

# NOTHING TO BEAR

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## ABSTRACT

The practice of taming bears has been a tradition of Vlachs since centuries on and outside of the Balkans, providing entertainment for public by forcing the animals into “dancing”. With the raised awareness around animal welfare, the practice has been prohibited and aborted, leaving a trace in both the humans and animals.

This thesis investigates the historical timeline of the case of the dancing bear in Bulgaria. Along, it delves into the stages of the bear’s life by analyzing the intimate tamer-bear relationship. Aiming to grasp an aspect of the human view over the animal, it researches the concept of captivity, and questions the tendency of personification and objectification of non-human bodies. In the stage after the released from the chains, a process of rewilding is challenging the bear to forget the human imposed lifestyle and behavior, searching for the buried instincts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Bulgaria, when someone is not well rewarded or paid, and therefore rejects to complete an assigned task, we use the proverb *A hungry bear does not dance horo*<sup>1</sup>. The metaphorical use of the sentence is demonstrating resistance to an unfair condition. As the saying sounds humorous and absurd, it stems from an as absurd but humorless practice of public entertainment. Less than two decades ago, chained bears were roaming through the streets of Bulgaria's cities and villages. Walking on hind legs and "dancing", the bears were accompanied by a man playing a small string instrument, begging for pennies.

People of the ethnic group Vlachs (Ursara<sup>2</sup>), also called мечкари/ мечкадари (bear-man), originating from Romania, were passing a tradition of bear training with generations, with the oldest records dating to the 13-14th centuries. Half nomads - traveling actively in summer through the Balkans and beyond, living in settlements during the winter. The Vlachs had their whole life dependent on an animal as everyone else who nourished domesticated livestock by means to place food on their table, with the difference that this one was not domestic but tamed. (Marushiakova) Nowadays, their descendants are generalized by the local population and media as Romani, constituting Europe's densest minority.

For centuries, the Vlachs resided on Bulgarian territory and were integrated into the local culture in various ways. Their image was mystical, with legends built around the bear. Bulgarian folklore included beliefs related to the power of the bear. If a woman wanted children, she plucked a few hairs from a bear's stomach and tied them around her waist, with a black string for a boy and with a white string for a girl. The smoke from burning bear hair was believed to cure a variety of illnesses. (Silverman) In some cases the bear would walk over an ill person, or the ill person would be pulled through the bear's open mouth as a way of curing. Dressing up as a bear and leader at the Kukeri carnivals was typical.<sup>3</sup> While the bears were dancing, the leaders sang on the streets and carnivals. The songs were traditional and well-known rural songs, original songs about the wars and domestic novellas, urban songs. The aim was to arouse listeners' attention and, on the group side, to satisfy the audience's taste. (Славоф) These beliefs have been instrumental in keeping the public interested around the practice and have managed to mask the reality. The bears were the opposite of the promised majestic fairy figure – miserable, malnourished, skinny, small animals were the usual sight.

Although similar practices were made illegal in other countries, Bulgarians continued to tolerate the practice of using brown bears for entertainment. It wasn't until 1998, after the fall of Communism and the rise of democratic Bulgaria, that a law was enacted to prohibit the selling, buying, and exhibiting of brown bears in front of paying audiences. However, this law did not immediately put an end to the practice. It was not until the Austrian animal welfare organization, Four Paws, and the Brigitte Bardot Foundation intervened that progress was made. Through their persistent efforts, all the dancing bears in Bulgaria were purchased from their owners by 2007 and relocated to a specially built reserve park near Belitsa, a town in southwestern Bulgaria. Today, the park serves as a tourist attraction and rehabilitation center where 18 bears live on 12 hectares, receiving medical care and constant monitoring.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Гладна мечка хоро не играе" – Хоро/ хорός/ oro is a collective dance, typical for Bulgarian folklore, as well as of other Balkan nations. (Wikipedia)

<sup>2</sup> Possibly stemming from the Romanian word *urs* meaning bear, or *ursus* in Latin. Other names of the bear-leaders: Власи, Лудари, Рудары, Урсари, Мечкари, Мечкадари, Лингуарари, Копанари

<sup>3</sup> Образът на мечката в Българския фолклор, Александрова, Таня, 2011

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.park.belitsa.com/>



Photograph possibly taken during the filming of the video "Мечката е домашно животно во Бугарија"<sup>5</sup>  
Source: Four Paws, year unknown

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<sup>5</sup> Мечката е Домашно Животно Во Бугарија, YouTube, Video, 5 Dec. 2014  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHSoUDgsgAI&list=PLvIA5nVWNtk1dzKPw7EFvMu9h5UPaltR&index=3>. (Accessed March 2023)

## PERFORATION

“The first subject for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. [...] it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal.” (Berger)

Animals have been the earliest subjects depicted by humans, and their interaction has been diverse and complex since prehistoric times. Humans have depended on animals for various purposes, and this dependence has persisted to this day. As human societies evolved and agricultural practices emerged, animals were domesticated for labor, food, and companionship. "Tame" and "domesticated" are often used synonymously, but they have different meanings. "Domestication" is a process that leads to genetic changes in animal and plant populations, adjusting their wild ancestors to human needs, while "taming" is the process of habituating individual animals to humans, reducing their natural avoidance response, and allowing closer contact and handling. (Diamond)

Bears have been tamed by humans from time immemorial in variety of cultures. Analysis of remains of a bear jawbone with peculiar deformation found at La Grande Rivoire rock shelter in France (fig.1) suggests that bears were tamed and tethered as early as 6.000 BC and possibly traveled alongside the early itinerant hunter-gatherer communities. (Tünaydin) The Roman Empire is well-known for its use of animals for entertainment. Emperors held gory spectacles in circular arenas in which animals fought to the death, either with each other or with human gladiators. (Linder) From the 12th century and for centuries, in Europe, bear trainers traveled through towns and villages with trained, muzzled, and chained bears. Only until last century or two did the practice disappear from western countries, with the latest cases on the Balkans, Turkey, Russia, and India. (Tünaydin)

The bears in Bulgaria were usually bought for large sums as small cubs from zoos with corrupted documents, or by some other bypass ways. Rarely, they were captured directly from their natural habitat, and doing so was considered heroic. While still small and innocent, the cub got a metal *ring* inserted in it's nose by piercing it with a heated metal bar, later being attached to a chain. (Szabłowski) Compared to human beings, a bear's smell sense is about 2100 to 3000 times better.<sup>6</sup> By causing this extreme and constant pain, breaking teeth, and cutting nails, the keepers ensured their control over the bear. (Ibid.)

There are different versions of the teaching process of the “dance”. In the 17th century in the town of Smorgon (Belarus), existed a bear training school. Performers from around the world were taking their bears to “educate”. The described technique of teaching there was the placement of the bear over a heated metal plate, with a simultaneous rhythm playing. The pain triggered the bear to rock back and forth on its legs, which was then reminded of by the sounds of the musical instrument.<sup>7</sup> Although this method is rejected to be used by the Bulgarian мечкапу, and stated that instead only classical conditioning was used for training. Like teaching a dog to sit, the bears were led into play and rewarded with a treat when the trick was right. By the words of biologist Dimitar Ivanov, however, bears are not capable of learning in this manner, instead another, simpler method was used. The person held the bow for his *gadulka* and a wooden stick, attached to the chain, at the end of which was the bear's nose. The bear would try to keep up with the bow, creating the illusion of dancing to the rhythm of the music. But in fact, it was an attempt to get away from the pain. (Szabłowski)

In any of the cases being true, *dancing was not an innate behavior* and would never be possible without the use of tools of physical manipulation, showing dominance and feeding fear, keeping the animal in submissiveness.

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<sup>6</sup> A Bear's Sense of Smell [Why It's So Good?], Fred Hoffman

<sup>7</sup> Сморгонская медвежья академия, Wikipedia



**fig.1 Lateral views of the right mandible**



**Bearman with a bear, 1920s, Photo courtesy of lostbulgaria.com**

## BIPEDAL SILHOUETTE

**An old Ursara legend that used to be widespread in the past in the Balkans, but now is almost forgotten, infers the origin of the practice:**

"Once upon a time there was an honest girl, who became pregnant without having anything to do with a man. She was very miserable and went to the river to drown herself. When she reached the river, the water drew back, fleeing from her, so she could not get to it and jump in. Suddenly a man stepped out of the river and said, Girl, do not be sorry that you have conceived. You will give birth to an animal that will be capable of working like a man. The girl went back home and in due time gave birth to a bear. When the bear cub grew up, the Vlach Gypsies trained it to dance and to do various other things, and that's how they became bear-trainers and started to travel round the world leading bears."<sup>8</sup>

**The legend of dancing bears does not include the part where the animal is caught and perforated. Instead, the bear is a child, born by a human, to work for him. Hiding the fact of capturing the bear, but perceiving it as a man-made creature, emphasizes the perception of "owning" the bear. And because the bear is man-made, it is natural to act and live as a human. The animal was perceived as a person and therefore treated as one. This misconception of the animal, lacking individual need for it's being, resulted in a mistreatment.**

**Most bear-man probably didn't dream of making a living of a bear. Some inherited the practice as a family tradition, but others were led to this decision, by the shortage of other possibilities. After the fall of Communism, and transition to an open market system in the early 1990s, majority and minority populations suffered from unemployment, resulting in poverty mainly in the rural areas. The combination of the ethnical prejudice towards Romani and the economical state of the country, led to some believing that the taming of a bear could be a profitable move. Hunger, driving the leader into actions of capturing the bear, taming it and using it for begging, turns the bear into commodity.**

However, once their bears were taken away, with the charge of providing "inhumane" conditions to their animals, the bear leaders who were interviewed stated that the bear had a place in their family and was treated as such. There are several interviews available with Rady Ivanov (Baj Rady), from the village Yagoda, known as the last living bear keeper in Bulgaria today. The journalists take interest in the man's personal life, inquiring about his relationship with the bear he used to "own" and how his life changed since the lost of his tool of making a living. Not a bear-man anymore, but a widower elderly man, living alone in a wrecked house, earning money by hand carving spoons - *it seems that the chain was tied both ways*. The person was attached to the bear, as much as the other way around. As he tells his nostalgic stories from the times when he used to walk with his bear on the shores of the Black Sea, he shows photos of him and Gosho (the bear). In one part of the interview, talking about his wife that passed away, he reveals a photo that used to be on her tombstone – on the photo her standing along with the bear. A personal memorial, but also a metaphorical one of the death of the practice, where the bear and the man are still together. When asked if he tortured his bear, the answer was "I was not a torturer, whatever he wanted to eat and drink, he got". This meaning that the diet of the bear was as the one of the human – including bread and alcohol daily.

**This troubled relationship may have led to the owners' denial of the bear's otherness and not realizing the extent of the harm they posted on the animal. Even if some of the bear-men were not ill-tempered consciously, as Rady seems, their actions towards the animals were as evil. This could be observed in the later encounter between the same bear and leader described by Witold Szabłowski. After a couple of years of the bear living in Belitsa, a foreign movie producer decides to take the man to see the bear. When he went next to the fence and threw a fruit, Gosho insisted to eat it. The other bears reacted and ate the other fruits, but the bear recognized his owner by the smell. For Rady it was an emotional experience. He called the bear as his child and couldn't hold his tears. But Dimitar Ivanov speculates**

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<sup>8</sup> Marushiakova, E. (1998). Bear-trainers in Bulgaria (Tradition and Contemporary Situation). *Ethnologia Bulgaria*, vol. 1., pp. 106-116.

that the bear remembered how he was threatened before he was allowed to eat food – he expected to be hit first. The bear in question has lost its vision during its life with the man, probably a result of the alcohol it received regularly and an accident it had, during the travels around the country.

Such attitude towards the bear can be defined as anthropomorphizing. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human traits and characteristics to non-human entities or events. This term comes from the Greek words *anthropos* meaning human and *morphe* meaning form. It is a common practice in our daily lives, in the arts, and even in scientific research, often unconsciously. Our desire to understand the world around us leads us to interpret it using the most familiar model available to us, that of human beings. However, the impulse to anthropomorphize is not about making the world more human-like, but rather about finding and emphasizing any human elements that may be present, whether they are actual humans, their messages, or their traces. Due to the uncertainty inherent in our perceptions of the world, we tend to overestimate these human-like elements. (Guthrie, 1993) This perception of animals provided hunters with a conceptual framework that enables them to understand their prey, to identify with it, and to anticipate its behavior. On the other hand, it creates the following moral conflict: if the animal is considered an equal, then killing it is murder. (Ricard)

Bipedalism being one of the most distinctive features of Hominids, possibly led the attention to the bear specie. Naturally, bears are capable of standing up on hind legs. Doing so allows them to get more information from its senses of smell, sight, and hearing. It is a sign of curiosity, not aggression. Their flat-footed stance makes it easy to stand up straight.

In *Non-Companion Species Manifesto* June Dwyer is referring to the non-reciprocal emotional attachment that humans feel for animals as “the pain of anthropomorphism”. Simply meaning that most animals don't care about us nearly as much as we care about them, which can lead to false prejudice. She suggests that there are two ways of approaching wild animals - the naïve expectation that we could treat them the way we treat pets, considered childish, juxtaposed with a more reflective approach where the emotional bond with the animals is avoided in order to keep an objective view over the situation.



The photograph from the tombstone of Rady's wife next to Goshu.



## DISTANCE

Humans tend to recognize themselves in animals, although in the case of the dancing bear, the animal is as close as possible to the human(just a ring apart) and still lacked the empathy it needed to get freed earlier.

As cities expanded, human social order established and boundaries between wild and urban, nature and culture redefined and proliferated, humans possessed a need to bring nature back to engage with it.<sup>9</sup> According to John Berger, the public zoo, the place where people go to meet, see, observe animals, is the monument of the impossibility of such encounters. “[...]an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as (hu)man.” He describes the captive animals in zoos as marginal. Inhabiting an artificial space, much like a theatre prop, trying to suggest something of animal’s original landscape, but providing the bare minimum of an environment in which they can exist. The cages being viewed as frames of the animal inside, often disappoint in not meeting the expectations of the original “reproductions”.

Haraway argued that camera and gun shooting are inexorably linked in animal objectification, animals are hunted and skinned to be transformed into objects for human use. Shooting animals for an objectified purpose (artistically, trophy collection, educationally) unveils the criteria a human embrace and strives to achieve and convey their idea of perfection in nature.

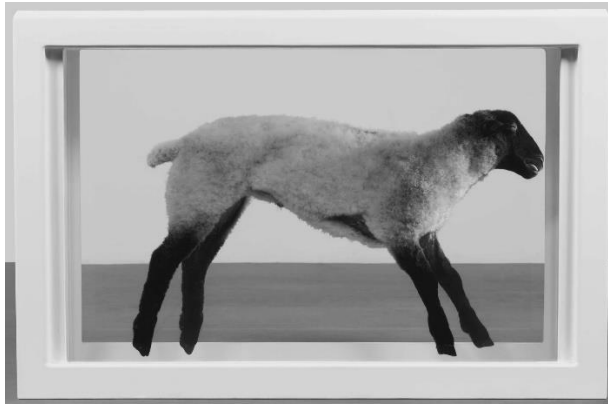
The ways animals are presented, with educational purpose, lacks to build a realistic idea of their being, and rather helps their perception of being insensitive object of study and observation. Taxidermy<sup>10</sup> is the process of preserving animal skin together with its feathers, fur, or scales. The taxidermist by various techniques *re-animates* the dead body. After removing the inner body parts, measuring them, and finding accurate replacements, an artefact is created, meant to reproduce the likeness of the living creature as accurate as possible. It is the taxidermist’s goal to rearticulate the animal into a ‘lifelike’ state and to therefore ‘re-create’ the essence of the once living creature. (Patchett) Although, by this *reanimation*, the captivity of the animal becomes double. With the intention of creating a ‘typical’ specimen, the individual animal that has been skinned and stuffed and turned into taxidermy object, becoming a symbolic animal that is representative of the species. (Ibid) The body becomes a scientific information. By developing classical poses and standardized arrested-motion stances, became associated with different species of animal’ (Desmond 2002: 160). These arrested-motion poses suggest two levels of fixity: firstly they ‘capture, or rather index the now lost capacity of the (once living) animal to move’ and secondly, they fix the animal as an ‘exemplar’ of its species, leading to objectification.(Ibid) First the animal is objectified, by literally being turned into object, and secondly its own presence doesn’t resemble the individuality of the subject.

In taxidermy, the empty body of the animal is meant to be seen as an image, representation of the other living individuals of the same species that we do not see, while simultaneously, the body represents itself. In *The work of Representation* by Stuart Hall, the way a sheep is represented by language and visual signs is questioned. It is stated that the literal and abstract visualizations meant to present the animal, are linguistic and cultural attributes, that are not embedded in the actual body of the sheep. Therefore, to the question “When is a sheep not a sheep” – the answer is “When it’s a work of art”. Arguably, a living body can as well represent the sheep in the same way as the one put in formaldehyde-filled tank by Damien Hirst. (fig.2) This could be seen in Jannis Kounellis’ work *Untitled (12 horses)*(fig.3). In 1967, the Greek-born artist arranged the tethering of a dozen of horses, facing the walls of a spacious Roman garage. Similar to the dancing bear, the horses’ living bodies are meant to represent themselves and as well reflect the human. By the displacement of the animal outside the realm we are used to see it, shifting between being an object and being grotesquely alive. The absurdism, the smells and beautiful figures, forces the viewers into facing what they do not want to see. In the moment when the body is presented as an object, the viewer realizes that it is not, and it’s rather closer to his own self.

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<sup>9</sup> Animals as Cultural Objects, Charlotte Grillet, 2020

<sup>10</sup> From Greek – *taxis*, meaning order, preparation, and arrangement and *derma*, meaning skin. (Wikipedia)



**fig.2 Damien Hirst, Away from the Flock, 1994**



**fig.3 This photograph is the only image of the installation that Kounellis has allowed to exist as a piece of evidence of the event - therefore becoming the artwork today.**

## DIGGING

A law prohibiting the selling, buying, and exhibiting of brown bears in front of paying audiences was issued in 1998. Although the death of the practice started with the involvement of the Austrian organization *Four Paws* and the French *Brigitte Bardot Foundation* and the establishment of the *Dancing Bears Park Belitsa* in 2000. Privately driven initiative of redemption of the bears started and the team of Four Paws started tours around the country, negotiating with the bear leaders to sell their animals. Described by Szabłowski, the process was far from smooth. The leaders were dependent on the animals, and losing them meant that they would lose their living. Couple of thousands of dollars were proposed in return of the animal. As this worked for some, others were trying to go around it by cheating or hiding, but the end was inevitable. The veterinary team was going directly to the houses where the bear-men lived with the animals and the bears were put to sleep on the spot. These irreversible historical events got media's attention and some of them were recorded.<sup>11</sup> The videos demonstrate the contradicting emotions and understandings surrounding the bear. Smiling ecologists, crying villagers and distressed bears. The chains of the bears are cut right there. A symbol of freedom, change, progress for the bears, people, nation. Simultaneously misread as a threat, misfortune and redundant for the ones that were holding the chains, literally and indirectly. Some of the chains are now behind glass, in the exhibition hall of Park Belitsa, others are kept as a sentiment in people's homes.

The removing of the metal ring symbolically makes the bear free, but it's existence can never be free from the traces of the human hand. Spending their whole life in captivity, means that wilderness is an unfamiliar idea. Szabłowski describes in details the bear's lives in Belitsa, after their captivity is over. The remaining of the bear's everyday is occupied with learning how to live like a bear and unlearn how to be a person. Arriving at the parks, most of the bears were "(...)sick with diabetes, cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and cataracts." in result of their human diet.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the park is the restoration of previously untapped natural instincts of bears by providing them an environment as close to their natural as possible. This requires a gradual presentation of the different spheres of freedom, by dosing. Slowly, the bears learn to search and find food, that was hidden for them. To socialize and build relationships with each other. Learn how to dig a hole in the ground and hibernate in it.

As the bear digs a hole in the ground, it also digs it's buried instincts. Going fully 'back' is hard for human bears. But why is such condition better? What is hidden inside the hibernation den, that humans cannot provide? In the dense coniferous and deciduous forests, hills and meadows, green grass, herbs, wind, silence. Coldness, hunger, open sky. Why no conditions are better than any conditions provided in captivation? Something that the ones born in captivity cannot grasp but will continue to mourn.

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<sup>11</sup>Освобождане на танцуваща мечка в с. Ягода, Rostislav Velichkov  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Epu4cQwZdCA&list=PLvIA5nVWNtk1dzKPw7EFvMu9h5UPaltR&index=4>

<sup>12</sup> Szabłowski, W. (2018). *Dancing Bears: True Stories of People Nostalgic for Life Under Tyranny* (p. 70)



Removing a ring from a bear's nose<sup>13</sup>



photo courtesy of park Belitsa

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<sup>13</sup> В село Ягода остана жив само един мечкадар, преди години бяха 18, Ваньо Стоилов, <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/9757576> (accessed March 2023)

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