

How Nonhuman Are Nonhuman Animals in Bulgarian Popular Music?

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My position in this text is based on the beliefs of Critical Animal Studies and on opposition to the objectification and normalisation of violence towards nonhuman animals. In a world shaped by violent anthropodomination, contemporary culture(s) provide a vast range of mechanisms designed to prove and reassure the self-proclaimed supreme status of the human. Like so many other artistic and cultural spheres, popular music also takes part in the substitution of real nonhuman animals with their false cultural duplicates. Proceeding from this ethical perspective, my paper will seek to examine various representations of nonhuman animals in Bulgarian popular music of the last six decades.

I will leave aside from this text the real practical contact with nature (like the festivals that take place in various natural places), as well as the real practical work of activist musicians. I will also not examine the animal songs in human music and the videos (in which nonhuman animals are also present in quite interesting ways). In this paper I will examine mainly the types of representations of nonhuman animals in Bulgarian popular music of the last six decades, and more specifically in the song **lyrics**. Lyrics have attracted serious theoretical attention in the last few decades, as popular music studies have developed more and more interdisciplinarity. Still, popular music lyrics are far from being the primary subject of scholarly research – in popular music studies they are still often seen as subsidiary, while in literary theory they are often perceived as popular, and therefore of poorer quality compared to “real” literature.

The lyrics of Bulgarian popular music deserve special research attention for various reasons, among which the pronounced tendency of using preexisting poetic works as lyrics for songs, and even more often of creating new ones by professional lyricists. This tendency was especially characteristic of the socialist period (1944–1989) and partly also later, for Bulgarian popular music – in both its then most prominent directions, *estrada* (light music or pop music) and rock (mostly in a “tamed” form, pop rock). Bulgarian popular song lyrics of the period are in a way a sung volume of poetry, and many of them have excellent literary qualities. Among the best-known authors of lyrics are the poets Pavel Matev, Evtim Evtimov, Alexandar Petrov, Bogomil Gudev, Lyubomir Levchev, Damyan Damyanov, Nedyalko Yordanov, Mihail Belchev, Miryana Basheva, Margarita Petkova, Petya Dubarova, Georgi Konstantinov, Petar Karaangov, Rumen Leonidov, Radoy Ralin, Victor Samuilov, Volen Nikolaev, as well as many others. With poets writing lyrics for various performers and bands, the role of lyrics in Bulgarian popular music during the second half of the twentieth century is definitely not as subordinate as it is in other cultures and periods. But my examples will be from other genres as well, I will not strictly stick to just lyrics by renowned poets.

A general broad view at Bulgarian popular music would ascertain right away **the lack of animal rights** as a subject of popular songs. An environmental turn in Bulgarian popular music is a process yet to be fulfilled, if it will be fulfilled at all. One cannot find in the lyrics neither global themes connected with animal rights (such as opposition to exploitation of animals for food, testing, fur, zoos and recreation industries, hunting, etc.), nor local themes concerning problems characteristic of Bulgarian reality (such as stray cats and dogs, dog spinning, horse-drawn wagons and carts, violence to animals, dancing bears, etc.).

Leaving the animal rights as a subject aside, in this paper I will briefly examine the nonhumanity of nonhuman animals in Bulgarian popular music. In other words, I will seek to find whether in the lyrics of Bulgarian popular songs there are references to real nonhuman animals, or are the nonhuman animals present in the lyrics only with numerous figurative and utterly anthropocentric appearances.

Figurative use of nonhuman animals as humans

First, I would like to mention a few groups of functions that together I will call figurative use of nonhuman animals as humans, namely a substitution of statements about humans with nonhuman animals. From the point of view of humans and rhetoric, those would be similes, juxtaposition, metaphors, personifications, etc. There is a wide variety of tropes and figures in Bulgarian popular song lyrics, which use nonhuman animals as a rhetorical basis for various semantic and syntactic formations.

The first type in this group would be called **social and political function**. Naturally, in certain popular music genres the social elements are more significant than they are in others. A tendency toward expressing social aspects became clearly visible among Bulgarian blues and rock circles in the 1990s – a period marked with abrupt and in many ways even painful political and economical transition. Bands were very strongly triggered by the euphoria that the transition from socialism to freedom (as it was then widely perceived) brought in 1989. The frequent meetings and rallies of those early full of hope months and years were regularly sound-tracked by leading stars of Bulgarian *estrada* and rock. Much more than in the previous decades or in the decades to come, Bulgarian popular music of that time undertook a political function – expressing both the local economical aspiration of Bulgarians for more prosperous living and the universal idea for freedom of speech, lifestyle, ideology. So where were the nonhuman animals in this picture? Mostly, in this period and with these functions, we can find them in blues, hard rock, punk, and other “loud” genres. Thus, in Poduene Blues Band’s famous 1992 “The Dog of the Outlying District” the dog is actually the singing I – homeless, hungry, thirsty, alone, but “freer than you, mister”. Hard rock/heavy metal group Ahat’s emblematic 1989 “The Black Sheep” asserts the protest of the individual and the choice to be different – a black sheep within a stupid flock of sheep that fight for power and grass. Again, this is purely anthropocentric use of nonhuman animals to illustrate purely human problems. In punk rock singer Milena’s 1991 song “Meat” the meat-mincer is actually the political machine that minces the people into forcemeat. The same motif could be observed in other songs as well, for example in Review’s “Terminator” or “No Address”. Punk rock group Control also criticised aspects of the social and political reality. Music journalist Rumen Yanev calls the following lyrics from their 1989 song “We Weren’t Dying of Happiness”: “one of the most synthesized and accurate definitions of socialism” (Yanev & Bratanov 2014, 238):

We lived quite well chosen
All gathered in the same pit –
Tigers, rabbits, hens, horses,
Different breeds of women and men.

We lived a little, stole a little,
Saved a little, bought a little.

No, no, we weren’t dying of happiness!

In general, nonhuman animals served quite well in those protest songs, expressing various aspects of human life as compared to nonhuman animal life. Oppression toward people was seen as parallel to the oppression toward nonhuman animals.

Another figurative function of nonhuman animals in popular song lyrics is as **metaphors and similes expressing human characteristics, feelings, etc.** There are numerous examples, actually this is the most common figurative use of nonhuman animals as humans, and it can be observed in various popular music genres. In Nova generatsia’s 1987 “The Snake Man”, for example, the singing first-person character describes himself as a snake. As a concentration of so many stereotypes (like being stupid, or bad, or a loner), one of the favourite figurative animals is the wolf – and a list of its uses, by no means exhaustive, would include progressive rock band FSB’s “Wolfish Time” (1993), pop singer Stefan Valdobrev’s “Wolf” (1998), and pop singer Grafaf’s “Lone Wolf” (2016).

Naturally, nonhuman animals appear in so many **love songs** – at times they describe **types of relations**. Numerous lyrics mention birds, for instance in pop diva Lili Ivanova’s 1979 hit “Like a Bird”, the singing I declares that her heart is a bird and birds don’t like cages, so “leave me my freedom, if you want me to be yours”, etc. – utilising the famous cage metaphor. Metaphoric horses appear often as well, as in the 1994 song “Wild Horses” by new-wave band Class. Relations in couples and in families are also often “animalised” – here I should mention “Dog and Cat” by popfolk singer Slavi Trifonov, because this person recently entered politics, in 2022

his party was part of the government, and it was his party who actually overthrew this government – but I will not have the space here for human animals in Bulgarian politics.

While still in the thematic field of the relations, I should mention the **sexist and insulting use of nonhuman animals** in Bulgarian pop folk and rap. Even more so in the videos, but there are quite graphic lyrics as well. Pop folk in particular is full of women being presented as prey, as various animals, cows, stupid sheep, cats, snakes – a lot of sexual insinuation or even direct insults. The lyrics of those genres bristle with womanisers, girl hunters, etc. Occasionally, there is also “man hunting” or women singers whose lyrics sound sexist toward women.

Next, I would like to mention the presence of animal tropes and figures as connected with **music**. Like Control’s “Rock is an Animal” (1993) or Factor’s “Bone Rock” (2000). And of course, just like in the English-speaking popular music, as well as probably in any other, there are the obligatory animal band names: Shturtsite (directly connected with the Crickets, as well as with the Beatles); Balkan Horses Band; Herman’s Wolf Band; Kottarashky; Nasekomix; etc. The last two examples are actually quite interesting transformations of Bulgarian words – *kotarak* means tom-cat, and *nasekomi* means insects. Herman’s Wolf Band is a title actually borrowed from Hermann Hesse, and here I will skip another type of figurative use of nonhuman animals, namely songs about cartoon characters, film characters, fairy-tale animals, toys, etc. – all these cultural duplicates of real animals that enter popular music as well.

References to real nonhuman animals

Let us now direct our attention to the considerably narrower realm of real nonhuman animals in Bulgarian popular song lyrics, that is the presence of nonhuman animals as such, not as substitutes for human aspects.

In some instances, the animals are **real, and at the same time symbolic**. Biser Kirov’s 1968 “Pigeons of Sofia” was the first song about the capital city Sofia – in it, the pigeons are real, as they are in Sofia, and in the video, but they are also presented as a symbol of the city. Similarly, in Boyan Ivanov’s 1983 “Pigeon City” there are “pigeons that alight around us”, there are chestnut trees, lilacs – all of them real, and at the same time representing and symbolising Sofia.

Sometimes in lyrics nonhuman animals could be **real, but connected with human feelings**. Quite often those animals are birds, they alight near windows, on eaves or roofs, and eventually they get somehow paralleled with the characters’ feelings or thoughts. Such are Rossitsa Ganeva’s 1980 “Pigeons”, Doni and Momchil’s 1998 “Sleeping Birds”, and many many others.

The next type of appearance of real nonhuman animals in Bulgarian popular song lyrics is as part of the **scenery**. In the immortal 1967 hit “White Silence” performed by Georgi Minchev and Shturtsite, the scenery is a seascape, and naturally, seagulls are important part of it. Interestingly, the video for that song is staged at the most significant place in the capital Sofia – the Alexander Nevski Cathedral – while the lyrics paint a very moving seascape (4-500 km from Sofia). But since I promised not to go into analyses of videos, let us just look at the lyrics: the “late seagull” in the song, and the other bird that flies through the night – they are all part of the seascape staged to strengthen the feeling of sadness and silence that the characters (named here with “we”) are experiencing.

There is a strong line of sea lyrics in Bulgarian *estrada*. The legacy of composers Stefan Diomov and Stefan Dimitrov, as well as various poets who were born and worked in towns at the Bulgarian Black Sea coast (Ivan Vanev, Petya Dubarova, et al.), created a microgenre with very distinct sea subject-matter (notable here are the vocal groups Tonika, Tonika SV, Domino, singer Toni Dimitrova, and others). In many of their songs birds are flying by, most often seagulls – all part of the seascapes, and the respective feelings the seascapes are designed to embody or express (e.g. Domino’s “Burgas Eves” (1994), Toni Dimitrova’s “Oh, the Sea!” (1997), et al.).

In comparison with the vast repertoire of Bulgarian popular song lyrics that offer various types of representations of nonhuman animals as either human, or figurative, or somewhat symbolic, or part of setting of feelings, or scenery – the corpus of **lyrics with environmental elements** in Bulgarian popular music is rather modest. Here are three examples of various environmental approaches that I have observed and outlined as types of attitude:

1) In Yordanka Hristova’s remarkable song “The Dolphins”, which in 1966 won the biggest Bulgarian popular song contest *The Golden Orpheus*, the dolphins are depicted as characters with their real habits of fast night swimming in pods.

2) Furthermore, the 1985 song “S.O.S.” by rock band Shturtsite touches on a very important perspective – the fact that nonhuman animals often excel the human being in various ways. In this case, the lyrics call the dolphins “even better than the people”, and refer to their selfless inclination to save people in trouble on the open sea.

3) And the third example is Lili Ivanova's 1982 hit song "Cricket", which draws attention to the lack of crickets in the concrete cities.

Those are types of attitude that we could call animal-friendly. But naturally, there is the opposite too, and here I will give just one example of **popular song lyrics proclaiming violence toward nonhuman animals**, namely Ruslan Maynov's "Pigs" (1999):

I love pork
I run after the pig
With a knife as razor
Stop, stop, get it!

Pigs, pigs,
All the pigs as relish.
Pigs, pigs,
All of them in jars and cellars.

To end this paper on a more optimistic note, there are also some Bulgarian performers and musicians who are actually involved in **animal rights actions**. Some of them are activists in life, like Vasil Gyurov, or vegetarians, as Doni and Kalki, while pop singer Rossitsa Kirilova is not just an activist in life, but also on television – she spent 15 years (1995–2010) hosting the weekly show *For the Animals with Love*, as well as in the lyrics of her songs, and here my last example will be her 1988 "A Song for the Lost Dog", in which the children in the neighbourhood lost their favourite stray dog, and did not want a pure bread substitution, and the laughter and playing in the neighbourhood never came back until the dog was found again.

Conclusion

To conclude this brief excursion through the animal world of Bulgarian popular music of the last six decades, I would state that the ethical potential of popular music for reduction of human cruelty toward nonhuman animals has not yet been developed in Bulgaria. Up to this day, nonhuman animals appear in lyrics in numerous figurative and utterly anthropocentric representations, in scanty references to real nonhuman animals, in quite scarce raising of environmental issues, and in general lack of animal rights as a subject of popular songs. I could only hope that this strong ethical potential will someday be developed in Bulgarian popular music, and that the reduction of violence and cruelty towards nonhuman creatures will find its strong voice in popular song lyrics, as well as in other channels of popular culture.

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