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animal holocausts

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— HOLOCAUST INTO HOLOCAUSTS

In today's culture the Jewish Holocaust is not only everywhere—in film, literature, theatre and museums—as many critics from various disciplines have pointed out, but is also utilized outside its historical boundary of the Nazi genocide in a vertiginous variety of different contexts of perceived suffering.¹ Countless examples demonstrate that there is a global cultural practice of turning the 'Holocaust' into 'holocausts'. A variety of contemporary events, especially those that are perceived as 'catastrophes' because of their extremeness, become interpreted in terms of the Holocaust. As Norman Finkelstein in *The Holocaust Industry* rightly points out, 'one is hard-pressed to name a single political cause, whether it be pro-life or pro-choice, animal rights or states' rights, that hasn't conscripted The Holocaust'.²

This paper argues that these conscriptions create an interpretative system of comparisons and metaphors in which Holocaust imagery and material as well as Holocaust theory become transferred. This interpretative system is a hierarchical system in which the Holocaust serves as a dominant signifier but also as the dominant theory of that signification. The problems of this practice arise in the highly diffuse use of terms and the difficulty of establishing clear-cut definitions in the face of extreme or limit cases, such as the Holocaust. The term 'genocide' provides one clear example of this and the Holocaust as a master theory is perhaps the most problematic case. By considering the deployment of the Holocaust by animal rights discussions, this essay paper argues that uses of the Holocaust do not necessarily result in pointless commodifications of the Holocaust but can also provide a powerful tool for creating awareness about suffering and grounds for political action against suffering.



In this paper, Holocaust denotes the particular and historical event of the Nazi genocide, whereas holocaust or holocausts signals the transfer of either Holocaust imagery or theory. The paper also addresses the complications of terminology in the face of catastrophic events and its relation to politics. Using the Holocaust as a referent for issues of animal rights is a test case for a critical reflection on the kind of events that become interpreted as being of catastrophic scope. In what terms can such events be talked about, how can they be (do they need to be) defined? What do terms such as 'Holocaust' or 'genocide' currently signify? What is their status and how does this constituted status influence political decisions—as in military intervention or humanitarian aid acts?

Figure 1. Farm workers disinfect sheep carcasses in a mass grave in Cumbria. Source: Owen Humphreys, PA Photos.

My title is drawn from a newspaper article on the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK during April 2001. In a report on what he refers to as 'the killing fields', Andrew Sullivan asks why it took 'a pointless animal holocaust' for us to realise that 'our proper relationship with this earth and its creatures' should be one of guardianship rather than of simple exploitation.³ The visual material, as well as most of the vocabulary used to talk about the culling of the animals in order to prevent foot-and-mouth disease from spreading, is chillingly reminiscent of the iconic images we all are familiar with from the Holocaust (see figure 1). The parallels are disconcerting if not shocking—killing fields, mass slaughter, mass graves, the logistical as well as technical difficulty of disposing quickly of the sheer mass of dead bodies (before they start rotting and thus pose health risks for us humans), and, most prominently, the burning pyres of corpses.

However clear the parallels seem to be, it is nonetheless important to ask exactly what is the point of drawing these analogies. Why deploy the Holocaust? What are the 'points' that

offer themselves to comparison and what ends do they serve? Is it justified, not just morally but also politically, to thus utilize the Holocaust? These questions mostly come down to the question of the danger, as Alvin Rosenfeld puts it, of what happens if the Holocaust comes to stand for the abstract idea of 'man's inhumanity to man' in general.⁴ What then is the danger if we take even one step further and ask what happens if the Holocaust also comes to stand for the idea of man's inhumanity to animal?

— THE HOLOCAUST AS MASTER THEORY

Given the uncomfortable moral issues and dangers that arise with using the Holocaust, it is easy to condemn the deployment of Holocaust analogies as vulgar, loose, potentially dangerous and lacking in cultural sensitivity. It is on these grounds that animal rights activists and philosophers have been condemned for using the Holocaust in their campaigns and rhetoric. Such condemnation is undoubtedly justified in the case of many invocations of the Holocaust, but not necessarily all of them. Instead of being mere trivializations, some uses of the Holocaust also provide tools that can be used, negatively or positively, for political ends. If the post-Holocaust pledge—never again—is to be applied not only to Jewish people, we will have to accept that the Holocaust is and will be used as a referent in different contexts precisely to prevent 'it' (something similar) from happening again. What has been said and thought in the wake of the Holocaust, including attempts to come to terms with the horror of the event, will also be used when trying to understand similarly catastrophic events. Therefore, instead of judging immediately whether Holocaust analogies are morally and intellectually acceptable or not, we should examine how they are drawn, why they are drawn, and what are their points of comparison. Here I will undertake some of these tasks by using two recent texts that have become influential in animal rights discussions. I will argue that Steven Wise's *Rattling the Cage*⁵ and J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*⁶ demonstrate that 'uses of the Holocaust' can be much more than merely drawing analogies or using it as a metaphor.

My thesis is that 'uses of the Holocaust' can involve not only a transfer of Holocaust imagery but also of Holocaust theory. The Holocaust is a master narrative in the sense that it provides the formal device for structuring narratives of catastrophe, and a master theory in the sense that it provides the critical apparatus for theorizing this representation: the various approaches and different implicit epistemological and aesthetic ideas.⁷ By Holocaust theory here, I refer to a large body of critical theory dealing with philosophy, consciousness, representation and aesthetics in the wake of catastrophe. The Holocaust has been seen as a challenge and problem for understanding and thus has become a space of 'anguished critical inquiry'.⁸ Since Adorno, this critical inquiry has been trying to come to terms with an event of such cruelty and unimaginable horror that, for many, it cannot but give the lie to culture and reason as a

humanizing force. Can human consciousness after the Holocaust still be what it had previously been? What forms of representations are possible and adequate?

These questions still preoccupy all forms of 'Holocaust theory' and also dominate Western philosophy. In that sense, the Holocaust could be seen as having incited a new epistemological break after the *Aufklärung*. Theodor Adorno's dictum that with Auschwitz not only did we experience a shock in philosophy, but philosophy itself experiences a shock,⁹ and Maurice Blanchot's concept of the writing of the disaster¹⁰ are probably the best known examples of Holocaust theory. Hence, not only does Holocaust imagery provide us with material for visual or verbal representations of catastrophe, but Holocaust theory potentially provides us with a tool for understanding—or at least a way to attempt to understand catastrophe. Drawing on the Holocaust in this way, then, is not just a rhetorical but also a critical tool; and the underlying motivation is how to manage the unimaginable.

In further elaborating this notion of the Holocaust as a master theory that is transferred in cultural production I will not just look at how Holocaust analogies are drawn but also at how they work, that is how they are perceived and adopted by different 'consumers' of this cultural production. It will be interesting to follow their traces not just through critical discourses but it will also be necessary to look at how they are utilized politically, in this case by animal rights activists. Both are part of what in theology, or history, is called *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (the history of reception). Our post-Holocaust time continues to produce Holocaust 'narratives'. The media representation of foot-and-mouth disease, for example, is full of iconic Holocaust images and vocabulary. The same is true for the footage of recent genocides such as those in Bosnia and Rwanda. The 'generic massacre story', as Gourevitch puts it, draws heavily on Holocaust imagery and codes to create representations of genocide.¹¹

Terrence Des Pres, a critic active in 'holocaust theory', has paved the way for those interested in bringing together representational, rhetorical and critical questions. He argues that due to 'modern communications', TV, photojournalism, the documentation of survivor testimonies,¹² what was perhaps 'unrepresentable' has actually been relentlessly presented and represented. This epistemological-cum-ontological shift, induced by technical progress that provides new means of representation, necessitates that 'we cannot not know the extent of political torment'¹³ and causes a 'radical change ... in the way the world is known'.¹⁴ Genocide makes us irreversibly aware of worldwide political torment:

The point is ... that now a wretchedness of global extent has come into view; the spectacle of man-created suffering is known, observed with such constancy that a new shape of knowing invades the mind.¹⁵

Des Pres thus claims not that the world of representation has changed but that, as a result our apprehension of these changes, we too are changed. As we 'know' differently we act on,

reflect and represent 'the insistent presence of related phenomena in our own culture',¹⁶ our contemporary catastrophes. One such catastrophe, for many, is the scale of suffering that humans impose on animals. The culling of almost six million cattle because of the foot-and-mouth disease in Great Britain is, for animal rights proponents, yet another incident in a long series of acts of inhumanity towards animals.¹⁷

— ANIMAL HOLOCAUSTS

Steven Wise, in his recent book *Rattling the Cage*, demands 'legal personhood for chimpanzees and bonobos.'¹⁸ The reason for that demand, in his eyes, is very clear: 'Their abuse and murder must be forbidden for what they are: genocide'. (7) This last sentence of his first chapter is the simple but Promethean trick in his argumentation-cum-justification for legal rights for animals. Genocide has to be fought, no one contests this. So if Wise can convince us, and he sets out to do so, that genocide is being committed towards chimpanzees and bonobos, he will have won. He contends that when negative liberties, as guaranteed by legal personhood, are:

absent or ignored for human beings, the horrors of the slaveholding American South, Nazi Germany, Rwanda, and Kosovo can ensue. When absent for chimpanzees and bonobos, the cruelties inflicted upon Jerom, the Yerkes chimpanzee [whose tragic and cruel fate forms the paradigmatic opening of the book], can occur. (56)

Wise here aligns his cause with a trinity of historical events (or rather processes) that have come to stand as authoritative 'myths' in western contemporary political consciousness—slavery, the Holocaust, and genocide. Positioning one's own claim in a tradition of foundational myths is a very effective means of asserting authority for it. Steven Wise attempts to provide a legal grounding for his animal rights thesis. Legal personhood establishes one's claim to legal rights, and is guaranteed in all formulations of universal Human Rights. The guarantee of legal personhood was and still is 'intended to prevent a recurrence of one of the worst excesses of Nazi law' (4); it gives us one means of preventing the Holocaust from happening again. Animals, under the current law, are things, not persons, as were slaves in America, as were Jews, Romas, Sintis, homosexuals and other 'unwanted lives', during the Holocaust. Legal personhood, so Wise's causal argumentation goes here, has to be granted to animals because they are not things but living beings and because if we keep on treating animals as we do (as things) we will also keep treating humans like animals. This is Wise's argument and he enforces it with another authority:

equality destroyed anywhere, even for chimpanzees, threatens the destruction of equality everywhere. That is why, near the onset of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln told Congress that '[i]n giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free.' (252)

Wise uses the Holocaust not to compare one set of horrors with another set of horrors, but rather to provide him with authority and a tool for political action—in this case to change the law, to revolutionise it by granting personhood to animals. The Holocaust therefore does not serve as an analogy or metaphor for the genocide of chimpanzees and bonobos but as another incident of genocide, knowledge of which, he expects, will change us into people who will know how to act. Consider Terrence Des Pres again: with the Holocaust ‘the spectacle of man-created suffering is *known*, observed with such constancy that a new shape of knowing invades the mind’. With Wise’s work, both the spectacle of man-created suffering and a new shape of knowing are extended to animals. The recent international project GRASP (Great Apes Survival Project), launched by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), calls attention to how urgent Wise’s call for rights for the great apes could be: at current rates of population decline gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orang-utans could be extinct by 2010 or 2020.¹⁹

Despite the pressing urgency of protecting animals if we do not want to lose them, the question, however, remains whether Steven Wise’s use of the Holocaust to press his case is justified. The undeniably persuasive power of his argumentation does not automatically grant it legitimacy. Why the Holocaust anyway, why slavery and why genocide? Is this appropriate and is there no other way to think about the outrage felt about the scale of the ‘abuse and murder’²⁰ of chimpanzees and bonobos? It is true that human atrocities towards humans have been justified, and maybe even made psychologically possible, by treating humans as animals. We may well believe that it is urgently necessary to change how humans think about animals and the notion of a human/animal boundary. But does it therefore follow that we can or should treat and think of animals merely in human terms?

This dilemma materializes very clearly in the controversy of legal rights for animals. Legal personhood, as Steven Wise claims it for animals poses several serious problems. For one, it is an utterly human hierarchy again that is imposed on the ‘natural world’. We are the agents who decide which forms of life are valuable enough for protection. These and similar problems emerge in a great deal of liberal advocacy for animal rights which is often underpinned by simplistic, universalistic and self-righteous notions about ‘our world’ and how to behave properly in it. Thus it is not surprising that both animal rights and conservation efforts are triggered mainly by charismatic or ‘sexy’ animals, and those regarded as closest to being human. In this respect, legal personhood for chimpanzees and bonobos becomes plausible while the Great Ape Project is highly successful in drawing public attention as well as public and private money in support of ‘our relatives’.²¹ Another set of problems is that Wise’s legal claims are based on a thoroughly Western concept of legal rights which easily neglects cross-cultural differences. Furthermore, granting legal rights also would have considerable ramifications for regional and global environmental politics. The question of habitat protection or the threat to endangered animal species by human diseases are just two examples of the

many troubling questions that arise once we start thinking about the practicalities of human rights becoming animal rights. In this context it is therefore important to remember the dangers of universalising the Holocaust, as Cole points out, arguing that

the 'Holocaust' risks becoming a popular past used to serve all sorts of present needs. In particular, the needs of contemporary liberalism tends to latch onto a powerful tale in the past and universalise it so as to produce a set of universal lessons.²²

To return to the question of using the Holocaust as a tool in arguing in support of legal personhood for chimpanzees and bonobos, it is necessary to look at what lies at the core of this danger of universalising the Holocaust. Wise surely does use it as a 'popular past' that serves his present need. As I noted earlier, Wise calls the abuse and murder of those apes a genocide. He also explicitly states that he does not intend this as a metaphor. (265) But is it really a genocide? Here it becomes clear what is at stake in using the Holocaust as a master theory, as a rhetorical as well as critical tool, as I have been suggesting earlier. Holocaust theory is being used as a tool to understand events that are of such scale that they come to be perceived as catastrophes. This is motivated by an attempt to imagine the unimaginable—but by whom and to what ends? When do such uses become comparisons or analogies, then metaphors, and finally often allegories? Do these uses run the risk of 'the Holocaust' becoming so flexible that it becomes an empty vessel that can easily be filled with whatever the present demands?

The case of Rwanda, where the killings were called anything but a genocide by the watching world and UN politicians for as long as possible, or the explosion of controversy over the use of the word 'genocide' in the reports about the Stolen Generation in Australia, are just two examples that demonstrate the dilemma of finding an appropriate vocabulary. In naming atrocities, the dangers of denial are never far away. These two examples also give some sense of how immensely difficult it is to talk about what kinds of killings should properly be called genocide in the 'human' world—let alone in the 'animal' world. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures designed to prevent births within the group; or (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.²³

Not least because of the experiences with the Holocaust, this definition shifts the focus from the number of dead to the destruction of a group and its members generally. It also shifts the focus from systematic and technical destruction to intended destruction generally. It is a

definition strongly emphasising the existence of a shared culture and the disruption of the possibility of sharing a culture.

The term 'genocide' was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew, in order to find a standard other than the Holocaust that would allow for political intervention. The word 'genocide' thus emerged from the Holocaust. Lemkin did not want to have the Holocaust as a standard for action. He did not countenance the need for a hideous numbers game—so many victims to be accumulated—before states would intervene. The definition of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide is thus already, at its inception, an adaptation of the definition brought about by having to deal with new incidents of genocide occurring after the Jewish genocide, genocides of a different scale, in different geographies, and in different social, cultural, and political contexts. It is an adaptation of the definition to the different issues and political needs arising out of new events. It should therefore make us aware of the fact that the term 'genocide' does have a genealogy; it is fraught not just with different meanings but also with different histories. Indeed the first sentence of Article 2 of the UN Convention explicitly states that genocide will refer to different 'events', and that such a legally binding document will have to be able to deal with the fact that globally there are various understandings of genocide.

By applying the term to animals, Wise adds to this process of adapting and interpreting the term; thus implicitly calling for a redefinition of 'human'. He justifies his use of 'genocide' by arguing that chimpanzees and bonobos share a culture. 'Genocide', he says, stems from the Latin roots 'genus' and 'caedere'. *Caedere* means to kill, and *genus* means a class or kind that share common attributes. And what we, as the destroyers, share with the destroyed (chimpanzees and bonobos) for Wise, is the membership in the genus *Homo* and possession of a culture (265–6). Researchers generally now agree that chimpanzees do have a culture.²⁴ Wise draws on the Latin root *genus*, which allows him to emphasize the meaning of class or kind (and Latin, after all, is still the language that provides biology with its scientific terms). The Greek *γένος* also includes the meaning of class or kind and family, or more generally our biological origin, but historically is dominantly interpreted in the sense of 'a people'.

In the UN definition, the core problem of deciding what comes to 'count' as genocide, however, lies in the word 'intent'. In Steven Wise's use it lies, arguably, in the word culture and thus in the definition, or rather re-definition, of the human–animal species boundary. But to return to the contentious issue of 'intent' again: this is the crucial point from which the political complications arise and where we are also thrown back onto the source of the definition, the Holocaust. 'Intent' is crucial for both those who oppose using of the term 'genocide' in relation to the Stolen Generation in Australia and those opposed to the use of the term for animal matters. Wise's chimpanzees and bonobos, after all, are killed or die for many complex reasons (habitat loss, war, food, medical experiments, etc.), but do we kill them

because we intentionally want to erase them as 'a race'? Inga Clendinnen recently wrote that the use of the word 'genocide' in the *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen Generation 'was a political disaster'. She argued that motives and intentions 'must be distinguished from outcomes, and hunted down not only in words but in the details of actions in their varying contexts.'²⁵ She is surely right here, and the particularities are most easily forgotten, but to have to take into account such considerations also shows the absurdity of the situation. We surely need to look into the political effects of our usage of terms and definitions, look into what is to be gained and lost. But we should also not forget how vexed issues of terminology become in the face of limit cases, as Dominick LaCapra calls them, or catastrophes, as they are called in a more popular usage.²⁹ How many murders make a massacre, how many murders make a genocide, how many murders make a holocaust? In deciding what is 'big' enough to call for intervention and critical attention, are we to count only murders, that is intent, or should we rather count deaths, that is outcomes?

These issues of scale and connections between intentions and outcomes as well as the difficulties of how to talk about the excess of suffering, of how to express the unimaginable—not just in regards to atrocities towards humans but also in regards to animals—are what J.M. Coetzee struggles with in *The Lives of Animals*. He, too, is concerned with the suffering of animals for which humans are responsible. Coetzee's book is couched in the form of a fiction that manages, in an astonishingly short text, to explore all the basic philosophical questions at the heart of the case for animal rights; from the issue of animal consciousness to our ethical relations to animals.²⁶ It also discusses extensively the arguments that have been made about the use or abuse of the Holocaust, the different positions being 'personified' by the different characters.

As with Wise, Coetzee also uses the Holocaust as a point of comparison not just at the level of content but also as a structural device for his argument. The analogy is carefully constructed. Holocaust material is introduced early when Elizabeth Costello, a fictional Australian novelist, gives the first of her two lectures that make up *The Lives of Animals*.²⁷ She invokes Kafka's story of Red Peter, 'the ape who performs before human beings as an allegory of Kafka the Jew performing for Gentiles.'²⁸ After this introduction, Elizabeth is direct in her argument: the horrors of animals' lives and their deaths are equivalent to the horrors of the Third Reich. (17–21) This is uncompromising material and certainly more difficult to swallow than Wise putting animal abuse and murder into a series of genocides. In Coetzee's fictional text, the animal holocaust outdoes the horrors of the Third Reich:

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (22)

Let us remember that it is Elizabeth who is speaking here. Does Coetzee use her to speak his own opinions or can we get away with dismissing the comparison she makes as an over-the-top emotional reaction of an old woman?

Again, before dismissing the analogy, let us see what the actual points of comparison are. They are the extent of suffering (17, 22), the willed refusal to acknowledge suffering in our midst (18, 19), and the subsequent silence and inaction (17–18, 47). Consequently, the Holocaust here is the event that should have taught us how to know and how to prevent suffering. Coetzee, even more so than Wise, uses Holocaust theory to reflect upon our state as knowers of man-created suffering.

The Lives of Animals is highly aware of the problems and dangers of Holocaust theory. LaCapra said that 'Auschwitz as reality and as metonym is the extreme limiting case that threatens classifications, categories, and comparisons.'²⁹ Coetzee's text can be seen as grappling with precisely this dilemma. Why do we keep making these comparisons in spite of their dangers? LaCapra's remarks that follow the sentence above may foreshadow a possible answer; he writes that this threat 'may reduce one to silence'. For him silence is not necessarily 'a sign of utter defeat' but rather 'itself a potentially ritual attitude.'³⁰ However, in Coetzee's text we see a different stand on this issue. For Coetzee, silence (whether ritual or not) cannot be the appropriate attitude in the face of contemporary catastrophes. Being silent in the face of the 'voiceless' suffering of animals would be silencing them even further and also silencing ourselves—into non-action.

Coetzee and his character Elizabeth are aware of the dangers posed by drawing on a 'limit case' like the Holocaust. Elizabeth apologises for scoring cheap points (23) after a passage that crystallizes this dilemma most clearly:

And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life (once its victims are dead, after all, it does not burn them to ash or bury them but on the contrary cuts them up and refrigerates and packs them so that they can be consumed in the comfort of our homes) is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been—pardon the tastelessness of the following—to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with. (22–23)

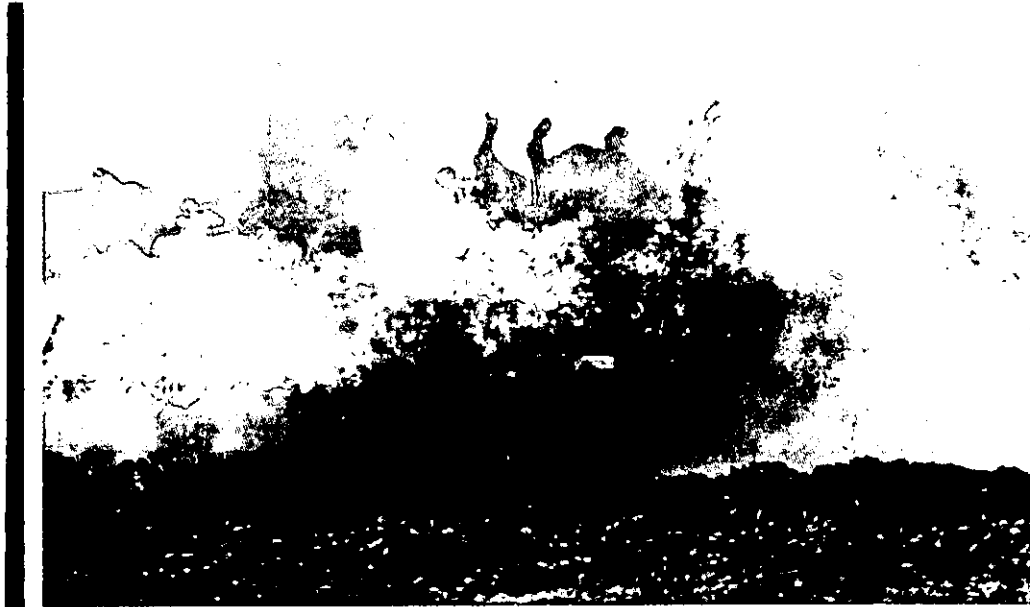
So is the Holocaust analogy in *The Lives of Animals* as carefully deconstructed as it is constructed? Three issues have to be pointed out here. Firstly, the word 'Holocaust' is only used twice throughout the whole book. The first time is when Elizabeth finishes her highly emotional lecture on the note of 'Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched'. (49) The second instance is when Nora, Elizabeth's daughter-in-law and

a philosopher, remarks '[s]he should have thought twice before bringing up the Holocaust' (81). The change of spelling from 'holocaust' for the animal holocaust to 'Holocaust' for the particular Nazi genocide, is surely not accidental and shows that Coetzee knows very well what he is doing and is not simply equating different events and processes. Secondly, *The Lives of Animals* is written against a willed ignorance and against turning the extermination of the Jews into a purely metaphysical (or sacred) event that would as such not be of relevance to the way we lead our lives in the here and now. And thirdly, the tension between either taking the risk of making comparisons or submitting to silence (which I have been highlighting with the help of LaCapra's remarks) acquires a new significance with the fact that Coetzee's fiction has ironically just recently been overtaken by reality. Since the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Great Britain, the notion of a meat industry devoted to life has been problematised, and death, always a factor of this industry, is now undeniably there to be seen in all its indignity. In a desperate effort to curb the disease, the meat industry could not pack the meat for consumption but did in fact burn to ash or bury the slaughtered animals (see figure 2).

— SCORING THE POINTS

Again the question: can this transfer of Holocaust imagery and theory be of critical value or is it a practice that transforms the Holocaust into an emptied signifier? Does drawing the Holocaust analogy get lost in cheap point-scoring, as Coetzee's character Elizabeth fears, and thus become pointless? As always, it is how something is done that is of interest. It is not the fact of using a Holocaust analogy that makes it pointless. It is rather the attempt to express excess of suffering itself that somehow fails or falters. It is also the difficulty, if not futility, of talking about one catastrophe in the face of so many other catastrophes. This problem culminates for many in the question of how to talk about atrocities in relation to animals in a world that is also full of atrocities against humans. How can we express the unimaginable, the unspeakable without ending up in empty metaphors? 'What kind of times are they, when/ A talk about trees is almost a crime/ Because it implies silence about so many horrors?' Bertolt Brecht asked.³¹ *The Lives of Animals* struggles with precisely these questions, and the character Elizabeth Costello embodies the futility and helplessness of metaphors here. The inexpressibility of pain, for instance, is at the heart of the struggle and dilemma of many Holocaust survivors trying to communicate unspeakable horror:

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it 'like a red-hot iron in my shoulders,' and was another 'like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head'? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The



pain is what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate.³²

Figure 2. Cattle carcasses are burnt outside a Staffordshire farm, as foot-and-mouth disease spreads. Source: Haydn West, PA Photos.

This is Jean Améry's description of his experience of torture during the Holocaust. This physical pain over time became itself the metaphor for the metaphysical ideas of endured suffering and unspeakable horror—and the Holocaust. The 'hopeless carousel of comparisons' is embedded in all of these ideas and this forms the starting point of a long tradition of Holocaust metaphors being seen as powerless.

Hence, this 'hopeless carousel of comparisons' for many is exacerbated by a transfer into different contexts, times, and even species. In *The Lives of Animals*, Abraham Stern, a poet, accuses Elizabeth of having misunderstood 'the nature of likeness'. (82) But Stern, the character, cannot show us that the likeness in the text lies not only in the scale of human atrocity but also in the futility of our attempts to communicate it. As, in Jean Améry's words, 'qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable,' excesses of suffering caused by a continuing history of human atrocity cannot be compared nor easily be described. In this context, comparisons as well as metaphors fall apart; but to keep on constructing them at the same time is one way of working against silencing.

The Lives of Animals thus both constructs and deconstructs its Holocaust analogy. An appropriation of the Holocaust analogy, Stern goes on to say, 'insults the memory of the dead' and also 'trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.' (83) It is true that simple commodification of the Holocaust is commonplace across the cultural industries. Nonetheless,

the potential of Holocaust analogies becomes evident if we see the Holocaust as an epistemological shift. Andrew Sullivan asked why it took us 'a pointless animal holocaust' to realise that 'our proper relationship with this earth and its creatures' should rather be one of guardianship than of simple exploitation.³³ To draw on the Holocaust in the sense of using it as a master theory, as I suggested earlier, offers the animal rights supporters a tool for what they regard as a necessary change; a change in our consciousness and understanding of animals; a change in our attitude and behaviour towards our fellow-creatures; a change in the relationship between society and nature. Holocaust analogies, consequently, might not be as pointless as they appear. They aim to force us to see things we, in order to not upset our 'moral being', would rather not see.³⁴ Such a potential for epistemological change derives from the power of Holocaust metaphors, evolving precisely out of the acknowledgment of their powerlessness.

At the end of the book, where Elizabeth is arguing that animal products are 'fragments of corpses' that have been bought for money, (121) Coetzee clearly pushes the Holocaust comparison to the limits of our imagination. These animal products, like leather, provide the evidence for Elizabeth of a 'crime of stupefying proportions'. (121) It is as if:

I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, 'Yes, it's nice, isn't it? Polish-Jewish skin it's made of, we find that's best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.' And then I go to the bathroom and the soap-wrapper says, 'Treblinka—100% human stearate.' (121)

While the exaggeration is deliberate, it provides Coetzee with a strategy to force us to look and see and think about what we do refuse to see, because things might become unbearable.³⁵ Such a politics of deliberately not-looking can lead to not having to acknowledge what is happening around us and includes what Helen Tiffin has called 'Holocaust thinking';³⁶ they are clearly what Coetzee addresses and attacks and uses as a point of comparison. Similarly, Steven Wise strives to make us see that the patterns in denying the 'animal holocaust' are all too similar to the patterns of denying knowledge of what was happening during the Nazi genocide, or for that matter the denial of the genocide in Rwanda.³⁷ He also urges us to understand that genocide, both in the human and animal context, needs to be battled by legal means. This is his *tertium comparationis*; he does not compare the actual respective horrors of the different holocausts or place them at the same level of tragedy and evil—a fact that might make it easier for us to accept the argumentation in *Rattling the Cage* rather than that of *The Lives of Animals*.

In the struggle over speaking the unspeakable—in order to create an awareness of it—we seem to inevitably end up in hierarchies and an interpretive system of comparisons, analogies, metaphors and allegories; another mode of transfer, which easily becomes a mode of deferral and disengagement. A recent newspaper article evokes the genocide in Rwanda as a 'three-

month carnage, often described as the twentieth-century's third-worst genocide after the Jewish Holocaust in Nazi Germany and the Ottoman Turk massacre of ethnic Armenians in 1915.³⁸ This description conveniently forgets that Nazi Germany did not only bring about a Jewish Holocaust but also included other groups; it loosely mixes 'genocide', 'Holocaust' and 'massacre'. Why do we need such hierarchies of genocide? What is to be gained or lost by using these terms, by drawing Holocaust analogies?

In this space, there might very well be a hopeless carousel of comparisons but the alternative of silence turns all too easily into a silent acceptance of and complicity with man-created suffering. Therefore, we might have to take the risks of desacrilising the Holocaust by using it. Using it as a critical tool³⁹ is not necessarily yet another form of commodification or yet another assassination of memory.⁴⁰ It does not deny the Jewish Holocaust's uniqueness, but neither does it deny the uniqueness of other cases of genocide.⁴¹ The transfer of Holocaust theory is not inevitably a mere conscription of the Holocaust. The transfer of Holocaust theory—not a transfer of the qualities of the trauma and suffering caused by the specific catastrophic events—can provide a powerful tool for creating awareness about suffering and thus possibly provides grounds for political action against suffering. It can eschew the competitive comparison game all too often played in Holocaust and genocide studies.⁴² Neither Wise nor Coetzee engage in such comparisons. When the Holocaust is used to point out and work against newly created suffering—to make us see and hopefully act—it is not pointless.

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1. See for example Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold*, Routledge, New York, 1999; Paul R. Bartrop, *Australia and the Holocaust 1933–45*, Australia Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1994; or Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry. Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, Verso, London and New York, 2000.
 2. Finkelstein, p. 144. Finkelstein's recent book is problematical in its evocation of exactly those racial stereotypes that were used in Nazi rhetoric. His contribution to demystifying and desacrilizing the Holocaust, however, is useful in that it shows very clearly that uses of the Holocaust are more than using metaphors. They rather constitute an extremely powerful political instrument and strategy, as well as a powerful ideological weapon.
 3. Andrew Sullivan, 'TRB from Washington: Killing Fields (Foot-and-Mouth Disease, England)', *New Republic*, 9 April 2001, p. 8.
 4. Quoted in Samantha Power, 'To Suffer by Comparison?', *Daedalus*, vol. 128, no. 2, 1999, <<http://www.daedalus.amacad.org/issues/sp99rel.html>>.
 5. Steven M. Wise, *Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals*, Foreword by Jane Goodall, Perseus Books, Cambridge, Mass., 2000.
 6. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Profile Books, London, 2000.
 7. The term 'catastrophe' is generally used very loosely. Earthquakes, AIDS, FMD, genocides, and much more have been called catastrophe. Thus catastrophe here is meant to denote events of such

an excess of atrocity or suffering that they are perceived as catastrophes. Most important here is that catastrophe is 'working' in the intersection of natural and social spaces. David Lloyd, for example, uses the term in the sense of when something is 'not simply a natural disaster but the effect of intersecting vectors of social change'. Catastrophe happens at the point where the volatility of those forces becomes suddenly deflected and disequibrated by a single and rather simple factor. Because of the volatility of those factors, for him, catastrophes are of such dimensions that they are 'virtually impossible to represent'. See David Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/ Postcolonial Recovery?', *Interventions*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2000, pp. 212–228.

8. Méira Cook, 'At the Membrane of Language and Silence. Metaphor and Memory in Fugitive Pieces', *Canadian Literature*, no. 164, 2000, pp. 12–33.
9. See particularly Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Continuum, New York, 1973 and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, Allen Lane, The Fold, 1973. For a detailed analysis of this issue see the first chapter in Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 2000. Rothberg further concludes that philosophy not only experiences a shock but is also traumatized by the catastrophe of modernity.
10. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Anne Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1995.
11. Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*, Picador, London, 2000.
12. Terrence Des Pres, *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the Twentieth Century*, Penguin Books, New York, 1988, p. xv.
13. Des Pres, p. xv.
14. Des Pres, p. xvi.
15. Des Pres, p. xiv.
16. Rothberg, pp. 2–3.
17. According to Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK) only 2,030 foot-and-mouth disease cases have been confirmed. <www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/fmd/default.htm>, accessed 5 March 2002.
18. Wise, p. 4. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
19. ENS, 'Business, Industry Asked to Help Save Vanishing Great Apes', 22 May 2001, Environmental News Service <www.ens-news.com>, 27 May 2001.
20. Wise's book gives numerous examples of this abuse and murder. His outrage he summarises in one dramatic paragraph:
Chimpanzees and bonobos ... are kidnapped for use as biomedical research subjects or as pets or in entertainment. They are massacred for their meat to feed 'the growing lad for 'bush meat' on the tables of the elite in Cameroon, Gabon, the Congo, the Central African Republic, and other countries,' so that their hands, feet, and skulls can be displayed as trophies, and for their babies. Thousands are jailed around the world in biomedical research institutions ... or are imprisoned in decrepit roadside zoos or chained alone and lonely in private dwellings. When the last century turned, there were 5 million wild chimpanzees in Africa. We don't know the number of bonobos because they weren't then considered a species separate from chimpanzees. But it was probably about half a million. By 1998, only 200,000 chimpanzees remained, perhaps as few as 120,000 and maybe 20,000 bonobos ... Takayoshi Kano, believes that less than 10,000 bonobos may have survived. Thousands of chimpanzees and bonobos are slaughtered every year. They are nearing annihilation. (6)
21. Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (eds), *The Great Ape Project. Equality Beyond Humanity*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1993.
22. Cole, p. 42.
23. Quoted in Richard B. Lillich, *International Human Rights Instruments, 130.1*, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, December 9, 1948, 78 U.N.T.S.: 277 (entered into force Jan 12, 1951), 2nd ed. (1990). Also quoted in Wise, p. 265.
24. See for example Whiten, Andrew et al., 'Cultures in Chimpanzees', *Nature*, no. 399, 1999, pp. 682–5; Christopher Boesch and Michael Tomasello, 'Chimpanzee and Human Cultures', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 5, 1998, pp. 591–614; Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among the Apes*, rev. ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998; Richard W. Wrangham et al. (eds), *Chimpanzee Cultures*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994; and W.C. McGrew, *Chimpanzee Material Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.
25. Inga Clendinnen, 'First Contact', *Australian Review of Books*, May 2001, p. 26
26. Interestingly, in the Biological Sciences Library of the University of Queensland. *The Lives of Animals* can be found right next to the texts that have become foundational and influential for the animal rights movement, such as Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Avon Books, New York, 1977, Cavalieri and Singer, or Wise.
27. Coetzee. Further references are given after

quotations in the text.

28. On the issue of the beast fable as the particular form on which especially Elizabeth's two lectures draw see Graham Huggan, "'Greening' Postcolonialism: Eco-critical Perspectives", unpublished paper (University of Munich, 2001). It is also striking how Coetzee uses the form of allegory for a text that so explicitly draws on the Holocaust, which to a large extent has become a sacred, if not spiritual, discourse. Elie Wiesel is probably one of the fiercest defenders of the Holocaust's sacredness and uniqueness. One could even argue that the Holocaust has become a religion, or rather *Ersatz religion*, for many. See for example A. Ophir, 'On Sanctifying the Holocaust: An Anti-Theological Treatise', *Tikkun*, vol. 2, no. 1 1987. Allegory, after all, is to speak figuratively and has become a dominant form of symbolizing a moral or spiritual meaning. In *The Lives of Animals*, the 'spiritual' meaning of the Holocaust is problematized along with the problematization of the form of the allegory itself.
29. Dominick LaCapra, 'Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate', in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, p. 126.
30. LaCapra, p. 126.
31. Quoted in Des Pres, p. 102.
32. Jean Améry, 'Torture', in John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, Paragon House, New York, 1989, p. 182.
33. Note that in the context of foot-and-mouth disease Sullivan is using the word 'Holocaust' in its correct sense as 'a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering' and 'complete consumption by fire, or that which is so consumed; complete destruction, esp. of a large number of persons; a great slaughter or massacre' (*OED*). It is, however, hard to escape an implicit comparison with the Nazi genocide since 'Holocaust' has become firmly ingrained into our consciousness as signifying—not only on a literal but also on a metaphysical level—the wholesale destruction of the Jewish people. But it is also true, that animals are destroyed, slaughtered and massacred in large numbers.
- Thus, it is important to note that the word 'holocaust' was in existence and use before the Jewish genocide, and does not have this event as its 'primary' referent. When, where and by whom which terms, like *Endlösung* (rather than *Vernichtung*, destruction), Holocaust or Shoah, creates different realities and enables different actions.
34. Coetzee, p. 49.
35. The fact of not being able to bear what one witnesses is a very important factor in such a politics of seeing. For example, Elizabeth Curren, the narrator figure in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, reports after she consciously 'sees' for the first time the cruelties in South Africa, in this case the murder of five boys, that 'now my eyes are open and I can never close them again'. J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1990, p. 95. Both Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* and Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* cannot live on with what they are witnessing. To not be able to close one's eyes after they have been opened clearly is a change of our status as knowers, as Des Pres noted it. In Coetzee's work the 'open eyes' in the sense of knowing atrocities are inextricably wound up with notions of death. Near death lingers around both female narrators. *The Age of Iron* provides an important subtext to *The Lives of Animals* on quite a few issues, such as the ones noted above, or for example the complicated issues of charity towards humans and animals.
36. Personal conversation.
37. On the politics of denial see Stanley Cohen's recent book *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Blackwell, Malden, Mass., 2001.
38. 'Nuns Guilty of Rwanda Genocide Killings,' *Weekend Australian*, 9–10 June 2001, p. 15.
39. The political relevance of seeing the Holocaust and Holocaust theory as an epistemological shift becomes also clear in what Israel W. Charny says in the Foreword to *Is the Holocaust Unique?*: '[M]aking it clear to all people that genocide has been, is, and will continue to be the fate of many different peoples—and one must be careful that even legitimate considerations of the uniqueness of a given genocide (such as the archetypal event of the Holocaust) not blind us to the enormity of the problem of mass murders of many different peoples, especially toward our collective future on this planet'. Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.), *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, Westview Press, Colorado, 1998, p. ix.
- It also shows the context in which Wise tries to place animal rights discussions in. He includes the mass murder of animals into the 'enormity of mass murders' that needs to make us think and act toward our 'collective future on the planet'. For Wise, genocide will not only continue to be the fate of many different peoples but also of many different animals! A fact that has ethical and practical consequences.
- For a good example of the pointlessness of animal suffering see Richard Ryder's upsetting report of statistics and examples of experiments on animals, which also shows how much of the experimentation is a thoughtless, unnecessary, and cruel 'game' for the sake of science and for the sake of imagined benefits for our human well-being.

- Richard Ryder, 'Experiments on Animals', in Tom Regan and Peter Singer (eds), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1976.
40. The French classicist Pierre Vidal-Naquet speaks of Holocaust deniers as 'assassins of memory', *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992.
41. For an interesting and challenging book on comparative perspectives on thinking about the Holocaust and considerations about its uniqueness see Rosenbaum.
42. One example of such cheap point-scoring is the maladroit 'number game' of counting off victims against each other that is 'played' in talking about the different genocides. For example, Louis Farrakhan, in his determination to address ignorance about slavery, obviously attempts to provoke Jews with such comments as: 'Don't push your six million down our throats, when we lost 100 million,' in *Power*.