Second, 2006).

approaches. Some graphic novels are non-fictional memoirs; others hover in a space “between fiction and non-fiction,” offering a fictional narrative yet one grounded in extensive research and a realistic portrayal of the genocidal context.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the sample size reflects that while animal imagery is relatively common, it is not a predominant feature. Within the sample selected, the examples of animal imagery discussed below form the majority of incidences of animal imagery within them. As I posit below, this suggests the strategic use of animal imagery to achieve specific outcomes.

### The Animal as Symbolic of the Human Condition

In this article I identify two primary functions that non-anthropomorphised animals fulfil in graphic novels about genocide. The first is as a prop, to provide direct insight into the human condition. In such scenes, the appearance of the animal is more than incidental, but attention remains firmly on the human context. In the opening scene of *Smile Through the Tears*, for example, there are several images of Rwanda’s iconic gorillas. The focus of the accompanying text, however, is firmly on people: “Visitors really only seemed to care about the country’s natural beauty and its mountain gorillas ... Visitors completely ignored the murder of thousands of Tutsis and the fact that large numbers of Rwandans had been forced to remain in exile.”<sup>27</sup> This is reflected in the composition of the shots. The reader does not view the gorillas in a natural context as a tourist might, but in a highly mediated space. In one image the reader views a gorilla over the shoulders of the reporters videoing and photographing it; below this, a second image is partially obscured by the resulting footage, photographs and newspaper depictions of the animal. The over the shoulder shot, moreover, immediately locates the reader as participant, not observer. The reader is thus unsettled and emotionally embroiled by this subtle cue suggesting complicity. The images of the gorilla do not serve to provide information about this iconic Rwandan species, but about the callously selective attention of the international community and its failure to aid the people of Rwanda.

Across numerous graphic novels, images of vicious dogs serve as a trope that symbolises perpetrator violence. Again, the animal images are not incidental, but it is the *human* experience into which they provide insight. In *Auschwitz*, Pascal Croci’s graphic narration incorporates many images of menacing dogs. In one scene, new arrivals at Auschwitz press against the cattle cars they have just exited, as a large and savage dog strains at the leash, poised to attack. “Whatever you do, don’t move!” cries a prisoner, clutching a toddler in terror.<sup>28</sup> The low angle augments the menace of the animal and its handler, while the depth shot adds to the confusion and fear within this complex scene. *Auschwitz* doesn’t refrain from graphic images of death and violence, but in a number of other graphic novels the pictorial trope of the vicious dog is used as a proxy for perpetrator violence. *The Search* and *A Family Secret*, for example, are both graphic novels about the Holocaust aimed at a juvenile audience. In *A Family Secret*, a boy is caught by the Nazis with two loaves of bread. A Nazi officer holds him up by the lapels of his coat and demands “What do you have there, boy?!” as a vicious dog, loudly barking, strains at his leash in close proximity.<sup>29</sup> Here, the violence is implied rather than depicted, as is appropriate for the younger audience. Similarly, in *The Search*, when the protagonist Esther is seeking a safe place to hide from the Nazis in the Dutch countryside, an unsympathetic farmer tells her to “Get out of here ...!” as he restrains a large, barking dog.<sup>30</sup> Esther runs for her life. In this image, the author uses composition to successfully navigate the challenge of implying menace without depicting violence. The tails away image foregrounds the fear-inducing elements without exposing the reader to the faces of either man or dog, and through the depth shot the reader knows Esther is already safely out of reach of both. In these scenes, the image of the vicious dog serves as a proxy for perpetrator violence, providing an important cue to the reader while working within age-appropriate limitations as to the depiction of events.

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Bumatay and Hannah Warman, “Illustrating Genocidaires, Orphans and Child Soldiers in Central Africa,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 24, no. 3 (2012), 336.

<sup>27</sup> Bazambanza, *Smile Through the Tears*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Croci, *Auschwitz*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Heuvel, *A Family Secret*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Heuvel et al., *The Search*, 25.

*Deogratias* employs animal imagery in this symbolic way multiple times within the narrative. It is a complex and challenging graphic novel about the Rwandan genocide, that contains both anthropomorphised and non-anthropomorphised animals. Here, I focus only on the latter.<sup>31</sup> In *Deogratias* the eponymous protagonist is a young adult perpetrator, and scenes shift between the periods prior to and during the genocide, and its aftermath. In one scene from the aftermath, a clearly disturbed Deogratias is pictured sleeping in a cowshed, alongside the livestock.<sup>32</sup> Deogratias' place amongst the cows is symbolic of his inability to function in the human world. Deogratias wears a dirty white t-shirt with many holes that reveal his dark skin underneath, cuing the reader to the temporal location of the scene as after the genocide. A few pages on in the narrative, a new scene reverts to the period prior to the genocide. Here, a French military advisor – whose unsavoury qualities the reader is already familiar with from previous scenes – is recommending a new breed of cow to a group of assembled pastoralists.<sup>33</sup> Benina, a love interest of Deogratias', serves as the translator: "The white guy says a good cow is not a cow with big horns and small udders, but on the contrary a cow with small horns and big fat udders, exactly like this one here, that's as graceful as a hog ...".<sup>34</sup> Benina's creative translation reflects the tension created by the white advisor's seemingly condescending advice, which clashes with local values and the reader's knowledge of his character. The image of the cow reinforces Benina's view, for indeed it appears hog-like with its thick neck, bulging udders and a smattering of mud.<sup>35</sup> Powerfully, the black and white pattern of its hide is strikingly similar to that of the disturbed Deogratias' torn t-shirt. As Deogratias' t-shirt symbolises his shameful complicity in the genocide, the dirty cow symbolises the shame and complicity of the western role in it. Using a subtext that directly contradicts the ostensible message that overlays it, Stassen's potent symbolism is expressed here through animal imagery.

A second deeply layered and symbolic scene in *Deogratias* occurs early in the narrative, when Deogratias stops the killing of a cockroach. In this scene from the aftermath of the genocide, Deogratias is drinking beer with the French advisor, who has returned to Rwanda as a tourist. The scene is ugly and distasteful: Deogratias appears dishevelled, the hotel is rundown, cockroaches run up the wall. The images of cockroaches are of course far from coincidental, with cockroach being a derogatory term used to refer to Rwanda's Tutsi minority prior to and during the genocide. The French advisor crassly reminisces: "Man those Tutsi girls! ... That's what I missed the most... And it's such a shame ... All those beauties who won't be sharing their soft little thighs with anyone anymore. All those sweet pieces of ass hacked to bits with machetes... What a waste!"<sup>36</sup> When a cockroach appears on their table, the advisor's attempt to squash it with his fist is unexpectedly thwarted. Deogratias cries out "No!" and blocks the movement, knocking over their beers in the process.<sup>37</sup> The action serves to humanise Deogratias, but the reader is immediately conflicted. Thus far, the reader's knowledge of Deogratias is limited to his unkempt appearance, his acquaintance with the obnoxious military advisor, and – from a flashback – that he stole money from a church and used it to attempt to hire a prostitute. Moreover, the cockroach as animal and the cockroach as symbolic of the Tutsi demand different responses. Later, the reader learns that Deogratias, who wouldn't allow the killing of a cockroach here, was a perpetrator during the genocide. In this scene, Stassen rejects easy resolution, opting instead for a "construction of meaning that ... is multifaceted, fraught with tension, and requires critical thinking."<sup>38</sup> The cockroach is both real and symbolic, Deogratias both human and inhumane, the situation both conventional and surreal. Here the cockroach is symbolic of Deogratias' inner conflict, and the external conflict of the genocide. At all times, however, it is less a cockroach than it is a symbol of the human condition.

<sup>31</sup> The role of anthropomorphisation in *Deogratias*, and particularly the role of the dog, has already been the subject of substantial analysis. See for example, Ong, *I'm Only a Dog*, 211-225.

<sup>32</sup> Stassen, *Deogratias*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Bumatay and Warman, *Illustrating Genocidaires*, 332.

Thus far the focus of this article has been on the animal in the graphic novel as a symbol, or a metaphor for the human condition. Yet animal imagery often serves a quite different function, that of providing cues to the reader as to the affective context of a scene. In the remainder of this article, I focus on this alternative function.

### **Animals as Emotional Cues**

In many graphic novels about genocide, scenes featuring animal imagery provide crucial emotional cues to the reader. Indeed, this appears to be the most common function of non-anthropomorphised animals. These emotional cues can vary widely. They can provoke positive emotions, negative emotions, or complex emotions. They can signify emotional disruption, a period of emotional intensity, or a return to a calmer emotional state. In all cases, however, they provide a cue to the reader, illuminating the affective context of the scene. In a medium in which text is inherently limited, this offers an effective shortcut to expression. Familiar visual images are used as emotional schemata to elicit specific affective responses, such as the use of aesthetically pleasing scenes from nature to invoke feelings of calm and happiness.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, imagery of particular animals functions as a visual trigger of emotion. Such emotional schemata serve as familiar stimuli, in line with network theories of emotion, triggering established neural pathways to emotional responses.<sup>40</sup> Thus the image of a friendly dog elicits feelings of comfort and safety, while images of vermin elicit disgust. When desiring emotional intensity, authors strive to strongly activate such schemata through careful composition of the images, such as extreme close up shots or repetition. By contrast, long shots and high angles temper the strength of emotion elicited through such schemata, and these compositional strategies are often associated with animal imagery that similarly invokes calm, such as that of domestic or farm animals. These sophisticated strategies effectively elicit emotional responses from the reader, and mediate the intensity of those responses.

Yet graphic novelists go beyond seeking to elicit and control an emotional response through the use of animal imagery. Through manipulating and altering emotion, they take the reader on an emotional journey. Complex scenes elicit emotion, yet as the reader cognitively processes each component of a scene, a continuous process of appraisal and re-appraisal mediates the emotional experience.<sup>41</sup> New emotions are elicited as the full implications of a scene are absorbed, and these may rapidly change in response to the new visual and textual information provided in each cell. In the scene described earlier in *Auschwitz*, for example, the reader first experiences fear and horror at the image of the prisoner clutching the toddler protectively while a fierce dog threatens to attack. Yet this is mediated by confusion, as the toddler is not the prisoner's child, but one the prisoner has snatched from a parent disembarking from the cattle cars. When the prisoner tries to give the small child to a grandma, again the reader reappraises the scene, and experiences a new emotional response upon realising the prisoner is attempting to save the mother's life. Even as this emotional cascade is unfolding, before the end of the page a soldier has shot the prisoner for his attempts. Such constant reappraisal in this hyperintense scene provokes recurrent cycles of emotion causation that result in an affective experience of rapidly shifting elicitation, intensity and differentiation.<sup>42</sup> In these ways, animal scenes not only contribute to progressing the narrative, but play a vital role in building the emotive strength of graphic novels about genocide. In the following section I identify and analyse several tropes that utilise animal imagery to invoke specific emotional responses in the reader.

### *Emotional Disruption*

One of the most powerful ways in which animal scenes function as emotional cues is through provoking emotional disruption. In these scenes, animal imagery is used to create a particular emotion, which is then immediately contradicted within the text. Very often the scene first

<sup>39</sup> Agnes Moor, "Theories of Emotion Causation: A Review," *Cognition and Emotion* 23, no. 4 (2009), 643.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Moor, *Emotion Causation*, 639; Paul Ekman and Richard Davidson (eds.), *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> Moor, *Emotion Causation*, 639.

portrayed is an idyllic one, as occurs *100 Days in the Land of the Thousand Hills*. Here, the graphic novel opens with a beautiful picture. Against a background of lush greenery, cows drink from a river just downstream of a pretty waterfall. The sun is shining, a cowherd sits peacefully alongside his dog, and the text begins "Once upon a time there was a wonderful country ..."<sup>43</sup> The reader is immediately drawn in by the beauty of this establishing shot, and this effect is augmented by the over the shoulder perspective from which the reader sees the cowherd. In the next panel, a low angle shot depicts birds flying in the sky with the sun overhead, and reads "It was a harbor of peace for all its inhabitants."<sup>44</sup> By the end of the page, however, images of peaceful animals have been replaced with those of burning houses and plumes of smoke. The reader, deceived into a calm and happy state, now learns "something terrible happens."<sup>45</sup> In many respects, this scene has strong parallels to the one described in the opening of this article. Katin first depicts the beauty of Budapest, and the joy of a little girl playing with her dog, before informing the reader that the dog must be surrendered and the lives of the Jewish protagonists are in peril.<sup>46</sup> Again, careful image composition strengthens the emotional disruption. Here, a beautiful establishing shot sets the broad scene, before the reader is drawn into Eva and Esther's conversation through a series of shots that progressively zoom in. As the ladies laugh, a macro shot includes the reader within this intimate circle. In both these scenes, the animal imagery cues the reader towards a positive emotional state, rendering a sharp emotional disruption. This abrupt emotional transition also promotes reader empathy with the plight of the main characters in each graphic novel.

The trope of animal imagery contributing to an emotionally disruptive scene is one that occurs repeatedly within graphic novels about genocide. In Rutu Modan's *The Property*, it is used twice to great effect. In this narrative, elderly Regina returns to Poland with her granddaughter, ostensibly to reclaim a property owned by her family before the Holocaust. Her motives turn out to be quite different from those initially expected, however. While the story is primarily set in contemporary times, both scenes I discuss here appear in flashbacks. In the first, the reader sees three beautiful panels across the page: a branch of flowering blossoms, a duck flying over the water, the calm of a beautiful lake. The caption informs the reader: "Wistula river, May 1939."<sup>47</sup> Yet as the scene opens out to an image of a young Regina and her beau Roman rowing down the river amongst the ducks, it quickly becomes apparent this is not a pleasurable jaunt. Rather, Jewish Regina has become pregnant to non-Jewish Roman, and they are attempting to escape Poland together to start a new life in Sweden. The high angle shot and their humble rowboat reinforces their vulnerable position. Again, the reader is drawn into the narrative through a series of increasingly close up images. Within just a few panels, their attempt is foiled. The idyllic image of two lovers rowing on a lake on a beautiful spring day is immediately replaced by the complexities of Regina's predicament, and an attempt to flee from the authorities. The scene is memorable precisely because of its emotional element, and this is important as it later transpires to be a pivotal moment in the narrative. It is Regina's predicament that leads her to be sent to stay with a relative in Israel to avoid shaming the family in Poland – an event that ultimately saves her life.

Later in the narrative, Regina's granddaughter Mica is having dinner with a Polish man, who has been assisting the family. A sexual vibe pervades the scene. When Mica asks where he is from, he replies "I'm originally from a village on the Ukrainian border."<sup>48</sup> The next panel depicts a beautiful forest, with the Pole and his dog happily walking through the woods. He expands: "It's a beautiful place. Miles of untouched nature all around. You can walk for a month and not see a soul. Only animals. Even bears, sometimes. But mostly rabbits. And foxes. Those were my favorite."<sup>49</sup> When Mica replies "foxes are cute", however, the unexpected response is "Yes. And

<sup>43</sup> ICTR, *100 Days*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Katin, *We are On Our Own*, 7-10.

<sup>47</sup> Modan, *The Property*, 56.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

profitable."<sup>50</sup> In the following panel, the idyllic forest is replaced with an image of the Pole's mother skinning a fox, a distasteful expression on her face. Again, this emotional disruption provides an important clue to the reader, that all is not as it may seem. Throughout the narrative, this character plays an ambiguous role. Mica's attempts to connect with him are repeatedly thwarted, yet it is unclear whether he is untrustworthy, or well meaning but somewhat misunderstood. Or is the primary issue one of Mica's Jewish family being unable to trust a non-Jewish Pole in light of their wartime experiences? The animal imagery in this scene cues the reader to the conflicting feelings the protagonists have toward this character, and invites the reader to share this emotional journey. In all of these scenes, the depiction of animals provides a crucial affective context for the author to provoke emotional disruption. Animal imagery contributes to the reader's emotional engagement with the narrative, and empathy with the plight of the protagonists.

#### *Decreased Emotional Intensity*

Animal imagery in graphic novels about genocide is sometimes used to demarcate a period of decreased emotional intensity. Initially this may appear counterintuitive – calm, or ordinariness in everyday life, are hardly features of genocide. Yet in many respects, being able to communicate decreased emotional intensity is essential. It enables graphic narratives to accurately represent the full spectrum of survivors' experiences, and provides contrast to render dramatic events most vividly. In three of the graphic novels analysed herein, animals are used to depict a period of relative calm. These scenes, in *Hidden*, *We Are On Our Own* and *The Search* contain numerous similarities. In *Hidden*, the protagonist Dounia is a young French girl forced into hiding after her parents are rounded up by the Nazis. With her neighbour, whom she must pretend is her mother, she arrives traumatised at a farm in the French countryside. The first positive sign they encounter is a friendly dog barking in the yard.<sup>51</sup> Across the three panels in which Dounia and the farmer who will protect her meet, the dog is foregrounded in each, its friendly and happy expression negating the inherent tension within the scene. Over the coming days, images of farm animals feature prominently as Dounia and her 'mother' try to process their traumatic experiences and settle in. Helping around the farm, such as milking the cows and feeding the rabbits, provides a way for them to regain some equilibrium. The reader sees a hint of smile from Dounia as she feeds the rabbits; in the following panel she is joyfully chasing the dog.<sup>52</sup> On the next page, the reader learns "Soon, we fell into a routine" and "I was very lucky." They took wonderful care of me."<sup>53</sup> The four images on this page, replete with numerous small animals, depict the passing of the seasons. In this way, the reader learns of the passing of time, and of the relative calm of this period.

In *We Are On Our Own*, the depiction of Esther and her daughter Lisa seeking refuge in the Hungarian countryside contains a number of parallel elements. As Esther and Lisa approach a farmhouse, again it is a dog that provides the first welcome.<sup>54</sup> When the farmer yells, "Shut up dog!" the reader senses a more ambiguous situation.<sup>55</sup> A letter from the farmer's nephew only proves sufficient to make them welcome when the farmer's wife intervenes on their behalf. Again, animal imagery is used to depict a sense of normality, and the passing of time. Esther is pictured hanging sheets on a washing line while Lisa chases the dog at her feet, with a chicken pecking in the foreground. To the right, another image depicts a bemused goat watching on as Lisa attempts to milk it. A thought bubble from Esther reads "Such a wonderful life for her."<sup>56</sup> The reader, of course, knows this is far from the case, as the preceding and subsequent pages overflow with details of threats to their precarious situation. Yet here, the animal imagery is very effective in conveying a period of relative calm and decreased emotional intensity. A similar scene in *The Search* depicts

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Dauvillier et al., *Hidden*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>54</sup> Katin, *We Are On Our Own*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 35.

not only calm, but moments of levity. The protagonist, also called Esther, is in hiding in the Dutch countryside, forced to spend much of her time in a hayloft. When it is safe, she helps around the farmyard. She accidentally squirts milk in the face of a young farmer she admires while trying to learn how to milk a cow.<sup>57</sup> The young farmer, meanwhile, steps on a rake while daydreaming about her, hitting himself in the head with its handle.<sup>58</sup> In this scene, the respite from danger is all too brief. Nevertheless, here, as in the scenes above, animal imagery provides the vehicle through which relative calm is communicated. The complexity of depicting calm within the hyperintensity of genocide is substantial; the sparse expression of graphic novels potentially offering a further barrier. This trope provides an effective and economical means through which decreased emotional intensity can be communicated.

#### *Animals as a Symbol of Comfort or Joy*

In numerous graphic novels, animals function as providers of comfort, and symbols of joy. This is particularly so in three graphic novels that incorporate animal imagery extensively: *Hidden*, *We Are On Our Own*, and *Letting it Go*. Sometimes, animals are used to heighten the emotion of a joyous occasion. In *Hidden*, for example, a full-page panel depicts the surprise reunion of Dounia's 'mother' and her husband.<sup>59</sup> In the foreground of the embracing couple, even the farmer's dog is smiling.<sup>60</sup> In an earlier scene, the dog is integral to a feeling of peaceful domesticity. Here, it is evening, and a fire burns in the hearth. The farmer reads quietly, Dounia's 'mother' sips a cup of tea, and Dounia and the dog lie curled up together by the fire.<sup>61</sup> The image is carefully composed to imply order and tranquillity, with the two adults in the left third, Dounia and her canine companion in the centre third, and the fire burning brightly on the right. The tranquil image is only disturbed by our knowledge that the situation is far from ideal – Dounia is separated from her real parents, whose fate is unknown at this point, Dounia's 'mother' is separated from her husband, and all three are at risk of arrest or worse should they be discovered by the authorities. Yet in these scenes, such complexities only marginally intrude. The animal imagery contributes to scenes focused wholly in the moment, as the animals themselves are.

In other scenes in which animals provide comfort or joy, the difficult situations of the protagonists intrude more forcefully. This highlights the emotional complexity of these positive feelings within a broader context of genocide. Both of Katin's graphic novels illustrate this complexity. *Letting it Go* uses animal imagery throughout, for multiple purposes. In this narrative Katin – whose story of surviving the Holocaust is recounted in her earlier publication *We Are On Our Own* – explores her discomfort when her son announces he is moving to Berlin. In the course of the novel she visits Berlin twice – first to see her son and his partner, and again for the opening of a comic art exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Berlin, which features her work. Throughout the graphic novel, animal imagery provides insight into the author's emotions. The first time we see Katin smile in Berlin is as she greets the dog of her son and his partner. In a comical scene, an uncommon foray into anthropomorphisation for Katin, the dog proclaims 'Oh my dog! I am shaking hands with Miriam Katin' as they greet each other. After a tense eleven pages – in which the reader has not seen Miriam smile since leaving New York – this scene provides a joyful emotional change. Yet this is a tempered joy. After the family eat at a dog-friendly restaurant, Miriam suffers terrible diarrhoea, presumably from food poisoning. Animal imagery also accompanies Katin's clear joy upon returning to New York. Across three panels she effusively proclaims "Hello Bridge! Hello River! Hello New York Pigeons."<sup>62</sup> The reader is first drawn into the scene with an over the shoulder shot of Miriam greeting the bridge, arms wide with exuberance. Only in the third image do we see a medium shot of Miriam front-on, framed first by the window of her apartment; more

<sup>57</sup> Heuvel et al., *The Search*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Dauviller et al., *Hidden*, 58.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>62</sup> Katin, *Letting it Go*, n.p. Note: *Letting it Go* does not use page numbers in the narrative.

widely by the pigeons that circle all around. Here joy and relief intermingle, while Katin's strong negative feelings about Berlin are the subject of the next panel.

In *We Are On Our Own* the comfort and joy that animals can provide is clear; but here it is countered with their loss. In this narrative, there is a recurring motif of dogs providing Lisa with joy and comfort, but then being torn away. At the opening of the narrative, as discussed earlier, Lisa plays happily with her pet dog Rexy – even feeding him some of her ice cream – before Rexy has to be surrendered to the Nazi authorities. Esther tries to explain to Lisa that he died suddenly, but she howls: “He was my bestest friend!”<sup>63</sup> Later, the farmer's dog becomes her “bestest friend” while they are in hiding.<sup>64</sup> A poignant image depicts Lisa and the dog, side by side, watching Russian tanks roll past in the distance.<sup>65</sup> When Esther and Lisa have to flee suddenly during a snowstorm, the dog is shot by Russian soldiers giving chase. Later, when Esther and Lisa emerge from their hiding place, they come across its corpse lying in the deep snow.<sup>66</sup> Once again, a dog that has provided joy and comfort to Lisa is brutally wrenched from her. This scene is perhaps the moment where Lisa loses her faith, but also serves as a metaphor for the inability of the Jews to find safety or comfort anywhere during the Holocaust.<sup>67</sup> The comfort provided by the dogs in *We Are On Our Own* is deceptive and illusory, and ultimately no comfort at all.

#### *Animals as Symbolic of Discomfort and Distress*

Just as animals can provide a positive affective context, they can also be utilised to symbolise discomfort and distress. In *Letting it Go*, Katin employs this strategy masterfully. Early in the narrative, Katin is distressed by the presence of cockroaches in her apartment. In a full-page cell, the reader first views Miriam and her husband sleeping peacefully in bed. A series of incomplete close-up images reveals a cockroach creeping ever closer to Miriam's face, followed by an extreme close-up of Miriam's eyes. Wide open in shock, one pupil is framed by the antennae of the cockroach. In the next image, the scene zooms out slightly to reveal Miriam's face, replete with a horrified expression reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The co-location of the repeated images of Miriam's face, close together within the same cell and several rendered incompletely, add to the intensity of the scene. Even as Miriam screams, one cockroach to her left is depicted as roughly equal in size to her face; a second poised menacingly over her shoulder is even larger. The next day, when Miriam discovers her nemeses are called German cockroaches, this is not just a curiosity. Instead, she conducts research and visits an expert at a museum to explore the origins of this term. Later in the narrative, Katin comes across a cockroach while making coffee. She is preparing to help her son apply for Hungarian (and therefore EU) citizenship, an undertaking to which she has previously been vehemently opposed. When her son questions “How come you let it [the cockroach] go?” she responds, “Neh. They help keep up the rage.”<sup>68</sup>

As *Letting it Go* reaches its climax, Katin returns to Berlin for the opening of an artistic exhibition featuring her work. The reader knows how important this occasion is for Katin – she has dieted, whitened her teeth, and so on. Yet when she attends the opening, she is distracted by a constant itch: “This itch! I can't stand it! Aaah!”<sup>69</sup> Here, the reader doesn't see the bed bugs responsible for Katin's discomfort, but is constantly distracted – like Miriam – by repeated images of her scratching interrupting the narrative. Only in the final images of the narrative does the reader view the bedbugs, and indeed they have the final word. The symbolism is heavy – the story encapsulated by the distress of the German cockroaches at the opening, and the bed bugs in Berlin at the closing. Even in Katin's triumphal moment, as she finds a seat reserved for her at the exhibition opening, views her own artwork on display and is interviewed by the radio and

<sup>63</sup> Katin, *We Are On Our Own*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-69.

<sup>67</sup> Deborah Mayersen, “Faith after Genocide,” in *Genocide Perspectives V*, ed. Nikki Marczak and Kirril Shields (Sydney: UTS Press, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Katin, *Letting it Go*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

newspaper, she is profoundly uncomfortable: "Itch! Itch! The alcohol might help a little."<sup>70</sup> Katin's husband – despite sleeping in the same bed – is entirely unaffected. Here, the reader can sense not only Katin's physical discomfort, but the metaphorical discomfort that underlays it.

Animal imagery is also employed in quite a different way in distressing scenes – that is to provide solace and soften the impact of tragic events. Two graphic novels aimed at a juvenile audience, *A Family Secret* and *The Search*, provide examples of this function. In *The Search*, as mentioned previously, Esther survives the Holocaust as a young adult hiding in the Dutch countryside. Her parents were rounded up by the Nazis. The story shifts between the narrative of Esther's survival and a contemporary narrative, in which she is revisiting the farm where she survived the war, with some family members. In a scene at the end of the war, Esther returns to her former neighbourhood. Efforts to find her parents are fruitless. Eventually she stumbles on a family friend, who informs her "I don't know how to tell you this... Your parents are not coming back, Esther."<sup>71</sup> The extreme sadness of this scene is tempered by an abrupt spatial, temporal and graphical change. The scene shifts from a close image of a grieving Esther after the war, to a birds-eye view of Esther recounting this conversation in the contemporary narrative.<sup>72</sup> The focal point of the latter panel is not Esther, but a horse grazing in a paddock. In this way, the image creates distance in time and space from the intensity of this tragic news, while the horse provides a comforting visual focus. A similar strategy is used when news of a death in the family is conveyed in *A Family Secret*. Immediately after the news, the scene switches from the wartime narrative, in which close up images depict family members' initial reactions, to a contemporary narrative in which the tale is being recounted to a grandchild.<sup>73</sup> The close up images of faces looking forward are replaced by a distant image of the characters side on, as the reader peeps distantly through a window. In the foreground, a passer-by is walking his dog. This frames the now small sad scene with a larger, happier image. Again, animal imagery has been employed to lessen the pain of loss.

#### *Animals as Symbolic of Closure*

The final trope considered in this article is one in which animals appear as a symbol of closure. In *Hidden*, this device is used twice as the narrative draws to its conclusion. The first symbolic closure occurs after an elderly Dounia has finished recounting her tale of survival to her granddaughter. She carries her now sleeping granddaughter back to bed.<sup>74</sup> The last image of this part of the narrative is a beautiful family photo of young Dounia with her parents, from before the war. Then, it is morning, a bright, contemporary family scene in which granddaughter Elsa wants to play with her ball, the family dog in the foreground.<sup>75</sup> But the narrative offers a second layer of closure, as Dounia and her son – Elsa's father – make peace over Dounia's previous inability to share her wartime experiences with him. In the final full-page panel, Dounia is embraced by her family, as the dog chases the ball in the foreground, barking happily.<sup>76</sup> Amidst the vibrant greenery of the garden, the image evokes the prospect of a peaceful, happy future for all. A similar device is used towards the close of *The Search*. Esther meets with family friend Bob Canter, who had previously informed her of her parents' deaths during the Holocaust. We learn that Bob "emigrated to Israel, where he could build a new life."<sup>77</sup> The images of Bob in the preceding and subsequent panels could hardly contrast more vividly. In the first panel, the reader sees Bob from behind, walking away from Esther.<sup>78</sup> He is hunched against the wind and rain, and his grey overcoat matches the dull, grey scene. After Bob arrives in Israel, he faces the reader. There is a bright sun in the background, and

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Heuvel et al., *The Search*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>73</sup> Heuvel, *A Family Secret*, 33.

<sup>74</sup> Dauvillier et al., *Hidden*, 69.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>77</sup> Heuvel et al., *The Search*, 57.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 56.

two horses plough a field behind him.<sup>79</sup> The animal imagery contributes to a clear sense of the closure of one period, and the start of his new life after the war.

### Conclusion

Animals perform a wide range of symbolic functions in graphic novels about genocide. Anthropomorphisation is widespread, with animals as diverse as cats, mice, cockroaches, dogs and bed bugs having much to say to the reader. In this article, I have sought to move beyond the strong focus on the anthropomorphised animal in critical analysis of this literature. I have also sought to move away from the heavy concentration of analysis on a small number of texts, primarily *Maus*, and to a lesser extent *Deogratias*. Through a comparative analysis of ten diverse graphic novels about genocide, I have elucidated the important and varied roles of non-anthropomorphised animals in these narratives. At times, animals play a strongly symbolic role, providing direct insight into the human condition. More commonly, they occupy a complex space in which they provide emotional cues to the reader. These cues provide important affective context. They immediately and effectively communicate emotion, removing some of the constraints to doing so in a medium in which written expression is inherently limited. They may cue emotional disruption, emotional calm, or positive or negative emotions. In this respect, animal imagery can offer a surprisingly flexible and functional trope. This may explain the relatively high prevalence of animal imagery within graphic novels about genocide. The graphic novels examined herein, moreover, trend towards a consistent use of animal imagery, irrespective of the genocide they depict. There is limited evidence of varied distribution of particular tropes, such as the use of animal imagery to depict decreased emotional intensity being more prevalent in graphic novels about the Holocaust. This may simply reflect the longer duration of the Holocaust, however. Generally, tropes can be identified across graphic novels depicting both genocides, which is suggestive of the universality of their symbolic function.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 57.

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