

Laibach and the NSK: Aestheticising the East/West Nexus in Post-Totalitarian Europe

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Abstract: This paper reflects a study in how the Slovenian art collective the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), and more specifically its sub-group Laibach, interrogate the representation of Central and Eastern European cultural memory in the context of post-Socialism, and operate as a nexus between Eastern Europe and the West.

Emerging in the wake of Tito's death and shaped by the break-up of Yugoslavia, the NSK were founded in 1984, in Ljubljana (northern Slovenia). The NSK is a multi-disciplinary collective primarily comprised of three groups: IRWIN (visual arts), Noordung (theatre), and its most influential delivery system, Laibach (music). Brought to academic scrutiny in the West by Slavoj Žižek for their subversive strategy of over-identification with the totalitarian spectacle, Laibach are Slovenia's most famous cultural export, with a global following, and an international and domestic history of controversy.

With the strategy of Retrogardism, Laibach and the NSK re-mythologise totalitarian iconography associated with Nazi Kunst and Socialist Realism. Through this process of re-mythologisation Laibach explore the unfinished

narrative of Communism and the legacy of the European traumatic historical in the context of a 'post-ideological' age.

Keywords: Laibach, Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), Slovenia, Retrogardism, Post-Socialism

LAIBACH AND THE NSK

Laibach were founded in the mining town of Trbovlje, Slovenia, in 1980, and in 1984 joined forces with other Yugoslav artists so as to form the NSK. The three primary groups of the NSK are IRWIN (visual arts), Sestre Scipion Nasice (theatre), and Laibach (music).¹ According to Alexei Monroe, cultural theorist and expert on Laibach and the NSK, "the aim of the association was the constitution of a transnational paradigmatic state, in which Laibach represented the ideological, the theatre the religious, and IRWIN the cultural and historical impulse" (2008, p. 247).² Other

groups are part of the NSK, such as the design department the NK (New Collectivism), and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy. This multi-disciplinary collective functions as a Gesamtkunstwerk, and images and symbols are cross-pollinated by all groups within the NSK, constituting its output as a whole.

Championed by Slavoj Žižek, for their subversive strategy of over-identification with the totalitarian spectacle, Laibach are Slovenia's most famous cultural export, with a global following, and an international and domestic history of controversy. However, despite having released 26 albums in their 33-year history, and touring regularly, music is paradoxically incidental to Laibach. They were founded in 1980 as a visual arts group (Laibach Kunst) and chose music as the most immediate channel of communication. Each album release varies enormously stylistically-speaking from the previous one, from the oppressive martial-industrial of *Nova Akropola* (1986) and *Opus Dei* (1987) to the digital bricolage of *Kapital* (1992), and from the heavy rock of *Jesus Christ Superstars* (1996) to the synthesiser interpretations of Bach fugues in *Laibachkunstderfuge* (2008). Each of these manifestations is an exploration of subjectivity and genre. Laibach's musical output, their imagery, press releases, literature, and the affect of their presence, are all of equal importance and must be understood as comprising a performative entirety.

The Slovenian cultural theorist Marina Gržinić has described Laibach as "the most radical avant-garde rock-and-roll exploration of the time" (2007, p. 201). Their early period in particular was defined by a series of interventions considered offensive to mainstream Yugoslav culture and political bodies. The name

Laibach itself was a national scandal in Slovenia, first appearing on posters in their home town of Trbovlje in September 1980, and has been termed the group's "ideological original sin" (Monroe, 2008, p. 158). By naming themselves after the Nazi occupation name for the capital Ljubljana, Laibach were resurrecting uncomfortable and unspoken truths concerning Slovenian Germanisation and the trauma of occupation.³ This founding act of controversy was further substantiated by an onslaught of ideological and aesthetic provocations. At the Zagreb Biennale, for 1983 for example, the concert was interrupted by the police and were Laibach expelled after projecting images of Tito montaged with pornography. Laibach's music at this time was particularly loud, raw, aggressive and discordant, their concerts described as: "nightmarish and utterly extreme combinations of alienation, infernal noise, and brutal visual imagery" (2008, p. 180). Their dress was equally incendiary in a country that had weathered Nazi occupation within living memory. This comprised an austere non-specific totalitarian coding suggesting both the Italian fascist and Nazi uniforms, yet with essential signifiers such as the fasces or the swastika replaced with Malevich's Suprematist cross. It was, however, a staged interview on Slovenian TV in 1983 that was to establish Laibach's notoriety in Slovenia, leading to a four-year ban on the use of their name. Thirty years later, Slovenia's relationship with their prodigal sons remains problematic. On the one hand, Laibach have established themselves and their Slovenian identity globally on their own terms, yet their 'militant classicism' is at odds with how Slovenia would like to be perceived on the world stage. However, in 1994 Slovenia formerly recognised the NSK State (the NSK

State-in-Time project was created in 1992), and the Slovenian ambassador attended Laibach performances in London.

RETROGARDISM

Laibach and the NSK's prime strategy is Retrogardism, also known as the Retro-avant-garde, a system of aesthetics which re-mythologises totalitarian iconography, in particular that associated with Nazi Kunst and Socialist Realism. Through this process of re-mythologisation, Laibach explore the legacy of the European traumatic historical in the context of the contemporary 'post-ideological' age. The NSK artist Eda Čufer wrote on Retrogardism to accompany the NSK's *Black Square in Red Square* action in June 1992, explaining that the "Retro-avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts" (Čufer cited in Conover, 2006, p. 356).⁴ In returning to the historical avant-garde, Retrogardism identifies with the avant-garde at the moment of its assimilation into totalitarianism, and in doing so, demonstrates the collusion between art and ideology. Thus, the historical avant-garde form Suprematism is axiomatic to Laibach's and the NSK's aesthetic system, and is most apparent in their ubiquitous use of Kazimir Malevich's *Cross* (1912-1923), which by analogy replaces the swastika in Laibach's ritual. Laibach and the NSK restore art to its problematic relationship with power, a relationship severed in the West, which, post-war, sought to strip art of its taint of totalising utopian

narratives so as to focus on individual freedom and expression.

Retrogardism is a process of bricolage, the artistic practice of montaging found objects. In Retrogardism, the iconography of Nazi Kunst is juxtaposed with that of Socialist Realism, religious imagery, icons of Slovenian national identity, and Völkish sentimentality. The three most recurrent symbols in Laibach and NSK imagery are the sower cipher-figure, the stag, and the Malevich cross. Imagery associated with the grand utopian narrative has no exchange value in late-capitalism beyond that of playfully offensive kitsch, thus constituting free-floating signifiers for Laibach to re-anchor, or re-mythologise. This re-mythologisation is key to Retrogardism, as it sustains the ideological power of the original symbols and tropes of the grand utopian narrative, but re-codes them within the aesthetics of the Retro-avant-garde spectacle. However, although Laibach and the NSK emphatically re-activate the energies contained within Völkish signifiers such as the stag, antlers, the worker cipher-figure and the Zahnrad (cog), these signifiers are left free-floating, and are not quilted to any coherent ideological field. The totalitarian spectacle as articulated by Laibach and the NSK, being bereft of any teleological or utopian drive, personality cult, 'enemy' or *other*, frustrates attempts to align the spectacle with any ideological structure.

Retrogardism is unique to Eastern European aesthetic praxis, and in the 1980s was re-contextualised by artist and cultural theorist Marina Gržinić as the new "ism" from the East (2006, p. 328). As such, Retrogardism has struggled to be recognised in the hegemonic Western aesthetic discourse. Thus, it is often misrecognised by the Western press as

postmodern, ironic, or even playful. This search for a reassuring irony or pastiche in Laibach by the Anglo-American press results in the consistent employ of meaningless phrases such as “flirting with fascism”, “tongue-in-cheek” and “Wagnerian”, claiming an irony to Laibach found nowhere in their music or literature. It is both an express attempt to render comfortable the provocation of an incongruously overt grand utopian narrative form, indicative of a Western chauvinism and a myopic approach to history. Britain, for example, has not directly experienced the trauma of totalitarianism, nor the phenomenon of total war. This defining degree, of separation from the audio and visual coding Laibach and the NSK reference, results in a failure by the West to effectively engage with their discourse.

EAST/WEST POSTMODERNISM

Retrogardism may be considered as a reaction to an Eastern European cultural identity as defined by the West, but also indicative of a perceived rise in Eastern European aesthetic autonomy following the collapse of Soviet communism. In this way, Retrogardism must not be confused with the playful pastiche of Western postmodernism, central to Laibach’s and the NSK’s praxis of aestheticising the East-West nexus. The Retro-avant-garde is not Baudrillard’s notion of playing with the pieces of history. It is distinctively Eastern European, whilst postmodernism is a *Western* discourse, and furthermore one that fails to reflect the Eastern European experience of history. Without grasping this fundamental divide, between Western postmodernism and Eastern European aesthetic praxis, there can be no effective engagement with Laibach, or the NSK. Western aesthetic discourse can

be said to have been built on the dictates of the art-market, whilst that of the former Eastern Bloc reflects not only the cultural trauma of Soviet communism but an art necessarily more focused on the relationship between art and ideology, wherein art was either in direct opposition to - or organised by - the state. Moreover, Central and Eastern Europe has been a liminal space of borders in flux, where whole nations were/are lost and found. In this context, national identity attains a mythic resonance. So ineffectually does Western aesthetic discourse apply to Eastern Europe that Marina Gržinić has suggested the neologism “*Easthetics*” which is an attempt to define an approach to aesthetics independent of the Western discursive field (2006, p. 484). In 1999, IRWIN, the NSK visual artists, launched the *East Art Map* project, an attempt to create vocabulary to articulate an art history of Eastern Europe, and thus generate a discursive vocabulary. Understanding this East-West divide is essential in order to meaningfully engage with Laibach and NSK texts.

This perceived difference, between Eastern European and Western postmodernism, is an attitude Johannes Birringer finds himself guilty of neglecting in his book *Performance on the Edge*. In writing on the NSK, Birringer questions whether his thinking around identity politics and his assumptions about “de-centred” post-Yugoslavian identities are not over-determined by Western postmodernism (2000, p. 103). Aleš Erjavec suggests that Socialist countries had actually entered the “hyper-real” postmodern world before their Western counterparts (2003, p. 4). In late-capitalism, for instance, the death of the identity of the sign is hidden, whereas in post-Socialism it was seen everywhere, the legislative meta-language that gave

legitimacy to socialist reality now absent. In other words, towards its end, Soviet communism was becoming an exercise in absurdism. This vital difference between Eastern and Western Europe is echoed by Fredric Jameson when he berates Western parodic art as being simply narcissistic, an indictment of consumer capitalism itself, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history (cited in Hutcheon, 1989, p. 113). In contrast, Laibach's Retrogarde actions are not postmodern parody or pastiche, but reflect an active traumatic historical. Fascism may have been militarily defeated in the last world war, but it has neither been symbolically destroyed nor deconstructed.

LAIBACH AND THE NSK AS NEXUS

Laibach and the NSK perform a role of nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. In their context, nexus is both a point of communication and a point of creative frisson. Laibach and NSK texts provide a platform to interrogate the East-West divide, but as part of this process, they often appear to re-affirm such. In performance, Laibach express the fear and allure of the dark European *Other*. For example in the video for *Sympathy for the Devil* (1988), Laibach play out the role of feudal overlords in a Teutonic hunting lodge, feasting and wearing furs beneath mounted stag heads. As Alexei Monroe suggests, "the luxuriousness of the feast confirms and denies Western stereotypes of impoverished, oppressed East Europeans who can access only pre-modern forms of enjoyment" (2005, p. 235). In the video, Laibach have cast themselves not only as the 'devil' of the track but

also as the barbaric Eastern European overlords of the Western imagination. Here, Laibach's performance over-identifies with the Western fantasy of Eastern Europe as commonly articulated in Western reportage.

Western chauvinism often depicts Eastern Europe as a feudal wilderness locked in barbaric totalitarian drudgery, Slavic hordes in desperate need of liberation, democracy, and capitalist aspirations. This perception of the West, as free-market liberators bringing goods to the passive consumers of Eastern Europe, fuels the notion of Eastern Europeans lacking the discrimination to judge good from bad in popular culture, and therefore incapable of producing 'pop' forms that can compete globally (2000, p. 280). Laibach's challenge to this misconception is necessarily militant, and drives the selection of both their recording material and adaptation of musical genre. As Aleš Erjavec writes, the position of artists such as Laibach and the NSK is complex, "for they deconstruct not only post-Socialist culture and history, but also the wish of the Western art system to see and identify the artist in such a culture as an asymmetrical and exotic *Other*" (2003, p. 96). Laibach at once deny and re-affirm this prejudice, by exploiting the need of Western culture and its art institutions to see the post-Socialist artist as a caricature or degeneration of Socialist Realism and Socialist culture. Zdenka Badovinac, in her article on Eastern European performance art, *Body and the East*, writes that "just as Western art has mainly presented itself to the relatively isolated East as reproduced in magazines and books, so the East has been presented in the West with a small quantity of poor-quality documents, with white spots in retrospectives of European art, and with the myths of official art and the suffering dissidents"

(1999, p. 5). In this dialogue, the West is dominant, with the power to create new trends and dictate the boundaries of the visible. Badovinac claims the only way Eastern art can remain viable in this representative economy is by an expressed ideology. Laibach and the NSK operate autonomously from this system of Western preconceptions, and yet simultaneously over-identify with this ideological surplus that art from the East is deemed to possess.

Perhaps the most apparent example of Laibach's exploration of the creative potential of the East-West nexus is in their interpretations of well-known Western popular music recordings. Laibach made their name in the West with their interpretations of Queen's "One Vision", which they renamed "Geburt Einer Nation" ["Birth of a Nation"] (1987), and Opus's Euro-hit "Life is Life" (1987). Both translate the original's upbeat rock rhythms into a triumphalist martial cadence and thus suggest a hidden totalitarian agenda behind Western popular music. This is part of a wider strategy whereby Laibach invert the dominant given that Western democracy is a by-word for freedom, and is free from the mass mobilisations of totalitarianism. According to Monroe, "Laibach's politicised interrogation of popular music indicates that the western style entertainment sphere contains ideological power structures that are far more refined and less visible than those of totalitarian propaganda" (2008, p. 57). Laibach themselves have spoken on this mission to demonstrate to the West the uncontested nature of rock music's given as oppositional space:

Pop culture is the Social Realism of the West. It is the social theatre. Why we deal with Socialist Realism and Nazi Kunst so much is because the relationship

between art and ideology is so clear. The basic problem is that westerners believed that they were – in contrast to those in the East – free, and that they alone were doing pure art and pure music whereas Easterners had to make ideological art. It's not true. It's basically the same model, except it's more sophisticated in the West (cited in Aulich and Sylvestová, 2000, p. 80).

Here Laibach challenge a perception commonly held by those in Eastern Europe and the West, which understands the latter as liberators, bringing freedom and democracy to a blighted East emerging blinking out of a totalitarian darkness.

LAIBACH: INDIRECT/DIRECT CRITIQUE

Laibach's position in the East-West nexus is a specific strategy, undertaken through both direct and indirect critique. Laibach's presence in the West is one of *other* to Western aesthetic and ideological discourse, which throws the latter into relief. An example of this is Laibach's presence in America, captured in Sašo Podgoršek's 2004 film, *The Divided States of America*. A recurring motif is Laibach's vocalist walking alone in American urban environments dressed in his stage costume, which emphasises his alien status. He is effectively the protagonist of the film, and the viewer experiences America through his eyes. This posited *other*, functioning as indirect critique, operates in contrast to Laibach's direct critique, in which Laibach texts directly address both Eastern Europe and the West, and their dialectic. Rather than challenge Western hegemony by operating within its system, such as may define Laibach's indirect critique, the direct critique is comprised of statements by Laibach

and the NSK that directly challenge the West. These challenges are emphatic, and the phrasing employed in this critique suggests a fanaticism and an absolutism at odds with a perceived Western liberalism. Laibach's discourse can be thus said to be a continuation of the Socialist Realist critique of Western cultural imperialism, something Monroe claims is partly to account for Laibach's popularity in former Socialist states (Monroe, 2005, p. 224). In the film *Laibach, a Film from Slovenia* (1993), Laibach speak directly to camera, couching Western democracy in the vocabulary of disease:

Democracy ensnares people through the Utopian injection of desires and fantasies into a social bloodstream. Its hypodermic needle is the entertainment culture industry. It's a shared needle, and a shared needle leads to the spread of disease. In democracy there is no cure against its own disease (1993).

Here Western cultural and political degeneracy is depicted as an illness, an infection, and Laibach cite Western pop art as indicative of this malaise: "POP art is linked through a distant artificial irony to a certain aspect of social nihilism; LAIBACH KUNST rises above such tendencies and wants to show the truth as it should be, restoring to things and people their unadulterated meaning" (2006).⁵ Laibach's edicts are radical, and are redolent of the National Socialist ban on "Entartete Kunst" [degenerate art], arguing for a purity of spirit in art. In an interview with the *Toronto Star* in 1989 entitled, *Jackbooted Laibach Never Smiles While Stomping Rock in Your Face*, Laibach posit an Eastern Europe 'spirit' as an antithesis to Western materialism:

Lech Walesa made a good point when he came to Paris and said, "The West is economically wise and free, but it lacks the spirit of the East'. He meant that the difference between us is the difference between materialism and spirituality, and I see his point. I tried a meal at McDonald's in New York and I was ill for three days. It was a taste of America (Potter, 1989).⁶

Laibach's notion of a spiritually 'purer' East set up in opposition to the West is to some extent also a construct that demonstrates the failure of the East to see the emergence from Socialism as an opportunity to create an alternative to both Socialism and capitalism. For Laibach, this opportunity was provided by the difference between the two systems: "In socialism the abyss between subject and superstructure was large enough to produce scepticism; in capitalism there is no abyss between the subject and the superstructure, because superstructure and subject are brutally melted together" (2006). Laibach find post-Socialism has squandered this opportunity:

The East collapsed because it blindly believed in the Western Utopian definition of freedom of the individual. The West only survives because it slyly established a system which insists on people's freedom. That is to say, under democracy, people believe they're acting according to their own will and desires (1993).

Thus, the 'former East' has allowed itself to be seduced by Western promises. However, Laibach see this as an aggressive move on the part of the West: "Eastern states are not adopting the Western model but the model gradually dictated by the West" (2006). This Laibach see as Western cultural imperialism, in other words, globalisation. In 1989, Don McLeese of

the *Chicago Sun-Times* reported that at their performance Laibach projected sports scores, headline news, Coca-Cola and hair product commercials, all overlaid with World War Two audio reportage celebrating victory, with: "The flags of freedom fly all over Europe" (1989). The *Volk* (2006) album sleeve contains quotes from various sources dating from 1941 to 2002 that state English will eventually become the world language. Laibach themselves pointedly misuse English: "When we speak English, we make no favour to it" (2006). On the rear of the *Occupied Europe Tour 1985* sleeve (released in 1991) Ronald Reagan is also quoted: "It is my fervent wish that in the next century there will be one Europe, a free Europe, a United States of Europe" (1991). In the context of Laibach's interrogation of American cultural imperialism, the latter phrase acquires greater significance. Laibach have spoken out against globalisation:

Europe is not North America. It has marinated in blood several thousand years of political and cultural differences between regions, each with its own powerful traditions. It cannot turn itself into a characterless melting pot without causing pain, frustration and conflict (2006).

Laibach remind the West that ideas of nationalism and its concomitant ideologies are fundamental to the Eastern European experience, and cannot be ignored. These ideas are not necessarily inimical to ideas of democracy, but certainly to Western democracy.

Analysis of Laibach's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West must include the manner in which they interpellate their audience.⁷ If, as Igor Vidmar suggests in the sleeve notes to Laibach's

M.B.21. December 1984 (1984), music is incidental, to Laibach, what then is their core appeal? Laibach's romantic appeal for the West is encapsulated not only in their fanaticism and courage, which throws the perceived cynicism of Western contemporary capitalism into stark relief, but they offer a nostalgia for a lost role of art, a belief in the possibility for change, and a nostalgia for history as active agency rather than late-capitalist entertainment. For example, in comparison with many Western bands who demand political change in their native country, Laibach can be said to have both been in attendance at the making of history and to have helped bring it about. Laibach's recording and touring history covers tectonic shifts in their country's development, including a European war and Slovenia's independence. In November 1995, at the *NSK Država Sarajevo* event, the national theatre in a besieged war-torn Sarajevo was declared NSK state territory for two days, involving two Laibach performances, an exhibition and speeches. NSK state passports issued at this event were subsequently used by several individuals to leave Sarajevo during the Balkan war. In 1996, the Slovenian foreign minister Zoran Thaler ceremoniously handed Laibach's *NATO* album to N.A.T.O. Secretary-General Willy Claes. As well as being Slovenia's unofficial state band, these examples illustrate the way Laibach and the NSK are directly connected to their country's political history.

CONCLUSION

Through a strategy of non-alignment with geopolitical, temporal, ideological and aesthetic determinants, Laibach and the NSK are able to operate as a nexus between the West and Eastern Europe. In

treating their native Slovenia and Eastern Europe as text, Laibach and the NSK simultaneously embrace and distance themselves from potential geo-political affiliation. In resurrecting the discredited utopian energies of the historical avant-garde in Retrogardism and looking to the past to reveal the future and present, they escape temporal determinants. In celebrating an Eastern European aesthetic autonomy from Western aesthetic discourse, they evade hegemonic aesthetic determinants, and with a wilful strategy of misdirection and radical ambiguity they escape ideological appropriation. This comprehensive position of non-alignment, which directly references Tito's 1948 political non-alignment policy, has enabled Laibach and the NSK to find themselves at the meeting point between Eastern Europe and the West, a position the NSK refer to in their ubiquitous employ of Malevich's Cross:

To us the cross, with all its meanings and connotations it has gained by now, stands for one of the symbols from the picture book of European culture. The cross on a painting by IRWIN is therefore a method of translating this culture into consciousness. Nevertheless, for us, members of a small nation, the cross simultaneously takes on a different, fateful meaning. Our culture nails us into the centre of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined, but its significance has never been completely clarified. It is in here that we materialise our own ideas (NSK, 1991, p. 122).

The Malevich cross as employed by the NSK not only represents art history discourse, and a perceived appropriation of the historic avant-garde by the West,

but it also functions in a more literal sense as a diagram of Slovenia and the NSK's position as nexus. Slovenia conceives itself as a geo-political threshold between East and West, whilst the NSK sees itself as being an aesthetic-political point of dialogue between Eastern Europe and the West.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Sestre Scipion Nasice were later renamed Red Pilot Cosmokinetic Theatre, and then in 1995, Noordung Cosmokinetic Theatre. IRWIN were initially known as Rose IRWIN Sélavy, after a pseudonym of Marcel Duchamp's.
- [2] Monroe has written *Interrogation Machine* (2005), one the two key texts on Laibach and the NSK in the West, the other is the NSK monograph. He is also involved with organising Laibach performances and NSK conferences in Europe, and contributes to Laibach album sleeve notes.
- [3] Ljubljana is also known as the "Hero City" in Slovenia, in reference to its wartime resistance history.
- [4] The NSK's *Black Square on Red Square* action of 1992 was the placing of an enormous black cloth square in the centre of Moscow's Red Square. In this way the NSK can be said to have been returning Malevich to the East, after Stalin's rejection of the Russian avant-garde in favour of Socialist Realism in 1934.
- [5] The capitals are Laibach's.
- [6] The "I" in this quote is a Laibach spokesperson.
- [7] Althusser's theory of interpellation is that an ideology 'hails' or interpellates the subject, and this ideology, in interpellating the subject, validates the subject by affirming their subject-position (2008, p. 48).

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