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LAIBACH IN NORTH KOREA

On opening night, the movie *Liberation Day* (2016), directed by Morten Traavik and Uis Olte, was screened. The documentary is about a rock concert in Pyongyang – the first rock concert in North Korea ever to have been held by a foreign band. Laibach, a Slovenian industrial rock band founded in 1980 in what was, at the time, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, is a provocative and experimental group that has often been the object of criticism for its use of strong and ambiguous symbols, especially those reminiscent of a Nazi aesthetic from which Laibach, however, has always distanced itself. The concert is the brainchild of Morten Traavik, who had already directed a few videos for Laibach, in addition to his longstanding collaboration with the government of North Korea in the staging of cultural events. The director, with whom we exchanged a few words after the screening, tells us how after years of working with the government, he felt that the time had come to introduce them to a band like Laibach, and that North Korea perhaps was ready to stage its first ever Western rock concert. The situation in North Korea, says the director, is one of total lockdown towards anything foreign – rock and roll in particular. Rock music, although not prohibited by law, is not tolerated in practice and seen as a negative symbol of the Western world. This doesn't stop the arrival of Western music through unofficial channels, of course, especially from those well-off young people who are permitted to travel abroad. In any case, before the concert, nobody in North Korea had ever had the chance to hear Laibach, and from the start, the band found themselves dealing

with a climate of diffidence and censure, not to mention a near-total absence of technical equipment and competence. The movie basically recounts the whole process of preparation for the concert, in which we witness the contrast between fundamentally different ideologies and approaches, and the attempt to reach compromises with government censorship officials whilst salvaging the artistic integrity of the band and trying to avoid offending the North Korean government and public. Finally, with a program that has been pared down to the bone, the band holds its concert in August, 2015, on the occasion of the national Liberation Day, while at the border between North and South Korea, tensions rise and the two countries appear to be close to war. Beyond the story of Laibach and the concert, the movie is a well-made slice of social history that opens a window into one of the most rigid totalitarian systems ever to have existed, a country considered to be rife with corruption and civil rights violations. The movie opens with a series of scenes alternating North Korean military marches and Western music, David Bowie and the Beatles, to underline from the beginning the differences in musical and cultural influences that exist in the two worlds, and, in addition to the Laibach storyline, also shows scenes of everyday life in the country. The final part of the movie holds one of its most beautiful sequences, the Laibach concert and the director's close-up parade of the audience's perplexed faces, which in some cases reveal a barely discernible smile. Some of them may even enjoy the concert, but it seems they don't have the courage to express it. We ask the director whether he believes the Laibach concert has left any traces in North Korea, or may do so in time, to which he quotes Chinese premier Zhou Enlai's answer when asked in 1972 about the impact of the French revolution: "It's too soon to say."

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