

Resistance is Futile:

Laibach & the Lviv Philharmonic in Ljubljana, 2018

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When I discovered that the Slovene fascist/Communist/anarchist (depending on who you ask) band and art project Laibach was going to be performing in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana – which, until a century ago, was known by its German name of Laibach – on September 7 with the Lviv Philharmonic Orchestra, as a longtime devotee, I knew I had to be there. So I once again undertook the train trek through the stunning vistas of the Slovene Alps, this time with Greg Johnson, to arrive in the lovely, vibrant city – the history, culture, aesthetics, and mindset of which have always permeated Laibach's work. Feasting on many a burek and čevapčiči (traditional Balkan foods), I fortified myself for the imminent acoustic assault of the Laibach *Gesamtkunstwerk* – "total work of art."



For those unfamiliar with Laibach and who want an introduction to their work, last year I wrote an extensive essay on the history of the band and about the album with which they're currently touring, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (based on Nietzsche's text), entitled "[Barbarians are Coming from the East: Laibach in Trbovlje](#)" [4]."

On the evening prior to the concert, the opening of a photographic exhibition was held at the Photon Gallery entitled *Forbidden Whispers: Laibach and North Korea* [5], consisting of images taken by photographers who travelled with Laibach on their historic – and controversial – performance in Pyongyang in 2015, as documented in the film *Liberation Day* [6]. Ivan Novak, who was part of the original lineup of the band but who now spends his time behind the scenes as Laibach's spokesman, was on hand to present the works – only in Slovenian, unfortunately for me.

According to the exhibition catalog, some of the photos were being shown for the first time and were taken without the knowledge or approval of the North Korean authorities. This may

be the case – and this is in no way intended to denigrate the photos – but while they are indeed interesting, there isn't anything earth-shattering in them. About half of the photos displayed were of the band members and their crew during the trip, and many of those had already been widely used in Laibach's promotional materials over the past several years. The rest were taken around Pyongyang, and show ordinary North Koreans and some military personnel. They depict an entirely typical modern city (apart from the fact that the garish advertising that permeates most other cities is here replaced with regime propaganda) and entirely normal-looking, healthy people going about their daily lives. The only thing that might be striking about the photos is in how they undermine the West's narrative that most North Koreans are starving and stifled by non-stop oppression, fervently hoping for the day when American troops and corporations arrive to set them "free."

While Laibach endured some criticism for undertaking a project which many saw as collaboration with the North Korean regime – not that Laibach has ever been a stranger to controversy – it is really only logical that the group, whose entire body of work could be seen as an examination of the relationship between totalitarianism and art, would extend its labors to one of the last remaining, really existing bastions of "classical" totalitarianism (to distinguish it from the far more dangerous, postmodern forms of totalitarianism that are taking form in the United States and Europe at present) in the world today. As I discussed in my last essay on Laibach, while it is clear that Laibach has never promoted any specific ideology, and while I do not believe that they actually are advocates for any form of totalitarianism, it is equally obvious that their work has always contained an implicit critique of neoliberal democracy, which puts the lie to those commentators who see in Laibach nothing more than an elaborate, postmodern, and of course (in keeping with current fashion trends) "ironic" parody of illiberalism. Indeed, this is further confirmed by the fact that in interviews upon their return from North Korea, Laibach stated that the country is "better than Europe today," which doesn't strike me as a veiled, ironic critique. As the Laibach scholar Alexei Monroe sagely put it in the exhibition catalog, had Laibach not accepted the invitation:

It would have been an abandonment of its non-aligned position and a falling into line with Western consensus reality . . . It would have lost its capacity to criticise and antagonize the West, becoming just another activist group, allowed to ask difficult questions only on the understanding that ultimately, when all's said and done, "it's alright", that they're really "one of us". Laibach would have been following in the path of numerous Western counter-cultural groups who ultimately only went so far and were ultimately happy to conform while still pretending to challenge. Ultimately, you can have ideological and moral reassurance or you can have Laibach. You can't have both.

For those who might be in Ljubljana in the coming weeks, the exhibition will be continuing through October 16.

The concert itself was held in an outdoor theater, the southern courtyard of the Križanke, in the city center. The Križanke was designed – or more properly, redesigned – by the famous

Slovene architect, Jože Plečnik, who had an enormous impact on the look of the city by designing many buildings and other structures in it during the first half of the twentieth century. The accompanying building was originally a monastery for the Order of Teutonic Knights, established in the thirteenth century, and despite numerous reconstructions and modifications over the centuries, the site remained a monastery until 1945, when it was nationalized. The last project of his long and illustrious career, Plečnik was commissioned in the 1950s to redesign it to make it a suitable venue for the annual Ljubljana Festival – a tradition which continues up to the present, and the Laibach concert was part of this year's festival.

Laibach has given many other orchestral concerts over the years, but this was the first I ever attended, and I was indeed quite impressed. It's fascinating how Laibach has managed to remain fresh and vibrant for four decades by continually changing style and personnel (of the original lineup, only Milan Fras, their lead vocalist, is still performing with the band), as well as by venturing into new territory and types of projects. Curiously, their female vocalist, Mina Špiler – who, upon joining Laibach in 2006, for the first time added a feminine (of a certain cold, militaristic sort) element to the band – was absent from the performance, although she appeared in several songs as part of the projections on the back of the stage, and in a couple of cases recordings of her voice were used. I'm not sure what the reason for this was – whether she was otherwise engaged, ill, or perhaps has left the band – but given that Laibach has never emphasized the personalities or personal lives of its members, presenting itself as a workers' collective of a sort, we may never know. (Perhaps somebody with more knowledge of Laibach gossip can fill me in.) I noticed Dejan Knez, one of the original members who no longer performs with the group, mingling with the audience and checking out the merchandise table outside the entrance before the concert, few people recognizing him in his ordinary dress.

The concert itself consisted of the band members in their uniforms (as always, either black or grey) at the front of the stage, with Fras as usual in the center, the orchestra behind them, and a chorus at the rear, while animations, films, and images were projected against the backdrop. Some of these I recognized from some of their previous concerts; others were original, or at least were new to me. There were also banks of lights at the front of the stage, which would occasionally be directed outwards at the audience with such intensity that one was nearly blinded; it seemed to be part of the disorienting effect that Laibach tries to achieve in every performance.

The show got off to a strong start with "Polonia," a recent song which hasn't yet appeared on any of Laibach's official albums. The music was eerie and chaotic, sounding reminiscent of the semitonal and tritonal works of contemporary Eastern European composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki and Alfred Schnittke. Fras, in his canyon-deep voice, intoned these words:

Brothers and sisters, I appeal to you as a veteran of war. Let us not spill a single drop of blood in this country that has suffered so much. I appeal to you, fellow workers, renounce

strikes till the hard times are gone. I turn to you as a brother. Do not let your fellow citizens starve. I turn to you, brothers, wives, and sisters. Let no tears be shed. I turn to you, young men and women. Secure the future of your homeland. I appeal to all citizens. Fasting times are upon us. You must rise to the challenge. You must prove yourselves worthy of your homelands.

Knowing Laibach, chances are this text is a translation of an actual speech made by their spiritual godfather, Tito, or some other Central or Eastern European political figure; I don't know it myself and couldn't find any reference to it (if anyone recognizes the source, please let me know). But it's classic Laibach in that it is vague enough to be applicable to our contemporary situation, if read allegorically, and yet packing a lot of emotional power, given that it is the sort of rhetoric – appealing to the strength and heritage of a people – that has evaporated from Western political discourse, having been replaced by talk of economic growth and largely illusory threats. And also, needless to point out, it is strongly nationalistic; all of Laibach's shows have the feel of being at some sort of nationalist political rally, but this one had the most such overtones of anything that I've experienced with them.

Festival Ljubljana - Laibach 7.9.2018



The next six songs were all from *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: "Vor Sonnen-Untergang," "Ein Untergang," "Ein Verkündiger," "Das Nachtlid I," "Von Gipfel zu Gipfel," "Als Geist," and "Vor Sonnen-Aufgang." As I said in my previous essay on Laibach, *Zarathustra* was originally music that Laibach composed to accompany a Slovene play based on the book, and apart from the lyrical "Vor Sonnen-Aufgang ^[7]," I didn't find the rest of the album to be particularly moving or inspiring prior to this, as it sounded too much like the incidental music that it was. But it was entirely different in this performance. With the addition of the orchestra, it took on entirely new dimensions, and I was riveted the entire time. It seems that modifying the music to suit the orchestral accompaniment had forced Laibach to reinvent it in such a way that it truly did stand on its own, and the results were impressive.

After this, Laibach moved into the "greatest hits" segment of the evening, performing some of the better-known songs from their earlier albums. The first was one of my personal favorites,

“Ti, ki izzivaš,” or “You Who Challenges,” which is one of their industrial songs from the early 1980s and originally appeared on their album *Rekapitulacija 1980-84*. The piece, which is backed by a powerful militaristic drumbeat, was accompanied by images of woodcuts which appeared to be depictions of the struggle of the Slovene partisans against the Italians and Germans during the Second World War, when Slovenia was occupied first by Fascist Italy and then by the Third Reich. Many Slovenes collaborated, but others joined Tito’s partisans and fought, and nearly one hundred thousand Slovenes died during the course of the war. For me, this song has always been an affecting depiction of the tragedy of the Second European Civil War, when Europe as a civilization committed suicide by engaging in the mass killing of Europeans by other Europeans. If nothing else, the song well conveys the tragedy that was the Slovene experience during the war.

(The video that follows is not from the concert I saw, but rather from a Laibach performance unaccompanied by an orchestra that took place in Ljubljana in 2014.)

Laibach - Ti, Ki Izzivaš (live in Ljubljana)



Next up was “Eurovision,” from Laibach’s masterful 2014 album, *Spectre*. Although it was composed and released more than a year before Europe’s migrant crisis, Laibach proved themselves once again to be prophets by predicting the struggles that our civilization would soon be experiencing, underscored by the song’s refrain of “Europe is falling apart.” (It should be noted that Europe’s immigration problem was even more directly addressed in their 2003 song from the album *WAT*, “Now You Will Pay ^[8].”) Although the song is about more than merely any specific political problem in Europe; more broadly, it is about the general malaise that has been afflicting postmodern Europe for decades, including lyrics such as:

In the absence of war
We are questioning peace
In the absence of God
We all pray to police

This is clearly not a critique of neoliberal Europe that could be described as “ironic” or

“satirical”: putting aside the rather meaningless question of what the members of Laibach actually believe, it is an attack on a civilization that has lost any sense of higher meaning and focuses instead on institutions and authority figures to fill in the gaps. The fact that Laibach chose this song from the many other hits from *Spectre* indicates that they are well aware of its crucial importance for contemporary Europe as it undergoes the crises that have gone along with its false unity, based solely as it is on material values.

Laibach - Eurovision (Spectre), official video



This was followed by another of their early industrial songs, “Smrt za smrt” (“Death for Death”), and then another song from *Zarathustra*, “The New Parnassus”:

Laibach: Smrt za smrt (Death for Death)



The next song was an unusually lyrical and romantic song for Laibach, “Warsawskie Dzieci,” which was composed for the 2014 album that they were commissioned by the Polish government to produce to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. After this was “Resistance is Futile” from *Spectre*, the lyrics of which again demonstrate that if Laibach is critiquing totalitarianism, it is the form of it that we’re currently living in rather than some historical manifestation:

What we are, you will become . . .

A parasite, absorbing souls

We'll suck your culture

Brains, energy

Implant your genes

To our collective being

Do not fight against us

Resistance is futile

Resistance is futile

And you will be assimilated with

Blitzkrieg! Blitzkrieg!

Anyone who thinks this is some sort of anti-fascist message due to the presence of a "Nazi" word needs to pay closer attention to the lyrics. Obviously, it is the world of globalization that is being described, and the future it heralds is that described in the 1975 film *Network*: "And our children will live, Mr. Beale, to see that perfect world in which there's no war or famine, oppression, or brutality, one vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock; all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused." In the lyrics, Laibach identifies itself as the organism doing the assimilating; as such, it becomes more clearly apparent that Laibach styles itself as a totalitarian entity because it is mirroring the world as it exists today, revealing the collective spirit at its core disguised as radical individualism, rather than as some historical parody.

(The video below is from a different performance.)

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE - Live with RTV Slovenia Sy...



After this song, the performers left the stage, returning to perform two encores: "The

Whistleblowers," the most-played (and incidentally, most fascistic) song from *Spectre*, and "Leben heißt leben" from their most fascist album (and my personal favorite) of all, 1987's *Opus Dei*. The former has become the most recent of their many anthems, or perhaps more accurately statements of purpose, with Fris pointing to the audience when he sings "We fight for you," and encouraging the audience to sing along. The latter is a cover version of a popular, vacuous europop song from the '80s which vastly improves on the original, transforming it into a fascist marching song, while Fris growls about "one race, one vision" in German. It's undeniable that Laibach's most fascistic pieces tend to be its most popular ones; many in the audience were obviously excited by it and clapping along, with one gentleman a few rows ahead of us pumping his fist in the air in time to the beat throughout the entire song. To top it off, near the song's conclusion, a spinning swastika was projected onto the back of the stage. This swastika, composed of four interlocking axes, appeared in the design of the original album, and is actually a form of it originally concocted in 1934 by the German anti-Nazi artist John Heartfield; nonetheless, as perhaps the most powerful symbol in all of iconography, its power backing such music was undeniable, in spite of any possible "ironic" intent.

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With that, Laibach and the orchestra – representing a wonderful Balkan/Baltic synthesis – left the stage to thunderous applause from the packed theater. Greg and I, still pumped from the experience, decided to give them a standing ovation. While I did hear some other languages being spoken, it seemed that most of the audience was Slovene; of those, there were more than a few younger people in attendance, but it appeared as if most were middle aged or older. This confirmed for me the impression I'd gathered from my previous Laibach experience in Slovenia that – in their homeland, at least – Laibach fans consist primarily of people who first encountered them in their heyday of the 1980s and '90s. By contrast, when I've seen them in the US, the UK, and Hungary, the audience seems primarily composed of younger people.

As we exited, Greg and I agreed that we had been mesmerized by the performance, no small feat considering that we're both longtime Laibach fans. We likewise concurred that it's simply

untenable to believe that the intention is for one to sit through an entire performance such as that thinking, "What a wonderful send-up of fascism and Communism! Thank God that Laibach is warning us about what we need to avoid in returning to the bad, old days before the advent of liberal values!" Rather, as already stated, Laibach is in fact parodying the materialistic, nihilistic values of the neoliberal world itself, and reminding us that there are higher elements of community, heritage, identity (in their case Slovene identity, which they unabashedly promote in everything they produce), and purpose that we can only lose touch with at the cost of our humanity.

If you get the opportunity to see Laibach live, don't miss out. It provides endless food for thought – and may be the closest you can come to a genuine fascist experience in this lifetime.

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[3] here: <https://www.counter-currents.com/tag/podcasts/feed/>

[4] Barbarians are Coming from the East: Laibach in Trbovlje: <https://www.counter-currents.com/2017/11/barbarians-are-coming-from-the-east/>

[5] Forbidden Whispers: Laibach and North Korea: <https://www.visitljubljana.com/en/visitors/events/forbidden-whispers-laibach-and-north-korea/>

[6] Liberation Day: <http://www.liberationday.film/>

[7] Vor Sonnen-Aufgang: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b39CfCN2bNE>

[8] Now You Will Pay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CT7ofyt120>

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