Laibach: Post-Ideological Tricksters

by Simon Bell

On the 14th April Laibach delivered the Monumental Retro-avant-garde performance at the Tate Modern, London, celebrating over thirty years of Laibach Kunst machine. The Turbine Hall was split in two; on one side the Laibach stage, on the other a large black box. At the forefront of the stage was a stag’s head with antlers, inside the box was a diamond-encrusted skull. The antlers are a familiar Völkish motif occurring throughout the Laibach spectacle; the skull is Damien Hirst’s For the Love of God (2007). The price of the mounted stag head is unknown, the price of the Hirst skull £50 million. It was possible to touch the antlers, to photograph it, and it would have been possible to remove it from its mount. The Hirst skull on the other hand was subject to the tightest security, only a few were allowed into the black box to view it at a time, it glittered under a glass case, and photographs were forbidden. Thematically however, the conditions of accessibility are reversed. Whilst the title, cost, and vulgarity of the Hirst skull is an arguably straightforward observation on the art world, consumerism, mortality, and their interrelations, Laibach’s antlers remain obscure. The antlers might be a familiar Völkish trope, but re-encoded in the Laibach spectacle they simultaneously denounce and re-affirm the association with the grand utopian narrative and a traumatic European historical. The Hirst skull is a novelty of its time; a coy playful pastiche arising from and in collaboration with late-capitalism. The antlers are antiquated Weltanschauung, whose only currency in late-capitalism is as playfully offensive kitsch. It is in this discourse that Laibach’s interventions are so vital, and why, after thirty years of provocations and controversy, the Laibach enigma remains as salient as ever.
“martial-industrial” band, yet music is paradoxically incidental to Laibach Kunst. They have consistently frustrated categorisation and assimilation into the current hive-mind media-age nightmare of Baudrillard’s “obscene transparency”, where information is currency. They occupy a unique space, both sustaining and frustrating our fantasies; fantasies of a historical Eastern Europe, of totalitarianism, of obedience and dissent. Central to an analysis of this unique quality is Laibach’s role as a nexus between East and West; despite the discourse’s defining centrality, it’s curiously neglected both in “global” aesthetic discourse and in academic work on Laibach. The Laibach spectacle/construct has a correlation in Agnes Horvath’s Nulla; in maths the Nulla is the numberless number, and in Horvath’s understanding of Eastern Europe, the Nulla is a ‘fluid state of non-being’; caught in a liminal geopolitical space between the West and the Orient, and the transitional historical of post-socialism where ‘everything can happen without meaning’. [i] This is the space of the trickster figure, a liminal space of Laibach’s origin and reason for being.

Operating from a space of non-being, with a strategy of treating their native Slovenia, the state, and history itself as a Duchampian readymade, Laibach are free from cultural and historical determinants. They belong neither to the establishment nor to opposition; they are the true Trickster, one that is neither party, not self or other, but a third and disruptive (external) unit in a dialectic. Ethnographically, the Trickster is involved with bodily functions and excreta, but the abject here has a positive rather than negative value. The abject becomes what must be expelled from the subject as threatening to its sense of coherence; ‘an anxiety emerging with bourgeois power and its attempts to eradicate values inconsistent with its own claims to truth’[ii]. In resurrecting the trauma and guilt of Europe’s totalitarian past, moreover in re-mythologizing it, are Laibach and the NSK still playing with Europe’s shit?[iii]

This role as nexus between East and West is integral to an understanding of Laibach and NSK praxis, whether as Trickster operating outside this binary or in establishing an Eastern aesthetic autonomy in the face of hegemonic Western aesthetic discourse. The West’s failure to meaningfully engage with Laibach and the NSK is manifested in its reportage of Laibach. Reviews of the Laibach recordings, performances and texts (particularly in the eighties) are guaranteed to contain the phrases “Flirting with fascism”, “tongue-in-cheek” and “Wagnerian”, claiming an irony to Laibach found nowhere in their music or press releases. It is an express attempt to render comfortable the provocation of an incongruously overt grand utopian narrative form that is apparently without irony or pastiche, and is indicative of a degree of separation from the European traumatic historical. In living memory Central and Eastern Europe has experienced the cataclysms of total war and the trauma of two totalitarian political systems.[iv] Its borders have been in a state of flux; whole nations have been founded and lost, and it has known mass refugee movements. This necessarily more direct understanding of the European traumatic historical differs from the perspective of Britain or America, whose version of events is primarily shaped by the dominance of the Hollywood film industry.

Laibach - Ljubljana-Zagreb-Beograd (1993)
The insistence in the West not only that Laibach are funny, but find themselves funny, demonstrates further the space between East and West that Laibach and the NSK both employ as raw material and occupy as a position of critique. This is exemplified in the vital differences between Eastern European and Western postmodernisms. The notion as propounded by Mikhail Epstein and Aleš Erjavec (among others) that postmodernism existed unrecognised in the East before the America of the 1950s continues to fly in the face of received (Western) opinion. The Socialist countries had actually entered the “hyper-real” postmodern world before their Western counterparts – towards its end Soviet communism was becoming an exercise in absurdism. Yet the similarities in postmodernisms are superficial - the most relevant difference being parody and pastiche. Fredric Jameson refers to this 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. In contrast, Laibach’s Retrogarde actions are not postmodern parody or pastiche, but reflect an active traumatic historical. In re-mythologising the problematic iconography and tropes of European totalitarianism, Laibach restore them to a historical continuum, reinvigorating their aura and disrupting their currency as kitsch-value in late-capitalism. Fascism may have been militarily defeated in the last world war, but it has not been symbolically destroyed nor deconstructed. As a strategy of resistance, Laibach occupy a unique position. Their tactic of over-identifying with the totalitarian ritual to the point of alarming political ambiguity has received considerable attention as a site of resistance in recent years, as championed by Slavoj Žižek and the independent research project BAVO, who observe that criticism of an ideological system fails in late-capitalism as every ideological discourse is corrupted by cynicism. In contrast, Laibach’s discourse is without cynicism, pastiche or parody, leaving only disconcerting emphatic declarative ambiguity. In The Critique of Cynical Reason, Peter Sloterdijk posits that the cynic is no longer the outsider position but the default point of view in late-capitalism, whereby the subject knows very well that they are colluding in the capitalist system but goes along with it anyway. What possibility can there be for opposition to late-capitalism? The rebel has become fully habilitated; hitherto rebellious “rock-and-roll” is its karaoke, Iggy Pop advertises car insurance, Johnny Rotten butter, and in 2010 a major mobile phone company used flash-mobs to advertise its products. In art too opposition is proving increasingly improbable. The apparently oppositional body-modification aesthetic of performance artists such as Ron Athey, Franko B and Fakir Musafar for example, provide recognisable languages of performance, couched as they are in comfortable otherness in which the audience is more witness than spectator. Further, the performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña in his essay Performing against the Cultural Backdrop of the Mainstream Bizarre points out this mainstream culture ‘has so thoroughly high-jacked the transgressive codes of the marginal and radical, that media spectacle has dissolved content and meaning’. Late capitalism is fully equipped with the vocabulary of the transgressive, and subversion has been fully assimilated.
In contrast, a vocabulary for comprehending Laibach’s disruptive tactics of ambiguity, over-identification, and a Retrogardism alien to Western aesthetics, does not exist. Laibach disrupts mind media-orientated late-capitalism by not existing in a commodifiable fantasy space. In posing the question of the position of our subjectivity they stand beside us and are not projected into a fantasy space which would make them comfortably ensconced in this flow-of-meaning. As Žižek points out; in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) when Grace Kelly proposes to James Stewart she is disruptive, it is only when she is in the fantastical space seen through the window she becomes comprehensible to him. Similarly with Laibach, but in positing no ideological field, in floating signifiers that are emphatic nodes in a Lacanianquilt that cannot be fixed, they cannot function in an assimilatory fantasy space. In the words of Laibach: ‘In art, morality is nonsense; in practice it is immoral; in people it is a sickness’.

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[iii] Laibach and the NSK refer to this process of re-mythologizing as “re-capitulation”
[iv] For example, the British public and media often recounts the bombing of Coventry on the 14th November 1940 as a cataclysmic wartime event, yet the death toll of 568 pales in comparison with the fire-storming of Hamburg, Leipzig and Cologne, for example. In Dresden over the two nights of the 13th and 14th of February 1944, allied bombing and the subsequent firestorm phenomenon killed an estimated 25,000, many of whom were refugees.