



Laibach in North Korea – A Journey to the East (from the Slovene Perspective)

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ABSTRACT

In summer 2015 for the first time in its history the Democratic People's Republic of Korea welcomed a western rock band, making an unexpected gesture of inviting the Slovene art group Laibach. Laibach's credentials for this type of cultural diplomacy may be best observed in the sociopolitical context of the 1980s, when they operated within a broader alternative cultural scene of civil society movements in Slovenia (then socialist Yugoslavia). Laibach have since uniquely employed different media and approaches to inspect relations between art, politics, processes of nation-building and popular culture. In the Western media they are mainly presented as a highly controversial music group originating from the former communist East and disturbing the audiences with their totalitarian imagery and ambiguous political messages. Across the globe they were seen as going to North Korea to entertain a brainwashed and utterly unpredictable audience in the most totalitarian and isolated society in the world. This unusual and well documented journey to the far end of what has remained of the former communist East provides interesting material for analyzing the media interpretations of the East/West divide in the contemporary context. However, this paper focuses on the media debate in Slovenia informed by the local knowledge of Laibach's significance and history which was largely lacking in the international coverage of this out-of-the-ordinary voyage.

KEYWORDS

Laibach, North Korea, Slovenia, media controversy, cultural exchange

In summer 2015 the whole world was made aware that for the first time in its history, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would invite a western rock band to play in the country and that it would be no other act than Laibach, "probably the most recognizable pop-cultural phenomenon" of Slovenia.¹ They would perform as part of the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule (15 August 1945), and their performances were scheduled for August 19 and 20.

Laibach's credentials for this type of cultural diplomacy may be best observed in the sociopolitical context of the 1980s, as the existing Cold War order was facing its demise and the all-encompassing system of global capitalism was starting to come

1 V. NJEGOVAN, *Laibach v soočenju s Korejo*, in: Mladina, 10 July 2015, <https://www.mladina.si/167863/laibach-v-soocenje-s-korejo/>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.



into its own. The Laibach phenomenon is rooted in the context of the (f)ailing socialist Yugoslavia and its version of socialism. Since their beginnings in the early 1980s, Laibach had been emphasizing both socialism's subordination to Western culture and the logic of capital in which socialism was trapped. Hence their simultaneous fascination with, and distance from, the North Korean political utopia, evident in their interviews and extensive media coverage of their Korean tour.

This unusual and well documented journey to the far end of what has remained of the former communist East (as the last and ultimate outpost of the Cold War) serves as a good case study for analyzing the contemporary media interpretations of the East/West divide in the context of the "New Cold War". Apart from the stereotypes in representations of North Korea and former communist East (and stereotypes in presentation of Laibach, for that matter) to a general audience, what complicates this picture is the group's ambiguous identity. Namely, their origins may have been "Eastern" (and even communist), but they have been for several decades coopted by the global music industry and, at least in North Korea, they perceived themselves as "Westerners". This paper focuses on the media reception of Laibach's North Korean expedition in their home country, Slovenia, where it stirred a public debate about the band's "moral compass", informed by local knowledge of their history and strategies of artistic provocation (which was largely lacking in the media coverage from the rest of the world).

LAIBACH IN THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Laibach was originally a member group of the interdisciplinary artistic collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK),² a community which operated within a broader alternative cultural scene of civil society movements in Slovenia (then Yugoslavia), engaged in the critique of the established socialist order and working towards the overall democratization of the society. Laibach was among the three founding members of NSK — together with the theatre group *Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre* (1983–1987) and the visual arts group *IRWIN* (1983). Later in 1984 the three groups founded the NSK design department *New Collectivism*, followed by other subdivisions, including the theoretical *Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy* lead by philosopher Peter Mlakar. The complex discourse of Mlakar's speeches as prologues to Laibach concerts was politically charged, specific to the performance locations, and in itself highly provocative for regular "rock" audiences.

NSK collectives employed different media and approaches to transcend the boundaries of inveterate understanding of art and spotlighted the relations between art, politics and processes of nation-building. The name *Neue Slowenische Kunst* re-

2 See NSK (eds.), *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, Los Angeles, 1991; A. MONROE, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, Cambridge MA, 2005; B. BORČIČ, *Celostna umetnina Laibach: Fragmentarni pogled*, Ljubljana, 2014; Z. BADOVINAC — E. ČUFER — A. GARDNER (eds.), *NSK from Kapital to Capital*, Cambridge MA, 2015; D. KIRCHSTEIN — J.G. LUGHOFER — U. SCHÜTTE (Hrsg.), *Gesamtkunstwerk Laibach: Klang, Bild und Politik*, Klagenfurt, 2018; among many other titles discussing Laibach within/and NSK.



ferred to “Junge slovenische Kunst”, the title of a 1929 special issue of the German avant-garde journal *Der Sturm* featuring young Slovene art. The collective’s German name challenged the trauma of more than one thousand years of German political and cultural hegemony over the small Slovene nation. With its eclectic iconography, largely borrowed from the past (from Eastern and Western European avant-garde movements to socialist and national-socialist realism), NSK called attention to a society of discipline and collectivism which was dying out together with its apparatus, only to fall prey to the far superior forces of capital with its all-encompassing technological control. NSK differed from the Western “appropriation art” in that it appropriated the state itself (its official institutions) with its events. According to NSK both the state and its institutions needed to be constructed (anew), which in reality happened in Slovenia with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. The more the state is failing as a public authority, the stronger the various nationalisms and neo-Nazi-fascisms which spread on the both sides of what was once the Iron Curtain. The more the real power of global capital grows, individual states cling more desperately to their national symbols. Laibach and NSK underscored this, using totalitarian imagery to assert that Nazi-fascism had never been conquered on the symbolical level. Nation-states are left to hold the symbols of authority as empty signifiers of a bygone era. Accordingly, after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing establishment of the independent Slovene state, the NSK groups joined forces in founding the NSK State in Time (1992). Since then, the NSK State in Time has issued passports, had its own visual identity and symbols, opened embassies and consulates in countries all over the world, and has far surpassed the Vatican in the number of citizens. Members of Laibach were among the first holders of its passport.

Laibach’s symbolically charged language of visual communication encompasses an eclectic assemblage of artistic, totalitarian and religious visual references, as a rule, provocative and perplexing. Laibach have used them throughout their career while exploring the relationships between art and ideology, more often than not relying on their shock value. In socialist Yugoslavia in the 1980s, the black “Malevich” cross was a recognizable symbol for Laibach’s core audience, but also something that the wider part of the population was coming to know and, in many cases, genuinely fear. On the album *Nova akropola* (1986) Laibach’s “militant classicism” combined with industrial noise and samples from contemporary, classical and film music induced a sublime terror. Laibach were invoking demonic totalitarian forces and resurrecting past terrors as a “retroactive” warning of things to come.

The group was formed on June 1, 1980 in the small industrial town of Trbovlje. As starting points for their work Laibach cited the modes of industrial production and totalitarianism, collectivism and member anonymity. Their industrial aesthetics gave prominence to the group’s origins, referring to the working-class and revolutionary traditions of Trbovlje. Laibach returned to the industrial era and used its almost archaic iconography to deconstruct the post-industrial nature of the contemporary cultural industry. In accordance with the practice of the contemporary industrial music bands, in their early works they used sounds and images as tools to provoke fear and fascination. With Laibach, industry appeared as a specter from a nightmarish, archetypal past, rather than the promise of a gleaming technocratic future. When asked why they were wearing Yugoslav army uniforms and using means of combat (smoke



bombs) at their concert in Zagreb in 1982, Laibach answered that “they were working on war-related subject matter”.³

Another well remembered concert, in Ljubljana in the same year, was introduced with the words coming from one of the many protest letters expressing outrage at the group’s German name — “Is it possible that a youth band in Ljubljana — the first Hero City of Yugoslavia — has been permitted to wear a name that forces us to recall the bitter memories of Laibach!”⁴ The name Laibach first appeared in 1144 as the original name of Ljubljana, then in the era of the Austrian Hungarian monarchy, and finally in 1943, at the time of the German occupation of Yugoslavia. The controversy around the name and the group’s provocation reached its peak in 1983, when they appeared at the program “TV Weekly”. They staged a controversial television appearance, after which the host journalist (successfully) called for a political lynching of the group. Eventually, the presidency of the Ljubljana City Committee of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia passed a resolution to the effect that the German name of the group was inappropriate, that the group’s use of it had no legal basis and contravened the ordinance on the proper use of the coat of arms, the flag and the name of the city of Ljubljana. A formal ban of all public presentations of the group under the name Laibach, registered in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, remained in effect until February 1987.

After an exhibition of Laibach Kunst in Zagreb in 1983 the members of Laibach were escorted to the railway station by the police and asked to leave and display their art elsewhere. The appearance at the Zagreb Music Biennial in the same year meant another large-scale inter-republic scandal for Laibach followed by a media witch-hunt, because during the performance a pornographic scene was repeatedly projected over images of Josip Broz Tito, the leader of socialist Yugoslavia. The organizers of the festival, police and even soldiers rushed into the hall and attempted to end the concert. Some months later Laibach’s first album was supposed to be released by the public broadcasting organization ZKP RTV Ljubljana, which did not happen due to the Zagreb scandal.

In 1986 Laibach were invited by the renowned British dancer and choreographer Michael Clark to collaborate on the production *No Fire Escape in Hell*. When it was performed at the BITEF festival in Belgrade, Laibach were not allowed to perform live. The production was staged with recorded music, and the video recordings of a patriotic speech by Josip Broz Tito used by Laibach were censored. In 1987, at the invitation of Peter Zadek, the intendant of Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, Laibach participated in the production of *Macbeth* directed by Wilfried Minks. Laibach’s contribution of oppressive, martial music divided opinion amongst the German audience and media, with some interpreting the group as neo-fascist, despite the theatre’s radical tradition.

In Slovenia, Laibach’s public image began to change after their contribution to the theatre production *Krst pod Triglavom* (*Baptism under Triglav*), conceived and per-

3 *NSK from Kapital to Capital — Neue Slowenische Kunst: An event of the final decade of Yugoslavia*, Exhibition Guide, Curator: Zdenka Badovinac, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2015, p. 43.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 42.



formed by various branches of the NSK. They were invited by the foremost Slovene convention, congress and culture center Cankarjev dom (Cankar Hall) to mark the national cultural holiday in 1986 with a staging of the central modern national myth of Slovenia, France Prešeren's lyrical poem *Krst pri Savici* (*Baptism at the Savica*). Initially, this costly and subsequently highly influential production was not received with great enthusiasm by theatre critics but nevertheless received the *Zlata Ptica* (Golden Bird) for exceptional achievements in art awarded by the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (ZSMS). The support of ZSMS largely helped the normalization of Laibach's legal status in Slovenia. To celebrate the first legal Laibach concert in Ljubljana in 1987, after the ban, they played recorded partisan songs outside the hall and German songs from the same period inside. In 1989 Laibach tested the Yugoslav audience's patience again with cultural (political) provocations such as recorded excerpts from nationalist speeches by Serbia's strongman Slobodan Milošević and sounds of *gusle* (folk instrument holding a distinct place in the cultural heritage of Serbia) played at a concert in Zagreb (Croatia). In Belgrade (Serbia), Peter Mlakar would address the audience in German and Serbian, paraphrasing Slobodan Milošević, while a Third Reich film entitled *The Bombing of Belgrade* ran in the background.

The year 1986 was a momentous year for Laibach when their growing success abroad culminated with the backing of Mute Records, a leading British independent record label, alongside such renowned music acts as Depeche Mode or Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Signed for Mute, Laibach were able to record their breakthrough album *Opus Dei* (1987) in the most important studio in Slovenia (Studio Tivoli). This album marked a shift from industrial sounds and militant classicism to a more communicative and apparently populist sound. "It was also the first Western Laibach release to be released in Yugoslavia. The ZKP RTV Ljubljana version appeared in the autumn and included a number of reprinted reviews, including one from Britain's Communist newspaper, *The Morning Star*, calling Laibach "The Soldiers of Freedom".⁵ At the time when Laibach discretely started to show their humorous side, other parts of the British media focused on Laibach's "new originals" (re-Germanised cover versions of songs by Queen and Austrian pop-rock group Opus). The bombastic arrangements thereof and Laibach's totalitarian imagery and posturing were largely seen as parody undeserving of serious discussion. In the new context of capitalist music industry Laibach faced a continuing challenge: a tendency on the part of international media to deflate their critical complexity to the acceptable standards of the global entertainment industry. Accordingly, even after their North Korean tour, the group was described as "high-kitsch Slovenian art-metal veterans best known for their doomy neo-classical covers of such pop cheese nuggets as 'Live is Life' and 'The Final Countdown'"⁶ or as "mildly notorious for flirting satirically with fascist imagery".⁷ Such reception of Laibach was voiced again by British comedian John Oliver

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶ G. LODGE, *IDFA Film Review: 'Liberation Day'*, in: *Variety*, 20 November 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/liberation-day-review-1201923274/>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

⁷ P. BRADSHAW, *Liberation Day review — the hills are alive as North Korea embraces rock'n'roll*, in: *The Guardian*, 22 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/nov/22/liberation-day-review-north-korea-laibach-documentary>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

who raucously mocked the Korean mission in HBO's *Last Week Tonight*, saying "North Korea seems like a terrifying place to visit. But if it is really true that that guy [Milan Fras, lead singer] is going to be singing *The Sound of Music*⁸ — I kind of want to go there."⁹



THE SLOVENE DEBATE

Back in Slovenia, the media closely followed each step of Laibach's expedition, from the technical details of their performance to their sightseeing activities. Their coverage of Laibach's visit occasionally included news about the strained situation at the border between South and North Korea, which added suspense to the story and made the Laibach expedition even more attractive to the general public.¹⁰ In addition to numerous articles which focused on the foreign media coverage of Laibach's trip to North Korea,¹¹ Slovene media put great emphasis on the episodes with the Korean censors. For example, the state-sponsored North Korean pop hit "We will go to Mount Paektu" in the Laibach version was not acceptable for the Korean censors and the song was eventually not performed in the respectable Ponghwa Art Theatre in Pyongyang. Nor did the hosts allow matching the song "Edelweiss" from the Alpine Hollywood musical *The Sound of Music* with images taken from the North Korean 1972 film classic *The Flower Girl*. The interventions on Laibach's playlist and other aspects

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- 8 In a 2015 interview for the Belgrade political weekly *Vreme* I have asked Laibach spokesman Ivan Novak how Laibach conceived the "playlist" for the Pyongyang concerts and what kind of audience they hoped to address. He responded that the North Korean audiences "know well the melodies from the musical *The Sound of Music*, because in high schools they learn English from those songs. They are also familiar with some Beatles songs, so we are going to play for them our version of *Across the Universe*..." I. ŠENTEVSKA, *Uspomina na planinu Paektu* (interview with Ivan Novak), in: *Vreme* no. 1282, 30 July 2015, p. 41.
- 9 J.V. SIMOULIN and M. TRAAVIK, *Liberation Days: Laibach and North Korea*, Éditions Timeless, 2018, p. 75.
- 10 S.U. STA, *Obstreljevanje med Severno in Južno Korejo. Kje je skupina Laibach?*, in: *Slovenske novice*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.slovenskenovice.si/novice/svet/obstreljevanje-med-severno-juzno-korejo-kje-je-skupina-laibach>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.
- 11 A. LEBINGER, *Severna Koreja ne razume skupine Laibach*, in: *Mladina*, 23 July 2015, <https://www.mladina.si/168157/severna-koreja-ne-razume-skupine-laibach>, accessed 8. 7. 2021; M. MEGLA, *Laibach: Etični problem je igrati v katerikoli državi*, in: *Delo*, 31 July 2015, p. 18; A. POTOČNIK, *Kaj je skupini Laibach zares uspelo z nastopom v Severni Koreji*, in: *Dnevnik*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042718905>, accessed 8. 7. 2021; V. U., *Poklon Severnih Korejcev Laibachu: "Svojsko petje, bogat glas in iznurnjena izvedba"*, in: *Delo*, 20 August 2015, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/glasba/poklon-severnih-korejcev-laibachu-svojsko-petje-bogat-glas-in-izurnjena-izvedba.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021; B. GRADIČ OSET and A. ŽUŽEK, *Tuji odzivi na Laibach: od subverzivnega repertoarja do fašističnega Disneylanda*, at: *SiolNET*, 28 August 2015, <https://siol.net/trendi/glasba/tuji-odzivi-na-laibach-od-subverzivnega-repertoarja-do-fasisticnega-disneylanda-399025>, accessed 8. 7. 2021; M. MEGLA, *Tudi Ramones želijo v Severno Korejo*, in: *Delo*, 1 September 2015, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/glasba/tudi-the-ramones-hocejo-v-severno-korejo.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.



of the performance were reported in depth by Slovene journalists,¹² including other forms of restrictions imposed on Laibach by their hosts. The reason for such attention paid to the issue of censorship was perhaps best described by journalist Jure Tepina: “Censorship is part of their stage performance, their work, their essence.” In other words, the more the apparatchiks watch their steps, the happier Laibach are. “Finally, someone started to take them seriously again, [because] in a ‘democracy’ it is rather difficult to offend anyone and get censored”.¹³

On August 14 *Delo*, the major Slovene daily newspaper, published an article by Slavoj Žižek¹⁴ where the famous philosopher with quite an autonomous position in Slovene culture and society at large mildly criticized the band whose “relentless affirmative interpreter” he had been “ever since the beginnings of the group”.¹⁵ This contribution based on fragments of texts published in several Žižek’s books was re-published by the German daily *Die Welt* five days later, on the day of Laibach concert in the “world’s most gruesome dictatorship”.¹⁶ In this article Žižek refers to the film *The Sound of Music* as “ridiculous” and “one of the worst cases of Hollywood kitsch”, noting that its kitsch imagery is not Austrian but belongs to “Hollywood and, more generally, Western popular culture”. Namely, “the paradox is here that it is as if, in the last decades, Austrians themselves started to ‘play Austrians,’ i.e., identified with the Hollywood image of their own country.” However, Žižek finds that “the power of the film resides in its obscenely-direct staging of embarrassing intimate fantasies”, such as “resolving the problem stated by the nuns’ chorus in the introductory scene: ‘How do you solve a problem like Maria?’” with a proposed solution “mentioned by Freud in an anecdote: ‘Penis normalis, zwei mal taeglich...’”¹⁷ Žižek points to “arguably the most powerful scene” in the film where Mother Superior summons Maria and delivers her message in the “weird song ‘Climb every mountain!’” Thus, citing an old ironic review of the film, Žižek described it as “a movie about a stupid nun who would be allowed to lead her happy monastic life if her Mother Superior were not to invite her to her room and start to shout at her hysterically about the need

12 See, for example, J. TEPINA, *Laibach se privajajo na Severno Korejo, cenzorji prepovedali tri pesmi*, at: 24UR.com, 17 August 2015, <https://www.24ur.com/ekskluziv/glasba/foto-lai-bach-se-privajajo-na-severno-korejo-cenzorji-prepovedali-tri-pesmi.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

13 J. TEPINA, *Komentar: Laibach so združevalci*, at: 24UR.com, 25 August 2015, <https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/komentar-laibach-so-zdruzevalci.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

14 S. ŽIŽEK, *Josef Fritzl, Moje pesmi, moje sanje in Severna Koreja*, in: *Delo*, 14 August 2015, <https://www.delo.si/sobotna/josef-fritzl-moje-pesmi-moje-sanje-in-severna-koreja.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

15 Ž. LEILER, *Kdaj iz konja postaneš trojanski konj* (interview with Morten Traavik), in: *Delo*, 17 March 2017, <https://www.delo.si/sobotna/kdaj-iz-konja-postanes-trojanski-konj.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

16 S. ŽIŽEK, *What Laibach should know when playing in Pyongyang*, in: *Die Welt*, 19 August 2015, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article145381503/What-Laibach-should-know-when-playing-in-Pyongyang.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

17 On Laibach’s album *The Sound of Music* the cover version of this song is titled *Maria / Korea* (“How do you solve a problem like Korea?”).



to climb every mountain...")¹⁸ noting that in the late 1960s, when *The Sound of Music* was shown in (socialist) Yugoslavia, "THIS scene — the three minutes of this song — was the only part of the film which was censored (cut out). The anonymous Socialist censor thereby displayed his profound sense for the truly dangerous power of Catholic ideology." As for North Korea, Žižek thinks that the country is "closest we get today to Shangri-la" from James Hilton's novel *The Lost Horizon*, "an isolated valley in Tibet where people live happy modest lives totally isolated from the corrupted global civilization". He quotes a popular North Korean political song which includes the lines: "Ah, Korean Workers' Party, at whose breast only my life begins and ends" and two entries ("mother" and "father") from the North Korean *Dictionary of the Korean language* published in 1964. Whereas the former is more elaborate and has at least four¹⁹ main definitions of the word "mother", "father" is only defined as "the husband of one's birth mother". In Lacanian terms Žižek accordingly sees a North Korean leader as "hermaphroditic with the dominance of the feminine features".

In this essay Žižek does not, in fact, discuss Laibach or their motives to perform in North Korea. With this article, somewhat ironically, he wishes them "all the best" when they play their music "for the big happy family headed by the well-caring" Kim Jong-un. However, in the interview promoting Uģis Olte and Morten Traavik's documentary film *Liberation Day* (2016) Žižek referred to Laibach's North Korean tour as "the most fascinating cultural and ideological political event... of the 21st century", concluding his statement as follows:

"Laibach is not simply making fun of totalitarianism. Laibach is bringing out, let's call it the 'authoritarian feature' which is present in all societies, even the most democratic... So, you see, it's not about North Korea. You will not learn a lot from Laibach about North Korea. You will learn a lot about our own anxieties and hypocrisies".²⁰

As a person "responsible" for the whole business of shipping out Laibach to North Korea, Norwegian theatre and film director Morten Traavik was prominently present in the Slovene media by way of interviews and reports on his previous activities²¹ in this country and the history of his collaboration with Laibach. In the interviews he often assumed the role of the spokesman for the whole expedition who had to justify his personal and Laibach's motives to perform in Kim Jong-un's "grue-

18 A special place among Laibach's visual references is claimed by the symbolism of Mount Kum and Mount Triglav as the highest peak and national symbol of Slovenia. Laibach used the number "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" to associate the Slovene Alpine imagery with the symbolism of the volcanic Mount Paektu, "sacred mountain" of the North Korean revolution, mythical place of origin of Kim Il-sung's socialist state and alleged birthplace of his son and successor Kim Jong-il.

19 For example: "(3) A metaphor for being loving, looking after everything, and worrying about others: *Party officials must become mothers who ceaselessly love and teach the Party rank and file, and become standard-bearers at the forefront of activities.*"

20 J.V. SIMOULIN and M. TRAAVIK, *Liberation Days: Laibach and North Korea*, Éditions Timeless, 2018, p. 189.

21 In May 2012 Traavik organized the first Norwegian cultural festival in Pyongyang, invited by and in close collaboration with North Korean cultural authorities. His first film about his experiences in North Korea was titled *Yes, We Love This Country* (which is the title of the Norwegian national anthem, *Ja, vi elsker dette landet*).



some dictatorship". As a foreigner who had considerable previous experience with the country he was also one of the "experts" on daily life in North Korea invited to share their knowledge and observations with the Slovene public. In line with Žižek's abovementioned statement he said that Laibach are not a band which communicates definite political positions, but questions our own attitudes or dispositions.²² In one of his interviews Traavik explained that, initially, he was not interested in North Korea per se, but in the media stereotypes and interpretations, in prejudice and opinions shaped before the fact.²³ Accordingly, North Korea is a case study which unveils "our" own (that is, Western media and its consumers') tendencies of oversimplification. In "our" perception, each "exotic" place, especially places which have a more authoritarian mode of government, like Russia or Turkey, is inhabited by victims and perpetrators. The dichotomy of perpetrator/victim is completely useless if one is to comprehend any repressive society. For Traavik North Korea is primarily a showcase for demonstrating this. According to the Norwegian director, one of Laibach's guiding principles is that true subversiveness always works on more than one level. The Pyongyang concert was conceived, on the one hand, as subversion of the North Korean regime but, on the other, as subversion of the expectations in the rest of the world about its meanings.²⁴

In his public statements Traavik often addressed the argument that cultural exchange with North Korea solidifies the present regime. The implication of such criticism is that the only sound reason for visiting a totalitarian state is propagating "our own" way of life. Westerners often see cultural exchange as an opportunity to set out for some place to demonstrate their superiority. For Traavik, this is not cultural exchange. Exchange is when the both sides are open enough to learn from each other. Art is not about delivering a single message or a single conclusion. The members of his expedition did not visit North Korea in the capacity of human rights activists or politicians, although the tour, admittedly, included many political elements for those who saw them as such. In this interview for *Delo* Traavik compared North Korea with other "problematic" countries. When it comes to different aspects of daily life and human rights issues, Islamic State in Syria, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and many other countries in the world fare worse in different respects, but have a far better reputation than North Korea.²⁵ There is an incredible amount of propaganda surrounding this country, claims Traavik. Most people still believe that Western press is more credible than North Korean. But sometimes it is not.²⁶ Not that Traavik believes that North Korea is a social democracy and a free state. Such as it is, distant and secluded, it has nevertheless become a convenient playground for Western tabloids, an

22 M. MEGLA, *Kdo je Morten Traavik, organizator Laibacha v Pjongjangu?*, in: *Delo*, 31 July 2015, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/razno/kdo-je-morten-traavik.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

23 M. MEGLA, *Novinarska besedila o Severni Koreji — zdijo se kot šala, vendar niso* (interview with Morten Traavik), *Delo*, 14 August 2015, p. 16.

24 A. JURČ, *Izguba popkulturne nedolžnosti z Laibach je brutalna izkušnja* (interview with Morten Traavik), MMC RTV SLO, 18 March 2017, <https://www.rtvlo.si/kultura/film/izguba-popkulturne-nedolznosti-z-laibach-je-brutalna-izkusnja/417562>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

25 M. MEGLA, *Novinarska besedila o Severni Koreji*, p. 17.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 18.



easy target for loathing, a convenient object for animosity and ridicule.²⁷ According to Traavik, in a sense, Laibach is a state just like North Korea. And he thought that with their performance in Pyongyang they finally returned “home”, to their natural habitat. Finally, if their concert serves to fortify the North Korean regime, perhaps that regime deserves it. Moreover, any regime which would try to promote itself with a Laibach performance plays with fire.²⁸

In addition to Slavoj Žižek and Morten Traavik as privileged commentators of both Laibach and North Korea, a number of Slovene (admittedly few) experts on North Korean politics, economy and everyday life, was invited by the media to give their comments on Laibach’s expedition. Slovene scholar (economist and political scientist) Bogomil Ferfila, who had recently published on North Korea²⁹ was thus invited to give his contribution in an interview. Ferfila shared with the Slovene public his knowledge about the (almost non-existing) relations between Slovenia and North Korea, social structure of the North Korean society and its gradual opening to the West, North Korea’s foreign policy, issues of censorship and surveillance, possibilities of unification with South Korea, access to popular culture and entertainment, and other matters of daily life. As for the Laibach tour, Ferfila was convinced that they would not be playing for “ordinary people”, but for members of the highest echelons of the society, excluding nevertheless the very top of the state hierarchy. “If they are acquainted with Laibach’s reputation, they [the authorities] may flaunt with their visit like, for example, they did when they invited [US basketball star] Dennis Rodman”. According to Ferfila, Laibach’s audience would probably be made of “Party youth, people who want to be influential”. Their ideas may perhaps become important in the future and this is why a Laibach concert in North Korea is a good thing. Kim Jong-un’s wife (Ri Sol-ju) is a former pop icon and the invitation to Laibach might also be a sign of the opening of the state to pop-cultural influences. Ferfila also (correctly) predicted that Laibach would be, as visitors, taken to pay homage to the 20-meter high monument to the supreme leaders on the central square in Pyongyang.³⁰

As for experienced journalists, Zorana Baković, longtime foreign correspondent of *Delo*, made parallels between China and North Korea in two articles discussing the dynamics of the gradual opening of the respective countries to influences of Western pop culture. In the first article (*The World in Soy Sauce*) Baković focused on the mechanisms of censorship and official bans of blacklisted Western performers in China.³¹ Discussing the importance of Cui Jian, “father of Chinese rock”, she also notes that he is a member of the Korean ethnic minority in China. Baković advised

27 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

28 M. MEGLA, *Vrnitev domov*, in: *Delo*, 5 September 2015, p. 26.

29 B. FERFILA, *Severna Koreja: zadnja stalinistična in komunistična monarhija*, Ljubljana, 2015; B. FERFILA, *Severna Koreja: Najbolj čudna, grozljiva in zaprta država na svetu*, Ljubljana, 2015.

30 D. CRNOVIĆ, *Če v Severni Koreji poznajo sloves Laibach, se bodo z njihovim obiskom lahko pohvalili* (interview with Dr Bogomil Ferfila), at: SiolNET, 19 August 2015, <https://siol.net/trendi/glasba/ce-v-severni-koreji-poznajo-sloves-laibach-se-bodo-z-njihovim-obiskom-lahko-pohvalili-395939>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

31 Maroon 5, Oasis, Linkin Park or Björk.



Laibach to be careful about what they write and tweet prior to their visit to North Korea, and made a somewhat ironical remark: “I don’t know what I would give to find out why Kim Jong-un chose exactly Laibach” to perform in Pyongyang. “Was he perhaps attracted by the genre of ‘industrial rock’ or the promise given by the Slovene music group that they would adapt their program to the ‘North Korean situation’?” Continuing with painting this picture of the almighty and all-seeing Great Leader Baković asserts: “Militarized North Korean pop and Slovene defiance to everything that is forbidden, converge at some point. Perhaps in Kim Jong-un’s head”. She concludes that “after Laibach’s visit to Pyongyang, of course, one should not expect anything extraordinary” in terms of changes of the political landscape, yet Laibach’s expedition is an “important event. Regardless of what they would sing, the[ir] music would reach the ears of the young leader. And North Korea shall never be as it was before”. Admittedly, according to Baković, such changes take a long time to become visible to the outside world.³² In the other article (*The Most Normal Country in the World*), published few days before the Laibach concerts, Baković addressed the question whether North Korea should be considered as a completely normal state in light of the facts that more than 120 000 people live there in prison camps, the General piles up nuclear warheads while common people are starving, and his army of 1,2 million threatens to turn the whole region into a “see of blood”. At the conclusion of this article the journalist again establishes a (fictional) direct connection between Laibach and the young leader. Namely, Kim Jong-un “perhaps tests his society with the invitation sent to the Slovene music group? Doesn’t he open another lock through which North Korea could peek into the outside world?”³³

The main question which stirred the public debate in Slovenia about Laibach’s presence in North Korea is whether it was ethically problematic (and in which respects). On August 7 *Delo* published an article which included responses to this question from several competent public figures.

Sociologist Gregor Tomc (also formerly prominent punk musician of Laibach’s generation) suggested that North Korea, with its death record, was a country which should be avoided by all means. “And what do Laibach say to this? ... ‘When we are invited to some country as guests, we obey its regime, even though we do not support it’”.³⁴ Tomc finds this statement problematic, regardless of whether Laibach’s concern in this case is human rights abuse or their income.³⁵ Tomc praised Laibach for their subversion of the authoritarian communist rule back in the 1980s (Laibach were also

32 Z. BAKOVIĆ, *Svet v sojnini omaki: Vpliv rock’n’rolla na jedrske konice*, in: *Delo*, 23 July 2015, http://www.laibach.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Svet-v-sojnini-omaki_-Vpliv-rockn-rolla-na-jedrske-konice.png, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

33 Z. BAKOVIĆ, *Najbolj normalna država na svetu*, in: *Delo*, 23 July 2015, <http://www.laibach.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Zorana-Bakovi%C4%87-Sobotna-priloga-Delo-14.-8.-2015.pdf>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

34 Laibach’s statement extended to the regime in the USA.

35 Negative responses to the Laibach expedition in this article also included that of music critic and man of letters Jure Potokar who saw it as a project primarily based on commercial exploitation of totalitarianism. According to this line of argument, Laibach’s main goal in traveling to North Korea was (more) money and fame.



influenced by punk), but panned them for their present cautiousness. “We do not go to North Korea to provoke the Koreans, but to provoke everyone else in the world” was another statement which Tomc found highly problematic, as provoking everyone on the whole meant provoking no one. Tomc thus sees Laibach’s performance in North Korea as “completely opposite” from what they were once doing. “Let us be frank: what is the symbolic meaning of a show for the representatives of the elite, who directly or indirectly participate in the worst forms of human rights abuse in the world”. Tomc locates Laibach’s problem in the neo-leftist ideological posture which enables them to see evil wherever they look. For Laibach, there is no difference between North Korea and the USA. According to Laibach it is equally ethically questionable to perform in Trbovlje and in Pyongyang, which indicates a highly problematic loss of “moral compass”, concludes Tomc.

In this debate writer Alojz Ihan was more reluctant to judge Laibach before their actual departure to North Korea, but voiced his opinion that “Laibach performance does not have a true importance” for the country, as the regime would interpret it on its own terms. Moreover, if the whole world is indifferent towards the situation there, why should anyone demand ethical responsibility from a group called Laibach. “Laibach’s real position is simple — the performance will only serve as material for new (self)interpretations of their artistic poetics,” claims Ihan. Journalist Vojko Flegar suggested sarcastically that after Dennis Rodman’s sojourn in North Korea, visiting this country became something not particularly original. Raqqa, capital of the caliphate of the Islamic State, would rather fit the bill...

On the other side of the debate table, Laibach’s expedition was greeted by journalist Ali Žerdin: “if a conceptual artist works with the questions of art and totalitarianism, he would sooner or later set his stage in the laboratory clean version of the object of his analysis”. In other words, Laibach’s presence in North Korea was something to be expected sooner or later. Žerdin opines that Laibach have a chance to “shake the very foundations of the Korean totalitarianism”, because “music is subversion”. According to this commentator, in this case international sanctions should not apply: “after all, the East European socialism began to fall apart with the first Eastern tour of Laibach”. Slovene politician and prominent intellectual Dimitrij Rupel also took Laibach’s side in this debate as they, according to him, alarm the ongoing presence of the totalitarian rhetoric and aesthetics (which does not exclude the US and the West in general). However, Rupel felt that he was unable to answer the question whether the subversiveness of their art would be acknowledged in North Korea.³⁶

In his column at the website *za-misli.si* philosopher and psychoanalyst Dušan Rutar also gave his contribution to the ongoing debate about Laibach’s concert in North Korea. His opinion was also positive. Rutar described Laibach’s controversial history in socialist Yugoslavia as an ethical quest for opening the space of freedom in a closed and ideologically charged society. However, according to Rutar, when the group went abroad (to the West) and found itself in a neoliberal environment where “everything is possible”, its subversive charge was severely diminished. Accordingly, Laibach is now “given a one-time historical opportunity” in a state which

36 Ž. LEILER, *Provocirati vse pomeni provocirati nikogar*, Delo, 7 August 2015, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/glasba/provocirati-vse-pomeni-provocirati-nikogar.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.



is completely closed, to “demonstrate that Everything is not possible and is not totalitarian. Laibach literally has to go to North Korea”. However, Rutar warns: if the audiences in North Korea perceive Laibach as emissaries of the Western entertainment industry it will be even worse than if the authoritarian government does so.³⁷ Blogger Aljaž Pengov Bitenc published on *Delo*’s website his (also affirmative) comment of the news of Laibach’s “assault on Pyongyang” (which he at first took as a joke). This comment also draws from Laibach’s history of subversion through over-identification with the political system in socialist Yugoslavia / Slovenia, referring specifically to the notorious 1987 “Poster Affair”, in which Laibach were indirectly involved. Pengov Bitenc wonders “who would be the North Korean Nikola Grujić³⁸ who would inform Kim Jong-un that he had just allowed some guys from Slovenia to criticize his regime from an open stage, while the virtuous representatives of the North Korean people eagerly applauded.” So, the end result of Laibach’s performance would hopefully be a demonstration of the “absurdity and hollowness of the dictatorship of the Kim family”, not for Europe and the West in general, but for the subjects of that regime.³⁹

The flare of heated tabloid rhetoric was brought into this debate by Maja Sunčič in the review *Reporter*. According to Sunčič,⁴⁰ because of Laibach Slovenia experienced one of the biggest disgraces in its history as an independent state. While the group “in their complete degeneration” of hunger for glory and media attention “licks the floor beneath the most brutal dictator of the 21st century, Kim Jong-un”, Slovene media sing the praises of that exchange. Sunčič again envisages some sort of direct communication between Laibach and the Supreme Leader: “This week dictator Kim Jong-un received Laibach as the first foreign band in North Korea, although he commanded destruction of all music which threatens the survival of his regime. If members of Laibach headed by their leader Jani Novak opposed Kim Jong-un, they would instantly after entering the country get a bullet in the head or they would be crammed in some of the numerous prison camps. Laibach’s performance is, therefore, not aimed at liberating the North Korean population from the regime. Quite the contrary: with their concert Laibach supports one of the most brutal regimes in the contemporary world!” Sunčič makes her case by quoting numerous instances of abuse from *Human Rights Watch*, *World Report 2015: North Korea* and together with “inhuman Laibach” scorns the “dominant leftist media” in Slovenia for supporting them.

37 D. RUTAR, *Laibach v Severni Koreji*, at: Za-misli, 20 August 2015, <https://za-misli.si/kolumne/dusan-rutar/2426-laibach-v-severni-koreji>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

38 “Engineer Nikola Grujić” “discovered” (and shared his discovery with the Yugoslav press) that the poster design by the NSK member group *Novi kolektivizem* for the Youth Day (official celebration of President Tito’s birthday) was a “remake” of a Nazi painting. His (fake) identity was later attributed to the Yugoslav secret police and, alternatively, to the designers themselves, who allegedly wanted to provoke what would become a major public scandal in the last years of socialist Yugoslavia.

39 A. PENGOV BITENC, *Dobrodošli v džungli: Severnokorejski Nikola Grujić*, at: *Delo*, 30 July 2015, <https://www.delo.si/mnenja/blogi/dobrodosli-v-dzungli-severnokorejski-nikola-grujic.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

40 Due to her high emotional involvement in the “North Korean debate” a colleague, Marko Crnkovič, later referred to her as Kim-Il Sunčič.



Like many other participants in the debate Sunčič refers to Laibach's past in socialist Yugoslavia, but with a surprising twist: "Laibach's enthusiasm for Kim Jong-un is not surprising, because this aged band regularly mourns the dictator Tito and the ruined Yugoslav regime. As they are not obliged any more to carry ceremonial youth batons for Tito and sing him praises, in the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un members of the band have now found a contemporary substitute for Tito."⁴¹ In this debate Laibach (from their youth) were thus seen as both praising and subverting (even demolishing) the communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Slovenia included), depending on the political perspective of the "beholder".

As for Laibach, their spokesperson Ivan Novak confirmed that they went to North Korea for "on-the-job training" in a totalitarian regime. Namely, "we went to Pyongyang for some on-the-job training, as it were, because there is no other state in the world which so earnestly and openly assumes a totalitarian posture" when it comes to the relations between art, ideology, politics and mass culture, which have been Laibach's major concerns for 35 years.⁴² At the early stages of announcing the North Korean expedition Laibach collectively and Ivan Novak individually gave succinct comments on their views of the political situation in North Korea. For example, Laibach's explanation why capitalism has not invaded North Korea (yet) is because the US need an "excuse for military presence in the Asian-Pacific region", where they guard their global economic and political interests. "The main target is, of course, China".⁴³ Laibach also announced that they would support the "legitimate striving" of the people for unification of North and South Korea,⁴⁴ but after their return from North Korea these assertive statements gave way to more temperate ones. In a genuinely Laibachian twist, Ivan Novak gave many interviews where he revealed his fascination with North Korea and was subsequently criticized for painting an idyllic picture of the society as a "utopia which evidently works".⁴⁵ Because of this "bias" and perceived lack of criticism towards his North Korean experience (apparently taken at face value) Novak was even panned as acting like an unassuming "accidental tourist from Trbovlje".⁴⁶ Vocalist Boris Benko summed up their stay in North Korea as "endless meetings and coordination with the locals, which was occasionally inter-

41 M. SUNČIČ, *Laibach se klanja Milanu Kučanu in klavcu Kim Džong Unu*, in: Reporter, 19 August 2015 (updated 20 August), <https://reporter.si/clanek/slovenija/laibach-se-klanja-milanu-kucanu-in-klavcu-kim-dzong-unu-468869>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

42 R. DOLHAR, *Laibachi na strokovnem izobraževanju v totalitarnem režimu*, in: Primorski dnevnik, 2 September 2015, p. 8.

43 M. ŠTEFANČIČ jr., *Zadnji bodo prvi, izkoriščani bodo izkoriščevalci!*, in: Mladina, 25 April 2014, <https://www.mladina.si/156071/laibach/>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

44 V.U., *Laibach v Pjongjangu: Nastop v "civilnih korejskih oblačilih", na programu tudi korejske skladbe*, in: Delo, 23 July 2015, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/glasba/laibach-bo-v-civilnih-korejskih-oblacilih-zapel-tudi-nekaj-tradicionalnih-in-sodobnih-korejskih-skladb.html>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

45 M. MEGLA, *Ena sama fascinantna lepota ljudi*, in: Delo, 19 August 2015, p. 24.

46 B. VEZJAK, *Laibach kot naključni turisti iz Trbovelj v Severni Koreji na Fox News*, at: Fokuspokus, 23 August 2015, <https://arhiv.fokuspokus.si/article/834?=-laibach-kot-nakljucni-turisti-iz-trbovelj-v-severni-koreji-na-fox-news>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.



rupted by sightseeing and music activities”.⁴⁷ Other members of the group, vocalist Mina Špiler,⁴⁸ drummer Janez Gabrič, keyboard player Luka Jamnik, and even technician Sašo Pučnik also gave earnest statements about their experiences in North Korea stressing the technical difficulties of the staging of their show, but openly shared their fascination with the country and their hosts.⁴⁹

TO BORROW A CONCLUSION...

In his article about Laibach’s journey to North Korea journalist Borut Mehle focused on the group’s “ambassadorial” capacity, noting that this was not the first guest appearance of a Slovene act in North Korea: the modest cultural exchange between the two countries goes back to the Yugoslav era when “folklorists of Emona” paid an official visit. This, however, would make Laibach’s expedition no less “pioneering”: they were in the same mission as Yugoslav performers of light music who toured the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain.⁵⁰ A staunch supporter of Laibach, journalist Jure Tepina (who was a member of Laibach’s 25-member North Korean’s expedition), pointed out in his comment that with this tour Laibach (effortlessly) did more for Slovenia than any politician in the last 30 years. Moreover, “Laibach unites the politicians and their activist satellites in resistance and even upfront animosity towards the misunderstood and unknown”.⁵¹

Along the similar lines, journalist and editor of the portal *Fokuspokus.si* Marko Crnkovič also took Laibach’s side in the “North Korean debate”. According to Crnkovič, Laibach did not go North Korea to glorify Kim Jong-un, nor to provoke his regime. He preferred to see them as “ambassadors of democracy”, indeed in the same role as Wham,⁵² only 30 years later. Who else would better perform this role, asked Crnkovič, if not Laibach “in their polite and hushed version”. According to this commentator, scorning the band for performing in North Korea demonstrates that not many people in Slovenia understand the meaning and essence of “artistic freedom, politics, provocation, *Zeitgeist* and irony”. Laibach’s journey to North Korea “was a superb conceptual idea. Probably the most obstinately totalitarian, difficult, provocative band in the world performed in the most obstinately totalitarian, difficult, tragicomic regime in the world”. Crnkovič does not see why any artist in the world —

47 D. CRNOVIČ, *Ves čas so zahtevali, da igramo — tudi takrat, ko na odru še ni bilo niti enega samega kabla*, at: SiolNET, 25 August 2015, <https://siol.net/trendi/glasba/ves-cas-so-zahtevali-da-igramo-tudi-takrat-ko-na-odru-se-ni-bilo-niti-enega-samega-kabla-396863>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

48 G. BAUMAN, *Intervju s pevko Mino Špiler, članico kolektiva Laibach: Severna Koreja nam nastavlja nelagodno ogledalo*, in: *Dnevnik*, 5 September 2015, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042719751>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

49 M. MEGLA, *Vrnitev domov*, pp. 25–26.

50 B. MEHLE, *Laibach bodo nastopili doma v Pjongjangu*, in: *Dnevnik*, 30 June 2015, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042715871>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.

51 J. TEPINA, *Komentar: Laibach so združevalci*.

52 The British pop duo (George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley) were the first international pop attraction allowed to perform in China in 1985.

especially Laibach — should not perform in any state, regardless of the level of democratic freedoms there. Political or civilian common sense does not apply here, simply because artists are not politicians and Laibach are not Karl Erjavec⁵³, much less John Kerry.⁵⁴ Returning to the 1987 “Poster Affair”, Crnkovič applied the logic of the right-wing critics (personified by “Maja Kim Il-Sunčič”) to that situation: according to them *Novi kolektivizem* should be scorned for their design of the Youth Day poster because their political provocation was merely an excuse for collaboration with the (communist) regime.

This time, claims Crnkovič, Laibach were most successful in provoking the Slovene public, especially the Slovene media. The right-wing commentators use this backlash to assert that Slovenia (with Laibach as “state artists” and the overall left-wing camp) is on the way to becoming North Korea. At the same time, they impart a high level of aggressiveness and anxiety to the debate, much like their regime-friendly predecessors in the communist era. On the other hand, Laibach tricked the other side of the media camp (their supporters included) into showing mostly their fascination with the Supreme Leader of North Korea. According to Crnkovič, this only shows Slovene media’s considerable lack of talent for perceiving and interpretation of irony, and that is exactly why some of them presented this “spontaneous provocation” as a cheesy joke. Namely, they demonstrated how easily even the obscure topic of North Korea leads to a quarrel about right-wing meanness and left-wing benevolence in the local political context.⁵⁵



53 Then Slovene foreign affairs minister.

54 Then US Secretary of State.

55 M. CRNKOVIČ, *Das ist Kunst: Laibach bombardiral Pjongjang, preživel backlash SLO medijev*, at: Fokusfokus, 22 August 2015, <https://arhiv.fokuspokus.si/article/831?=-das-ist-kunst-lai-bach-bombardiral-pjongjang-prezivel-backlash-slo-medijev-2>, accessed 8. 7. 2021.