

Reality to Dream: Western Pop in Eastern Avant-Garde (Re-)Presentations of Socialism's End – the Case of Laibach

Authors

Introduction: Socialism – from Eternal Reality to Passing Dream

The Year of Revolutions in 1989 presaged the end of the Cold War. For many people, it must have felt like the end of the Twentieth Century, and the 1990s a period of waiting for the Millennium. However, the 1990s was, in fact, a period of profound transformation in the post-Socialist world.

In early representations of Socialism's end, a dominant narrative was that of collapse. Dramatic events, such as the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in Germany enabled representation of the end as an unexpected moment. Senses of unexpectedness rested on erstwhile perceptions of Socialism as eternal.

In contrast, the 1990s came to be a decade of revision in which thinking switched from considering Socialism's persistence to asking, "why it went wrong?" I explore this question in relation to former-Yugoslavia. In brief, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was replaced through the early 1990s by six independent nation states: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Kosovo came much later. In the states that were significantly ethnically mixed, the break-up was accompanied by violence. Bosnia in the 1990s will be remembered for an important contribution to the lexicon of ideas – ethnic cleansing.

Revisionist historicising of the former-Yugoslavia in the 1990s was led by the scholarly community. By and large, it discredited the Ancient Ethnic Hatreds (AEH) thesis commonly held by nationalists, simplistic media commentators and

many Western politicians. The AEH thesis held that Socialism's end was a consequence of the up-swelling of primordial (natural) ethnic tensions. Conversely, the scholarly community tended to view Socialism's failure as an outcome of systemic economic and political deficiencies in the SFRY, and that these deficiencies were also, in fact the root cause of those ethnic tensions. And, it was argued that had such deficiencies been addressed earlier Socialism may have survived and fulfilled its promise of eternity (Verdery).

A third significant perspective which emerged through the 1990s was that the collapse of Socialism was an outcome of the up-swelling of, if not primordial ethnic tensions then, at least *repressed* historical memories of ethnic tensions, especially of the internecine violence engendered locally by Nazi and Italian Fascist forces in WWII. This perspective was particularly *en vogue* within the unusually rich arts scene in former-Yugoslavia. Its leading exponent was Slovenian avant-garde rock band Laibach.

In this article, I consider Laibach's career and methods. For background the article draws substantially on Alexei Monroe's excellent biography of Laibach, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (2005). However, as I indicate below, my interpretation diverges very significantly from Monroe's. Laibach's most significant body of work is the cover versions of Western pop songs it recorded in the middle part of its career. Using a technique that has been labelled *retroquotation* (Monroe), it subtly transforms the lyrical content, and radically transforms the musical arrangement of pop songs, thereby rendering them what might be described as martial anthems. The clearest illustration of the process is Laibach's version of *Opus*'s one hit wonder "Live is Life", which is retitled as "Life is Life" (Laibach 1987).

Conventional scholarly interpretations of Laibach's method (including Monroe's) present it as entailing the uncovering of repressed forms of individual and collective totalitarian consciousness. I outline these ideas, but supplement them with an alternative interpretation. I argue that in the cover version stage of its career, Laibach switched its attention from seeking to uncover repressed totalitarianism towards uncovering repressed memories of ethnic tension, especially from WWII. Furthermore, I argue that its creative medium of Western

pop music is especially important in this regard. On the bases of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bosnia (University of Melbourne Human Ethics project 1544213.1), and of a reading of SFRY's geopolitical history, I demonstrate that for many people, Western popular cultural forms came to represent the quintessence of what it was to be Yugoslav. In this context, Laibach's retroquotation of Western pop music is akin to a broader cultural practice in the post-SFRY era in which symbols of the West were iconoclastically transformed. Such transformation served to reveal a *public secret* (Taussig) of repressed historic ethnic enmity within the very heart of things that were regarded as quintessentially and pan-ethnically Yugoslav. And, in so doing, this delegitimised memory of SFRY ever having been a properly functioning entity. In this way, Laibach contributed significantly to a broader process in which perceptions of Socialist Yugoslavia came to be rendered less as a reality with the potential for eternity than a passing *dream*.

What Is Laibach and What Does It Do?

Originally of the industrial rock genre, Laibach has evolved through numerous other genres including orchestral rock, choral rock and techno. It is not, however, a rock group in any conventional sense. Laibach is the musical section of a tripartite unit named *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK) which also encompasses the fine arts collective Irwin and a variety of theatre groups.

Laibach was the name by which the Slovenian capital Ljubljana was known under the Austrian Habsburg Empire and then Nazi occupation in WWII. The choice of name hints at a central purpose of Laibach and NSK in general, to explore the relationship between art and ideology, especially under conditions of totalitarianism. In what follows, I describe how Laibach go about doing this.

Laibach's central method is eclecticism, by which symbols of the various ideological regimes that are its and the NSK's subject matter are intentionally juxtaposed. Eclecticism of this kind was characteristic of the postmodern aesthetics typical of the 1990s. Furthermore, and counterintuitively perhaps, postmodernism was as much a condition of the Socialist East as it was the Capitalist West. As Mikhail N. Epstein argues, "Totalitarianism itself may be

viewed as a specific postmodern model that came to replace the modernist ideological stance elaborated in earlier Marxism” (102). However, Western and Eastern postmodernisms were fundamentally different. In particular, while the former was largely playful, ironicising and depoliticised, the latter, which Laibach and NSK may be regarded as being illustrative of, involved placing in opposition to one another competing and antithetical aesthetic, political and social regimes, “without the contradictions being fully resolved” (Monroe 54).

The performance of unresolved contradictions in Laibach’s work fulfils three principal functions. It works to (1) *reveal hidden underlying connections between competing ideological systems*, and between art and power more generally. This is evident in *Life is Life*. The video combines symbols of Slovenian romantic nationalism (stags and majestic rural landscapes) with Nazism and militarism (uniforms, bodily postures and a martial musical arrangement). Furthermore, it presents images of the graves of victims of internecine violence in WWII. The video is a reminder to Slovenian viewers of a discomfiting public secret within their nation’s history. While Germany is commonly viewed as a principal oppressor of Slovenian nationalism, the rural peasantry, who are represented as embodying Slovenian nationalism most, were also the most willing collaborators in imperialist processes of Germanicisation.

The second purpose of the performance of unresolved contradictions in Laibach’s work is to (2) *engender senses of the alienation*, especially as experienced by the subjects of totalitarian regimes. Laibach’s approach in this regard is quite different to that of punk, whose concern with alienation - symbolised by safety pins and chains - was largely celebratory of the alienated condition. Rather, Laibach took a lead from seminal industrial rock bands such as Einstürzende Neubauten and Throbbing Gristle (see, for example, [Walls of Sound \(Throbbing Gristle 2004\)](#)), whose sound one fan accurately describes as akin to, “the creation of the universe by an angry titan/God and a machine apocalypse all rolled into one” (rateyourmusic.com). Certainly, Laibach’s shows can be uncomfortable experiences too, involving not only clashing symbols and images, but also the dissonant sounds of, for example, martial music, feedback, recordings of the political speeches of totalitarian leaders and barking dogs, all played at eardrum-breaking high volumes. The purpose of this is to provide, as Laibach state: “a

ritualized demonstration of political force” (NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* 44). In short, more than simply celebrating the experience of totalitarian alienation, Laibach’s intention is to reproduce that very alienation.

More than performatively representing tyranny, and thereby senses of totalitarian alienation, Laibach and NSK set out to embody it themselves. In particular, and *contra* the forms of liberal humanism that were hegemonic at the peak of their career in the 1990s, their organisation was developed as a model of totalitarian collectivism in which the individual is always subjugated. This is illustrated in the *Onanigram* (NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst*), which, mimicking the complexities of the SFRY in its most totalitarian dispensation, maps out in labyrinthine detail the institutional structure of NSK. Behaviour is governed by a *Constitution* that states explicitly that NSK is a group in which, “each individual is subordinated to the whole” (NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* 273). Lest this collectivism be misconceived as little more than a show, the case of Tomaž Hostnik is instructive. The original lead singer of Laibach, Hostnik committed ritual suicide by hanging himself from a hayrack, a key symbol of Slovenian nationalism. Initially, rather than mourning his loss, the other members of Laibach posthumously disenfranchised him (“threw him out of the band”), presumably for his act of individual will that was collectively unsanctioned.

Laibach and the NSK’s collectivism also have spiritual overtones. The *Onanigram* presents an *Immanent Consistent Spirit*, a kind of *geist* that holds the collective together. NSK claim: “Only God can subdue LAIBACH. People and things never can” (NSK, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* 289). Furthermore, such rhetorical bombast was matched in aspiration. Most famously, in one of the first instances of a micronation, NSK went on to establish itself as a global and virtual non-territorial state, replete with a recruitment drive, passports and anthem, written and performed by Laibach of course.

Laibach’s Career

Laibach’s career can be divided into three overlapping parts. The first is its career as a political provocateur, beginning from the inception of the band in 1980 and continuing through to the present. The band’s performances have touched the raw

nerves of several political actors. As suggested above, Laibach offended Slovenian nationalists. The band offended the SFRY, especially when in its stage backdrop it juxtaposed images of a penis with Marshal Josip Broz “Tito”, founding President of the SFRY. Above all, it offended libertarians who viewed the band’s exploitation of totalitarian aesthetics as a route to evoking repressed totalitarian energies in its audiences.

In a sense the libertarians were correct, for Laibach were quite explicit in representing a third function of their performance of unresolved contradictions as being to (3) *evoke repressed totalitarian energies*. However, as Žižek demonstrates in his essay “Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists”, Laibach’s intent in this regard is counter-totalitarian. Laibach engage in what amounts to a “*psychoanalytic cure*” for totalitarianism, which consists of four envisaged stages. The consumers of Laibach’s works and performances go through a process of over-identification with totalitarianism, leading through the experience of alienation to, in turn, disidentification and an eventual overcoming of that totalitarian alienation. The Žižekian interpretation of the four stages has, however been subjected to critique, particularly by Deleuzian scholars, and especially for its psychoanalytic emphasis on the transformation of individual (un)consciousness (i.e. the cerebral rather than bodily). Instead, such scholars prefer a *schizoanalytic* interpretation which presents the cure as, respectively collective (Monroe 45-50) and somatic (Goddard).

Laibach’s works and pronouncements display, often awareness of such abstract theoretical ideas. However, they also display attentiveness to the concrete realities of socio-political context. This was reflected especially in the 1990s, when its focus seemed to shift from the matter of totalitarianism to the overriding issue of the day in Laibach’s homeland – ethnic conflict. For example, echoing the discourse of [Truth and Reconciliation](#) emanating from post-Apartheid South Africa in the early 1990s, Laibach argued that its work is “based on the premise that traumas affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts” (NSK *Padiglione*).

In the early 1990s era of post-socialist violent ethnic nationalism, statements such as this rendered Laibach a darling of anti-nationalism, both within civil society

and in what came to be known pejoratively as the Yugonostagic, i.e. pro-SFRY left. Its darling status was cemented further by actions such as performing a concert to celebrate the end of the Bosnian war in 1996, and because its ideological mask began to slip. Most famously, when asked by a music journalist the standard question of what the band's main influences were, rather than citing other musicians Laibach stated: "Tito, Tito and Tito." Herein lies the third phase of Laibach's career, dating from the mid-1990s to the present, which has been marked by critical recognition and mainstream acceptance, and in contrasting domains. Notably, in 2012 Laibach was invited to perform at the Tate Modern in London. Then, entering the belly of what is arguably the most totalitarian of totalitarian beasts in 2015, it became the first rock band to perform [live in North Korea](#).

The middle part in Laibach's career was between 1987 and 1996. This was when its work consisted mostly of covers of mainstream Western pop songs by, amongst others Opus, Queen, The Rolling Stones, and, in *The Final Countdown* (1986), Swedish 'big hair' rockers. It also covered entire albums, including a version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. No doubt mindful of John Lennon's claim that his band was more popular than the Messiah himself, Laibach covered the Beatles' final album *Let It Be* (1970). Highlighting the perilous hidden connections between apparently benign and fascistic forms of sedentarism, lead singer Milan Fras' snarling delivery of the refrain "Get Back to where you once belong" renders the hit single from that album less a story of homecoming than a sinister warning to immigrants and ethnic others who are out of place.

This career middle stage invoked critique. However, commonplace suggestions that Laibach could be characterised as embodying *Retromania*, a derivative musical trend typical of the 1990s that has been lambasted for its de-politicisation and a musical conservatism enabled by new sampling technologies that afforded a forensic documentary precision that prohibits creative distortion (Reynolds), are misplaced. Several scholars highlight Laibach's ceaseless attention to musical creativity in the pursuit of political subversiveness. For example, for Monroe, the cover version was a means for Laibach to continue its exploration of the connections between art and ideology, of illuminating the connections between

competing ideological systems and of evoking repressed totalitarian energies, only now within Western forms of entertainment in which ideological power structures are less visible than in overt totalitarian propaganda. However, what often seems to escape intellectualist interpretations presented by scholars such as Žižek, Goddard and (albeit to a lesser extent) Monroe is the importance of the concrete specificities of the context that Laibach worked in in the 1990s – i.e. homeland ethno-nationalist politics – and, especially, their medium – i.e. Western pop music.

The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Western Popular Culture in Former Yugoslavia

The Laibach covers were merely one of many celebrations of Western popular culture that emerged in pre- and post-socialist Yugoslavia. The most curious of these was the building of statues of icons of screen and stage. These include statues of Tarzan, Bob Marley, Rocky Balboa and, most famously, martial arts cinema legend Bruce Lee in the Bosnian city of Mostar.

The pop monuments were often erected as symbols of peace in contexts of ethnic-national violence. Each was an ethnic hybrid. With the exception of original Tarzan Johnny Weismuller — an ethnic-German American immigrant from Serbia — none was remotely connected to the competing ethnic-national groups. Thus, it was surprising when these pop monuments became targets for iconoclasm. This was especially surprising because, in contrast, both the new ethnic-national monuments that were built and the old Socialist pan-Yugoslav monuments that remained in all their concrete and steel obduracy in and through the 1990s were left largely untouched.

The work of Simon Harrison may give us some insight into this curious situation. Harrison questions the commonplace assumption that the strength of enmity between ethnic groups is related to their cultural dissimilarity — in short, the bigger the difference the bigger the biff. By that logic, the new ethnic-national monuments erected in the post-SFRY era ought to have been vandalised.

Conversely, however, Harrison argues that enmity may be more an outcome of similarity, at least when that similarity is torn asunder by other kinds of division. This is so because ownership of previously shared and precious symbols of

identity appears to be seen as subjected to appropriation by ones' erstwhile comrades who are newly othered in such moments.

This is, indeed, exactly what happened in post-socialist former-Yugoslavia. *Yugoslavs* were rendered now as *ethnic-nationals*: Bosniaks (Muslims), Croats and Serbs in the case of Bosnia. In the process, the erection of obviously non-ethnic-national monuments by, now inevitably ethnic-national subjects was perceived widely as appropriation – “the Croats [the monument in Mostar was sculpted by Croatian artist Ivan Fijolić] are stealing *our* Bruce Lee,” as one of my Bosnian-Serb informants exclaimed angrily.

However, this begs the question: Why would symbols of Western popular culture evoke the kinds of emotions that result in iconoclasm more so than other ethnically non-reducible ones such as those of the [Partisans](#) that are celebrated in the old Socialist pan-Yugoslav monuments? The answer lies in the geopolitical history of the SFRY. The [Yugoslav-Soviet Union split in 1956](#) forced the SFRY to develop ever-stronger ties with the West. The effects of this became quotidian, especially as people travelled more or less freely across international borders and consumed the products of Western Capitalism. Many of the things they consumed became deeply meaningful. Notably, barely anybody above a certain age does not reminisce fondly about the moment when participation in martial arts became a nationwide craze following the success of Bruce Lee's films in the golden (1970s-80s) years of Western-bankrolled Yugoslav prosperity.

Likewise, almost everyone above a certain age recalls the balmy summer of 1985, whose happy zeitgeist seemed to be summed up perfectly by Austrian band Opus's song “Live is Life” (1985). This tune became popular in Yugoslavia due to its apparently feelgood message about the joys of attending live rock performances. In a sense, these moments and the consumption of things “Western” in general came to symbolise everything that was good about Yugoslavia and, indeed to define what it was to be Yugoslavs, especially in comparison to their isolated and materially deprived socialist comrades in the Warsaw Pact countries.

However, iconoclastic acts are more than mere emotional responses to offensive instances of cultural appropriation. As Michael Taussig describes, iconoclasm reveals the *public secrets* that the monuments it targets conceal. SFRY's great

public secret, known especially to those people old enough to have experienced the inter-ethnic violence of WWII, was ethnic division and the state's deceit of the historic normalcy of pan-Yugoslav identification. The secret was maintained by a formal state policy of *forgetting*. For example, the wording on monuments in sites of inter-ethnic violence in WWII is commonly of the variety: "here lie the victims in Yugoslavia's struggle against imperialist forces and their *internal quislings*." Said quislings were, of course, actually Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (i.e. fellow Yugoslavs), but those ethnic nomenclatures were almost never used.

In contrast, in a context where Western popular cultural forms came to define the very essence of what it was to be Yugoslav, the iconoclasm of Western pop monuments, and the retroquotation of Western pop songs revealed the repressed deceit and the public secret of the reality of inter-ethnic tension at the heart of that which was regarded as quintessentially Yugoslav. In this way, the memory of Yugoslavia ever having been a properly functioning entity was delegitimised. Consequently, Laibach and their kind served to render the apparent reality of the *Yugoslav* ideal as little more than a dream.

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