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Animalitas versus Humanitas: A Comparative Analysis of a Comic Book Series by Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski and a Graphic Novel by Gosia Kulik

Abstract: Regarding the context of the longstanding discussion about the status of nonhuman hominids, this article compares two Polish graphic narratives about a chimpanzee functioning in the human environment. The first case is Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski's comic book series *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek* addressed to young audiences. Chmielewski presents the relations between the intelligent ape protagonist and his human companions in a playful and simplified way. Practices meant to humanize the chimpanzee named Tytus do not entail moral dilemmas. The second case, the graphic novel *Ta małpa poszła do nieba* by Gosia Kulik, is designed as a pseudo-prequel to celebrated series about Tytus. This serious narrative, addressed to more mature recipients, renders a complex network of events that precedes and succeeds the death of a little chimpanzee "adopted" by a human family. Kulik emphasizes not only what is "human" in the animal, but also what is "animal" in humans. In the article, her novel is interpreted through the prism of the concepts by Giorgio Agamben and Raymond Corbey.

Keywords: human-animal relations, nonhuman hominids, graphic novel, comics, Chmielewski Henryk Jerzy, Kulik Gosia

Over around four centuries, the tension between *animalitas* and *humanitas* has been a recurrent motif in the philosophical and scientific scrutiny of hominids – a family of primates which includes *homo sapiens* and other extinct human species, along with orangutans, chimpanzees and gorillas. Within the newer strand of "the metaphysics of apes", as Raymond Corbey calls the discussion about the status of nonhuman hominids (Corbey, 2005: 13), also literary pieces, films and comics have played an important role. This article proposes that the body of ape-centered works, which can be viewed through the prism of human-animal studies, can be expanded thanks to the inclusion of two Polish graphic narratives: the series of comic books *Tytus, Romek*

i A'Tomek (Titus, Romek and A'Tomek) by Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski (published since 1957) and the 2018 graphic novel *Ta małpa poszła do nieba* (This monkey has gone to heaven) by Gosia Kulik. What proves indispensable to grasp the specificity of these word-and-image approaches is a short overview of the most poignant dilemmas and persistent clichés in the discussion on the status of *hominidae*.

As Corbey surveys, in the mid-seventeenth century, when Europeans learned about the existence of orangutans and chimpanzees, the conspicuous similarity of these animals to humans seemed to be a potential threat to the human position within the hierarchy of beings (Corbey, 2005: 15–23). Nicolas Tulp (famously portrayed by Rembrandt during a lesson of anatomy) saw a chimpanzee as early as 1641 and described it. In 1698, Edward Tyson (also an anatomist) dissected another specimen. Soon, this experience prompted him to write the treaty *Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmie Compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man* (1699). Following the typical anthropocentric bias, Tyson tried to define the human as superior than "the Pygmie" and proposed a revised hierarchy of beings with primates at the lower level, next *Pygma* (as the intermediate link), humans, and angels on the top. For his contemporaries, an additional stimulus for reflection about human-animal boundary was the knowledge about so-called "wild children" (sometimes, ascribed to the *homo ferus* genre), who did not speak. In the face of such borderline cases, the answer to the unsettling question about the *differentia specifica* of human beings remained unclear. What used to be interchangeably summoned to safeguard human dignity was the mind, self-awareness (Linnaeus), speech and soul. The debate reignited when Charles Darwin announced the "common ancestor" theory (1859). Also today, such features of nonhuman hominids as the bipedal posture, high intelligence and tool use, along with the proven genetic similarity to humans, prompt scientists and philosophers to pose the question about the border between *animalitas* and *humanitas*. Giorgio Agamben regards this longstanding pursuit for an adequate definition of the human as an anthropological "machine" which produces the differences between beings (Agamben, 2004: 26). Since over centuries – Agamben argues – this machine functioned within the in-between area, it has shaped not only the concept of the ape-man or the wild child but also of the barbarian, the slave, the foreigner – to put it shortly, each excluded "Other" (Agamben, 2004: 37–38).

The liminal status of nonhuman hominids proved to be a puzzle also for many writers who cast representatives of these species in the role of protagonists. For example, the famous *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) by Edgar Rice Burroughs unfolds a story of a "wild child" raised by a gorilla-like ape Kala. In "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to the Academy"), Franz Kafka went even further since a great ape called Rotpeter (Red Peter) is the narrator

of this 1917 short story[1]. Although Red Peter seems eloquent and well-educated, his humanization has not made him happy. Furthermore, the assumed monstrosity of nonhuman hominids began to draw the attention of artists. An archetypal example is the *King King* film (Cooper, Schoedsack, 1933) about a gorilla-like giant. Both Tarzan and King Kong became pop-culture icons and frequently appeared in movies, comic books and novels. The storyworld created by Pierre Boulle in his 1963 novel *La Planète des singes* (*Planet of the Apes*) proved equally popular. The book was soon followed by a plethora of film and comic adaptations. The exceptional quality of Boulle's idea is the role reversal: on a distant planet, human savages are fully subordinated to civilized chimpanzees, orangutans and gorillas.

It is precisely the outstanding pop-cultural career of ape protagonists that forms an indispensable context for the analysis of two Polish narratives about nonhuman hominids placed in human environments. First of all, the choice of the medium of comics perfectly fits into this tradition. Undoubtedly, Chmielewski's series and Kulik's graphic novel share many features. Both are single-creator hand-painted works. Both present the character of a young chimpanzee which seems a well-thought choice because the neotenous features of this animal encourage treating it as a child (see Małecki et alt., 2019: 24–28). In both graphic narratives, the chimpanzee's cleverness results in humanizing attempts on the side of surrounding people. Yet, these works differ evidently in such respects as the model recipient, the visual convention and – most importantly – the approach towards tensions between *animalitas* and *humanitas*. As a consequence, their degree of delving into entangled aspects of the hominid discussion varies significantly.

The playful series by Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski, initially published as comic strips in the magazine "Świat Młodych" (The world of the young)[2], is addressed to children and younger teenagers. Hence the original meaning of "comics" (as a pop-cultural work which foregrounds the humoristic facet) is definitely applicable in this case. Notably, Chmielewski's series is not the first Polish children's comics with a funny ape protagonist, for as early as 1935 Kornel Makuszyński and Marian Walentynowicz published *Awantury i wybryki małej Małpki Fiki Miki* (Adventures and escapades of a little monkey called Fiki Miki)[3]. This rhymed work about the adventures of a monkey befriended by African boy Goga-Goga soon spawned a trilogy, ensuing volumes appearing in

[1] Interestingly, Red Peter is recalled by J. M. Coetzee's character, Elisabeth Costello, in her lecture about animal rights (Coetzee, 1999: 18–30).

[2] For the full record of publications from the series *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek* up to 2010, see: Rusek, 2010: 282–283.

[3] The second part of the monkey's name, "Miki", may have been designed to evoke Mickey Mouse (Sosnowski, 2005: 252). Similarly, a possible allusion to American pop culture in comic strip by Chmielewski is connected with the character of Dużuś, who resembles King Kong (Chmielewski, 2002: 31–33).

1936 (see Rusek, 2010: 67–68). Chmielewski's idea has become a far more developed enterprise – a series of comic books and their reeditions that has been released since 1966. It has always been designed as approachable for young audiences. Tytus and his friends travel through time and space and meet exotic creatures, yet even the most surprising adventures are told chronologically. Although the style of Chmielewski's cartoons has changed over decades, it is possible to recognize his stable predilection for legible lines and lettering, a rather regular panel grid, conventional speech balloons, cartoon jokes, and – in case of color graphics – a bright, cheerful palette.

In the same vein, the human-animal relations are presented in a simplified way. First of all, with regard to the assumed public, the casting of a chimpanzee in the role of the "team mascot" accompanying two teenage boys, Romek and A'Tomek, seems more than justified. Tytus, as an animal of short posture, is a bit childlike. However, he is often dressed in casual teenage clothes, uses youth language and has a tendency to tell "monkey" jokes, so he resembles an unruly adolescent who never grows up. The background story of this character is incongruent and ramified. In the 1957 comic strip, Romek and A'Tomek bump into a laboratory animal kept on a space shuttle and make friends with him (Chmielewski, 2002: 9). Interestingly, Chmielewski employs a motif of a talking laboratory ape which exceeds its natural condition prior to Boulle. What is more, initially, Tytus is not a genuine chimpanzee because in some panels he has a tail. An alternative story from the 4th edition of *Book One* presents the artistic origin of Tytus as created by Papcio Chmiel, the comic *alter ego* of Chmielewski, who formed a chimpanzee on the basis of a splash of ink (Chmielewski, 2009a: 52–55). Romek and A'Tomek called him "Tytus de Zoo" (based on the similarity between the word "tusz" – Polish for "ink" – and the name "Tytus"). In turn, according to one of the earliest stories, Tytus lives in a cage in the zoo and is regularly kidnapped from it by his human friends (Chmielewski, 2002: 52). Likewise, in another old comic strip, three protagonists meet a whole tribe of Tytus's talking relatives in Africa (Chmielewski, 2002: 63), who learn that their relative is being "educated" in the best European zoological gardens. Moreover, in the story "Sen Tytusa" (Tytus's dream), when the chimpanzee writes his resumé, he claims to be born in "the monkey grove" (Chmielewski, 2002: 86). This way or another, the status of Tytus is unnatural and impossible to explain in a rational way. Moreover, such properties as the ability to speak, developed emotions or the faculty of reasoning characterize many different animals presented by Chmielewski. Animals perceived as animals (non-humans) rarely appear in this storyworld. For example, the uneducated chimpanzees who cannot speak serve only as a backdrop against which Tytus stands out. As long as he does not utter words, he is indistinguishable from other exemplars of the same species. When he wants to hide, even the lineup that engages dozens of nearby chimpanzees cannot give him

away. Only the exact number of his hairs (2365205124!) is to confirm his identity (Chmielewski, 2002: 237). Tytus is cast as a being superior to an ordinary chimpanzee and inferior to his human companions. He functions somewhat as an intermediate link in the evolution of hominids – just like his ancient ancestor who "got bored of being an ape", so he became a Neanderthal (Chmielewski, 2002: 66, trans. D.L.-G.). Furthermore, before Tytus marries a female chimpanzee, he flirts with women; hence, there are no genre boundaries in this innocent courtship.

The likewise blur of interspecies boundaries underpins the motif of transgression which propels the scenario of many adventures[4]. Tytus is being humanized through many educational activities. For example, in *Book One*, he joins a scout team. This topic was imposed previously by Świat Młodych, issued by Scouts Publishing House Horizons. Tytus is also educated through sport, military training, reading books, music and art. Even the proportions of his body are to be changed, as if an accelerated evolution of species were to take place during one lifetime. Whereas this idea reveals scientific claims, the tool of a rolling pin meant to cause the change turns the whole experiment into a parody of torment (fig. 1 – "Enough! You rolled him into a pancake" – Chmielewski, 2009b: 5, trans. D.L.-G.).

From the point of view of human-animal studies, stories about the adventures of Tytus, humanized by the environment (and willingly humanizing himself),

[4] The issue of transgression in Chmielewski's series had not been raised by researchers until Jacek Kołodziej and Weronika Pisarska addressed it in their papers presented during the 2022 scientific conference "Z Tytusem przez wszechzbytki. Konteksty, tropy i motywy w twórczości komiksowej Henryka J. Chmielewskiego" (Toruń).

show a naive and playful anthropomorphization of the hominid. There is no clear demarcation line between *humanitas* and *animalitas*, and there are no moral tensions either. The only direction of possible change of status leads from animal to human. Thereupon, Chmielewski's humorous approach can only be loosely inscribed in humanistic-liberal tendencies connected with the idea of emancipation (see Wolfe, 2010).

In this context, Kulik's graphic novel turns out to be a compendium of possible tensions in the economy of the relations between a small female hominid and her human environment. Her intermediate, liminal position between apes and men is confirmed even by the fact that her adoptive parents, Janek and Krysia Harcerscy, call her "Małpgosia". This name is combined of Polish word "małpa" ("monkey") and the diminutive form "Gosia" derived from the female name "Małgorzata" ("Margaret"); which is also the name of the author herself. The complicated human-animal relations in Kulik's narrative can be captured through the prism of the concepts by Agamben and Corbey. Also the title recalling the afterlife alludes to the discussion on the hierarchy of beings and the topic of animal soul. What is more, the scene of the commentary on the *Planet of the Apes* movie also highlights a very conscious reference to the basic themes in the artistic reflection on the status of hominids[5]. This graphic narrative is definitely addressed to more mature audiences (young adults and adults), for the mere subject here can be drastic. The retrospective layer pictures the death of a chimpanzee adopted by a couple who could not have their own child. The scattered plot covers also the complex network of social and family relations which had led to this tragedy and the equally entangled composition of detrimental effects in the aftermath. In regard to the wide range of issues, one can label Kulik's novel "socially engaged", "psychological" or recognize it as "the animal story".

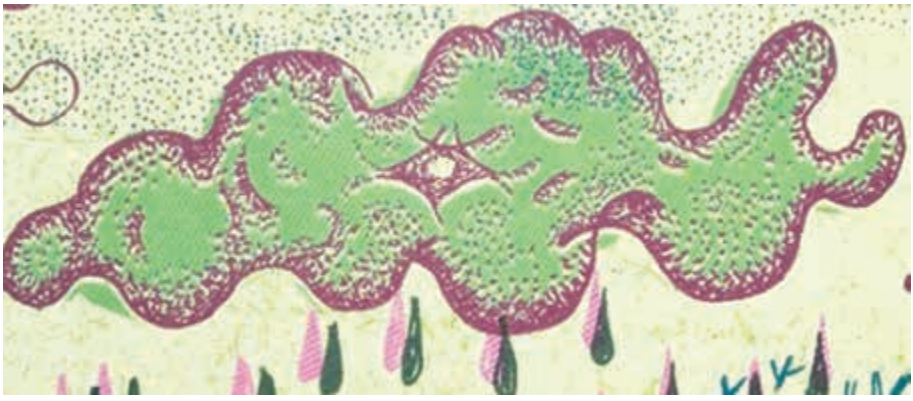
Also, the underground style of this work is intended for non-child recipients. It is highly congruent in its artistic form, which is based on an unrealistic palette and gutter-less panels, mostly arranged in a chessboard, quadriptych design. The volume features many chronological, narrative loops and enigmatic, quivering scenes. In particular, numerous panels without speech balloons, including three single-page spreads (Kulik, 2018: [54],[80],[143]), signal the serious character of the work. Subdued colors sometimes give way to an intense red of details emphasizing the private dramas (for example, in the opening panels picturing Janek's account, the red color accentuates the blood of a chimpanzee that allegedly wounded herself in an accident with scissors (Kulik, 2018: [8–9]). Kulik pictures violence, hallucinations, traumatic recurrences of images from the past or a distorted perception of the characters. All

[5] Within an intermedial reference, Kulik additionally emulates the recognizable lettering of the blockbuster's title (Kulik, 2018: [63]). Page numbers are given in square brackets because there is no pagination in the volume.

these elements enable one to call *Ta małpa poszła do nieba* a graphic novel not only in reference to its book-bound format, but also to its "high production value" and literariness (see Stein, 2015: 425), as well as its character of a piece that is "strange, puzzling, disturbing in its otherness" and undermines comic book conventions (Tuszyńska, 2015: 52, trans. D.L.-G.).

Notably, in Kulik's project, the topic of human problems is inseparable from the issue of animal distress, just like words are inseparable from images. This is why I will organize my analysis of tensions between *animalitas* and *humanitas* in this graphic novel around four iconotextual motifs that epitomize the following: Janek's "metaphysics of apes", the traumatic repetitions that haunt the adoptive father, the self-incrimination and depression of the adoptive mother and an idea of animalization as the moral development of a human.

The most emblematic for the first area is the leitmotif of a rain cloud. Its picture contains an internal figure resembling both the eye of providence and an unusually regular cell body of a neuron (fig. 2)[6].



This visual symbol, used on the book's cover, meaningfully conflates the metaphysical and biological facets, in accordance with Janek's private "metaphysics of apes". First of all, as an admiring – hence anthropomorphizing – "father" to a little chimpanzee, he resists the anthropodenialist pressure (see de Waal, 2006: 59–68) from a conservative, Catholic milieu. This environment, epitomized by a priest (Kulik, 2018: [15]), associates apes with sin and Satan, which reminds one about the traditional image of the monkey as *figura diaboli* (Corbey, 2005: 8)[7]. After somebody has left on Janek's door the "666" and "Sinners will go to hell" inscriptions, he creates his own hierarchy, or rather numerology, of beings, with 6 meaning Satan, 7 – God, 5 – human, and 4 – monkey. As four is separated from seven – he explains – monkeys are far from the devil,

[6] Kulik uses the almost identical symbol of God in her next graphic novel *Poczwarki* (Kulik, 2020: [47–48]).

[7] Tytus is also cast as a devil – but only in a nativity play (Chmielewski, 2009c: 27) or when he falls out of the chimney covered in soot (Chmielewski, 2009a: 18).

so his ape protégée must have gone to heaven (Kulik, 2018: [17], trans. D.L.-G.). Notably, the cloud is launched in panels depicting essential occasions in relation to Janek and his chimpanzee "daughter", when she transgresses the status of an animal. Janek mentions the rain cloud (the word "cloud" is underlined) in his retrospection of the moment when he stole a weeping chimpanzee orphan from a cage in the zoo, because he heard the most thrilling, although wordless, cry for help that suspended the difference between humans and animals[8] (Kulik, 2018: [94]). Since raindrops resemble tears, the cloud epitomizes the emotional resonance between equaled beings, which outclasses the verbal communication (so valued by defenders of *humanitas*). The said visual motif assists Janek's secret mourning ritual at Małpgosia'a grave under the park tree, which bears the inscription "07.07.07" (Kulik, 2018: [79–80]). These numbers – as we may easily observe – rather than denoting the date of death allude to God and heaven. Also the penultimate panel of the novel features the cloud symbol (Kulik, 2018: [142]), which is again connected with Janek's forbidden grief. In the finale, he learns that his abandoned lover gave birth to their child and passed away. The story closes with a narrative loop, for the baby boy turned out to be chimpanzee-like. Since he was covered with fur, the lice infected him with typhus. The orphaned boy was then called "Tytus" (because of the sonic similarity of this name to the word "typhus") and handed over to the zoo (Kulik, 2018: [140]). Undoubtedly, Kulik refers to Chmielewski's evergreen character of "Tytus de Zoo". Her intention of creating a pseudo-prequel[9] to the celebrated comic series is also linked to her protagonists' surname ("Harcerscy" can be rendered by the adjective "scout"). Therefore, we encounter a peculiar case of intramediality (one work refers to a different work using the same medium – Stein, 2015: 421), which completes the presumably omitted dark background, so typical of authentic life stories of the zoo animals.

Another area to be analyzed is connected with the traumatic repetitions that overwhelm Janek after Małpgosia'a death. They are transposed onto the whole series of disguised variants of the monkey motif. Janek seems to be persecuted by significant coincidences which bring back painful memories. For instance, when he goes to the cinema, he can only watch *Planet of the Apes* (probably Tim Burton's 2001 remake). Despite his recent anthropomorphizing tendencies, he mercilessly disavows the film: "Monkeys that live like humans?! It's madness!" (Kulik, 2018: [65], trans. D.L.-G.). Likewise, the intrusive homonymy seems to besiege him during everyday conversations (in Polish, the

[8] What is distinguished in Kulik's novel, as a feature common to monkeys and humans, apart from developed emotionality, is the possession of opposable thumbs (Kulik, 2018: [90]).

[9] I use the prefix "pseudo-" quite intentionally since Kulik's story is set in the imprecise, probably, postmillennial era of cell phones and cinema screenings of *Planet of the Apes*, while Chmielewski's plots were originally embedded in the reality of communist Poland.

word "monkey" also means a small bottle of vodka and the @ sign). What is more, Janek and Krysia's persistent question whether Małpgosia has gone to heaven becomes surprisingly mirrored in Janek's life. He meets the mute alcoholic Gosia, who drinks in a pub called "Heaven". Parents dehumanize her by calling her "monkey", nevertheless she can communicate by writing, for example, on a steamy mug (Kulik, 2018: [134–136]). Therefore, again, Kulik travesties the issue of speech as faculty separating humans from animals.

The less numerous word-and-image sequences that focalize Krysia's perspective are equally congruent due to a recurrent motif of the wounded monkey. Initially, the achronological narrative makes the recipient think that Małpgosia's accidental death and care about her afterlife were to cause Krysia's depression. Kulik pictures her endless crying that turns into a serious flood inside the flat (Kulik, 2018: [52–55])[10]. Then, the page that features Krysia cutting the stomach of a toy monkey previously owned by Małpgosia raises suspicions. Eventually, Janek discovers the truth. His toxic mother-in-law told Krysia that only liver transplantation could save her life (the woman was addicted to alcohol). Krysia surrendered to the attitude imposed by her disdainful environment and wanted to restore the "proper" hierarchy of beings, according to which human life is more precious than animal life. This is why Krysia tried to cut out the chimpanzee's organ for transplantation and then poisoned the howling animal. Meaningfully, in all panels presenting the dying Małpogosia, her complaint "Mum! It hurts! Ouch!" is included. Her words can only be treated as an element of traumatic flashbacks haunting the perpetrator, who feels as if she has killed a human being, or even worse – her own daughter. Due to the introspective character of these panels, even the question whether the chimpanzee actually spoke just before her death must remain unanswered. While in the context of (un)anthropomorphizing hominids, this is a key point.

The last motif of hair/fur brings us back to the dominant perspective of Janek. First of all, he grew a moustache to animalize himself and resemble his adopted "daughter", who liked it very much. The handful of hair, found behind a TV set, is the only relic of his lost "child" that he preserves with care. When he learns about his wife deed, he takes the murder weapon (scissors) and punishes Krysia with cutting down her hair. Hair means then an honorable index of parenting love toward an animal and a status of the victim, not the perpetrator. From this angle, conceiving a chimpanzee-like Tytus proves Janek's internal

[10] Although Kulik does not include images of the brain, her strategy seems similar to "neurocomics" and "neuroimaging" – experimental graphic narratives which present the inner perspective of people burdened with mental disorders, such as Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012) and David B.'s *Epileptic* (2006) – see Tougaw, 2018: 188; cf. Tuszyńska, 2015: 311. Also two other of Kulik's single-creator works can be connected with this current. See e.g. Kulik, 2012; Kulik, 2020.

moral transformation[11]. It is important also because he is definitely subjected to imposed animalization as a victim of his mother-in-law. She keeps on insulting him as an alleged impotent who could only give an ape child to her daughter. She compares all male humans to "apes", which – along with the parallel oppression of the mute Gosia being called "monkey" – allows the equating of all kinds of violence and discrimination with established attitudes toward defenseless animal "Others", in Agamben's terms[12]. On the other hand, a willful animalization of Janek means accepting the patient and martyr role of animals and standing for them. As a result, it may entail the moral development of a human. In a way, the author herself identifies with the chimpanzee character she created because, on the book cover, she uses the meaningfully adjusted signature "(Małp)gosia Kulik".

What makes Kulik's approach so original is precisely the disruption of the hierarchy of beings in the key, borderline case of a nonhuman hominid faced with humans. Kulik not only emphasizes what can be regarded as "human" in the animal, but also discovers "animal" dispositions in humans. Importantly, these dispositions seem to be highly moral, whereas cruel behaviors are ascribed to distorted social relations between human protagonists. In this sense, Kulik's graphic novel turns out to be fit for the contemporary dilemmas of animal studies researchers who raise the issue of posthumanism. As I have shown, Chmielewski's humorous series is set in a completely different mental horizon and lacks moral complications. While the status of Tytus and other animals is not always obvious and playfully intermingles *animalitas* and *humanitas* in changeable proportions, the position of human protagonists is never destabilized. Yet, technically, probably nothing stands in the way of introducing a non-anthropocentric openness (similar to the one which emerges from Kulik's serious graphic novel) in comics addressed to children. However, it is more than obvious that the authentic fate of so-called wild animals dependent on humans rarely fits into the comic aspect traditionally associated with comics for young audiences.

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[11] The last pages picture Janek as a bearded man.

[12] Interestingly enough, Krysia's father was killed in a hunting accident because he was wearing a cap with deer antlers meant to attract the prey (Kulik, 2018: [119]).

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