From Forests to Rabbits

Reconsidering Human and Nonhuman Agency in Concentration Camps

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This article argues that Nazi concentration camps blurred the line between human and nonhuman by juxtaposing dehumanized prisoners with animals kept in camp zoos and the SS Angora project. Drawing on survivor testimonies, philosophical posthumanism, comic books, and the concept of the 'material witness', the study argues that overcoming anthropocentrism is essential for rethinking perspectives on life, memory, and testimony. The Nazi system's hierarchy of life – caring for rabbits while people starved – demonstrates how domination relies on rigid species boundaries. By treating nonhuman actors, such as trees, animals, and landscapes, as witnesses, the article proposes posthumanist solidarity and shared vulnerability. These challenges inherited notions of humanity and claims that perception should become an ethical act, involving both human and nonhuman agents, in the reconstruction of history. | *Keywords: Dehumanization, Nonhuman, Material Witness, Human–nonhuman Relations, Memory and Materiality*

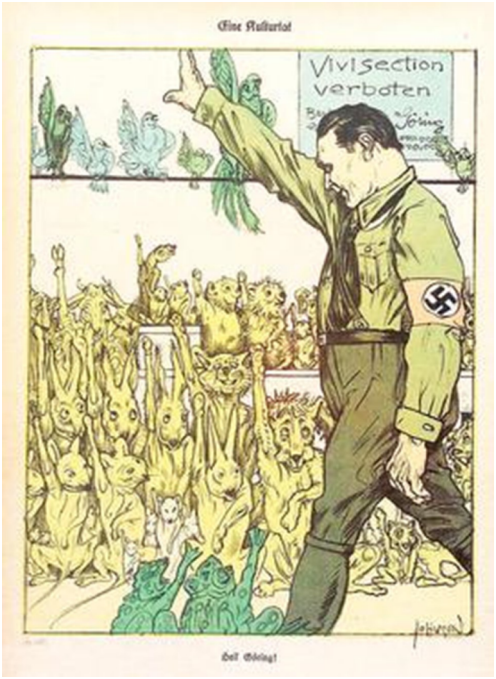
1. Introduction: Between Humans and Animals

In August 1933, the satirical magazine *Kladderadatsch* published a caricature of Hermann Göring performing the Nazi salute over laboratory animals. The caption read 'Vivisection verboten', meaning vivisection is prohibited. The drawing responded to the ban on vivisection. In Nazi Germany, specifically in Bavaria and Prussia, the law took effect on April 1933. Göring, then the new *Reichsstatthalter* of Prussia, announced the end of 'unbearable torture and suffering in animal experiments'. He threatened to "send those who still think they can continue to regard animals as inanimate property to concentration camps" (Arluke and Sanders, 1996, p. 133). Evidence shows that high-ranking Nazis were actively interested in animal protection. This is shown by the *Reichsjagdgesetz* (Reich Hunting Law), adopted on July 3, 1934, and the *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* (Reich Nature Conservation Law), adopted on July 1, 1935. According to the Finnish cultural magazine *Kaltio* (Aikio, 2003), Nazi Germany was the first country in the world to place the wolf under protection.

These systematic steps by the Nazis to promote animal and nature conservation are surprising, if not shocking, from our perspective. This is especially notable given the crimes against humanity they committed.

This example illustrates how the status of humanity is sometimes granted to certain nonhumans, such as animals, while being denied to some humans. The complex relationship between humans and nonhuman – animals becomes especially fraught in the context of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany. At that time, the Nazis simultaneously used animal language to insult Jews and herded them into concentration camps (Klein, 2011, p. 42), complicating the notion of animal protection. Our focus is not on comparing the suffering of Jews, Roma, or homosexuals with that of animals, but rather on exploring the conditions and purposes for which humanity as a value was assigned or withheld.

This text addresses species hierarchization and dehumanization in Nazi Germany, including the rejection of equality between humans and nonhumans. I aim to show that more frequent analysis of nonhuman actors in history can help us remember and better understand these inequalities, ideally motivating efforts toward their resolution.



Arthur Johnson: *A Caricature* (Proctor, 2000, p. 129)

The term ‘nonhuman’ is now prominent in philosophy, cultural history, memory studies, and Holocaust studies. It refers to more-than-human actors, such as animals or ecological entities, who challenge humanity's central place in memory and history. Linked to the notion of the ‘material witness’, the term introduces posthumanist perspectives on witnessing and subjectivity. This perspective reveals how human and nonhuman agencies are deeply entangled in bearing witness.

The nonhuman or environmental history of the Holocaust and related topics are being discussed with great intensity (Bartov, 2022; Katz, 2022; Kittel, 2023; Małczyński, Domańska, Smykowski and Kłos, 2019, 2022; Rapson, 2015, 2021). One major problem is the issue of prioritization and dominance of certain agents in the narrative and remembrance of the Holocaust. The refusal to prioritize nonhuman entities and the environment may be understandable from an ethical perspective. Focusing on nonhuman entities raises doubts about appropriate mourning and respect for human victims of the Holocaust. Nonhuman and more-than-human research, as well as the use of terms such as ecocide or animal memory, may imply that humans are being displaced by nonhuman entities, nature, and other living organisms. However, nonhuman analyses of Holocaust memory do not automatically equate victims of ecocide and genocide. There is no denial of human suffering. Instead, these analyses uncover other hurt lives and types of affliction.

We assume a common history and use its perspective to examine our topic. This approach provides us with new insights into dehumanization and the disparities between humans, animals, and other non-human entities. By examining the living conditions of humans and nonhumans, we gain a deeper understanding of how power is diminished and why this occurs. First, this study looks at nonhuman testimony and ontological contexts to reveal parallels and clarify relationships with human actors. Next, we focus on dehumanization from nonhuman perspectives and their experiences. Finally, we present examples that challenge the clear divide between humans and nonhumans. These examples illustrate the problems with anthropocentric thinking and human privilege.

This text argues that understanding the relationship between humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans requires a framework of common history. This perspective must replace a focus solely on human-centered narratives. By exploring shared memories, particularly those involving nonhuman actors such as animals, the aim is to analyze how they witness and participate in historical and political transformations. Emphasizing their stories sharpens our analysis of these transformations and encourages sensitivity to interspecies violence. All of this still recognizes human experiences.

To form a common history, it is necessary to develop different types of perception. The need for such an approach is urgent today for several reasons. First, the spatial dimension of memory shows that even after conflicts end, traces of violence remain in the environment. These marks affect both human and nonhuman bodies. Second, in times of climate crisis and environmental devastation, we need new ways of perceiving the world. These should promote sensitivity to interspecies violence and more ethically responsible relationships with the more-than-human world (Tsing, 2015). Building on these ideas, the study emphasizes the need to reflect equally on both human and nonhuman experiences. Importantly, this does not deny human suffering. Rather, it shows that the environment and its changes co-create collective memory and provide unique testimony to violence and its consequences.

2. The Ability of Nonhuman Actors to Testify

> Things themselves are much too talkative to be treated as mute intermediaries. (Latour, 1993)

British theorist and artist Susan Schuppli conducts artistic research at the Forensic Architecture center, examining material evidence from wars, climate change, and ecological disasters. In her study, *Arguments. Should Videos of Trees Have Standing? An Inquiry into the Legal Rites of Unnatural Objects at the ICTY* (2019) she focuses on nonhuman actors and in her book *Material Witness* (2020), she describes 'material witnesses' as "nonhuman entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reconstructed into history" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3).

Schuppli attributes to material witnesses the ability to prove and bear external events. She also includes the processes that allow things to bear witness in the scope of material or physical testimony. These entities preserve evidence of events. They "harbor direct evidence of events as well as provide circumstantial evidence of the interlocutory methods and epistemic frameworks whereby such matter comes to be consequential" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3). She states that these materials can record evidence of violence. According to her, material witnesses "continually twist between divulging 'evidence of the event' and exposing the 'event of evidence'" (Schuppli, 2020, p. 3).

Material evidence, including non-human evidence, may appear insufficient when viewed in isolation. This is mainly because it lacks explanation and context. Combining evidence with other sources and testimonies, whether similar or different, helps fill in gaps and expand our understanding. This process helps us organize our perspective and make sense of our experiences.

Material testimony needs more than looking or listening. It requires searching for links that trigger deeper memory. With nonhuman testimony, this task is even more challenging. We must set aside our human perspective and try to understand a different way of receiving information. Combined testimonies can effectively convey parts of collective memory. Their strength is in preserving the full essence of past trauma or tragic events. However, non-human and material witnesses face a challenge. They cannot testify fully on their own. As people, we must find, interpret, and speak on their behalf. We must translate their meaning and help explain it.

The argument here is that the human perspective is always present, even when non-human witnesses are involved, since humans must interpret such testimony. This creates an ongoing epistemological tension any time nonhuman testimony is considered. The point is not to eliminate or replace human testimony, but rather to reconsider who preserves memory. Witnessing is a network of relationships in which dependence signals a need for cooperation rather than weakness. Interpretation may be uniquely human, but memory itself transcends this limitation.

Video segment of alleged locations depicted on exhibit D2 at 15:36 and 15:42. Document Type: Exhibit 231 (Schuppli, 2019, p. 104)

Chief US Prosecutor at Nuremberg, Robert H. Jackson, who "made the controversial decision" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 115), based the indictment solely on the administrative archives of the Nazi regime and not on the testimony of survivors.

> Jackson's decision emphasized both the sober impartiality he attributed to such material artifacts […], but also the implicit belief that the sheer scale and transparent ambitions of the Third Reich evidenced in these records […] would convert mute witnesses into fully realized agents of legal speech. (Schuppli, 2019, p. 115)

Jackson considered these material witnesses capable of speaking for themselves – if we ignore the fact that someone had to go through them, sort them, and present them to the court – and so devastating that a stark description of the systematic plan to exterminate European Jews would elicit at least the same reaction as 'live' testimony. Apart from minor mentions (e.g., Irma Grese, a guard at Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, was accused, among other things, of setting dogs on prisoners), the position of animals or the environment was not reflected at all in the Nazi trials. The absence of the topic of animals itself reveals the anthropocentric framework of postwar justice.

In her project *Evidence on Trial* (2014), Susan Schuppli explores a wide range of possible non-human evidence materials and presents a mosaic of testimonies of various kinds that come together in the final verdict. The investigation is conducted through a sixteen-channel installation of objects and hearings, in which these objects served as evidence during the proceedings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former

Yugoslavia between 1993 and 2017. We will now turn away from Nazi Germany to explore, together with Schuppli, the potential of nonhuman actors as witnesses. In the aforementioned text, Schuppli describes one specific trial and the evidence associated with it. It is about "unfold some of the ways in which the procedural arrangements of international criminal courts such as the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) manage, and are challenged by, the non-human witnesses or 'unnatural objects' that enter into its vast legal machinery" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 99). Schuppli does not deny the primacy of human testimony, but notes that in the prosecution of crimes by this tribunal, nonhuman witnesses were also often used as evidence. She presents a case study, the trial of Slavko Dokmanović[1] (along with additional references to other prosecutions), and discusses the role of material witnesses in the current legal system.

Dokmanović's defense attorneys presented a videotape in court that was supposed to serve as his alibi. Although he was seen at the farm where the murders took place, he claimed he was traveling south of Vukovar that day, filming his route. The date and time on the tape matched the day of the Ovčara farm massacre; however, two survivors confirmed his presence at the killings. As a result, prosecutor Clint Williamson remained highly skeptical of the filmed alibi. To investigate, Tribunal investigator Vladimir Dzuro traveled the alleged route and documented it in its entirety. This footage underwent a careful comparative analysis, after which the prosecution summoned Professor Paul Tabbush, "a British silviculturist, 'tree expert'" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 103). Tabbush examined the footage in detail, identifying several distinctive roadside trees. He explained that no two trees grow identically and their branch structures are so unique that they're considered more informative than fingerprints (Schuppli, 2019, pp. 101–103). By matching the trees in the video to their exact locations on the actual route, Tabbush concluded that Dokmanović did not follow the route as claimed. Instead, Tabbush clarified that Dokmanović turned around at a certain point and returned to the vicinity of the farm, contradicting the alibi (Schuppli, 2019, p. 103).

The analysis of the trees alone could hardly prove that Dokmanović participated in the killings, but it could prove that his alibi was a lie and that he did not travel the route described and recorded. At the same time, the testimony of the nonhuman witnesses supported the statements of two human survivors of the executions on the farm. Schuppli concludes the case in which the trees stood trial: "Since its establishment on May 25, 1993, the operations of the ICTY have generated millions of procedural records and processed a staggering number of exhibits. Out of this vast archive of evidential holdings, a videotape of a mulberry, walnut, and poplar tree have emerged to stand as steadfast material witnesses before the law" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 124).

[1] Croatian Serb Slavko Dokmanović was one of the defendants at ICTY, and after the trial, he took his own life in prison in The Hague after the verdict. He was charged, among other things, with the massacre of non-Serbian civilians that took place on the night of November 20-21, 1991. At a farm near the village of Ovčara, approximately 260 people from the Vukovar hospital were beaten, tortured, and subsequently murdered.

Schuppli stating that "the crucial role that non-human forms of testimony and new forms of evidence, such as videos of trees, have played in resolving questions of legal truth does position them as active agents in the production of jurisprudence" (Schuppli, 2019, p. 124). Simply put, an object or living entity becomes a medium of memory when it is presented before a court, assumes the role of a witness, or is incorporated into representative frameworks. The medium of memory, as a material witness, is supposed to prove the existence of certain historical events or document the behavior of specific individuals. The change in form from object to witness is a shift in function, emphasizing the ability to reveal the past, testify, and be presented as evidence.

The example of the 'trees on trial' may, in some respects, resemble the ways in which material witnesses or traces have been treated so far, e.g., in archeology. Working with non-human carriers is not new, but its ontological, political, and ethical framework is changing. In these cases, it is not merely the integration of nonhuman perspectives, where the example of trees as witnesses may not be quite convincing, as if we admit that the nonhuman must always be interpreted by humans. It is not a return to anthropocentrism; the change is that humans cease to be the sole bearers of meaning, becoming instead actors in the network, where memory arises from material processes beyond human control. From inclusion, we move to a fundamental re-evaluation of the forms of memory, testimony, and history – the past persists also in the nonhuman and is not reduced to human knowledge. This post-humanistic approach thus situates the human at the network of epistemic and ethical authority, suggesting that testimony values are grounded in relations of reciprocity and co-agency among things, objects, and environments. Moving beyond Anthropocentrism does not have human experience, but situates it within a broad ecology of witnessing, where the capacity to remember, testify, and signify extends across the more-than-human world.

Schuppli's reflection on non-human witnesses invites a fundamental rethinking of what it means to bear witness within post-humanist thought. Trees themselves need not be the most radical example of nonhuman witness; their strength lies in ceasing to be isolated evidence and becoming part of broader ecological and temporal processes that cannot be integrated into anthropocentric frameworks of knowledge. The presented example shows that witnessing is not an exclusive human act grounded in consciousness or intention, but rather a distributed process unfolding across human and non-human agents. To acknowledge nonhuman witnesses is, therefore, to recognize that the material world does not have a record of human actions but active participation in the articulation of truth. While archaeology uses material layers primarily to reconstruct human history, nonhuman witnesses are seen as memory-holders that persist beyond human narratives and place ethical and political demands in the present. It is not a new source of knowledge, but a transformation of what we consider to be memory, witness, and historical responsibility.

3. Dehumanization: Rethinking Humanity under Nazism

> Experiments on animals during the Renaissance and early Enlightenment were particularly heinous and cruel. When animals cried in pain, it was surmised by science that they were not able to reason, thus they lacked the ability to feel pain and suffering: their desperate shrieks were described by scientists as an instinctive, natural, and purely mechanical reaction. The suffering of animals was/is denied by a rationalized response, allowing people to experiment on animals without showing compassion for their fate (or demise). (Klein, 2011, pp. 42–43)

The right to rule the world, as granted to humans in the Book of Genesis, establishes a relationship between humans and animals (Klein, 2011, p. 42; Bartlett, 2002). In the Western world, based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, animals have been or are used (or, according to Klein, directly exploited) for their meat, fur, or physical strength. Until recently, their killing was not disputed by the majority of society, mainly due to the ingrained perception of their inferior position to humans. This perception of the relationship between humans and non-human actors is fundamental not only to post-humanist philosophy and, for example, memory studies, but also to the broader cultural and environmental context – in many ways, it also illustrates the superior attitude of humans toward the landscape and the surrounding environment. In addition to religious conventions, this approach is also related to Enlightenment thinking, which posits humans in opposition to nature and reduces the landscape and nonhuman entities to passive backdrops of human history or mere sources of raw materials (cf. Descola, 2013; Latour, 1993). This limiting view is proving increasingly problematic. Building upon this historical context, current issues arise not only in the treatment of animals but also in the ways society approaches the memory of traumatic places: it is primarily human destinies and suffering that are remembered, while possible destructive changes in the environment often remain neglected.

The position of animals in relation to humans is important for a more comprehensive understanding of the Nazi process of dehumanization – the inclusion of nonhuman actors who carry material and affective memory (Haraway, 2016; Weizman, 2012) in the analysis will help bridge the gap between the separate realms of the human and nonhuman worlds. Although it may seem after this introduction that the Nazis were progressive in the area of animal rights, their strategy of genocide was based on the same ‘traditional’ foundations: a being with the status of humanity is naturally superior in power to nonhuman actors. The hierarchical subordination of certain ethnic or national groups to the Aryan race was intended to ensure that their subsequent extermination would not be contested by society. Therefore, dehumanization was a key tool in the Nazi system.

The presented text offers a critical-historical analysis of human dehumanization and treats inhumanity as a borderline concept. It reflects a broader shift in historiography and the philosophy of history, giving more attention to non-human actors. However, it does not fully adopt this new perspective. Instead, posthumanistic and more-than-human approaches function as a critical horizon for rethinking anthropocentric historical thought

and for analysing how Nazi ideology systematically deprived human subjects of their humanity.

Inspired by Donna Haraway's ideas – especially making kin and challenging the concept of human exception – this approach does not expand the actors in historical narratives. Instead, it uncovers the paradox of dehumanization: hierarchically attributing inhumanity to certain groups. While Haraway seeks to ethically break the human/non-human boundary to broaden responsibility and care, Nazi dehumanization used analogies with animals and nature to justify violence and exclusion. Haraway's approach provides a contrasting background, showing that dehumanization's history is not merely a questioning of human exclusivity, but a violent, hierarchical, and exclusive redefinition.

The deprivation of humanity and degradation justified murder, torture, and experimentation on these no-longer-human beings. This was similar to how experimental animals during the Enlightenment were not seen as rational or equal to humans. This process freed the perpetrators from guilt, compassion, or responsibility.

Dehumanization was part of Nazi propaganda against Jews from the very beginning and was based on clear associations. This strategy was based on several representations, the most notable of which was comparing Jews to mice or rats. The 1940 film *The Eternal Jew* (*Der Ewige Jude*),[2] presented as a documentary, is an example of Nazi propaganda and, at the same time, preparation for the Holocaust and the so-called solution to the Jewish question using the process of dehumanization. The film was commissioned by Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, in 1939. This anti-Semitic film is composed of diverse material: footage from ghettos in occupied Poland (e.g., Łódź, Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin) taken after the invasion of Poland in 1939 by German army film units (*Propagandakompanien*) and also from staged scenes – the actors were often actual inhabitants of the ghettos. The film also includes montages of veterinary documents, mainly footage of rats; a shot of rats crawling out of a sewer is followed by an image of Jews in the ghetto, with the caption 'Jews are the rats of mankind'. There are also manipulated statistics and graphs presenting, among other things, the 'spread of Jewry' around the world, as well as footage from American films as 'evidence' of alleged control over the film industry. The film also includes, for example, pro- Zionist footage from Palestine and photographs from the archives of the Institute for the Study of Jewish Questions. Today, the film is banned and can only be screened under certain conditions, such as in closed seminars and with accompanying commentary.

Art Spiegelman, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning comic book *Maus* (1986), describes *The Eternal Jew* film as a powerful example of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda:

> The most shockingly relevant anti-Semitic work I found was *The Eternal Jew,* a 1940 German 'documentary' that portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters, bearded caftaned creatures, and then a cut to Jews as mice –

[2] See also Koonz (2003), Leiser (1974), Petley (2005) and Welch (2001).

> or rather rats – swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said 'Jews are the rats' or the 'vermin of mankind'. This made it clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project. In fact, Zyklon B, the gas used in Auschwitz and elsewhere as the killing agent, was a pesticide manufactured to kill vermin – like fleas and roaches. [...] To accomplish that [trying to kill an entire ethnic group] required totally dehumanizing one's neighbors – one murders people; one commits genocide on subhumans. [...] In Rwanda, for example, Hutus referred to Tutsis as cockroaches. (Spiegelman, 2011, p. 115)

In the book *MetaMaus* (2011), a conversation between Spiegelman and comic theorist Hilary Chute, he explains in detail why he chose comics as the medium for his narrative, the theme of the Holocaust, and the reason why he anthropomorphized the characters. They are depicted according to their nationality – Jews are mice, Poles are pigs, Germans are cats, French are frogs, etc. Spiegelman used national stereotypes for his allegories, but he also drew on Nazi propaganda and used the narrative form to emphasize the dehumanization that the reader is confronted with on every page of the comic. This is an attempt to challenge the notion that animals are beings without consciousness, who do not feel or suffer. A similar line of thinking underpinned the concept of the superiority of the Aryan race over other people who did not meet the idea of "[...] 'superior' and 'inferior' human traits, just like they had been mapped out for animals, attributing some kind of moral justification for the former and despising the latter for the purported lack of desired qualities" (Klein, 2011, p. 43). In this respect, Spiegelman's narrative bridges the human and animal experiences and memories.

Remaining within the genre of autobiographical comics, Nora Krug's acclaimed comic chronicle *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) also explores connections between the human and non-human worlds. Her search for identity as a German woman after the Holocaust involves mapping her family history and confronting the legacy of guilt. Krug revisits her uncle's adolescence in Nazi Germany, drawing on his 1939 school notebook, which she discovered as a child. In her book, she presents examples such as a text comparing Jews to poisonous mushrooms, accompanied by drawings of a forest and red toadstools. Mushrooms, mushroom picking, and especially the red toadstool are intertwined with German cultural traditions. Krug (2018, chapter 3) observes: "The poisonous red, white–polka–dotted mushroom is depicted in many German children's books. On New Year's Day, it is a symbol of good luck that appears on greeting cards and in marzipan sweets made in its shape". She includes a photograph of her mother as a child dressed as a toadstool (Krug, 2018, chapter 3).

At this moment, the visual metaphor transforms into a posthumanist image: the mushroom ceases to be merely a cultural symbol and becomes a material witness to the interconnection of nature, ideology, and history. Like Schuppli's 'trees on trial', it shows that even nonhuman entities bear traces of collective memory – here, however, in a different, disturbing form. In Krug's work, mushrooms and forests become places where we see how

deeply dehumanization is rooted in images of nature itself. What was supposed to be a 'harmless' symbol turned into a tool of visual toxicity during the Nazi era. We see not only a metaphorical 'comparison of humans to animals or mushrooms', but a process in which the boundary between the human and the non-human becomes an instrument of ideological power.

In the previous subchapter, the *Thing German* is the forest – der Wald. Krug quotes the German-Jewish author Berthold Auerbach, who wrote in 1832: "French should be spoken at the salon, and German in the forest", as well as Joseph Goebbels, who advocated "barring Jews from German forests" (Krug, 2018, chapter 1). Here, the forest appears as a space of national identity, purity, and exclusion – an ecological image of collective memory in which nature becomes an instrument of ideological division. As in the case of trees – nonhuman witnesses discussed in the previous chapter – here, too, the nonhuman world participates in maintaining and mediating historical experience.

A posthumanist reading thus shows that testimony cannot be understood solely as a human activity, but as a network of relationships between the living and the non-living, the human and the nonhuman. In Krug's comics book, the forest, the mushroom, and the body are witnesses that speak the language of memory encoded in the material and symbolic layers of the world. Overcoming the anthropocentric understanding of history here means accepting that nature is not merely the backdrop of history, but its co-creator – and that to understand the past, we must also listen to its nonhuman voices.

The associations involved in dehumanization are clearly and comprehensively framed: the film image of Jews in ghettos is accompanied by the caption 'Jews are the rats'; in the forest, 'you see mushrooms, that look beautiful,' but also "they are poisonous and can kill a whole family. The Jew is just like this mushroom" (Krug, 2018, chapter 3). In both cases, the logic of infection, poisoning, and threat appears – that is, an image in which the nonhuman (animal, fungus, parasite) is used as a metaphor for moral and biological degeneration.

The labelling of Jews, Roma, or homosexuals as pests, parasites, or 'poisonous' beings, reinforced by the language of propaganda, pseudoscientific discourse, and segregation laws, allowed perpetrators to reshape the ethical boundary between human and non-human. As posthumanist theory demonstrates, this boundary was never natural; rather, it is a cultural construct that served to define 'full humanity'. It is dehumanization that reveals the paradox of anthropocentrism: humanity is defined through the constant exclusion of others – those who are likened to nature, animals, or the material world.

From this perspective, Krug's work becomes not only a reflection on collective guilt, but also a sensitive posthumanist gesture of reversal. The motif of the mushroom, forest, or tree, which was an instrument of exclusion and hierarchization in the totalitarian imagination, is transformed in 'belonging' into a space of testimony. These nonhuman entities do not represent a threat,

but rather a continuity of memory that persists even where human stories have failed or fallen apart.

It becomes clear that overcoming an anthropocentric understanding of history does not simply mean 'adding' animals or plants to the human narrative, but recognizing that the world itself is a witness. Memory and testimony are not exclusive to human acts, but rather processes that extend across material and ecological relationships. Krug's 'Belonging' thus offers not only a reflection on German identity but also a picture of how the past can be read through non-human forms of life – fungi, trees, and forests – that persist as a silent yet inseparable part of history.

In this context, dehumanization is defined as the loss of humanity, which, in the issue we are examining, becomes a privilege that affects safety. Concentration camp survivors often recount the loss of identity, degradation, or loss of dignity as daily experiences. Chemist, writer, and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes: "The personages in these pages are not men. Their humanity is buried, or they themselves have buried it, under an offense received or inflicted on someone else" (Levi, 1959, p. 142). In contrast, Levi also shows that preserving one's humanity can be vital to survival. He describes his friend Lorenzo: "Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man" (Levi, 1959, p. 142).

Within a concentration camp, humanity is perceived as a fundamental value that supports survival by helping individuals retain awareness of their significance, abilities, and past. The camp system granted this privilege freely only to the SS, who, paradoxically, acted with cruelty and inhumanity. Ordinary prisoners struggled to maintain their humanity, and this internal value could determine their survival. Maintaining a sense of humanity could shape prisoners' futures, even under extreme conditions. Humanity is thus linked to will, autonomy, and the ability to expend the energy and creativity necessary for self-preservation.

The process of dehumanization taking place and continuing in the camps sought to strip every prisoner of their status as a human being and degrade them to the lowest conceivable level – in this case, the level of animals. Descriptions of this decline are again a frequent feature recurring in the memories of concentration camp survivors. Writer, political activist, and Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivor Elie Wiesel, for example, describes the transports to the camp: "There was little air. […] The heat was intense. Sweat streamed from our faces and our bodies. The air was thick and heavy. We were all waiting for the inevitable end. We were all crushed together like animals" (Wiese, 1986, p. 24). Neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, imprisoned in Terezín, Auschwitz, and Türkheim, describes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (2000): "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity […] to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for selfpreservation he may

forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal" (Frankl, 2000, pp. 26–27). The loss of human status is also referred to in the memoirs *None of Us Will Return* (2013) by writer and Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo: "We were like a pack of animals crowding around a dish, fighting for a drop of soup. Yet, somewhere deep inside, we still knew we had once been" (Delbo, 2013, p. 23). Similarly, poet and prose writer Tadeusz Borowski, a survivor of Dachau, Auschwitz, and Dautmergen, writes in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1992, p. 35): "When the door opens, we jump out like a herd of cattle. Those who fall are trampled; those who survive, survive. That's how it is here".

The degradation of prisoners from human beings to animals was ubiquitous in the camps, but not all animals occupied the same position in this constructed hierarchy. Some animals were given more privileges than prisoners, such as dogs that were well-fed, housed, and allowed close proximity to SS officers, even sharing certain rights akin to those of humans or, rather, to SS officers themselves. Others, like vermin or livestock, were treated as unwanted or expendable. In this paradoxical and unprecedented situation, people ceased to be human beings. This paradox allows us to interpret the camps as places where the boundaries between human and nonhuman become materially and symbolically variable categories. Prisoners, animals, and their privileged or degraded status create a complex network of relationships that shows that the concept of 'human' is constructed and, at the same time, vulnerable to ideological violence.

4. Hierarchies of Life: Animals and Humans

> Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only insofar as the anti-tank ditch for Germany is finished. We shall never be rough or heartless, when it is not necessary; that is clear. We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude towards animals, will assume a decent attitude towards these human animals; but it is a crime against our blood to worry about them. Himmler's speech on October 4, 1943 (Schulz, 1967, pp. 396–397)

A few dozen meters from the crematorium building in Buchenwald, the remains of the bear enclosure, known as the *Bärenzwinger*, are still visible today. It stood just behind the barbed wire through which prisoners could see the bears – the zoo, built by camp commander Karl Koch, was financed by 'contributions' confiscated from prisoners upon their arrival at the camp, including the cost of purchasing the animals. Construction of the zoo and falconry court began in 1938 and was completed two years later. The site was intended to provide Members of the SS and *Deutschen Ausrüstungswerke* (DAW) with an opportunity for rest, relaxation, and entertainment. Employees would go to the zoo for lunch, and officers would take their families there on weekends.

Eugen Kogon describes in detail the construction and topography of the camp, including the falconry court built specially as a tribute to Hermann Goring (Kogon, 1998, p. 42): "The area held the following buildings: the falcon house proper, in ancient Teutonic style, of massive and artfully carved oak; a hunting

hall with hand-carved oak furniture, huge fireplaces and hunting trophies; a circular garden house; and the falconer's house". He states that it also included "game preserve and a cage for wildcats. Fallow deer, roebucks, wild boar, a mouflon, foxes, pheasants and other animals were kept there". Five monkeys and four bears lived in the zoo, and "In the early years there was even a rhinoceros".

The Buchenwald Memorial website documents the zoo's history and features stark archival images. The site's shocking irony lies in two coexisting realities: "The zoo demonstratively placed the well-being of the animals over that of the inmates. were punished for any mistreatment of an animal. This contrast to the mass suffering in the camp was apparently intended. In the early years of the camp, the morgue was situated next to the zoo, alongside the nearby watchtower" (Buchenwald Memorial.de, n. d.). Officers faced severe penalties for hurting animals, highlighting the tragic inversion of compassion.

The existence of this place is hardly reflected in the prisoners' memories, which is interesting because Buchenwald was not the only camp that had a zoo or menagerie on its premises. There was a similar facility in the Treblinka camp – the Treblinka Museum website states the following in the section Topography of the camp: "Another object in the area of the barracks was the ZOO. There were forest animals, such as roe deer, foxes, pigeons and two peacocks. Next to the ZOO, there was a valuables sorting square" (Muzeum Treblinka, n. d.). Patterson (2002, p. 123) quotes Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl, who said after the war that "We had any number of marvellous birds there", and then goes on to describe: "Photographs from the album of Kurt Franz, who followed Stangl as camp commandant, show a small fenced-in enclosure that confined a couple of unhappy-looking foxes" (Pattrson, 2002, p. 123). Similar to Buchenwald, the place was designated for rest:

> Here the SS men relaxed from their bloody work. The main building was a wooden cave for foxes, covered with birch branches. Wire netting prevented the animals from escape. A dovecot was built on top of the zoo. Birch benches, chairs and tables were placed in the centre of the zoo area. The entire site was enclosed with a low birch fence. Flowers rounded up the surrealistic location (DeathCamps.org, n. d.).

Like at Buchenwald, the zoo and menagerie built for guards' entertainment enforced a façade of normality that contrasted sharply with the brutal reality: prisoners were systematically denied their humanity. Memoirs frequently reveal that prisoners compared themselves to animals, highlighting a paradox rooted in Nazi ideology's peculiar morality. This ideology relied on a hierarchy in which Aryans were considered superior to both nature and other humans, who were classified as less than fully human. The animals, under SS control, symbolised domesticated nature, while prisoners were degraded below even these creatures. Prioritising animal care over prisoners reinforced and demonstrated prisoners' utter subordination. The location of the zoo, visible from the prison barracks and crematorium, heightened the psychological dominance of the guards.

Nazi rationality aimed to reshape the world through ideology, dissolving clear boundaries between humans and animals. Categorisation was guided not by consciousness but by ideology that arbitrarily determined who was or was not 'truly' human. This logic underpinned both the use of animals – in agriculture, laboratories, and zoos – and the dehumanisation of people: both became objects, rendered into things deemed 'insufficient'. This parallel shows that camps were sites of violence not just against people but also against the very idea of what it means to be human, exposing how power dictated who deserved protection, care, or recognition.

The paradox of the human and the nonhuman in concentration camps opens up the possibility of using a posthumanist lens to interpret the past. Nonhuman forms of life – animals, fungi, trees, and forests – can function as silent yet effective witnesses that capture and carry historical experiences. At the same time, they can serve as witnesses in court and provide a framework through which collective memory and trauma can be understood and addressed. Accepting this perspective transcends the traditional anthropocentric narrative: memory and testimony are not exclusive to humans, but rather processes that extend across material and ecological relationships. This also challenges the Western hierarchy, which, in its transformed form in concentration camps, determined who was 'fully' human. Humanity and inhumanity are variable categories that are constituted in the dynamics of power, care, and testimony.

In 1945, reporter Sigrid Schultz discovered a hand-bound album in Heinrich Himmler's villa, its covers made of sheep's wool and inscribed with 'Angora' and 'SS.' The album provided evidence of *Project Angora*, an obscure program initiated by Himmler to produce sufficient angora wool to supply warm clothing for several branches of the German military. The project officially began in 1941 with 6,500 rabbits. It will likely come as little surprise that these rabbits were housed in concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Trawniki, and Mauthausen. Schultz writes: "In the same compound where 800 people filled barracks built for 200, rabbits lived in luxury in elegant hutches. In Buchenwald, where tens of thousands starved, rabbits enjoyed scientifically prepared meals. The SS who whipped, tortured, and killed prisoners ensured that the rabbits received loving care" (Schultz, 1967, p. 396).

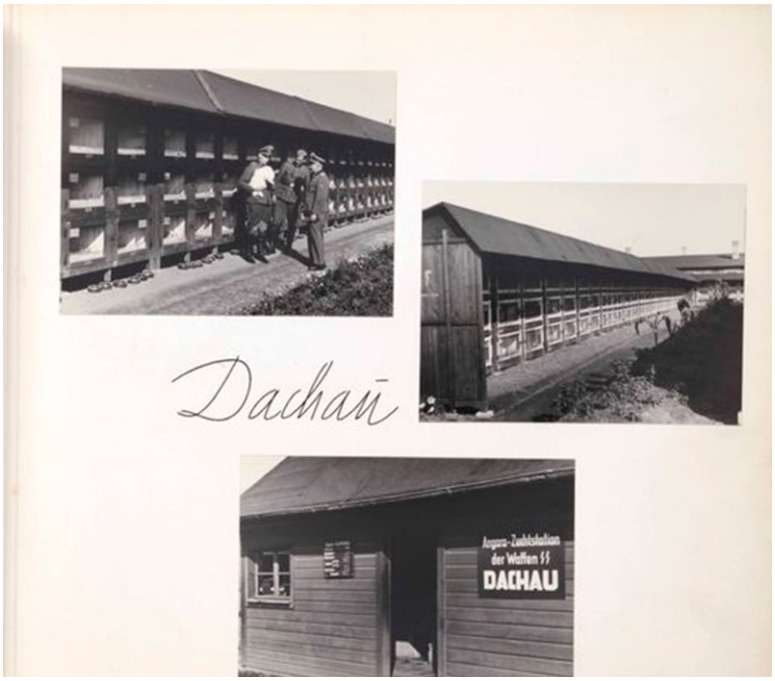
Project Angora offers a precise illustration of the Nazi regime's perverse ethical hierarchy. The regime allocated meticulous care to rabbits – contrasting sharply with its systematic starvation and abuse of human prisoners – inverting normative ethics in favor of ideological values. This calculated display of animal welfare as cultural advancement highlights how civilization can mask profound moral failure. As is often mistakenly attributed to Adorno: "Auschwitz begins wherever someone builds a slaughterhouse and says: these are only animals".[3] *Project Angora* exemplifies as well how the Nazi logic of dehumanization operated through shifting hierarchies of value. Within this context, care and cruelty were not opposed, but rather intimately connected – what determined

[3] Charles Patterson cites German Jewish philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who he claims said "Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they're only animals" (Patterson, 2002, p. 50). However, there is no evidence that Adorno said those words. See also Stuart (2020) and Anonym (n.d.).

care was a constructed utility, rather than any sense of shared humanity. Human beings labelled 'subhuman' were denied care and dignity, while nonhuman animals were objects of attention because they served state goals. This exposes the moral risk of anthropocentrism: the capacity for care is neither universal nor naturally aligned with the human, but instead contingent on arbitrary classification and utility. *Project Angora* thus compels us to question any ethical system that distributes care based on constructed categories, revealing the dangers of subordinating ethics to ideology.

Project Angora can be understood by directly comparing the existence of zoos and menageries in camps to the keeping of rabbits in high-quality hutches. In both cases, animals were treated as objects of care, aesthetic pride, and symbolic control. In stark contrast, prisoners were systematically stripped of their humanity and degraded below even the status given to these animals. This paradox clearly illustrates how power hierarchies define who is considered 'worthy' of care and who is deprived of rights and dignity. The connection between *Project Angora* and camp zoos thus provides a framework for exploring how testimony and memory can extend across both human and non-human actors. The presence and care of the animals become material witnesses to an ideological logic that values life based on usefulness and controllability, highlighting that ethical responsibility is shaped by cultural and power constructions, not limited to human concerns alone.

Camp commandant Karl Koch with his son in the onimal enclosure (1939) (Buchenwald Memorial.de, (n. d.)



Rabbit Hutches at Dachau (1943) (The Wisconsin Historical Society, 1996)

5. Conclusion

When discussing this issue, it is crucial to emphasize one fundamental point: the very idea that certain people can be hierarchically subordinate to other groups of people or animals is fundamentally flawed and ethically unacceptable. Such hierarchization of people and animal species reproduces the logic of evaluation and superiority that underlies the dehumanization and violence that took place in concentration camps. Historical examples, such as *Project Angora* or camp zoos, illustrate how power systems construct artificial boundaries between the human and the non-human, attributing privileges or care only to selected actors while depriving others of their rights, dignity, and chances of survival. Recognizing and rejecting these artificial hierarchies is not only essential for understanding the past but also for defending fundamental ethical values in the present and future. Only by challenging such systems of devaluation can we genuinely affirm the dignity and worth of all beings.

An alternative to this hierarchical way of thinking may lie in a posthumanist approach, where the world is understood as a network of interconnected human and non-human actors, among whom the principles of solidarity and equality apply, rather than superiority or inferiority. This is the only way to dismantle the ideological constructs that legitimize the dehumanization of people and the determination of who is 'higher' or 'lower'. Instead of categorization, which produces hierarchies and exclusion, space opens up for an ethic that recognizes the value and participation of all actors – human and non-human – in a shared world.

At the same time, it must be remembered that posthumanism is not the first, nor the only, way of thinking that analyses the human relation to the nonhuman. Relationship is also present in other concepts, but it is a type of relationship and perception of the abilities of nonhuman actors. The difference between posthumanism and earlier conceptions also lies not only in the degree of sensitivity to the nonhuman but in questioning the exclusivity of the human subject.

The theme of dehumanization in concentration camps shows how power ideologies hierarchically divide life – human and non-human – according to their own logic of superiority and usefulness. This paradox defines 'appropriate' humanity not only symbolizes the moral perversion of Nazi ideology but also reveals the long-standing cultural assumption of anthropocentric thinking, according to which humans can hierarchically subordinate other humans or other species. Such hierarchies are not only ethically problematic, but also analytically limiting: the world cannot be understood solely through human categories and human privilege. Memory and experience are spread across human and non-human actors – trees, fungi, animals, and material objects function as 'material witnesses' that allow us to read the past and think about the present through a broad ecological and material context. The examples presented demonstrate that recognizing non-human actors and their testimony and perspectives can offer not only new interpretations but also an ethical framework that transcends anthropocentrism and ideological hierarchies.

It is necessary to overcome thinking that evaluates and hierarchizes life and instead strive for solidarity and equality between human and non-human actors. Such a perception allows us not only to understand how dehumanization arises and functions, but also how it can be resisted – by recognizing the value and subjectivity of all forms of life, not just those that are privileged, superior, or 'useful'.

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