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# ‘Strange times to be a chicken’: The meaning of a metaphor

## ABSTRACT

*This article addresses Cock Fight’s displacement of the Judaic metaphor of ‘sacrificial chicken’ onto the Palestinian, and its simultaneous reimagining of the Jew as a victimizing ‘cock’. Concurrently, it discusses the problematic implications of the film’s use of actual chickens as metaphors, which subverts its anti-exploitation political agenda.*

## KEYWORDS

cinematic metaphor  
Judaism  
victimization  
animal rights  
Jewish literature  
Zionism

Strange times to be a Jew have almost always been, as well, strange times to be a chicken.

(Chabon 2008: 13)

In the opening to his dystopian detective novel *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2008), Michael Chabon introduces the readers to a violent scene: the protagonist Meyer Landsman, a homicide detective, examines the humble chambers of the recently murdered Emmanuel Lasker, and in the process accidentally stumbles upon a mysterious conspiracy involving, among other things, a plan to precipitate the arrival of the messianic age. Such eschatological machinations are linked with the end-of-days’ atmosphere of the book’s alternative history – one in which a portion of Alaskan soil became a sanctuary for Jewish refugees in the aftermath of World War II, an autonomous district

that, 60 years after its institution, is now being dismantled. This so-called 'Reversion' process not only signals a bureaucratic change but also a cosmic metamorphosis. The signs, as the book's opening tells us, are already there: indeed, even as early as a week before the homicide, 'amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet [butcher] as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in Aramaic, the imminent advent of Messiah' (2008: 13). This miraculous event leads Detective Landsman to the conclusion noted in this essay's epigraph – namely, the existence of an intimate connection between Jews and chickens, which causes both to undergo 'strange times' simultaneously.

What may be attributed to Chabon's famously whimsical sense of humour, and subsequently dismissed as mere frivolity, actually holds true to Jewish lore. Thus, within Judaic tradition, Jews have often been associated with chickens and vice versa – a metaphorical bond with real-life consequences. This dynamic is clearly evident in the *Kaparot* ritual, which has been performed for centuries on the eve of Yom Kippur (Trachtenberg 2004: 163). During the ritual a live chicken is passed three times around the head of the subject and then slaughtered, but not before proclaiming that 'this fowl is my substitute, this is my surrogate, this is my atonement; may it be designated for death, and I for life'. Through these declarations 'the presenter thereby creates a representational relationship between himself and the sacrifice' (Halbertal 2012: 31) and exposes its substitutive logic: chickens, 'the choicest of birds' (Feliks 2007: 603) within rabbinical literature, come to represent the 'chosen people' – the Jews – and in so doing are situated as their proper proxies and bearers of their sins. In short, the fowl takes on the role of innocent 'victim' (which in Hebrew is the same word for 'sacrifice' [*Korban*]), so that the Jew, its metaphorical kin, would not suffer from divine retribution.

The existential position that this practice embodies – where Jews surrender to the judgement of Judaism's God – was one that Israeli Zionism sought to abolish as part of its challenge to the observant lifestyle of Diaspora Jewry (Almog 1997: 124–61). According to the modern Zionist outlook, Jews were no longer 'slaves to the Lord' but masters of their own fate; hence, in their world, there was little need for 'sacrificial chickens'. This suppression of the metaphor, in turn, opened it up for new, and more critical, symbolic applications. Eli Amir's celebrated 1983 novel *Tarnegol Kaparot/Sacrificial Chicken* serves as a poignant case-in-point. Like other examples of the 'transit camp' genre of Israeli literature, *Tarnegol Kaparot* (2010) focuses on the experiences of Jewish immigrants of Middle Eastern origins during Israel's founding decade (1949–1959), and is geared towards unveiling their marginalization by the contemporaneous Eurocentric Zionist hegemony. In the novel, the adolescent protagonist Nuri leaves his Iraqi family in the ramshackle immigrants' transit camp to join the kibbutz and become a 'true Israeli'. There, however, he discovers an environment that trades in Zionism's promise of socialist equality for racial segregation (Berg 1996). Through recognition of this power structure, the book's title emerges as a complex signification – Middle Eastern Israeli Jews become 'sacrificial chickens' themselves, used by Europeanized Israeli Jews to bear their sins of hubris and racism. In Judaic tradition, Jews were metaphorically related to chickens but removed from their sacrificial fate; in *Tarnegol Kaparot* (2010), such salvation is made available only for some Jews, but not for all.

*Cock Fight* picks up on this critical use of the 'sacrificial chicken' but transposes it onto the Palestinian Israeli conflict. At face value, the 'cock'

in the film's title refers metaphorically to both main characters: Marziano's abrasiveness resonates with the machoism of cockish behaviour (indicated as well through the Hebrew tradition of calling a rooster *gever*, meaning 'man'); Nabil's own tendency to flare up is also cockish, as is his admiration of his moustached visage in the mirror (Shot 2). As the fight between these two 'cocks' escalates, it becomes clear that the true victims of their feuding are the chickens from Marziano's farm. They wither in the heat as the two protagonists' stubbornness prevents them from reaching a peaceful resolution. They literally stand on the physical barrier between the protagonists (Shot 69), as both sides flirt with disaster, with Marziano threatening to cross the barricade and Nabil *cocking* his gun. And even as human violence is finally averted, they nevertheless die in the aftermath, their bodies thrown all across the road like in famous massacre photographs (Shot 92). Thus envisaged, if Nabil and Marziano come to represent the warring nations (Palestine and Israel, respectively), and their behaviour is metaphorically aligned with that of the cock, then the chickens come to symbolize those innocent individuals who are caught in the crossfire.

Through this reading, the particular ethnic character of this injured population remains unclear. Yet a closer inspection would reveal that, in spite of a supposed air of neutrality, *Cock Fight* nevertheless seems to metaphorically relate the Palestinians to the victimhood of sacrificial chickens. Indeed, as representative of Palestine, Nabil is not as cockishly violent as Marziano, and seems more aligned with the constrained and subdued posture of the locked-up chicken. Such alignment is made clear in the song the two characters share, which opens with the line 'our chicken and your chicken cry in the same language'; while the content equates between Israelis and Palestinians, the language itself (Arabic) indicates that the latter are much closer to the position of the chicken than the former. Later, Nabil would assert as much when answering Marziano's accusation about his lack of care for the chickens: 'I don't feel for them? I used to live with them in the coop. I slept with the chickens and woke up with the chickens' (Shot 49). Like the chickens, the Palestinian people live a caged existence in the Occupied Territories, and like them it is forced to relinquish autonomy to an Israeli warden. Thus, in *Cock Fight* we see another stage in the evolution of the 'sacrificial chicken' paradigm, one where Jewry is no longer privileged as the metaphor's primary referent. Rather, if Jews are still related to chickens in this film, it is only in the aforementioned role of cocks – the victimizing bird, rather than the victimized fowl of atonement. Considering the nature of the long-standing metaphorical relationship between Jews and chickens, such transformations appear as truly radical, and are perhaps suggestive of the strangeness of the times.

Interestingly, however, in spite of Lipschitz's attempt to subvert the traditional applications of the 'sacrificial chicken' metaphor, she still tacitly endorses this tradition's use of chickens *as* metaphors – a measure that seems to run counter to her radical political message. Jewish history has proven that reducing a live chicken to a metaphor makes it easier to kill it. *Cock Fight's* metaphorical use of chickens, in turn, guarantees their eventual demise in the frame of the narrative. Unlike the actors (Raskin 2005: 17–18), the dead birds were not given leeway to reshape, broaden and subvert the boundaries of their prescribed metaphor. And even if some were saved from their metaphor's desired end, by their very presence in the film, they nevertheless contributed to a rationale that justifies their victimization, hidden amidst protests against another form of victimhood. In realizing this rationale, the film thus comes

dangerously close to those works, which, throughout history, have ‘appeal[ed] to the animality of the victims’ in order to justify ‘colonization, oppression, discrimination, and genocide’, and as a result it misses the opportunity to search in our relationship with animals for ‘a way of relating to others [...] without excluding them on the basis of what makes them different or unique’ (Oliver 2010: 271). This way of relating cannot be founded on linguistic parameters, which do not recognize the animal’s otherness but symbolically anthropomorphize it instead. Rather, to the extent that it can be extracted from accounts of animal rights activists, this novel relationship operates, for humans at least, through ‘an acute sense of *awareness* of the animal that can be translated as “exposure”’ (Aatola 2011: 401, original emphasis). It is in this ‘exposure’ that a new kinship between humans and animals may arise, one that could potentially save both from the lingering effects of potent metaphors.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dan Chyutin is a Ph.D. candidate in Film Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His doctoral work focuses on film and religion, and specifically on contemporary Israeli cinema’s articulations of Judaism. He has essays published or forthcoming in *Cinema Journal*, *Shofar*, *Jewish Film and New Media* and *Journal of Jewish Identities*, as well as in the edited volumes *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion* (UT Press, 2011) and *Media and Translation* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

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