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Formal Characteristics of Animal Liberation in Comics

Martin de la Iglesia (Heidelberg)

Introduction

In a narrower sense, ›animal liberation‹ can refer to the eponymous book by Peter Singer in which he argues the case for animal rights from the perspective of moral philosophy (Villanueva, 5–19); or to the actions of the international activist group Animal Liberation Front or similar organisations who, motivated by animal welfare beliefs, free non-human animals (simply referred to as ›animals‹ in the following) from captivity or partake in other ›efforts to end [...] cruelty and suffering‹, such as hunt sabotages (Scarce, 116–121). In this article, however, the term ›animal liberation‹ is employed in a wider sense to encompass any action which results in a previously captive animal gaining its freedom, regardless of the motivations of the liberator(s) and the specific circumstances of the captivity. While this may seem a rather arbitrary and wide category, in the vast majority of instances, the liberators are motivated by *benevolent* feelings towards the animals (regardless of whether the animals actually benefit from their liberation), while the captors are *exploitative* of animals and (ab)use them for selfish reasons. Exceptions to this rule aside – one can easily imagine benevolent captors, e.g. in conservationist breeding projects, or malevolent liberators, e.g. mischievous pranksters who unleash animals on unsuspecting human victims –, animal liberation is a potentially rewarding topic of study: in it, contradictory attitudes of humans towards animals – ›the unresolvable dialectic between humane and cruel attitudes to animals that governs their history in modern culture‹ (Burt, 85) – become manifest. In turn, through learning about human-animal relations we might learn about humanity and our place in the environment (although Critical Animal Studies scholars might dismiss such notions as anthropocentric; Jeong, 94). One might even go as far as to say that animal imagery always has a tendency ›to symbolize human identity and human values‹ (Baker, 33–34). As Brian K. Vaughan, one of the comic creators who I deal with in this article, has put it: ›Well, I absolutely love

animals, but as a storyteller, I'm much more interested in what they have to say about us than what we have to say about them« (Vaughan/Henrichon 2011, 54).

Understood in this wider sense, animal liberation is a topic frequently encountered in all kinds of media, including comics. Perhaps comics even lend themselves particularly well to the depiction of animal liberation, due to two typical characteristics specific to the comics medium: one is the representation of sound through lettering (i.e. in speech balloons and sound effects) and its relation to the images. While not a necessary component of comics, such kinds of written text are frequently employed and have developed into a wide variety of possibilities to convey auditory information. They leave more to the reader's imagination than e.g. the soundtrack of a film, yet can be more expressive than the (usually) strictly sequential and typographically homogeneous rendering of sound in a purely textual novel, for instance. These possibilities may be used to represent animal communication and perception, or at least to convey a sense of them being vastly different from those of humans, as we will see below.

The other relevant property of comics in this context is the page layout, or more specifically the spatial arrangement of panels and variations in the size and shape of juxtaposed panels, which allows for emphasis (see also Simpson) and salient changes in perspective. When a comic depicts animals or human-animal interaction, it might thus attempt to represent visual perception of animals as fundamentally unlike that of humans and invite readers to share the animals' point of view, a device which Glenn Willmott has termed »animalized focalization« (Willmott, 68, 69). We shall find out whether such techniques are actually employed in the examples below.

For researchers at the intersection of Comics Studies and Critical Animal Studies or Environmental Studies, representations of animal liberation in comics appear to be a highly relevant object of study. There are not many comics that focus on animal liberation in the narrower sense of animal rights activism, most notably perhaps those written by Matt Miner, *Liberator* (2013), *Critical Hit* (2014), and *Lab Raider* (2019). On the other hand, the amount of comics that feature depictions of animal liberation in a wider sense is vast. There is no bibliography of such comics, nor would it be feasible to compile one. This poses a certain challenge to the research of this kind of comics, as it is neither possible to analyse them all, nor to select at random a sample of a few such comics for analysis out of their total number. It is not viable either to pick a random sample of relevant comics from the totality of all comics ever published, as those comics depicting acts of animal liberation yet again only constitute a small fraction; one would have to trawl through possibly hundreds of randomly selected comics in order to end up with a satisfyingly large sample of comics containing animal liberation scenes.

Therefore, the sampling process for this study was driven by practical considerations. One might even call it arbitrary: the sample size of four comics appeared to be the largest that still allowed for in-depth analysis within the limited space of a journal article, while

selection of the specific titles was influenced by their already having been the subject of comics research with a focus on animals or vice versa. At least this is true for *Animal Man* (Lupinacci, dos Santos Rodrigues / da Cruz e Zica), *We3* (Link, Dushane) and *Pride of Baghdad* (Keen, Baraw/Smyth). Ann Nocenti's *Daredevil*, in contrast, has not received this kind of scholarly attention (Hagan examines the same *Daredevil* issues but focuses on the human characters), but as a superhero comic that almost offhandedly features an all but archetypical act of animal liberation in which livestock is freed from a factory farm by an animal rights activist, it seemed too good a fit not to include it alongside the almost contemporaneous *Animal Man*.

This sampling method almost inevitably creates biases. All four comics were written in English and published in the US (all but one even by the same publisher, DC/Vertigo) within the course of less than 20 years; three of them originally came out as a series of comic books while *Pride of Baghdad* was published in book form, which means that this sample omits e.g. newspaper comic strips, minicomics and zines, and webcomics entirely. Then again, the sample might be particularly apt for our purposes as each of the four comics features a different kind of captive animal: a vivisection specimen in *Animal Man*, livestock in *Daredevil*, military animals in *We3* (though they could be also regarded as experimental specimens) and zoo animals in *Pride of Baghdad*. The liberators also act out of different motivations: a personal bond to a specific animal in *Animal Man*, animal rights activism (at least ostensibly) in *Daredevil*, pity and remorse in *We3*, and by sheer accident in *Pride of Baghdad*. While the analysis of these four comics might not cover all possibilities of how animal liberation is represented in comics, it hopefully indicates which compositorial formulae are *typically* employed by comics.

Before we turn to these comics, let us first think about how the representation of an act of animal liberation might be structured, so that we know what we are looking for in each comic. In his seminal book on ecological activism, *Eco-Warriors*, Rik Scarce tells the story of, among others, »one of the first Animal Liberators in the U.S.« named Anna and how she and her accomplice Jane (both names changed) liberated some laboratory animals (Scarce, 213–216): they drove to a university laboratory where animals were experimented on. Entering the building after hours through a door that an accomplice had unlocked, they found small cages with three cats, one of which had a brain electrode implanted, and took them to a veterinarian for examination. The veterinarian had to put the cat with the electrode down, but the other two survived and were arranged for adoption.

I consider this an archetypical animal liberation story. We can structure such an account according to its actors and locales, and I propose that typically, the structure of any animal liberation narrative, including comics, may be constituted of the following five key moments:

1. The central moment must surely be – generally speaking – the ›opening of the cage‹. This can take many different forms: in Scarce's story it is simply Anna opening the unlocked door to the room where the cats were kept, but it can also be e.g. cutting a fence, breaking a chain, or tearing down a wall. What matters is that it is an action performed by the liberator(s) that allows the captive animal(s) to escape.
2. The moment that can be depicted following the opening of the cage is the escape. Again, this action can take different forms, e.g. the animal steps out of its cage itself, or is carried out by the liberator, as in Scarce's account when Jane »removed the three cats and placed them in the pillowcases« (Scarce, 215) to take them out of the laboratory building. This is an important step as it shows that not only the prerequisites for the escape have been created (the opening of the cage) but that the liberation has been followed through.
3. These two moments can be preceded by one or more others some time earlier (e.g. immediately preceding the liberation, or years earlier) that metonymically represent the status quo of the animals before their liberation, i.e. the conditions in which they live in captivity. Scarce and Anna leave this mostly to the reader's imagination, only mentioning the »cruelty« (Scarce, 214) of the experiments and later the electrode in the cat's head and the small cages. However, it seems important in animal liberation narratives to give some idea of the animals suffering under these conditions, as this provides the liberators their motivation.
4. Optionally, the escape can be followed by one or more other metonymic moments that show the new status quo of the animal after its liberation, e.g. in the wild, as a stray, or as the liberator's or someone else's pet. The animal can be shown, contrasting its new freedom with its former captivity, to be either happy and feel at home, or to have difficulties to adapt. In Scarce's story, only two of the cats get to live »together in a loving home« (Scarce, 216), but it is implied that the death of the third one is a kinder fate than continued captivity.
5. Another option to lead up to the opening of the cage is to focus on the human liberators and their preparations, as Scarce does with Anna: he starts his account with Anna's biography and takes care to explain what drives her to do what she does, e.g. »her emotions about the ›inhumanity‹ inflicted on the animals« (Scarce, 214). He also gives some details of what happened before the actual lab raid, e.g. Anna and Jane planning the raid »over a vegetarian dinner« (Scarce, 214). Such scenes may provide another opportunity to comic creators to convey these characters' motivations and beliefs.

However, such an entire five-part structure is only an ideal type. Neither logically nor empirically is any of these five moments a necessary constituent of the depiction of an act of animal liberation. In comics, we find that creators mix and match these moments variably, and even the opening of the cage need not be shown, as we will see in one of the examples below. In some comics, the depiction of the liberation is reduced even further. For instance, an animal appears and the narrative implies that it has been liberated ›off-panel‹, or the liberation is only indicated by a narrator’s voice in a caption text. Such elliptical examples, however, might not be the most fruitful ones to analyse, so the comics that I am going to discuss in the following deal with animal liberation slightly more extensively by depicting most of the five moments listed above.

Animal Man

In the *Animal Man* run by writer Grant Morrison, penciller Chas Truog, and inker Doug Hazlewood (replaced by Mark Farmer in later issues), which spanned 26 issues (DC Comics, 1988–1990), there might be more famous stories, such as *The Coyote Gospel* (#5), and at least one which deals with animal liberation more thoroughly (*Consequences* in *Animal Man* #17; see Lupinacci). But the first act of animal liberation to be shown in this series occurs already within the first four issues, more precisely in *The Nature of the Beast* (#3).¹ The relevant part of this story has little to do with the titular superhero: Djuba, an »evolved ape« (Morrison et al. 1991b, 17; i.e. a kind of gorilla) from Africa, has been abducted to California by a company named S.T.A.R. Laboratories. They secretly experiment on Djuba with the aim of developing a new biological weapon similar to anthrax. B’wana Beast, a superpowered human and Djuba’s companion, traces her to San Diego in order to rescue her.

On the very first page of the first *Animal Man* issue, we are already introduced to B’wana Beast as a mysterious cloaked figure walking towards San Diego while a third-person narrator relays his thoughts, feelings and sensations via caption boxes: »... screaming... the monkeys screaming... rattling the bars, hammering the wire mesh, playing their cages like tuneless instruments...« (Morrison et al. 1991a, 1). Later it becomes clear that this is what he telepathically perceives to be going on inside S.T.A.R. Laboratories.

After a failed attempt to rescue Djuba, the actual act of animal liberation is depicted in the third issue. Page 1 can be regarded as an amalgamation of steps 3 and 5 mentioned above, i.e. a portrayal of the animal’s life in captivity and of the liberator (Fig. 1). In a 3×3 panel layout, glimpses from inside the laboratories alternate with impressions of B’wana Beast preparing for his lab raid, donning his helmet and taking off his coat. Throughout the page, caption boxes complement both scenes. The laboratory scene is particularly striking: the first of the five panels shows an emaciated chimpanzee behind

the metal bars of a cage, the second depicts how two S.T.A.R. employees in hazmat suits lower his lifeless body into a plastic-lined container. The caption text implies that he was deliberately infected with a deadly disease: »[...] the germs struck his body dumb [i.e. preventing him from using sign language] and ate away the defiant light in his eyes« (Morrison et al. 1991b, 1). The other three panels of this lab scene show Djuba inside a similar cage. Green spots on her body indicate that she too is fatally ill. The fifth panel is a close-up view of Djuba with tears flowing from her eyes. These five panels conspicuously convey the impression that these lab animals are suffering under the inhumane treatment in captivity. This impression is reinforced by the caption text which tells us that before his death, the chimpanzee and Djuba had been communicating via sign language and thus exchanging complex information equivalent to English sentences: »I'm leaving here,« Roon [the chimpanzee] had said once. »I'm going home. Piss on them. I'm going home.« This display of extraordinary, human-level intelligence might entice the reader to empathise more strongly with these animals. In contrast to the animals, the humans depicted on this page do not show their faces – B'wana Beast is turned away from the picture surface (i.e. away from the reader, as it were) and the lab staff wear protective masks – which inhibits readers' empathy with them.



Fig. 1: The opening page of *Animal Man* #3 juxtaposes the liberator B'wana Beast with the captive apes (Morrison et al. 1991b, 1).

The ›opening of the cage‹ happens off-panel after page 14, on which we see B’wana Beast entering the lab building, and before page 16. On the latter page, he leaves the building carrying Djuba on his shoulder just as Animal Man enters it. In both of the two medium-sized panels that show B’wana Beast carrying Djuba, the focus is entirely on B’wana Beast, rushing down the stairs with an animalistic »Rraarr!« and shoving Animal Man out of his way. Djuba’s face is completely obscured in both panels. If this emphasis on the human character seems to contradict the previous and following scenes in which the emphasis is on the apes, we must remember that *Animal Man* is after all still a superhero comic, and as such it needs to adhere to the conventions of the genre by providing some space to the central conflict between superhero and supervillain, i.e. Animal Man and B’wana Beast (who once was a superhero in previous publications but now acts as Animal Man’s antagonist and has thus become a villain). This conflict is more extensively dealt with in the subsequent issue.

On the next page on which B’wana Beast and Djuba appear (Morrison et al. 1991b, 22; Fig. 2), he has taken her as far as the San Diego Zoo, but instead of continuing their flight, he seems to have realised that she is about to inevitably die from the infection. This page consists of six panels on top of each other that span the breadth of the page. The first two are exterior views of the zoo while the other four show B’wana Beast holding the dying



Fig. 2: Towards the end of the third *Animal Man* issue, the liberated ape Djuba dies in B’wana Beast’s arms (Morrison et al. 1991b, 22).

Djuba in his arms and talking to her. While the first of these four panels depicts the background of the scene – palm trees, lawn, pavement, the corner of a building – the following panels only have an empty, blue (or white in one instance; Morrison et al. 1991b, 23) background. This may either emulate Djuba's gaze upwards to the sky or their obliviousness of their surroundings, but it might be meaningful that Djuba appears to be dying under open sky, seemingly in freedom, and not in man-made surroundings which would signify ongoing captivity. A more mundane explanation of this background design choice might be the overall tendency in *Animal Man* towards a rather simplified, economical artwork – there are many more panels in this comic, including interior views, with blank or monochrome background.

On the next page, this scene continues in a slightly irregular layout of two rows with three vertically oriented panels each. The first four panels on p. 23 depict B'wana Beast and Djuba again, while the fifth shows his face alone, indicating that she has died, and on the last panel we see zoo animals reacting to his telepathically mediated emotions of grief and rage. In most of the eight panels with B'wana Beast holding Djuba, the focus is on the dying Djuba's agonised face, while of B'wana Beast's face, which is furthermore partially obscured by his helmet, we only see his mouth and chin in two panels. This marked compositorial focus on the animal instead of the human is another invitation to the reader to empathise with the former.

Daredevil

In Ann Nocenti's *Daredevil* run, the story segment involving animal liberation (#271–272, collected in Nocenti / Romita Jr. et al., hereinafter referred to as ›DD‹, 147–192) is already set up in issue #267 when Daredevil saves the life of Skip, a farm owner who is also secretly a drug dealer. In the beginning of issue #271 (*Genetrix*) we are introduced to this farm by way of Skip taking an inspection tour there while getting a report from his employee, Harry. Spanning three entire pages, this dialogue leaves doubt about neither the mistreatment of the animals in this factory farm nor the exploitative attitude of Skip: »The new cages have waste removal floors, so the pigs now stand on a grillwork of bars. / This tends to break the pigs' legs...« – »Tell me Harry -- are the pigs ever let out of their cages to walk around?« – »Uh... no.« – »Well then, what need have they for legs?« (DD, 149).

In a similar vein, Harry reports about the chickens: »The chickens, Sir, are exhibiting stranger and stranger behavior... / They've been de-beaked to cut down on the self-mutilation, but some of the birds are so acutely stressed from the forced feeding and crowding that they've turned to cannibalism, which is pretty aberrant behavior for a chicken.« – »Don't worry about it, Harry« (DD, 150).

Notably, the wretched conditions in which the animals live are almost exclusively relayed through the dialogue text, not through the images. The pigs and chickens are depicted in two panels each, and while we get the impression that their cages are indeed crowded, one cannot tell from their faces whether they are feeling pain or not. The pigs are shown from a slightly elevated point of view so that we cannot see if their legs are broken, and the chickens' depiction is too small to discern whether they are debeaked and show signs of cannibalistic behavior.

The next relevant scene again combines steps 3 and 5, the portrayal of suffering animals and the portrayal of the liberator (DD, 162–165). On page 163, a large portrait in profile of Brandy, Skip's daughter, is surrounded by borderless panels depicting people eating or preparing meat. The reduced colour palette of these panels marks them as belonging to a different diegetic level than Brandy, as they are visualised stand-ins for »this country« and »most people« in Brandy's monologue.

Page 164 continues images in this palette and Brandy's speech as she reaches the topic of factory farms (Fig. 3). In four panels, the goings-on inside such a factory farm are shown, though probably not Skip's farm specifically, as one of the panels shows cattle whereas Skip only keeps pigs and chickens. The »gross cruelty« (DD, 164) towards the animals is once more not made evident clearly through the images, only through the caption text. Additionally, this cruelty is symbolised through streaks of red that run across all panels like blood. These streaks connect

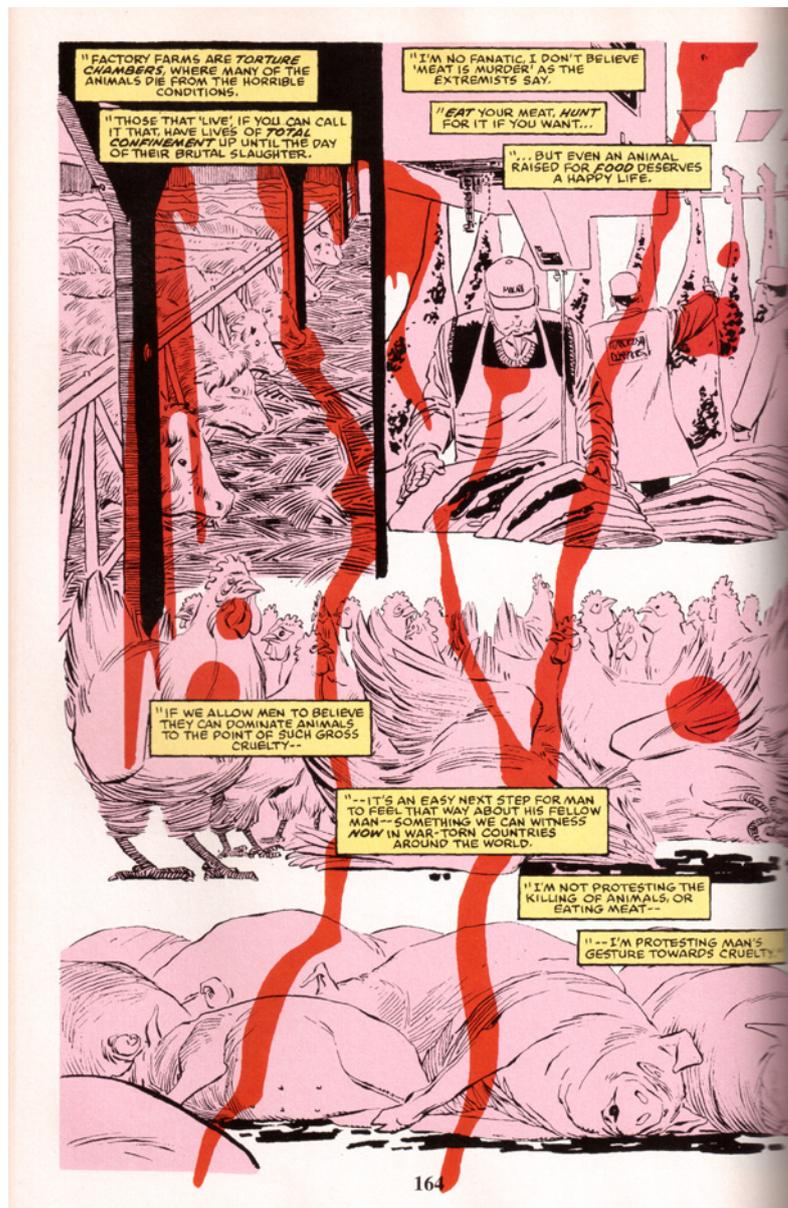


Fig. 3: In *Daredevil* #271, animal rights activist Brandy condemns factory farms (DD, 164).

the panels and thus intensify their metonymic character as they form a coherent picture, both literally and figuratively in the sense that the individual animals depicted stand for all livestock in factory farms all over the world. Such a two-layered page layout is a formal device specific to the medium of comics: in contrast to a time-based medium such as film, or a strictly sequential text-only novel, a comic can thus simultaneously depict two different actions (even though in this case, one of the actions is only blood running down an unspecified surface), or two different narrative strands. However, none of the other three comics discussed here employ this device.²

Daredevil, who accidentally has come across Brandy and discovered her plan to raid her father's farm, challenges her views in a rather thoughtful way: »It isn't so easy to open a cage door, and expect that an animal who has, all its life, only known confinement, can handle liberation. [...] It's one thing to open the door... another to leave the cage« (DD, 165).

Page 166 depicts the actual ›opening of the cage‹: the first panel is a wide shot of the farm, shattered by an explosion. The second shows chickens flying and pigs running, presumably out of the farm; but as some animals move towards the left and some slightly to the right, we get the impression that they are confused and perhaps even terrified, heightened by the sound effects of their »Braaak!« and »Squeee!« noises which are as large, i.e. as loud, as the »Wup! Wup! Wup! ...« of the helicopter overhead. Thus, on the one hand, readers might get the impression that the animals are negatively affected by their liberation. On the other hand, here too the animals are shown as a large mass instead of individuals able to express feelings through body language, thus impeding readers' empathy with them. The last panel of this page is a ground-

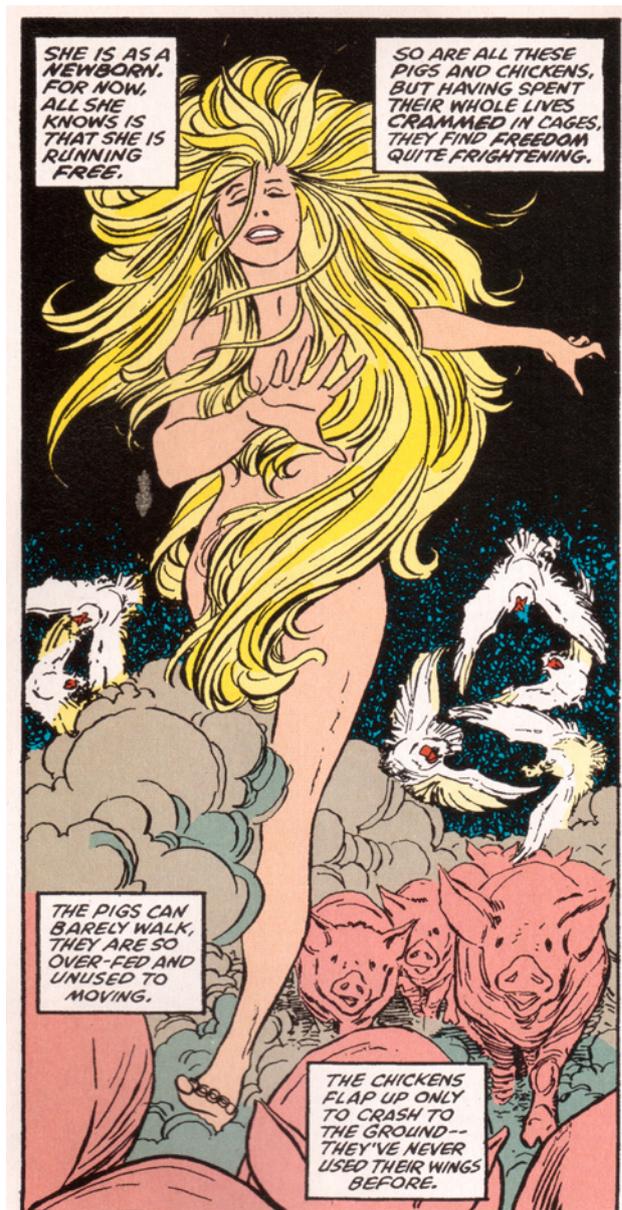


Fig. 4: At the beginning of *Daredevil* #272, pigs, chickens and the human character Number Nine escape from Skip's farm (DD, 172, detail).

level view through the legs of Brandy and Daredevil of a group of pigs that, unlike the others, have not left their pen yet. Their faces are expressionless and their bodies show no signs of mistreatment. It is up to Daredevil to explain: »Look at these pigs, Brandy. They're terrified. / Is this liberation?«

There are two more panels that depict the flight of the chickens and pigs away from the farm, one in which Daredevil and Brandy are reduced to tiny characters in the background (DD, 169), and one which already belongs to issue #272 and in which the animals surround the larger human figure of »Number Nine« (DD, 172; Fig. 4), a subject of genetic experiments at a secret laboratory below the farm who becomes more important later in the story (Hagan). In both panels, the placement of human characters amidst the animals encourages readers to identify with the animals. However, the only visual information about the state of the animals is their movement in various directions and the dust cloud, both of which suggest a frenzied and perhaps terrified flight. The caption text on page 172 is more eloquent, but it contradicts the image by denying the drive and vitality of the animals' movement: »[...] having spent their whole lives crammed in cages, they find freedom quite frightening. / The pigs can barely walk, they are so over-fed and unused to moving. / The chickens flap up only to crash to the ground -- they've never used their wings before.«

The ambiguity in Brandy's act of animal liberation and her conflicted feelings towards »these darn animals«, as she calls them (DD, 169), is intentional; the aim of the story is to introduce her as a complex character and to set up the conflict between her father and Daredevil in later issues. But when Daredevil chastises Brandy with the words, »You're so focused on your issue you won't even look at the actual animals!« (DD, 167), that is a criticism one could also make about the comic itself: if its point is to thoroughly deal with the issue of factory farms – which is by no means self-evident, as the story from this point quickly drops the topic and takes another direction – then the visual and the textual elements do so with little success; the mistreatment of the animals and thus the justification for their forceful liberation is only *told*, not *shown*.

We3

We3 (Morrison/Quitely et al., hereinafter referred to as ›We3‹) is a science-fiction story set in the present day about a dog, a cat and a rabbit who had once been pets but were abducted by the United States Air Force and turned into »biorgs«, weaponised cyborgs with electronically enhanced brains that enable them to speak in rudimentary English. For their speech balloon texts, non-standard orthography and other typographical devices are employed to imply a way of speaking that is different from human speech without specifying how exactly this »animal-ese« (Gaboury) language sounds different. Such a comic-spe-

cific representation of animal speech is an important device regarding animal liberation: it resists complete anthropomorphisation and thus anthropocentrism, while still anthropomorphising animals enough to enable the reader to ›understand‹ them, i.e. to identify and sympathise with them (Aloi, 101–103).

From the depiction of the three animals prior to their liberation, e.g. on page 28 (Fig. 5), there is little to be learned about their well-being and their feelings: the dog looks confused because he cannot fully follow the conversation of the humans in the room, the cat is somewhat disgruntled because she does not like the smell of these humans, and also because she is hungry, as is the rabbit. We may identify the electronic components sticking out of their heads and the exoskeletons in which they are currently restrained as signs of mistreatment, but these do not seem to affect their mood. It is the reader's knowledge of their past and their future that makes them appear pitiable: the cover of *We3* #1 is designed as a missing pet poster showing the dog, »Bandit«, described as »friendly & approachable« (*We3*, 5). The covers of the other two issues show the cat and the rabbit and confirm that all three had once been pets and probably living a happier life than in the involuntary service as killing machines in the military. As for their impending future, we learn from the dialogue of the humans – USAF personnel and a politician – that they are going to be »decommissioned«, i.e. put down, because they are going to be replaced by animals

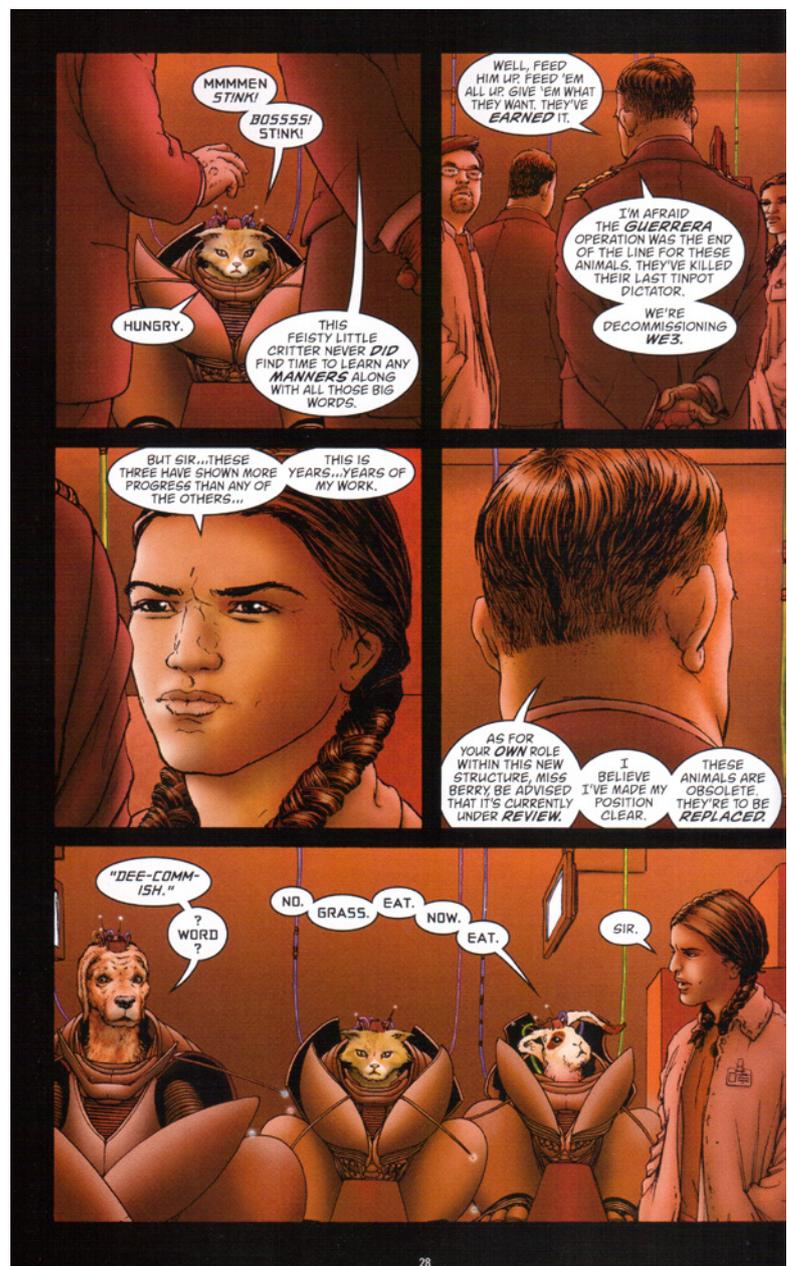


Fig. 5: The three biorgs at the USAF facility (*We3*, 28).

»bred for the job« (We3, 29). If this makes the reader sympathise with the animal protagonists, this feeling is heightened by the cynical words of the military officer who orders their death: »Feed ‘em all up. Give ‘em what they want. They’ve earned it. [...] // [...] Put them out of their misery« (We3, 28, 29).

Furthermore, here, too, the difference in visibility of the characters’ faces is striking, as the animals – particularly the dog – are often shown facing the picture surface whereas the human characters are repeatedly seen from behind or with their faces truncated by the panel borders, i.e. without their eyes; this guides reader empathy away from the humans – or even »against a vaguely defined humanity« (Link) – and towards the animals. These panels in which the gaze of the dog seemingly meets that of the reader are examples of an empathy-inducing effect described by Jonathan Burt (with regard to the medium of film): »[t]he image of the animal’s eye reflects the *possibility* of animal understanding by emphasizing animal sight. This does not mean that the eye gives any access to what is understood but it does signal the significant participation of the animal in the visual field« (Burt, 71).

The ›opening of the cage‹ is presented through what the creators, in the appendix to the collected edition of *We3*, call the »CCTV sequence« (We3, [130]). This is a sequence of 6 pages (We3, 30–35; Fig. 6) with a layout of 6×3 small panels. By means of a grainy image noise effect overlaid over the images, and also through their aspect ratio and some of their

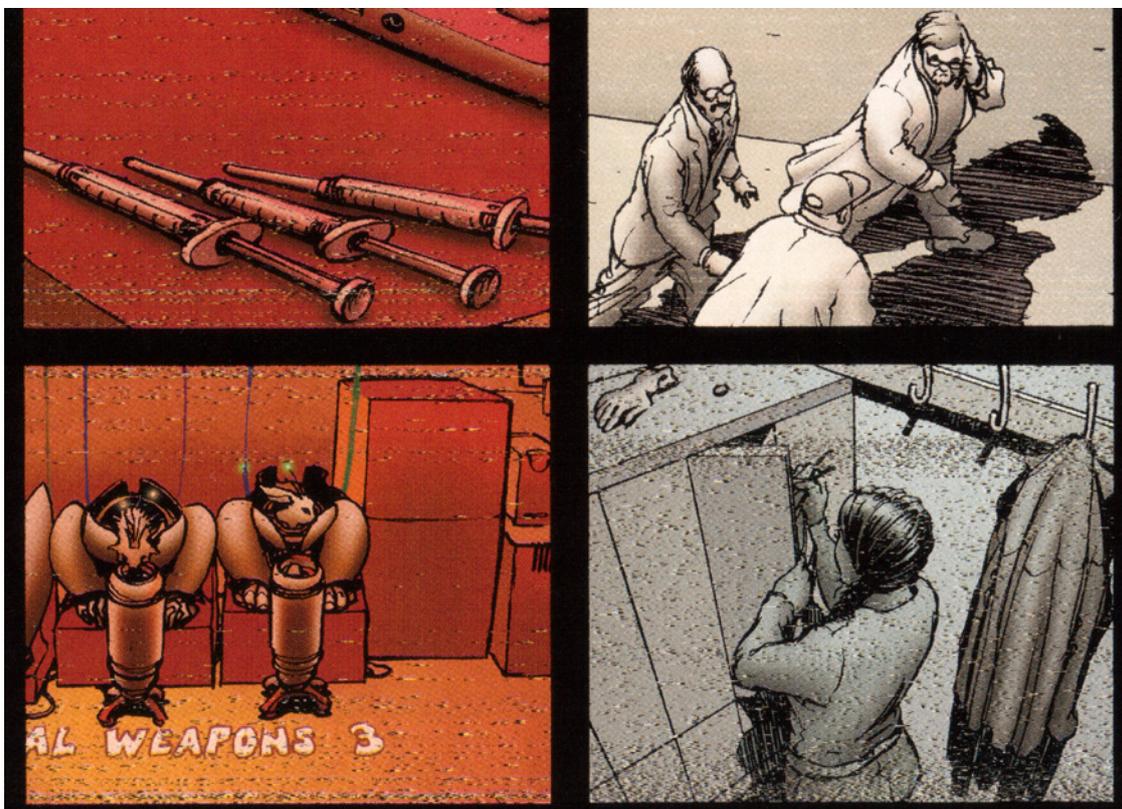


Fig. 6: Four panels from the CCTV sequence (We3, 31, detail).

points of view, these panels represent surveillance camera footage from different places inside the facility in which the animals are kept. However, some camera angles and zoom levels, as well as the addition of speech balloons to a few of the otherwise silent panels, counter this impression somewhat. The panels show how Roseanne Berry, the animals' handler who is tasked with their killing but who has grown attached to them, leaves three syringes presumably filled with deadly poison unused on the table, and the text on a computer screen suggests that she has deliberately left the animal restraint locks open. This allows the animals to dash out of the building and escape.

The sequence ends with a two-page splash panel that shows the three animals seemingly flying through the starry night sky. As Grant Morrison describes it in the aforementioned appendix, »[t]he tight repeated rhythm of the 18-panel grids creates a sense of tension and claustrophobia that is released by the lovely 2-page escape spread« (We3, [130]). One is tempted to locate this tension and claustrophobia and the release thereof not only in the reader but also in the animal characters. This contrast between tension and release is heightened by the lack of the surveillance camera filter effect in the double-page spread; after six pages of »machinic«, »other-than-human« perception through the camera that »interposes itself between the reader's gaze« and the characters (Link), we get to see the three animals directly and unmediated, as it were.

This kind of layout in which small panels are followed by a large one, ideally a full-bleed splash panel, is another comic-specific device with which an act of animal liberation is narrated. In such a sequence, the small panels signify confinement, restriction, and captivity, while the splash panel suggests openness and freedom (see also Simpson). Of course, this symbolism is not only found in depictions of *animal* liberation but can also be used for instances of *human* liberation. One example for this is a scene in *Daredevil* which shows the aforementioned human character Number Nine running away from the factory farm where she was imprisoned (DD, 171). This also marks the point at which the focus of this *Daredevil* story shifts away from the animals and towards the human character. Likewise, the *Animal Man* issue in question reserves its two splash panels for a human character – the enraged B'wana Beast (Morrison et al. 1991b, 2, 24). These serve both as an expression of the outrage that the reader is invited to share with him over the mistreatment of the apes, as well as to simply present him in all his glory as an excessively muscular figure and thus a formidable adversary for Animal Man. It should also be noted that *We3* uses splash panels in other scenes to convey a more general feeling of surprise, e.g. when the animals shoot the »tinpot dictator« Guerrera (We3, 12,13).

In the animal liberation scene in *We3* on page 30–37, the actions of the human liberator, Roseanne, are passive; she enables the animals' flight by *not doing*: not administering the lethal injection, not locking the restraints. The animals' flight, on the other hand, is decidedly dynamic as they move at high speed through the building without regard for the lives of

humans in their way. This contrast might lead readers to perceive the escape not so much as an act of animal liberation but as an autonomous action, how Allison Dushane writes: »the animals carry out their escape« (Dushane, 88).

There are two possible points in *We3* at which the three animals appear to be free (i.e. what I have proposed as step 4 above). One is the last page of the first issue (*We3*, 42), a splash panel that shows them as tiny figures running into a vast forest. The relative size of the forest and the sky implies wilderness and freedom. However, a squadron of helicopters searching for them looms at some distance in the sky, and the words of the cat, »WE3 NO HOME NOW«, might be taken to mean that they are not yet home and must continue their flight (but see also for a different interpretation – »that WE3 is already home, or [...] that no ›home‹ exists for them in their technologically humanized state« – Dushane, 88, 89). The other point at which the animals can be said to be truly liberated is the very last scene of the comic (*We3*, 114–116) in which the surviving members of the trio, the cat and the dog, are shown to have become the pets of a homeless man. Free of their carapaces and other cybernetic components, they are no longer capable of human speech – or no longer »forced [...] to speak« (Dushane, 93) – and are allowed to be ›merely‹ animals again. However, the gesture of the man holding the cat with his right hand and the dog with his left closely towards him, and the fact that he has to beg for money to be able to feed them, implies that their freedom is not unbounded but that their old captivity has been replaced by a new dependency.

Pride of Baghdad

Whether the animals escape autonomously or are liberated passively by humans is a question that can also be asked with regard to *Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughan/Henrichon 2006, hereinafter referred to as ›PoB‹). However, it cannot be denied that it is a human action – even though not intended for the purpose of liberation – that enables their escape: our four lion protagonists are kept in Baghdad Zoo when, during the Iraq War in 2003, an airstrike hits the zoo and accidentally blasts open their cage.

A difference between *Pride of Baghdad* and the other three comics discussed here is the assessment of the animals' life in captivity. While the ethics of the general idea of keeping animals in zoos are a matter of debate among humans, the lions themselves express different opinions about their status. At the beginning of the comic, Noor, the younger of the two lionesses, is actively plotting their escape, or »liberation« (PoB, [12]), as she herself calls it when talking to an antelope (as in *Pride of Baghdad* all non-human animals are able to talk to each other, which is represented by speech balloons with English text). The zoo animals are not shown as being mistreated, and Noor does not directly say why she wants to escape, except »I [...] resent having [dead rabbits] handed to us. I miss the thrill of the hunt« (PoB, [15]). Rather, it is the

idea of freedom itself and vague memories of her early life in freedom that motivates Noor. Pictorially, her feeling of constriction is expressed by the bars of her cage behind which she is always depicted throughout the four pages on which she talks with the antelope. Safa, the older lioness, on the other hand, has no fond memories of her life before the zoo and at first refuses to leave the zoo with the other three lions when the opportunity arises. Later in the comic, after their liberation, the two still look back on their captive life differently: »They may have been our captors, but they weren't torturers.« [...] – »Safa, no matter how they might treat us, those who would hold us captive are always tyrants« (PoB, [94]).

The ›opening of the cage‹ moment is also unusual because it comes as a surprise (perhaps to both the protagonists and the reader) due to the contradictory nature of the airstrike, which is at first shown as a threat to the lions' lives. Explosions toss them through the air and against walls and temporarily blind them, as the black panel immediately following the third explosion indicates (PoB, [27]; Fig. 7). »Are... are we dead?«, Safa asks on the third



Fig. 7: The four lion protagonists of *Pride of Baghdad* realise that their cage has been blasted open (PoB, [27, 28]).

panel of the same page. Zill, the adult male lion, answers on the next page: »... we're free«. This full-page splash panel shows the four lions inside their cage, but the metal bars of the side towards which the lions are facing have been blown off by the explosion. The dichotomy between captivity and freedom is not only expressed through the contrast in panel size between this page and the previous one (a 1×4 panel layout) but also through the contrast in colour and light: as the smoke and dust of the explosion settle, the panels on the four-panel page gradually turn from black to grey. Finally in the splash panel the lions are bathed in warm sunlight coming from the side of the den that has just been opened and towards which they are turned, i.e. the side of freedom, while dark, grey hues are relegated to the remaining concrete walls at their back, i.e. the side of captivity from which they are about to walk away. Consequently, Safa is shown to remain mostly in the shadow, as she is the most reluctant of the quartet to step into the light and into freedom. Thus, similar to *We3*, *Pride of Baghdad* in this sequence employs a contrast between several small panels and a large one to convey, in a way specific to the comics medium, the contrast between captivity and freedom. As in the other three comics, however, *Pride of Baghdad* also uses such splash panels to create a general surprise effect, e.g. in a later scene when the lions are suddenly confronted by tanks.

This liberation sequence is repeated and intensified by a later one that can be regarded as the decisive ›stepping out of the cage‹ moment. After the lions have left their den, they still need to escape from the zoo, which is made difficult by continued explosions and the hostility of some of the other zoo animals. After six action-packed pages with various 4-panel layouts, there is a two-page spread showing the lions sideways and from behind walking towards a monument of enormous crossed swords, and also in the direction of the sun (PoB, [48, 49]). While situated relatively close to Baghdad Zoo, this monument – the Victory Arch, or Swords of Qādisiyyah – does not in reality mark the zoo entrance. The actual entrance is depicted in the preceding panel as a less imposing cast iron gate. However, everything about the double-page spread suggests that by passing through the crossed swords, the lions are about to leave the world of man behind and to enter the wilderness, i.e. ultimate freedom. Apart from the monument, nothing man-made is shown here, let alone human figures themselves. There are green plants in the foreground and green trees in the background, implying that the »jungle« (PoB, [30]) of which at least some of the lions have dreamt for so long is just within reach at last. The sense of freedom conveyed through this composition is heightened by a low horizon – the almost cloudless sky takes up about three quarters of the image.

The actual freedom of the wilderness, however, is denied to the lions. Their life in Baghdad after they have escaped from the zoo is a constant struggle. Ultimately, they are shot by American soldiers – »liberated by death«, as Suzanne Keen puts it (Keen, 145). This scene makes the reader sympathise with the animals by means similar to those in the other three comics (except *Daredevil*): the faces of the human characters, like in all other

instances in *Pride of Baghdad*, are never shown; they are always depicted from behind or cropped while the faces of the animals are foregrounded (Fig. 8). Additionally, the humans' speech balloon script is rendered in all caps, thus separating human language from animal language (which in this comic is almost always printed in standard capitalisation) and portraying humans as the ›other‹. As we learn from the dialogue in other scenes, animal communication is still implied to sound, in the case of the lions, like »roaring« (PoB, [15]) and »bark[ing]« (PoB, [26]) and is unintelligible to the human characters in this comic. It is merely ›translated‹ into English for the benefit of the reader (which does not prevent Vaughan from inserting puns that would only make sense in spoken English, e.g. »cantaloupe«/»antelope« (PoB, [11, 12]) or »Tigris«/»tigress« (PoB, [55]). In contrast, the presumably Arabic utterances of the Iraqi soldiers are only transliterated into Latin letters, not translated into English). Similar to *We3*, this comic-specific way of representing animal communication has the effect of making the animal characters more relatable without fully anthropomorphising them.

Another device in this final scene of the comic to shift readers' empathy away from their own species and towards the lions, or perhaps even to symbolically destabilise species boundaries, is Noor's exclamation in the direction of the soldiers when she sees Safa and Zill gunned down: »Animals! You goddamn--« (PoB, [124]).



Fig. 8: Human soldiers shoot Noor and the other lions at the end of *Pride of Baghdad* (PoB, [126]).

Conclusion

While at first glance the four comics in question appear to depict animal liberation quite differently, there are also similarities between them: with the exception of *Daredevil*, the comics tend to employ a kind of »animalized focalization« (Willmott, 68, 69) which de-emphasises human figures (by means of cropping, cloaking, shrinking, hiding) and emphasises animal figures by foregrounding their bodies and particularly their faces. This allows for their gaze to be either met by or shared with the reader (Baraw/Smyth, 228).

Daredevil, on the other hand, makes heavy use of dialogue text to narrate the act of animal liberation as well as to discuss its general idea. The other three comics also rely on written text to tell their story, and they even go as far as to give a (human) voice to their animal characters: in *Animal Man*, a narrator conveys the sign language dialogue of the apes, their thoughts and feelings in caption boxes; in *We3*, futuristic technology enables the animals to speak English; in *Pride of Baghdad*, speech balloons with English text are used as a proxy in order to make the language of the animals intelligible to the reader. As we have seen, *We3* and *Pride of Baghdad* even represent animal speech in a way specific to the medium of comics through typography, making it both understandable to the readers and at the same time emphasising its difference from human speech.

The other of the two comic-specific devices used in the depiction of animal liberation is the kind of sequence in which several small panels culminate in a splash panel, signifying the transition from closedness to openness, or from confinement to freedom. However, only *We3* and *Pride of Baghdad* employ such sequences to depict the liberation of their animal protagonists, as described above.

To sum up, there appears to be only one formal device employed by the majority of our four examples of animal liberation comics: in panel compositions, animal characters are frequently emphasised and human characters de-emphasised. That, however, is not a technique exclusive to the medium of comics; a film, for instance, could use similar shot compositions to achieve a comparable effect. In this light, it might be a stretch to speak of the described traits as »characteristic« of the depiction of animal liberation in comics. Yet in all four comics, the act of animal liberation is not a purely incidental event, and it is not far-fetched to presume that their creators intended to make a statement about, or at least raise the issue of, animal rights and animal welfare. Thus it might be more appropriate to say that to comic creators, a certain range of formal options are available to depict animal liberation, some of which are specific to comics and some not.

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- Figure 3: Nocenti / Romita Jr. et al., 164.
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- Figure 5: Morrison/Quitely et al., 28.
- Figure 6: Morrison/Quitely et al., 31.
- Figure 7: Vaughan/Henrichon 2006, [27, 28].
- Figure 8: Vaughan/Henrichon 2006, [126].

- 1] The unpaginated collected edition (Morrison et al. 1991c) was used here; page numbers refer to the issue page numbers which are inserted in the bottom right panel of each page.
- 2] In *We3*, panels are frequently superimposed over one another, but they always depict actions happening at the same place.