

# For the Love of Antlers: Heads on a Wall or Antlers on a Bride

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Deer head and antlers are specific parts of the animal body embedded with complex symbolic implications and as *pars pro toto* represent the entire animal. Certain cultural practices of animal objectification within our contemporary society denote these parts of animals' bodies as trophies, decorations, and designed objects, which then become markers of individual human identities, lifestyles, and particular living spaces. However, such new meanings inscribed into these animal materialities do not necessarily classify them as passive objects. It has been acknowledged that material culture objects continually transform in meanings through their own accumulative biographies.

KEYWORDS: antlers, deer, trophy, decor, material culture

## DEER AND SWIFT GLANCES INTO THE PAST

Deer are large herbivores endowed with heightened sense organs, a strong physique and elongated limbs, which enable them rapid escape from predators (Putman 1988: 5). Their unique characteristic is, however, the development of antlers. As structures of solid bone, antlers grow in pairs and are usually developed by males.<sup>1</sup> Some of antlers' distinct features, which also distinguish them from horns, as noted by Rory Putman (1988: 11), are that they have no outer covering once entirely shaped, that they do not grow directly from the skull but are supported on basal discs of bone, and that they are usually branched but, most importantly, antlers are shed every year and then re-grown.

Specific biological characteristics of deer influenced various notions about these animals in human societies throughout history and the development of their roles in economic, social, mythical, and religious aspects of life. Due to their proportions, deer were prey that provided a substantial amount of meat and raw materials, while at the same time their rapidity and agility ensured that they were, perhaps, a less easily accessible quarry. However, as noted by the archaeologist Marina Milićević Bradač (2002: 13), the flow

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<sup>1</sup> Only in reindeer and caribou, (inhabiting parts of North America, Greenland and Arctic parts of Europe and Asia), are antlers borne by both sexes (Putman 1988: 137).

of time and natural cycles were known by Palaeolithic communities, and it is possible that cyclic growth and shedding of antlers gave this animal a unique status, in addition to the fact that it was one of the most hunted animals. Archaeological glimpses into our pre-modern past reveal numerous cross-cultural contexts of ritual treatment of deer and/or their antlers, suggesting meanings of rebirth and regeneration, notions about deer as liminal animals and mediators in communication with the supernatural world, as well as signifiers of the special status of certain human individuals or supernatural beings (for example, gods and spirits of the natural world, shamans or medicine men and women) (Ollofson 2010; Milićević Bradač 2002). Interestingly, certain aspects of these animalistic conceptions continue to persist in various European and non-European historical and modern time myths and folklore (Milićević Bradač 2002; Cartmill 1996: 52–75). The special status and symbolical importance of deer and their antlers among past societies, as indicated by the archaeological record, is vividly evident in the placement of antlers together with human remains in various burial contexts across cultures and time frames. It is perhaps a lesser-known fact, especially outside archaeological discourse, that the burial of a young individual from the Qafzeh Cave in Israel, considered to be amongst the oldest intentional burials of human dead, included deer antlers (Vandermeersch 2004: 40). The approximately 100,000-year-old remains belong to an individual whose age at the time of death was estimated to be 12–13 years, while the individual's sex is unknown (Coqueugniot et al. 2014). The individual was lying on her/his back with their legs bent to the side and both hands placed on either side of the neck, the antlers of a large Red Deer were found around the chest area (Vandermeersch 2004: 40). Interestingly, recent osteological investigations of a lesion noticed on the individual's skull pointed towards a possibility that this young person might have suffered from focal cerebral damage and related personality and neurological difficulties due to an injury (usually resulting from a blunt force trauma) suffered earlier in childhood (Coqueugniot et al. 2014).

Specific interpretations of the mentioned finds should certainly be a topic of another type of discussion.<sup>2</sup> However, as bone structures, antlers are amongst the hardest and most durable organic materials, and by handling antlers and placing them in specific positions within landscapes, by or on the human body, the past Others inscribed their cultural meanings into their surroundings, affecting their communities of the living and/or of the dead.

Another interesting perspective of symbolic denotation is revealed by one of the most well-known prehistoric figures, the so-called “magician” or “sorcerer”, a Palaeolithic drawing of a humanoid torso with antlers, discovered in the Trois Frères cave in Ariège, France. Some interpretations link this drawing with a figure of a hunter camouflaged as an animal (Bégouën & Breuil 1958: 54), while others consider it a spiritual being or a shaman (Mithen 1998: 200), able to communicate with the animal realms and secure his community a successful hunt. Although different in their understandings, the readings of this Palaeolithic figure carrying both animal and human features, point to various possible contexts in which boundaries between the human and the animal are crossed either through disguise, the special skills of individuals, or within the spiritual realm. Proposed

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Vandermeersch (2004: 19–51).

interpretations, together with the “magician” with antlers himself flatly embodied on the cave wall, also reveal the inevitable tension present in human relations with animals, as the latter are often simultaneously venerated, hunted and consumed as well as depicted as subjects of artistic expressions. However, a recent account of the perforated antler frontlets from the Mesolithic site Starr Carr in England previously described as ritual headdresses or hunting disguises (Clark 1954), proposes that the importance of these objects exceeded their use as symbolic adornment or disguise. In her article Chantal Conneller (2004) examines ways in which animals, humans and their bodies could be perceived during the Mesolithic and explores how antler frontlets as objects made from animal remains could affect people who used and wore them. She proposes that by being worn on human bodies, the antlers were not simply disguising the bodies but allowing them to transform and take on certain aspects of the animal’s identity (Conneller 2004).

### HEADS ON A WALL OR ANTLERS ON A BRIDE

Even though human relationships with deer have inevitably been changing through time and different cultural contexts, the fascination with deer and their antlers persists even in today’s modern urban and industrial settings. Deer hunting remains a world-spread (un) popular sport, recreation and leisure activity and deer antlers also seem to be recognized for their significant aesthetic qualities. Moreover, the mystical eminence accorded to the relationship between deer and humans in the past perhaps remains a part of our present-day awareness, as has already been noted by Putman (1988: XVI).

In our contemporary societies, antlers can be found incorporated in human lives in ways that extend to human embodied experience within their living space and to their everyday relations with certain aspects of materialities. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Krisztina Fehérváry (2012: 617) reminds us that the ideologies about the ideal organization of society can be embedded in the materialities and further replicated through different embodied practices. Cut off and taxidermied deer heads, deer skulls with antlers or simply antlers along with other dead animals or parts of their bodies have been displayed as hunting trophies, usually mounted on walls in the homes of individuals involved in hunting activities, in specialized hunting lodges, large dining halls of countryside restaurants, game trophy rooms and similar places embodying the contemporary ideology of hunting. One of the most vivid examples of specialized spaces exhibiting the deadly decadent grandeur of the hunting agenda in Croatia has for a long time been the Macola restaurant<sup>31</sup> in the rural part of Lika County, well-known for its hunting tourism. The restaurant is located on the highway leading south from the capital city towards the Adriatic coast. Here, deer antlers are displayed together with a forest’s worth of taxidermy bestiary, with smaller members of the animal kingdom fixed into poses of anthropomorphized activities of leisure, such as playing cards, reading books or playing instruments, while larger animals, such as bears, are serving drinks or simply

<sup>3</sup> The word “macola” stands for a large and heavy hammer in one of the Croatian dialects.

enjoying a glass of beer. The eerie atmosphere awaits those seeking refreshments or rest on their way to the Plitvice Lakes National Park, the Northern Velebit National Park and on to the sea coast. The same environment greets local communities attending large dinner parties accompanied by turbo-folk music and dancing (sometimes even on the roof of the restaurant) hosted by the owner, where animals are displayed for the amusement of guests, and figure as obscure representations whose presence adds to the overall Dionysian atmosphere combining hunting, excess and feasting. The fact that the restaurant is located on the busy tourist route, and the fact that the owner also has a small private “zoo” with deer, pigs and even two brown bears, which are protected in Croatia and whose exact biographies remain unclear while the specialized and well-known Bear Refuge is located literally in the neighbouring village of Kuterevo, raises multiple ethical questions and points towards many weaknesses in animal and wild species protection policies as well as the country’s tourist and catering industry, and was not ignored by the public.<sup>4</sup> The Macola restaurant and other similar places evoke contexts in which humans dominate animals and appropriate them through physical dismemberment and new ways of assemblage, by reducing them to bone or fixing an animal into a specific pose and using an individual animal as the representative of the entire species, as has been pointed out by Jane Desmond (2002: 160). Practices of appropriation of the animal body as a trophy and an exhibited commodity are clearly mediated, and parts of animal bodies indicate the identities of individuals that kill for sport, leisure, commercial gain and social status, or of those who do not engage in hunting but only corresponding “gathering activities”. In the words of Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (2003: 113) “The collection and exhibition of wild animals have been historically linked to the ideology of domination, patriarchy and colonialism”. The symbolic meanings of this triad are still being unravelled in contemporary societies and, at least in Croatia, also embodied in the actions of politicians. For instance, it was found that one of the 2010 presidential candidates had in his possession, well-hidden in the basement, and protected from the eyes of the public, trophy deer as well as other hunted Croatian, European, and non-European animals.

Today, another ambiguous but skilfully designed practice brings the tradition of displaying deer heads and antlers away from designated hunting and predominantly non-urban areas or hidden bunker-like trophy rooms and into public spaces of urban centres, and marks them as decorative elements of coffee-houses, bars, and different types of shops. Although not in the spotlight of the trend that has already been popular for a decade or two in various European and North American cities, the capital of Croatia has not been left out, as the recently opened Craft Room bar in the very centre of Zagreb testifies. As part of the larger project of branding the area of Opatovina in Zagreb as the location where bars will be serving only *craft* beers produced by small domestic and foreign producers that aim for quality and not quantity, the Craft Room stands out not only by its selection of beers but by interior decoration as well.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For example, <http://www.prijatelj-zivotinja.hr/index.hr.php?id=2569>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.google.hr/search?q=craft+room+zagreb&biw=1400&bih=913&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjq8i\\_3cflAhV14XIKHeBnCAcQ\\_AUIBigB&dpr=1#imgrc=EK4gtSmeqJewEM%3A](https://www.google.hr/search?q=craft+room+zagreb&biw=1400&bih=913&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjq8i_3cflAhV14XIKHeBnCAcQ_AUIBigB&dpr=1#imgrc=EK4gtSmeqJewEM%3A)

Dark brown rustic furniture is paired with green-painted walls, displaying bucolic paintings, mounted deer heads and skulls or simply differently arranged cut-off antlers. Smaller antlers even serve as draft beer tap handles. As such, they are reminiscent of ancient sacrifices to plenitude and abundance, which in today's consumerist context flows from barrels into customers' glasses. Directly above them, a central figure is placed, made of a taxidermied head of an antelope positioned in a circular frame and surrounded by human arms, most likely made from plaster, forming a circle and reaching outwards. In certain aspects, the overall construction resembles the iconography of Hindu gods and goddesses with multiple hands; only in this case, the core body is missing. Here, a clear abstraction affects both animal and human bodies reducing them to arms and heads, reminding us that in certain contexts both human and non-human animals can be treated as commodities and/or trophies<sup>6</sup>. As discussed by Gilbert Durand (1991: 119), the possession of a trophy from an enemy, a scalp, phallus, head or arm, symbolically endows the possessor with more strength and power. However, in the case of the eerie figure (resembling a divinity image) overlooking the bar, multiple faux human arms surrounding the taxidermied head of a horned animal may also symbolize dominion and authority and are reminiscent of the overreaching affinity of contemporary humans for drink, food and the appropriation of nature. The fact that during the opening night of the Craft Room the female waiting staff were dressed in short white and black uniforms with lace details resembling maid uniforms from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their eroticized contemporary variations, highlights the symbolic social stratification of the patriarchal society and feminine and masculine public roles within the sphere of labour and leisure, (alcohol) consumption and erotic fantasies. Rob Wilson (1999: 303) points out that the notions of fertility, authority/high status and divinity come together in a symbolic complex, often expressed in cult behaviour or the subculture of drinking alcohol in modern societies. For example, in British cultural contexts, they are even recognized in the names of pubs such as The Kings Head, The Jolly Farmer, The Fox and Hounds, etc., and are held as symbolic of an older rural-based culture connected with farming, hunting, drinking and sexuality (Wilson 1999: 303). Interestingly, similar symbolism has been utilized in various cultural settings and through different processes, even via contemporary design trends, that lure customers into the very heart of urban centres and into imaginary bucolic settings, for a drink, a glance at a trophy animal and perhaps at a "playful" waitress.

According to Durand (1991: 119–120), the trophy, the head and the antlers (or horns) of an animal signify exaltation and the appropriation of strength and power, while the winning or tearing off of a trophy can be seen as the first cultural manifestation of abstraction. By mounting an animal skull, organic remains of a once living being are displayed. For some people, the presence of animal bones in one's surroundings may evoke eerie and unsettling emotions, as bones can bring to mind images of hunting and killing as well as more general notions of transience, death and mortality. Bones are recognized as

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<sup>6</sup> Some examples of historical and contemporary contexts in which human bodies have been commoditized, treated as objects and trophies throughout history and further readings have been noted by Joan Sofaer (2006: 63–64).

the primordial elements of a living being (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1983: 285), and their material presence is ambivalent, signifying death as well as life. For example, in biblical narratives bones symbolize the very essence of creation and possess qualities related to the creation and recreation of life (Prosic 2004: 124). In many cultures, they stand for the spiritual essence of a person (Abramovitch 2015: 232), and Mircea Eliade (1968: 70) reminds us that “in the spiritual horizon of hunters and herdsmen bones represent the very source of life, both human and animal”.<sup>7</sup> Very often it is the head and/or the skull (human or animal) that is in the focus of different ritual practices, as in the case of various societies where it has been regarded as the centre of physical and spiritual strength, the seat of the soul (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1983: 285; Jordan 2003: 115, 119-123). Accounts from the late 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century indicate that the ritual activities among reindeer hunting and herding groups in Norway included the acts of leaving the skin together with the head and antlers of reindeer at the place where the animal was killed (Menius 1965, according to Bevan 2003). The practice of depositing antlers in places where sacrificial rites were performed by placing them in semicircles or mounting them on pillars, thus marking the sites as visible and recognizable points in the ritual landscape has been recognized in different cultural and chronological settings: from Mesolithic communities to historical and contemporary deer hunting and herding groups (Chatterton 2003; Bevan 2003).

Disregarding the fact that deer skulls and antlers potentially carry strong symbolic implications, the contemporary trend of using them for interior decoration has entered the homes of individuals drawn to various lifestyles on a grand scale. Modern artists and designers are offering old hunting trophies a make-over, and claim to be turning them into pieces of art.<sup>8</sup> According to the Croatian artist duo behind the name Kosti-Kosti (Bones-Bones), devoted to decorating and reselling old deer skulls with antlers as well as skulls of other horned animals, this new trend mostly appeals to younger people who come across animal trophy skulls previously hunted or acquired by older generations in their families, now kept out of sight in attics and various storage facilities.<sup>9</sup> As noted by the duo, the skulls and antlers are given new identities by being painted various colours, decorated and placed on posts, ready to adorn a modern interior.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, although their work has generally received positive comments, the skulls of dead animals did evoke unsettling emotions among certain individuals who were initially inclined to attach negative connotations to such undertakings, but changed their

<sup>7</sup> Such notions may be related to the special treatment of animal remains, a practice that has so far been extensively noted among different past and present hunting communities of the North and attested by both the archaeological and the ethnographic record. The appropriate treatment of animals' bodies and their bones ensures the regeneration of hunted animals and helps appease their rage for being killed and mistreated (For example, Losey et al. 2013: 92). Sometimes, the activities can be focused on the head and skull of the animal in particular (Hill 2013: 126; Willerslev 2007: 130; Losey et al. 2013; Jordan 2003: 115, 119-123).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dom2.hr/uradi-sam/item/3531-rogovni-kaos-ukrasinterijera>, <http://budiin.24sata.hr/interijeri/neobicni-detalji-za-suvremene-interijere-4624>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

mind once they saw the final product, which now seemed appealing.<sup>11</sup> Such and similar ways of using deer skulls as decorations gained significant popularity in a trend currently flourishing in Europe and the U.S., and is well present in the cross-cultural cyberspace. Social media abounds with tips on how to clean deer heads in order to acquire clean bones with antlers as the end result.<sup>12</sup> Such strategies usually involve boiling the head, degreasing and bleaching the bones, the use of flesh-eating beetles or simply burying the head in order to unearth it once the flesh has decomposed.

In addition to entire deer skulls used for home decor, cut-off antlers are also turned into preciously and thoughtfully designed objects that can be found in any type of home as trendy, desirable and easily obtainable commodities. With a miraculous touch of the hand of *homo faber*, they are transformed into chandeliers, lamps, mirror holders, candle holders, jewellery holders, and other types of furniture or small home accessories.<sup>13</sup> According to the advertisements, apparently there is no area in one's home where antlers cannot be used, including the bedroom, bathroom, living room, kitchen and even the children's room.<sup>14</sup> The indoor as well as the outdoor living space is decorated with antlers in myriad different ways. The possibilities of how one can use deer skulls or just antlers in the home are endless, and the exploration of one's creativity in that sense is encouraged through different DIY marketing strategies. As can be detected from the texts accompanying visual representations of deer skulls or antler-made objects, the ideological discourse of the home decor market, which falls onto the fertile grounds of the nature deficit of our contemporary culture, speaks of "bringing the nature in", "bringing the nature home", the "celebration of nature's beauty", "honouring the beauty of our natural world" and a "nature story where antlers play a prominent role".<sup>15</sup> However, the nature story, with which we may desire to interact through our embodied experiences and engagement with organic materialities (namely specific animal body parts) as well as the activities of creating something with our own hands, is also followed by texts that speak of hunting and killing. Sometimes messages are slightly hidden, sometimes explicit enough. For example, visual representations of antler decor creations are followed by a significant play of words. "The rustic woodland feel of the evergreen wreath puts these sweet antlers right at home. The organic feel of the completed piece hits the mark dead on".<sup>16</sup>

The trend of using antlers as decorative objects has even entered the domain of wedding decorations and has been especially popular in the U.S., where similar messages are straightforward yet ambiguous, and with a hint of auto-irony. Antlers placed on wedding tables as decorations followed by written notes such as "the hunt is over"

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dd9dSK\\_-4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dd9dSK_-4), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dd9dSK\\_-4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Dd9dSK_-4), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXr2\\_8xzZ4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXr2_8xzZ4o)

<sup>13</sup> For example, [http://www.home-unique.nl/Template\\_03\\_mb\\_project1\\_oonkamer2.html](http://www.home-unique.nl/Template_03_mb_project1_oonkamer2.html), <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/151503974942632481/>

<sup>14</sup> For example, <http://www.houseofhawkes.net/style-file-antlers>, <http://www.portlandquarter.com/great-antler-debate>

<sup>15</sup> [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-12-01/features/bs-hm-antlers-trend-20111201\\_1\\_antlers-home-decor-trophy](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-12-01/features/bs-hm-antlers-trend-20111201_1_antlers-home-decor-trophy)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.homeologymodernvintage.com>

make us wonder who is really the prey - the animal, the bride or the groom? Visual representations of brides wearing antlers as headdresses, bridal dresses paired only with deer skulls and antlers while the embodied female figure is missing, may lead us to ask if the messages and meanings created are those of the coming together of the masculine and the feminine principles (psychologically, spiritually and physically) as the act of marriage should supposedly do, or whether we should ask ourselves what or who is the real commodity here: the dress, the bride, the stag, the woman or the animal?<sup>17</sup> Setting antlers on the bride's head symbolically positions her within the realm of nature and marks her as stereotypical prey, in this case perfectly beautiful and graceful, in the same way (given that deer were imbued with erotic symbolism as early as in Old Testament texts, which have significantly influenced the Western notions of hunting from the late Medieval period onwards) as when the deer hunt became a metaphor for love relations and deer an ideal object of hunt and desire (Cartmille 1996: 37, 67, 69-70). Such metaphors can sometimes be visually explicit and clear-cut when it comes to brides wearing faux stylized textile antlers and grooms a camouflaged vest and a rifle;<sup>18</sup> much more often they are less straightforward, blurred in the overall attempt of creating a specific atmosphere and aesthetic. It seems that antlers, used as headdresses paired with lacy vintage dresses, table decorations, wedding cake holders, whole table holders and in flower bouquets or simply creatively arranged throughout the festive space, have been used to create an ambivalent, edgy and nostalgic fashion – a look not everyone would choose for their ceremonial wear, except for, perhaps, the more free-spirited ones wishing to communicate specific stylistic criteria and lifestyle ideals.<sup>19</sup> In the past decade, antlers have become a popular fashion statement, ranging from small-scale artisanal production of handmade jewellery, hair accessories or textile graphic prints to haute couture fashion industry, where designers such as Alexander McQueen added antlers as head pieces to their dresses, crafting various captivating atmospheres, some slightly sinister or fantastic,<sup>20</sup> and might have had a significant influence on the domain of wedding fashion and design. Whether viewed as a kind of homage to deer, or more likely just a fashionable tendency permeated with romanticising and appropriating nature and the ideology of the neoliberal market and patriarchy, the trend testifies to a great aesthetic appeal of antlers in different modern contexts, even those of a rather unexpected nature.

Coming back to antlers as decorations or home decor objects, one is faced with dismembered and rearranged parts of the male deer's body being turned into highly

<sup>17</sup> For example, [http://happywedd.com/wedding\\_theme/92-awesome-ways-to-use-antlers-for-your-wedding.html](http://happywedd.com/wedding_theme/92-awesome-ways-to-use-antlers-for-your-wedding.html)

<sup>18</sup> <http://blog.tbdress.com/post/Camouflage-Wedding-Theme-Camo-All-The-Way-14814/>

<sup>19</sup> For example, [http://happywedd.com/wedding\\_theme/92-awesome-ways-to-use-antlers-for-your-wedding.html](http://happywedd.com/wedding_theme/92-awesome-ways-to-use-antlers-for-your-wedding.html)

<sup>20</sup> <http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/dress-widows-of-culloden/>, <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/model-wearing-antlers-and-a-veil-walks-the-runway-at-news-photo/106911922> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/09/alexander-mcqueen-headpieces\\_n\\_1000785.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/09/alexander-mcqueen-headpieces_n_1000785.html), <http://dontpaniconline.com/magazine/festivals/weird-fashion3>, <http://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/news/a5376/fashion-week-antler-headbands/>, <https://modelslovelmodels.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/antlers-fashion-supper.jpg>, <https://modelslovelmodels.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/topshoprunway.jp>

aestheticized objects, a desirable and trendy commodity. Furthermore, such a commodity can be rather easily obtained and one does not need to be a hunter to participate in fostering a market that ultimately supports killing animals for pleasure. If once mounting or otherwise displaying antlers was a mark of a specific hunter's or rural lifestyle (where an individual may also provide himself with a significant amount of protein), the display of antlers now becomes a part of urban culture, public and private spaces and different ways of living. Furthermore, since hunting is still recognized as a predominantly male activity, such products, through the ideas of home decoration, become more attractive to women as well. By reducing the animal to antlers only, without the rest of the head, one does not have to look the animal in the eye. Dealing only with clean bones without the skin, hair and other animal features, as well as using bright colours and decorative patterns, further distances the consumer from the once living animal and makes the trend even more appealing to potential consumers. The distance from the animal consumed as a piece of commodity facilitates the idea that we should not feel any discomfort about the practice in place or about our overall consumption of animals as such (Lerner & Kalof 1999, according to Kalof & Fitzgerald 2002). Of course, the more one is willing to pay, the more elaborate their antler chandelier will be. For some items, prices rise as high as 1500 dollars, 1000 euros or more. However, disregarding the cost, apparently one also has to have style and has to do it right. As suggested by interior designers:

“You have to do it in a more contemporary way. We don't show them at all in a lodging or rustic look. I wouldn't put all of the deer-motif items in one room. They are really meant for an accent as opposed to a theme”.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, explicit guidelines are given on how to decorate with antlers “properly” and not to overdo it. Designers recommend “mounting a deer head on the wall of the living room while accenting the candelabra with candles and greenery on a dining room table”.<sup>22</sup>

### REAL, FAUX AND ECO

Antlers used as home decor are a controversial theme, although it is not the first time that questions concerning the ethics of using animal body parts for household adornment have been raised. Different animals and their body parts have been altered and utilized as household objects; for example, elephants have often been a popular choice (Kalof & Fitzgerald 2003: 114). Those repelled by hunting, but still in favour of the antler trend, stress the fact that antlers are naturally shed by deer and that they can simply be collected from nature. According to available data coming from the U.S., the popularity of collecting shed antlers has grown immensely in the last few years across the country,

<sup>21</sup> [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-12-01/features/bs-hm-antlers-trend-20111201\\_1\\_antlers-home-decor-trophy](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-12-01/features/bs-hm-antlers-trend-20111201_1_antlers-home-decor-trophy)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

and the estimated number of so-called shed hunters nationwide has reached hundreds of thousands.<sup>23</sup> The activity is considered a sport, and recently even dogs have been trained to search for antlers specifically.<sup>24</sup> The activity conforms to the discourse of hunting, as it is usually referred to as “shed hunting” rather than, for instance, “collecting”, and those who look for antlers are called “shed hunters”. It seems that antlers found on the ground still hold the same value as when they are acquired by hunting, as clearly noted by one of the shed hunters: “I consider it a trophy just like a deer that I shot, no matter what the size is. It’s just too much work to find one and then just let it go”.<sup>25</sup> Shed hunters keep antlers as trophies, make them into decorations themselves or sell them off to antique stores and the antler industry. In 2015, 64 antlers valued at 11,000 Croatian kunas (approximately 1455 euros), obtained at the Batina hunting ground in Eastern Croatia, were confiscated at the Croatian-Hungarian border, during an attempt to smuggle them to Hungary and sell them to the antler industry. In parts of Central Europe, a kilogram is valued around 25 euros. Even though the Croatian media stressed that the antlers in question were shed antlers, readers reacting to the story were not convinced of this fact,<sup>26</sup> and the true origin of the antlers is difficult to identify. The area of Baranja in Croatia is generally considered to be one of the richest hunting areas in Europe. In 2014 the biggest trophy deer of the last 20 years was shot there. Its antlers were bought for 191,000 Croatian kunas (approximately 25,262 euros).<sup>27</sup> The fact that the hunter took only the antlers, “as they are considered to be the pearls of nature”,<sup>28</sup> while the meat was left at the hunting ground and sold to local communities or restaurants, is another reminder that hunting in contemporary society often has only symbolic significance.

Although the activity of collecting shed antlers does not involve shooting the animal, it can still be harmful to their health and can affect their survival. The growing popularity of shed hunting, especially in the U.S., corresponds to growing disturbance to wildlife and the appearance of illegal shed hunting which attracts attention from wildlife management and the media.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, the time of antler shedding is also the time when the animals are especially vulnerable, as they have just survived the fall hunting season and the winter months, which can leave them hungry and weak.<sup>30</sup> As noted, chasing deer and elk, often on vehicles or with dogs, can force the animals to shed their antlers prematurely – a stress from which they usually do not recover and which can have fatal consequences.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> <http://ruralmissouri.coop/2010Pages/10FebShedAntlerDogs.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.osijeknews.hr/clanak/rogovlje-jelenje-divljaci-zapelo-na-granici-s-madjarskom>, <http://www.glas-slavonije.hr/266938/8/Baranjac-prodao-Madjaru-64-komada-jelenskih-rogova>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.vecernji.hr/hrvatska/bogati-lovac-platio-191-tisucu-kuna-za-jelena-kapitalca-972442>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See for example <http://www.pinedaleonline.com/thingstodo/antlerhunting.htm>, <http://nwpr.org/post/wildlife-detectives-illegal-antler-hunting-deadly-game-elk>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.pinedaleonline.com/thingstodo/antlerhunting.htm>

<sup>31</sup> <http://nwpr.org/post/wildlife-detectives-illegal-antler-hunting-deadly-game-elk>

For those reasons, U.S. states such as Wyoming, Washington and Oregon have imposed different rules to make sure that shed hunters do not harm elk and deer, and have even restricted access to certain wildlife areas in times of the year when antlers are naturally shed.<sup>32</sup> Finally, antlers can also be obtained from deer farms. As has been discussed in certain web articles, some farms in the U.S. breed trophy deer to grow hyper-real and large genetically altered antlers, which appear to be in demand on the market. It has been noted that these antlers can be three times larger than the ones naturally grown among wild deer and can actually represent a threat to the animal's health, as they can be much too heavy for their actual body size and weight.<sup>33</sup> Such animals end up being a valuable commodity; those with the largest and most attractive antlers become rewarding breeders while other large-antlered deer are sold to fenced hunting preserves.<sup>34</sup> Even though currently there are no farms producing genetically modified hyper real antlers in Croatia, in many ways the problematic practice of deer breeding is at its outset. As can be detected from the documented breeding trials, the manipulation of reproduction and the reproductive cycles of does in order to obtain a better quality of meat and antlers seems to be among standard procedures (Florijančić 2008).

Different ways of obtaining antlers have proven to be problematic. It is not difficult to anticipate that great demand for antlers can hardly be met only by collecting those shed nature. The practice also involves engaging with the hunting or farming industry, which raises serious ethical and genetic issues and supports practices that ultimately lead to killing. As shown above, whether they derive from a wild or bred animal, antlers are the ultimate trophy. We can assume that the majority of antlers appearing in homes as various types of trendy decorations and furnishings is obtained without any type of engagement with the animal itself, and their true descent is sometimes difficult to trace, if one even wishes to do so. Although the discourse of the design market in which antlers play a prominent role is built around the ideas of love and admiration for nature and the celebration of its beauty, by reading different texts related to practice, we recognize patterns of abstraction, depersonalization and objectification of the animal and the animal body, all appealingly disguised in the context of the modern lifestyle, ultimately supporting the consumerist use of animals. Such findings correspond with the conclusions reached by Kalof & Fitzgerald (2003: 119), who analysed the representations of dead animals in contemporary U.S. hunting magazines, and noted that although animals seem to be embedded in stories of love and affection for nature and wildlife, in truth they and their bodies are represented through extreme objectification.

It appears, however, that decorating with deer heads and antlers does not necessarily include the display of animal skins and bones. Those who are not in favour of hunting and do not wish to mount animal remains in their living spaces can choose from colourful and flashy "ecological" variations available at the market and apparently suitable for any kind of living space, even children's rooms. In this ironic taxidermy twist, deer heads

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.pinedaleonline.com/thingstodo/antlerhunting.htm>

<sup>33</sup> <https://medium.com/re-form/antler-farm-dbd3ba1ec3f2#.h07o7rd9y>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

with antlers or only antlers are made out of paper, wire, wood, resin and different kinds of fabrics.<sup>35</sup> In such processes of enculturation the “wild” and perhaps intimidating traits of the animal are removed and replaced with familiar materialities. The products are often advertised through an animal-friendly discourse advocating: “Lose your wall carcass!”<sup>36</sup> Instead of hanging skins and bones, in this imaginary realm one finds faux antlers glowing in bright colours, covered in flowers, city maps or other kinds of interesting patterns. One of the slogans used by designers to advertise the diversity of such products says: “Your house is your sanctuary and together with your animal-friendly family your vision will become your reality”.<sup>37</sup> Although no animals are ever harmed in these faux taxidermy practices, and the presence of the animal species is only symbolic, the represented animal is still reduced and abstracted by being displayed in a trophy manner, static and mute. However, with their attractive flamboyance, these faux animal heads lurking from the walls are far less threatening than real skin and bones and will not stir unsettling emotions but rather provoke pleasing ones. As noted by one of my colleagues who stumbled on a shop selling such faux antlers:

“I would never display animal remains on a wall, but when I saw this blue deer head with antlers branching into multiple twigs with blooming colourful flowers I thought they were so beautiful that I wished I could buy them” (Marković, personal communication).

#### “DEER MEDICINE”: POSSIBLE MEANINGS, BIOGRAPHIES, EMOTIONS

Although seemingly motionless and silent, dead animal remains, antler-made objects and faux deer heads and antlers are by no means inert. In his work, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Alfred Gell suggests that art and other objects have agency and can act as social agents in particular social situations (1998: 17-19). They are also invested with intentionality by their creators and may cause powerful effects, provoke strong emotions (such as wonder, awe or fear) and actions of others (Gell 1998: 23, 49). Thus, human interest in deer mounts, skulls used as decorations or in antler-made objects may initiate a point to define, question and redefine such a fascination and to renegotiate our relations with animals and the rest of the natural world. We can ask ourselves: does the urge to acquire a deer skull or antler decorations and exhibit them in our space come from the contemporary hunting ideology, a manipulated consumerist agenda, or do such objects actually spark true joy in us, and if so, why? Perhaps the desire to keep antlers in one’s home and surround oneself with objects of organic materiality may not be initiated by the hunting agenda or a consumerist

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgoralnick/4158747134/in/faves-3tuxedocats/>, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/164733298844409944/>, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/68044979/fabric-deer-head-wall-mount>, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/78390849742116010/>, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/405746247648182290/>

<sup>36</sup> <http://wallcharmers.com/>

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.whitefauxtaxidermy.com/faux\\_deer\\_antlers\\_decor](http://www.whitefauxtaxidermy.com/faux_deer_antlers_decor)

urge, but a deeply embedded need to interact with nature, as an attempt to “heal” the “nature deficit disorder”, a term coined by Richard Louv, the author of the book *The Last Child in the Woods* (2006), as a way to describe the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. However, even if there is such a need, we often tend not to be aware of the patterns of human-animal relationships our choices may reinforce. Without doubt, deer remains or deer representations can mean different things to different people who make choices to bring them into their spaces. The reasons behind such decisions, however, remain to be revealed only through personal stories and narratives.

As has been noted by Steve Ashby (2009:1), the meaning and status of objects can be changed by altering the way they look, the way they are used and displayed or by changing their owners. New owners may also encode new meanings into them through their own personalities and different narratives (Nylund Skog 2013). For example, the old hunting trophies that the Croatian artist duo Kosti-Kosti has been working with, as mentioned earlier in this text, may (by acquiring new owners, by being reassembled, decorated and renewed) shift their meaning from being perceived exclusively as a hunting trophy to being seen solely as decorations; they can boost memories of hunting family legacies and life stories or be active agents in attempts to negate and/or change them. In contrast, for a modern shamanic practitioner, different animal bones and antlers can be important ritual paraphernalia used to affect certain changes in the environment and spiritual domains. As becomes evident, animal body parts used for such practices can be acquired in different ways, and sometimes new meanings need to be inscribed into them. As noted by one of the practitioners:

“Sometimes people ask me why I have animal pelts, bones and hides all around me. I tell them it’s because they contain my kind of magic. I rescue them from thrift stores, vintage shops, and receive them as gifts to get close to their magic, to honour their lives, and to remember what is wild inside of all of us.”<sup>38</sup>

She further declares: “Yes, look for them! They are stuffed away in trunks and up on high shelves waiting for people like you to reconstitute their magic and appreciate their lives”. In a discussion developed on Instagram, another practitioner acknowledges the same reasons for keeping bones and feathers at home, adding that the bones are lately letting her know that it is time she took them home – to the woods.<sup>39</sup>

Ascribing attributes similar to those of a living person to bones is in accordance with their ambivalent materiality. As emphasized by Fontein et al. (2008), bones possess a curious quality of presence, even if considered “as things that have meaning only as they are caught up in human transactions and endeavours, this consideration is haunted by the animate personhood, which is imminent within the thing, held in its very form and

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.pixielighthouse.com>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

substance”<sup>40</sup>. Bones, both human and animal, can evoke deep emotions, they can contain them and provoke specific actions. Georgia O’Keefe, a well-known painter, collected bones of animals that died naturally in the desert landscapes of her surroundings. About them, she stated:

To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around...The bones seem to cut sharply to the centre of something that is keenly alive on the desert. Though it is vast and empty and knows no kindness with all its beauty. (O’Keefe, according to Loengard 2006: 10)

Yet, as asserted by art critics, her famous paintings of animal skulls can be seen to represent the death and destruction of the landscape, but they can also be viewed as celebratory works, an homage to the animals that first inhabited the Western American landscape that O’Keefe was strongly related to.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, visual texts, like any other cultural texts, are undetermined in their meanings, which are created by those who read or interact with them, often based on their own individual experiences and personalities (Denzin 1992: 32; Kalof & Fitzgarld 2003: 112). Images of antlers used as decoration or headdresses in the contemporary wedding context already mentioned in this text are open to various interpretations. Due to their shape and structure, antlers and horns are generally related to phallic symbolism and they signify masculine power. According to Durand (1991: 119), the symbolic trophy is only a result of the constantly dangerous exaltation of the power of the taboo through defeminisation and deanimalization. Therefore, placement of abstracted antlers on brides’ heads can be seen as an inscription of the male principle during this rite of passage, while reinforcing the social stratification of patriarchy. However, the use of antlers does open a playful and carnivalesque niche, and the same images can be read in a different way. By placing antlers on their heads, whimsical brides can choose to participate in self-irony and/or their own creative fantasies. Perhaps a bride would choose to place antlers on her head as a way to metaphorically claim back and appropriate power and strength. Though recognized as a masculine symbol, antlers are not a solely male feature. After all, in some deer species antlers are borne by both sexes. By claiming symbols of strength, cyclic life regeneration and ascension towards the otherworldly realms, they choose the way they represent their own femininity. Even if only for a single day, they can embody Artemidas, or Deer Women well known from Celtic and Native American myths and folklore; they can become their own she-shamans and implement “deer medicine” in their own way.

<sup>40</sup> The reference originates from the introduction to the research workshop *What Lies Beneath: Exploring the Affecting Presence & Emotive Materiality of Human Bones* which took place at the University of Edinburgh, UK, December 4-5, 2008.

[http://www.san.ed.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/19783/Bones\\_Workshop\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.san.ed.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/19783/Bones_Workshop_Statement.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/freed/okeeffe/bones.html>

## CONCLUSION

New meanings inscribed into animal materialities do not necessarily classify them as passive objects. For example, it has been acknowledged that material culture objects continually transform in meanings through their own accumulative biographies (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). They can also be bestowed with meanings through personal biographies of human beings (Hoskins 1998; 2005: 75). In its contemporary modalities, the “antler cult”, recognized throughout the cross-cultural virtual space of the Internet, including Croatian, European and North American designers’ web pages, blogs and e-newspaper articles, moves through a discourse of “natural kill off”, ironically steps into one about “nature preservation” and finally enters individual articulations of meanings that give the once reduced animal new connotations. Those practices also highlight current negotiations of boundaries between nature and culture, animal and human, femininity and masculinity mainly within the context of a cultural and historical Western legacy that has imbued deer with stereotypical meanings as an animal of ultimate beauty and innocence, grace and femininity, as well as strength and masculinity, and sometimes even the supernatural: an animal that is a symbol of nature and the archetypical prey (Cartmill 1996).

Different practices of animal objectification in the contemporary culture denote specific parts of the animal body, carrying strong symbolic meanings as trophies, decorations and carefully designed objects. Very often, their manipulation and display in various spaces maps landscapes reproducing aspects of contemporary hunting culture, the accompanying hunting industry and the design market, where nature is wanted but is also a trophy, as one that wants to be appropriated and materially consummated. However, the organic and inorganic deer crania, which lurk from walls in homes without their post-cranial parts or dislocated animal body parts caught in the web of stylistic or ritual practices, remind us that the borders between culture and nature and the role of humans in these arenas is constantly questioned. Animals and their bodies, even in their posthumous forms, as well as objects made from them, are active participants in these negotiations. With their presence, individual biographies of human beings have been created – by stepping into irony, auto-irony, romanticism, the ambivalent and sublime aesthetic, fantasy and perhaps even archetypology, where borders between femininity and masculinity, animal and human are being questioned. At the same time, specific identities of individuals ascribe new meanings and lives to once reduced animal persons. Even if one is to end in wishful thinking or a personal fantasy, the presence of antlers in contemporary wedding contexts can also be read as humankind’s call for symbolically marrying nature after centuries of divorcing its very own habitat.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Graeme Warren, School of Archaeology, University College Dublin for critically reading, commenting and improving the English language of the manuscript.

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## U IME ROGOVA. GLAVE NA ZIDU ILI ROGOVI NA NEVJESTI

MAJA PASARIĆ



Glava i rogovi jelena specifični su dijelovi životinjskog tijela snažnog simboličkog naboja koji kao *pars pro toto* označavaju cijelu životinju. Pojedine prakse objektivizacije animalnog unutar naše suvremene kulture ove dijelove životinjskog tijela označuju kao trofeje, ukrase te dizajnerski osmišljene predmete koje tada prepoznajemo i kao markere identiteta pojedinaca, specifičnih prostora i načina življenja. No, nova značenja njihove materijalnosti ne čine ih nužno inertnim i pasivnim objektima. Predmeti materijalne kulture aktivni su konstituenti svijeta u nastajanju dok se istovremeno kontinuirano transformiraju u značenjima putem svojih vlastitih akumulativnih biografija ili posredstvom osobnih biografija pojedinaca (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; 2005: 75). U svojim suvremenim modalitetima kult rogova, kakav razaznajemo posredstvom virtualnog prostora interneta, hrvatskih ali i drugih europskih i sjevernoameričkih dizajnerskih stranica, osobnih blogova i internetskih novinskih članaka iz registra, odstrjela prirode ironijski zadire i u registar njezina očuvanja te u posve osobne artikulacije značenja koja u nekoć reduciranu životinju unose nove oblike živote. Navedene prakse također osvjetljavaju i suvremena pregovaranja granica između prirode i kulture, životinje i čovjeka, pa i muškosti i ženskosti, premrežena povijesno-kulturnim zapadnjačkim nasljeđem koje je jelenu pripisalo stereotipna značenja savršeno lijepe i nedužne, gracilno ženstvene, snažno muževne i ponekad nadnaravne životinja koja figurira kao simbol prirode i divljine te arhetipske lovine (Cartmill 1996).

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