Barbarians are Coming from the East: 
Laibach in Trbovlje

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6,216 words

When I’ve tried to describe Laibach [2] to the uninitiated, the best analogy I’ve come up with is, “Laibach is what would emerge if you were to take a group of industrial musicians and a group of political scientists and lock them in a gallery containing nothing but fascist, Communist, and modernist art for a year and then released them.” But this is also inadequate, since Laibach has changed their musical style every few years since they first began, and have touched nearly every musical genre at some point in their history – always marked by their own unique interpretation, of course. Even calling Laibach a “band” is rather misleading, since it suggests that they have something in common with the likes of Beyoncé and Justin Bieber. Apart from the difference in aesthetics, Laibach has always presented itself in a manner that is the polar opposite of the usual way a pop band is presented – namely by fetishizing the lifestyles and personalities of its members. Laibach has always represented itself as a collective, and in the days before Wikipedia, even discovering the names of its members – their lineup has changed multiple times over the years – took a bit of effort, let alone anything about their private lives.

Attempting to present a brief history of Laibach is rather challenging, although I’ll try to provide the highlights – this documentary [3] also relates quite a bit of it. The significance of the name Laibach is derived from the fact that it was the original German name of Slovenia’s capital, today known as Ljubljana, and its use persisted from the Middle Ages up until 1918, and significantly, the city was known this way again when it was under German occupation during the Second World War. The band Laibach was founded in the Slovene coal mining town of Trbovlje in 1980. They courted controversy from their earliest days, adopting a fascistic style which alarmed the Communist authorities, and their early music [4], which was as much noise as recognizable tunes, was extremely brutal and militaristic. The art they developed to accompany their activities also occasionally took elements from fascist and National


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Socialist sources and combined them with the slogans and symbolism of the Yugoslavian Communist regime – and the way in which the two seamlessly blended together embarrassed the Communist authorities.

All of these factors led to Laibach being banned in Slovenia for several years during the mid-1980s, although they continued to develop their work and tour in other countries. In 1984, Laibach also gave rise to an affiliated art movement, "Neue Slowenische Kunst" (NSK, German for "New Slovene Art"), which included departments devoted to counter-culture, theatre, dance, film, and philosophy.

By the late 1980s, after extensive touring, Laibach had developed a following across both Eastern and Western Europe, as well as in the United States. Their early music, which was highly abstract and industrial, gradually gave way in the mid-1980s to covers of songs by other bands, invariable redone in the totalitarian style that Laibach had been honing from its beginnings. The first such example, and one of their most fascist works (the LP itself was adorned with a swastika designed by the German anti-fascist artist John Heartfield), was the 1987 album *Opus Dei*, which includes fascist renditions, sometimes translated into German, of songs from *Queen* (composer of the Austrian europop band *Opus*) and the entire Beatles album, *Let It Be*. They went on to cover the entire Beatles albums, *Abbey Road*, *Help!*, *Revolver*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *The White Album*, *Abbey Road*, and the entire Fleetwood Mac album, *Rumours*. They then went on to cover the entire *Beatles' Let It Be*, the *Rolling Stones* "*Sympathy for the Devil*" (NSK's version of the song was the first album to include the word "nazi" in its title), and the entire *Beatles' Let It Be*, and the entire *Rolling Stones* "*Sympathy for the Devil*". They went on to cover the entire *Beatles' Let It Be*, and the entire *Rolling Stones* "*Sympathy for the Devil*". They went on to cover the entire *Beatles' Let It Be*, and the entire *Rolling Stones* "*Sympathy for the Devil*". They went on to cover the entire *Beatles' Let It Be*, and the entire *Rolling Stones* "*Sympathy for the Devil*".
released statements and interviews throughout the years, but when speaking about their political attitudes, they invariably answer in vague, and occasionally humorous, cryptic and often philosophical terms, such as when on one occasion they were asked if they were fascists, and they responded, "We are as much fascists as Hitler was a painter."

Nevertheless, many critics have attempted to read political meaning into their works, and the inevitable accusations of both fascism and Communism have continued to follow them up to the present day. (Not that the band seems to be bothered by this in the least.)

Some of them have claimed that their early merging of Communist slogans with fascist art was an attempt to undermine the Yugoslavian Communist authority in its waning years using irony. The famed Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, however, who has been a defender and advocate of Laibach’s work from its earliest days, has rejected this interpretation, claiming that it is rather Laibach’s intention to be unironic – in fact, absolutely unironic. In Žižek’s view, every political system inherently contains its own opposite, hidden behind the official state ideology, but which is nonetheless an essential feature of that system and without which it would be impossible to maintain its facade of legitimacy. This being the case, Laibach’s work is not designed to be ironic but is rather meant to provoke thought and reflection, to make the listener question the meaning and implications of the work being presented. This approach is evident in their work "Opus Dei,"录取者, or the "opera," as it is sometimes referred to, which is designed to be an extreme example of totalitarian art, unironic in its representation of power and control.

I first heard about Laibach in 1996, when a friend of mine told me about the documentary on Laibach, "Predictions of Fire," which was then airing on the Bravo network, saying that he thought it was the sort of thing that would appeal to me. As I didn’t own a television at the time, and as this was before the days of YouTube, I didn’t see the film until many years later, but I did go to the local music shop (which was still functioning) and bought a number of Laibach’s albums for sale. Controversially, I still own and play "Opus Dei," which is still my favorite, and although I soon realized that Laibach were not in fact fascists or Communists, it was quite evident that they were doing totalitarian art in a very specific and unironic way that resonated with me. That being said, I do believe that there are reasons to read a certain implicit political – dare I say metapolitical – project into their work, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore that further.
sort that one frequently comes across in Eastern Europe, which is old, and he remains its director today. Mr. Poznič had a charming, masculine, unassuming, down-to-earth character of the sort one finds in director today. He was then managing director (more on this later), his not mentioned, which he returned to the town to convert Delavski Dom, but who had soon left the group to become a sculptor, while still remaining on friendly terms with the group. A decade ago I heard that Laibach was holding a “special event” there for their fans, on October 29, I knew I had to be there. And indeed, as I was to discover, it is impossible to fully understand Laibach without having experienced both Slovenia and Trbovlje.

My Counter-Currents colleague, Michael Polignano, and I set out by train from Budapest to attend the event. I had never been to Slovenia before, so even the journey itself was quite an experience. Eastern Hungary is flat for the most part, as is the westernmost part of Slovenia, but already one finds oneself in the Alps, amidst scenery that would not be out of place in Austria or Bavaria: tiny villages nestled between rivers, forests, and mountains, with the villages themselves running up the slopes so that one can occasionally see a church steeple sprouting up near a mountaintop. We stayed in Ljubljana, which is a charming Austro-Hungarian city also showing Italian influences, and which is absolutely breathtaking. We stayed in Ljubljana, which is a charming Austro-Hungarian city also showing Italian influences, and which is absolutely breathtaking. We stayed in Ljubljana, which is a charming Austro-Hungarian city also showing Italian influences, and which is absolutely breathtaking.

We headed into town and enjoyed a lunch of Ćevapcici – a traditionally Balkan dish, but common in many Slovenian towns – well, we headed into town and enjoyed a lunch of Ćevapcici – a traditionally Balkan dish, but common in many Slovenian towns – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce) – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce) – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce) – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce) – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce) – and then headed over to Delavski Dom, consisting of several stories served with bread, onions, and ajvar (a red pepper sauce).
Trbovlje was still a thriving coal mining area when Laibach was founded in 1980, although Mr. Poznič explained that its decline had

potentially explosive gases that are sometimes released in the mines. Most miners, whose health was not fully protected to enter the area due to the hazards resulting from the closed mine shafts.

Mr. Poznič told us much about the town's history. It has a long tradition of revolutionary activism, as its workers had begun agitating for more rights and better working conditions already in the 1920s. Trbovlje's people, he said, have always tended to be "socialist anarchists." This continued even after the introduction of Communism, as the workers of Trbovlje went on strike in 1958 – the first strike ever carried out in Communist Yugoslavia, in fact. It was a town where the workers collaborated on many social construction projects. Mr. Poznič said that, until the announcement that the mines were to be closed, for generations every man had known from birth where he would go to school, where he would work, and where he would ultimately spend his retirement.

In the hills surrounding the town were also apartment blocks for the families of the miners, including where Mr. Poznič himself was born and grew up, but all of them have been dismantled and have now vanished without a trace, and the grounds themselves are now forbidden to enter the area on foot due to the hazards resulting from the closed mine shafts.

Trbovlje Power Station also has the distinction of being Europe's tallest chimney at 1,180 feet – or, as Mr. Poznič referred to it, "Europe's biggest phallic symbol." The chimney was constructed to solve the problem of the gases from the plant becoming trapped in the town's valley. Its engineers realized that by building a chimney of such a height, the gases would dissipate into the atmosphere and eventually come down in nearby Italy – which, he said with a smile, was fine by them, since "everybody here hates the Italians," referring to the problematic relations between Slovenia and Italy throughout history.

We were first given a bus tour of the town and its surrounding area when Laibach was founded in 1980, although Mr. Poznič explained that its decline had
now thriving (some of their work is on display in the town’s high-tech coal mining museum [14]), and these industries are now seen as the area’s future.
An early Laibach Kunst poster highlighting their Trbovlje roots.

To which he replied, "Come and get it!" They never came, and the marble remains in the building to this day.

...
The first half of the concert consisted of all of the songs (if all of them qualify as such) from Also Sprach Zarathustra, apart from "Die Unschuld. I. The second half, which I have to admit was much more unengaging for me, was a selection of pieces from their earlier albums, as well as some that I believe may be new and unreleased, or at least which had been altered to such a degree that I could not recognize them. Perhaps the album will grow in meaning as I listen to it, much like their other albums. The drive and originality of their performance, I can see that similarity, but if I ever had to pick a single piece that represented the essence of Laibach, it would be "Die Unschuld." Their most famous album, Die Unschuld, also set to the words of Nietzsche's text of the same name, is a work that remains the most engaging and thought-provoking, and which has been released online accompanying a very beautiful video. The music was originally composed for a stage performance based on Zarathustra, and then considerably adapted in order to be suitable for a concert presentation. The second half, which I have to admit was much more engaging for me, was a selection of pieces from their earlier albums, as well as some that I believe may be new and unreleased, or at least which had been altered to such a degree that I could not recognize them.

For reasons that weren't made entirely clear to me, by the late 1970s the building was no longer in use, and Laibach used to hold their earliest sessions in the abandoned complex by candlelight. Mr. Poznič said that the local police were suspicious of them and disliked their activities, and he said he received what he referred to as his "first beating" at their hands when they were taken from the building one night, driven out of town, and beaten, and that he and his comrades had then been forced to walk back into town, bloodied, while everyone else was on their way to work in the morning. This was an important illustration of the fact that, for the members of the early Laibach, art was not merely a game being played by the members of a pampered elite as it is in the West today, but was an activity that entailed very real risk and consequences.

In the evening we were treated to the final dress rehearsal of Laibach's new tour for their latest album, Also Sprach Zarathustra, based upon Nietzsche's text of the same name. Those of us diehard fans who had come for the occasion were joined by the band members' friends and family. The music was originally composed for a stage performance based on Zarathustra, and its most famous album, Die Unschuld, also set to the words of Nietzsche's text of the same name, is a work that remains the most engaging and thought-provoking, and which has been released online accompanying a very beautiful video. The music was originally composed for a stage performance based on Zarathustra, and then considerably adapted in order to be suitable for a concert presentation. The second half, which I have to admit was much more engaging for me, was a selection of pieces from their earlier albums, as well as some that I believe may be new and unreleased, or at least which had been altered to such a degree that I could not recognize them.
I didn't recognize them. It's hard to be certain as even the songs I did recognize were extensively redone, not just musically but their lyrics as well. The ones I did identify were "Anti-Semitism" and "Hell: Symmetry" from \textit{W.A.T.}, "Brat Moj" from \textit{Anthem}, "Wirtschaft ist tot" and "Le Privilege des morts" from \textit{Kapital} (the latter of which was accompanied, as it has been in previous performances, by projections of video clips from Yukio Mishima's film of his own short story, "Patriotism"), and "Ti, ki izzivaš" from \textit{Nova Akrropol}. For encores they did "Bossanova" and their cover of the Laibach song "The Great Seal" from \textit{Opus Dei}, which is part of their 1988 film, \textit{Victory Under the Sun}. The trip up the mountain, which is part of \textit{Victory Under the Sun}, was quite an experience. You could tell that the riders were enjoying the trip, and the ride back down was equally pleasant and intellectual stimulation. The view from the top was incredible, and we could see for miles in all directions. The \textit{Weyerbacher} beer we had at the end of the evening was fantastic, and the \textit{Slovenian} soup we had was delicious. We also had a \textit{DJ} spinning for fun, and the music was fantastic. Overall, it was a fantastic evening. I would definitely recommend it to anyone who is interested in \textit{Laibach} or \textit{Yukio Mishima}.
He asked me what I thought of their latest album, and asked me to "be honest," so I was, and admitted that while I liked it, it wasn’t my favorite. He asked me which was my favorite album, and he seemed a bit disappointed when I said *Opus Dei*. I quickly added that I liked all of their work, but that *WAT* and *Spectre* were both great albums, completely reinventing Laibach’s musical aesthetic in interesting new ways. I also mentioned *Let It Be*, which surprised him, and he said, "But that’s just a cover album!" to which I replied, "Yes, but at the time I found it, I was living in a house full of hippies, and I used to put it on to annoy them," and he laughed. Someone else asked him why they had chosen the mountaintop, which required a long and treacherous journey up the slopes, for the concert, and Mr. Novak replied that that was precisely the point, that it was a demanding effort to get there, and that they wanted the fans to see this place, as they consider it to be their own special ground, which is where they have held many concerts over the years. Anyone who has seen the breathtaking video for "The Great Seal" can surely relate to the sense that he was describing.

Throughout the evening, I looked for Mr. Fras, and not seeing him, figured that he had decided not to come. But a longtime Slovene follower of the group who I spoke to after we had left told me that he had in fact been present, and I had simply failed to recognize him. Thinking back, I realized that he had been there, but had been hidden by the fact that he was wearing glasses, was wearing ordinary clothes, and was also shorter than he looks. Anyway, the evening was wonderful, and I hope they might repeat it and likewise again open to their dedicated followers, in future tours.
Ljubljana. And some have seen the fact that the band, while being Slovene, frequently sings in German as an indication that they are some sort of neo-Nazi Germanophiles, when in fact, during the era of the Holy Roman Empire, Slovenia was in a political union with present-day Austria and Bavaria, and its language and culture is just as deeply marked by German as by Slavic influences.
John Morgan, “Barbarians are Coming from the East: Laibach in Trbovlje” | Counter-Currents Publishing
This is not to say that Laibach has been innocently making use of such symbolism without realizing the way it will be taken by outsiders. On the contrary, it is certain that it is precisely this double meaning, and the resulting ambiguity, which they have been playing with all this time. Likewise, it cannot be questioned that Laibach has also made use of imagery that is very explicitly derived from fascist and Communist sources – as well as from anti-fascist and anti-Communist sources.

Above: a preserved coal wagon showing the symbol of Trbovlje. Below: Laibach Kunst.
Laibach Kunst: a gear, one of the symbols of Trbovlje, containing the Laibach cross, their insignia, which comes from a painting by Kazimir Malevich.

And this brings us back to the question that has been central to the band’s popularity all along: what are they promoting? Is there some hidden political agenda at work? Or is it all just some artistic game, and Laibach is privately laughing at all the attempts to read meaning into what they’re doing?

I would answer no to both of those questions, but with the qualification that, as I suggested before, I do believe there is an implicitly metapolitical message in Laibach. I do not adhere to the view of some, also rejected by Žižek, that they are simply good liberals who make use of fascism and Communism in order to undermine non-liberal ideologies and reinforce the neoliberal order. I could cite many examples of an inherent critique of liberalism in their imagery and lyrics, but one that springs to mind is the song “No Commandments on the Wall / No God, No Rules to Scare You All” from Spectre, the lyrics of which are quite clear: “call out for heroes / who will be the creed of a new political faith / use the language of misunderstanding / disguise it / occupy Wall Street / use the wisdom of ancient sages / call out for heroes / who will be the creed of a new political faith / use the language of misunderstanding / disguise it / occupy Wall Street.”

Interests that might cooperate in fact “better than Europe today,” suggests that they are quite cognizant of the fact that neoliberal progressivism is an utopian illusion. Their controversial choice to play in North Korea, over the objections of many Western liberals, and their further declaration in interviews that North Korea is in fact “better than Europe today,” suggests that they are quite cognizant of the fact that neoliberal and further declaration in

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totalitarian imagery of which Laibach makes use. It is not merely parody or a warning. It is also a reminder of a heroic vision that we have lost in condemning everything that frightens the liberal mindset to the dustbin of history. Also like the European New Right, I believe that Laibach searches through these traditions to discover what in them is still useful, and what was bad in them that brought about their failures and which needs to be rejected. And this is why Laibach makes use not just of totalitarian imagery, but of references to both high and popular culture; and makes reference to artists, events, and thinkers from both recent and more distant history. One is reminded of their song "Tanz mit Laibach," which seems to be a sort of credo for the group, in which Milan Fras sings (in German), "We dance with totalitarianism and with democracy; we dance with fascism and red anarchism." Laibach is all, and yet none, of these things at the same time. And this is why the traditional symbolism of a coal mining town in Slovenia can be easily mistaken for fascist art: such imagery is inherently Western; it belongs to an aesthetic tradition which became embedded in fascism, but which also predates it and has an existence and meaning independent of it. Just like the Western cultural tradition itself, Laibach is indeed the hidden reverse of today's liberal order, "an Easter egg hidden under a rock." The former Eastern bloc, of which Laibach is a product, is a combination of contradictory elements. All of this combines in them to produce something uniquely unique in today's cultural landscape. In an age when most rock stars are either cajoling the media or romanticizing alienation and cultural suicide, Laibach actually dares to suggest that our lives have a deeper meaning than what neoliberalism and the New World Order allows for.
If you're new to Laibach, I encourage you to check out their music and their art, much of which can be found online, and if possible, see them live. You might just be embarking on an intellectual adventure that could last for the rest of your life. As the band itself has said, "Laibach is a noble mission that demands fanaticism!"

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