

Liberation Day

July 10, 2017 By [James Hennessy](#) | [Sydney Film Festival Reviews](#)



RECOMMENDED

The world is not in particular need of new media which professes to peel back the curtain of North Korea's hermit kingdom. We have an excess of documentaries — on film and television — which study the DPRK's bizarre Juche zombie state from the outside without providing any particularly electrifying insights beyond “Shit's weird, dude.”¹

That being said, Norwegian filmmaker Morten Traavik has created something truly unusual and captivating in *Liberation Day*, which refreshingly charts the ultimate banality of life in North Korea. This is not, like most other films about the country, a film focused on state power, or authoritarianism, or ashen-faced soldiers marching in formation. It is about those things, but through its unprecedented access it captures something much more interesting.

The story of *Liberation Day* is, quite frankly, bonkers: it captures the first tour by a Western rock band into the notoriously restrictive country. Not just any band, either – it's Laibach, the controversial Slovenian art rock band who flirted with the aesthetics and imagery of fascist totalitarianism

long before Rammstein sensed a commercial and artistic potential in the visceral emotional overlap between the metal concert and the Nazi rally. Since Traavik had cultivated cultural links with the regime through [a number of his other art projects](#), he was able to convince the government that a group formed in Tito-era Yugoslavia and existing to satirise and exploit the imagery of fascism and authoritarianism ought to be allowed to perform there. Even better: we get to witness the pushback; there is an insane scene in which a DPRK bureaucrat reads out a list of reasons why Laibach ought not be allowed to play in North Korea.

It's moments like these which make *Liberation Day* such a fascinating exercise. We've been conditioned to see North Korea as some kind of Orwellian nightmare where government automatons administer a browbeaten and brainwashed population like robots. To whatever extent this is true, we don't particularly see it through Traavik's camera. We see government bureaucrats behaving like they do in any other country – acting as the very human apparatus of whatever faceless system is operating behind the scenes. In one notable scene, a handler looks after the band while they take promotional photos in Kim Il-sung Square, and becomes a little pissed off by their unwillingness to listen to his instructions. You get a sense of the vast dictatorial system behind the guy, obviously, but there's something much more immediately palpable: a government employee is annoyed by this whole song and dance and just wants to get it all over with. In this moment alone, *Liberation Day* puts more of a crack in the North Korean facade than any other documentary I've watched.

Of course, there's menace too – and the film plays it up in many ways both subtle and interesting. At one point a band member doesn't show up on the tour bus when he's supposed to, and the film documents the mundane task of sending someone up to see if he's still sleeping in his hotel room. Naturally, it implies a pervasive sense of paranoia: is he really sleeping, or did something happen to him? Did he commit some minor infraction and is now under arrest? This sense – that no foreigner is ever quite comfortable being in this country – is palpable for the film's duration.

Of course, too, there's absurdity. Laibach are an absurd band, and their show literally consists of doomy, synthy takes on songs from [*The Sound Of Music*](#) as well as patriotic North Korean folk songs. There's an almost constant, weird tension – are the North Koreans in on the joke? It's obvious they had concerns about Laibach's overtly fascist aesthetic – much of which could easily be applied to a critique of North Korea itself – but do they *get* that? Or is this weird, muddy, ideologically unclear mix of totalitarianism and art rock the only way the DPRK could readily reconcile a Western act performing in their closed-off state? Whatever labyrinthine justifications stand behind it, *Liberation Day* is the kind of film that might never be made again, so I can safely say that you'll never see anything quite like it.