

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

LAIBACH AND THE NSK: AN EAST-WEST NEXUS IN POST-
TOTALITARIAN EASTERN EUROPE

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A thesis in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Anglia Ruskin University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted: January 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Alexei Monroe, Christian Matzke, Dr. Susan Wilson, Dr. Gianna Bouchard, Dr. Duška Radosavljević, Pil and Galia Kollektiv, Dr. David Crilly, respondents to the audience survey questionnaire (anonymous), Lili Anamarija No, Lina Dzuverovic of Calvert 22 gallery, the Chelsea Space gallery, Timo Vuorensola, Sakshi Gupta, IRWIN, the Slovenian Embassy, Avi Pitchon, Michelle Whitney, Dr. Rowlie Wymer, Paul Jackson, Dr. Michael Goddard, The NSK, Chris Bohn (a.k.a. Biba Kopf), Stephanie and Stevphen Shukaitis, Dr. Michael Goddard.

Funding bodies

The Equity Trust Fund.

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

LAIBACH AND THE NSK: AN EAST-WEST NEXUS IN POST-
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JANUARY 2014

This thesis is a study of the Slovenian multi-disciplinary collective the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), with particular focus on the music group Laibach. This thesis interrogates how Laibach and the NSK operate as a nexus between Eastern Europe and the West through the ritualised staging of ideology as a mechanism of power. This research addresses the wider issue of Eastern European aesthetic discourse in the context of hegemonic Western aesthetic discourse.

Research involved an analysis of Laibach and the NSK's prime aesthetic strategy, Retrogardism, in the context of Western aesthetic discourse. This required an analysis of diverse fields such as the historic avant-garde, European history, critical theory, cultural activism, and Performance Art. Comparisons with activist, popular music and performance groups were drawn, and a survey of Laibach's audience undertaken as part of an analysis of Laibach's interpellative qualities in the West. This research was conducted within a Performance Art framework, and reference made to current Performance Art praxis.

Research revealed the dominance of Western aesthetic discourse and how this has resulted in an increased autonomy of Eastern European aesthetic discourse in a post-Socialist context. Laibach and the NSK are intrinsic to this discursive field, and effective engagement with Laibach is only possible within the discourse of this Eastern European autonomy. A study of Western reportage of Laibach was conducted, which demonstrated a failure of the West to engage with the complexity in the Laibach and NSK performative spectacle. It was found that this complexity is Laibach's dominant interpellative quality.

Laibach and the NSK articulate the dialectic between Eastern Europe and the West as both a point of communication and text for interpretation. Laibach and the NSK establish this point of nexus as one achieved by a process of non-alignment with any geo-political, temporal, aesthetic or ideological determinants. In this way they function as a site of resistance to late-capitalism, which has assimilated conventional forms of counter-cultural challenge. In this way Laibach and the NSK's Performance Art contrasts with Western Performance Art discourse.

Key words: Laibach, NSK, Slovenia, Retrogardism, Eastern Europe, Performance Art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter one: The European Context	51
Chapter two: Retrogardism	95
Chapter three: Over-identification	154
Chapter four: Nexus	199
Chapter five: Interpellation	251
Chapter six: Conclusion: Resistance	309

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Screenshot: <i>TV Tednik</i> interview.....	4
1.2 <i>Das Dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums</i> , Richard Klein (1936).....	4
1.3 <i>Dan Mladosti</i> , NSK (1987b).....	4
1.4 <i>Blut und Eisen</i> , John Heartfield (1934).....	9
1.5 Album sleeve (inner): <i>Opus Dei</i> , Laibach (1987).....	9
1.6 NSK Passport (exterior).....	10
1.7 NSK passport (interior).....	10
1.8 <i>Einkauf</i> , Laibach (2003a).....	32
1.9 <i>Opus Dei</i> screenshot (1987c).....	32
1.10 Laibach: Abbey Road, London. Press photo for <i>Let It Be</i> (1988).....	34
1.11 <i>Laibachkunstderfuge</i> (album sleeve) Laibach (2008).....	44
2.1 <i>An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is no Artist</i> , Mladen Stilinović (1992).....	52
2.2 <i>Hammer and Sickle</i> , Sándor Pinczehelyi (1973).....	84
2.3 <i>Malevich Country</i> , Aleksandr Kosolapov (1986).....	86
2.4 <i>Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin</i> , Aleksandr Gerasimov (1939).....	86
2.5 <i>Self-Portrait With the Palace</i> , Zofia Kulik (1990).....	87
2.6 <i>The Red Room</i> , Oleg Kulik (1999).....	88
3.1 <i>La Condition Humaine</i> , René Magritte (1933).....	96
3.2 <i>Artist Condition I. (from) René Magritte 1934</i> , Laibach (1981).....	96
3.3 NSK logo (1984a).....	98
3.4 Laibach logo: Zahnrad (cog) with Malevich cross centre.....	100
3.5 Album sleeve: <i>Nova Akropola</i> (1986).....	101
3.6 Album sleeve: <i>Neu Konservativ</i> (2003d).....	101
3.7 <i>Portrait of the Deer</i> , IRWIN (1986).....	101
3.8 <i>Two Stags</i> , IRWIN (1988a).....	101
3.9 Laibach performance (1986).....	102
3.10 <i>Monumental Retro-avant-garde</i> , Laibach performance (2012).....	103
3.11 <i>Red Thrower</i> , Laibach (1981).....	105
3.12 <i>The Steel Worker</i> , Laibach (2010).....	105
3.13 <i>Sower</i> , Ivan Grohar (1907).....	106
3.14 <i>Red Districts: Sower</i> , IRWIN (1989).....	107

3.15	<i>The Athens of Slovenia</i> , IRWIN (1987a).....	108
3.16	<i>Kofetarica</i> , Ivana Kobilica (1888).....	109
3.17	<i>Ausstellung Laibach Kunst</i> , Laibach (1983a).....	110
3.18	<i>Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Perspectives 1980 – 2011</i> (2011).....	110
3.19	Album sleeve: <i>Rekapitulacija 1980-1984</i> (1985a).....	111
3.20	<i>Katedrala Svobode</i> [Cathedral of Freedom] Jože Plečnik (1947).....	112
3.21	<i>Red Districts</i> , IRWIN (1987b).....	114
3.22	<i>Kraft Durch Freude (KDF)</i> Organisation poster (1930s).....	116
3.23	Album sleeve: <i>Sympathy for the Devil</i> , Laibach (1988a).....	116
3.24	<i>Einkauf</i> shopping action, Laibach (2003b).....	118
3.25	<i>Szobor Park</i> [Memento Park], Budapest.....	120
3.26	<i>Proun 99</i> , El Lissitzky (1924).....	123
3.27	<i>Yellow Cross</i> , Lazar Khidekel (1923).....	123
3.28	<i>Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack</i> , Kazimir Malevich (1915c).....	123
3.29	<i>Suprematism</i> , Kazimir Malevich (1915b).....	123
3.30	Album sleeve: <i>Krst Pod Triglavom</i> , (1987a).....	125
3.31	<i>Transcentrala New York</i> , NSK (1991).....	125
3.32	<i>Transcentrala Moscow</i> , NSK (1992).....	126
3.33	<i>Transcentrala Ljubljana</i> , NSK (1997).....	126
3.34	'Država' video still, Laibach (1984).....	127
3.35	WAT publicity photograph (2003b).....	127
3.36	Photograph of <i>The Last Futurist Exhibition '0.10'</i> , (1915b).....	130
3.37	<i>The Two of Us</i> , IRWIN (1988).....	131
3.38	Procession, Graz (2008a).....	131
3.39	Procession, Skopje (2008b).....	132
3.40	<i>Organigram</i> , NSK (1984b).....	151
4.1	<i>Blut und Eisen</i> , John Heartfield (1934).....	156
4.2	Album sleeve: <i>Opus Dei</i> , Laibach (1987).....	157
4.3	Paris Exhibition, 1937.....	161
4.4	Laibach (1980s).....	164
4.5	Laibach (1980s).....	164
4.6	<i>The Origin of Socialist Realism</i> , Komar and Melamid (1982).....	166
4.7	<i>Danger</i> , Eric Bulatov (1975).....	173
4.8	<i>Red Horizon</i> , Eric Bulatov (1971-1972).....	173
4.9	<i>Evil Bert Laden</i> , Mark Poster (2002).....	179
4.10	Advertisement, Finsbury Park tube station, London (2009).....	186
4.11	Puccino's 'stupid little biscuit' (2011).....	187
5.1	<i>Cross</i> , Kazimir Malevich (1923).....	206
5.2	<i>Trieste - Ljubljana – Klagenfurt</i> , NSK (1987a).....	210
5.3	Vojvodski prestol.....	210
5.4	<i>Die Erste Bombardierung über dem Deutschland</i> , Laibach (1985b)....	211
5.5	Graz University Palace, NSK installation (1988b).....	212
5.6	Screenshot: <i>Divided States of America</i> , Podgoršek (2004).....	214
5.7	Album sleeve: <i>Opus Dei</i> , (1987).....	224
5.8	Laibach in American uniforms, WAT press release (2003a).....	244
5.9	Laibach in Nazi uniforms, WAT press release (2003c).....	244

6.1	(Name and details withheld).....	267
6.2	(Name and details withheld).....	267
6.3	(Name and details withheld).....	268
6.4	<i>NSK Commissar Uniform</i> , Christian Matzke (2006a).....	269
6.5	<i>NSK Commissar Uniform</i> , Christian Matzke (2006b) detail.....	269
6.6	<i>NSK Commissar Uniform</i> , Christian Matzke (2006c) detail.....	269
6.7	Laibach figurine, Christian Matzke.....	270
6.8	Lego Laibach, Christian Matzke.....	271
6.9	Lego Laibach, Christian Matzke.....	271
6.10	<i>Lego. Concentration Camp</i> , Zbigniew Libera (1996).....	271
6.11	<i>Retrogarde Reading Room</i> , Portland, Oregon, Christian Matzke (2003a).....	272
6.12	<i>NSK State News</i> , Christian Matzke (2011).....	273
6.13	<i>Volk</i> symbol above Laibach Zahnrad and cog (name and details withheld).....	274
6.14	NSK logo, with additional antlers (name and details withheld).....	274
6.15	Laibach Zahnrad and cog (name and details withheld).....	275
6.16	NSK logo (name and details withheld).....	275
6.17	<i>Gesamtkunstwerk</i> , Avi Pitchon (1993).....	276
6.18	<i>Suprematistische Ikone</i> , Christian Chrobok (1995).....	277
6.19	<i>Disasterware</i> , Charles Krafft (1994a).....	277
6.20	<i>Disasterware: NSK Plate</i> , Charles Krafft (1994b).....	278
6.21	<i>NSK Garda Reykjavik</i> , Halldor Carlsson and Olafur Thorsson (2007)..	279
6.22	<i>NSK Garda Tirana</i> , (2000a).....	279
6.23	<i>NSK Garda Prague</i> , (2000b).....	279
6.24	<i>NSK Garda Zagreb</i> , (2000c).....	279
6.25	<i>IRWIN in Front of Black Slate Square</i> , Peter Blase (2011).....	280
6.26	<i>Untitled, Brooklyn – Berlin</i> , David K (2009a).....	280
6.27	<i>Untitled, Mauer – Malevich</i> , David K (2009b).....	281
6.28	<i>Culture Them</i> , Brianvdp (2013).....	281
6.29	<i>Kultureller Wettbewerb-Ostunek Plakata Za EPK</i> , Boris Faric (2012)..	282
6.30	<i>Rorschach Inspired Map of the World</i> , Bertrand Benois (2010).....	282
6.31	<i>The Tabernacle of Love</i> , Lili Anamarija No (2008-2009).....	283
6.32	Album sleeve: <i>Journeys to Glory</i> , Spandau Ballet (1981).....	284
6.33	<i>That Total Age</i> , Nitzer Ebb (1987).....	285
6.34	<i>Veni, Vidi, Vici</i> , Nachtmar (2012).....	286
6.35	<i>An Ideal for Living</i> , Joy Division (1978).....	288
6.36	Von Bach: <i>Kingdom Come</i> , Alex Ross (1996a).....	303
6.37	Von Bach: <i>Kingdom Come</i> , Alex Ross (1996b).....	303
7.1	Sleeve of 12” single: ‘Die Liebe’, Laibach (1985c).....	317
7.2	Album sleeve: <i>Sympathy for the Devil</i> , Laibach (1988b).....	317
7.3	<i>Vision of Excess Night</i> , Dominic Johnson (2011a).....	320
7.4	<i>Vision of Excess Night</i> , Dominic Johnson (2011b).....	320
7.5	The Amazing Mr. Lifto, <i>Jim Rose Circus</i>	320
7.6	Enigma, <i>Jim Rose Circus</i>	320
7.7	<i>Reincarnation of Saint Orlan</i> , Orlan (1990).....	321
7.8	Michael Jackson, Jocelyn Wildenstein, Amanda Lepore, Michaela Romanini.....	321
7.9	<i>Abandoned Xerox Machine</i> , Sakshi Gupta (2008).....	330

7.10	<i>Metropolis</i> , Fritz Lang (1927).....	332
7.11	Album Sleeve: <i>Occupied Europe Tour</i> , 1985, Laibach.....	334
7.12	Album sleeve: <i>Kapital</i> , Laibach (1992a).....	334
7.13	Video stills: 'Wirtschaft Ist Tot', Laibach (1992b).....	335
7.14	Video stills: 'The Final Countdown', Laibach (1994).....	335

ENCLOSED AUDIO/VISUAL MATERIAL

	Page
CD 1:	
Track 1: Jezero.....	3
Track 2: Vojna Poema.....	3, 34
Track 3: Država.....	5
Track 4: Panorama.....	6, 200
Track 5: Krst.....	8, 37, 299
Track 6: Geburt Einer Nation.....	34
Track 7: Sympathy for the Devil.....	32
Track 8: Zrcalo Sveta (Das Spiegelglas Der Welt).....	64
Track 9: Vade Retro (Satanas).....	99, 299
Track 10: Herz-Felde.....	196
Track 11: Sredi Bojev.....	196
Track 12: Tovarna C19 (Factory C19).....	196
Track 13: Hostnik.....	201
Track 14: Now You Will Pay.....	215
CD 2:	
Track 1: Satanic Versus.....	233
Track 2: WAT.....	259
Track 3: Steel Trust.....	260
Track 4: Alle Gegen Alle.....	287
Track 5: Tanz Mit Laibach.....	287
Track 6: Rdeči Molk.....	292
Track 7: STT (Machine Factory Trbovlje).....	292
Track 8: Industrial Ambients.....	292
Track 9: Hell: Symmetry.....	329

REFERENCES

	Page
Bibliography	343
Conference papers	372
Dissertations and theses	372
Press articles	372
Sleeve notes	378
Online sources	379
Personal communication	388
Images.....	389
Discography	397

Film/DVD/video/video Online.....	399
Live performance	401
Radio	401

LIST OF APPENDICES

	Page
Audience survey stage one questionnaire	402
Audience survey stage two questionnaire	449
Email correspondence	464

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the Slovenian multi-disciplinary collective the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), focusing primarily on its music division Laibach. I interrogate how Laibach and the NSK operate as a nexus between Eastern Europe and the West through the ritualised staging of ideology as a mechanism of power. This section introduces the subject and themes of the thesis, as well as the research methodology. What follows is a contextualisation of Laibach and NSK praxis. It is not intended as a detailed history or list of facts regarding Laibach or the NSK, but introduces a framework for more detailed analysis in the thesis.

LAIBACH AND THE NSK

Laibach were founded in Trbovlje, Slovenia in 1980, and in 1984 joined forces with other Yugoslav artists to form the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art). The three founding groups of the NSK were IRWIN (visual arts), Sestre Scipion Nasice (theatre), and Laibach (music).¹ According to Alexei Monroe, ‘the aim of the association was the constitution of a transnational paradigmatic state, in which Laibach represented the ideological, the theatre the religious, and IRWIN the cultural and historical impulse’ (2005, p.247). Other groups also comprise the NSK, such as the design department the NK (New Collectivism), and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy. This multi-disciplinary collective functions as a Gesamtkunstwerk, and images and symbols are cross-pollinated by all groups within the NSK, constituting its output as a whole.

¹ Sestre Scipion Nasice were renamed Red Pilot Cosmokinetic Theatre in 1987 and in 1995, Noordung Cosmokinetic Theatre. IRWIN were initially known as Rose IRWIN Sélavy, after a pseudonym used by Marcel Duchamp.

From the outset Laibach and the NSK were controversial, initially in Slovenia, and then internationally, as their fame grew. The Slovenian cultural theorist and artist Marina Gržinić has described Laibach as ‘the most radical avant-garde rock-and-roll exploration of the time’ (2007, p.201). Laibach’s early period in particular was defined by a series of interventions considered offensive to mainstream Yugoslav culture and political bodies. The name ‘Laibach’ itself was a national scandal in Slovenia, first appearing on posters in their home town of Trbovlje in September 1980. Their name has been termed the group’s ‘ideological original sin’ (Monroe, 2005, p.158). By naming themselves after the Nazi occupation term for Ljubljana, Laibach were resurrecting ugly and unspoken truths concerning Slovenian Germanisation and the trauma of occupation. This founding act of controversy was further substantiated by an onslaught of ideological and aesthetic provocations. At the Zagreb Biennale in 1983, for example, the concert was interrupted by the police and Laibach expelled after projecting images of Marshal Tito montaged with pornography. Laibach’s music at this time was particularly loud, aggressive and discordant, their concerts described as ‘nightmarish and utterly extreme combinations of alienation, infernal noise, and brutal visual imagery’ (Monroe, 2005, p.180). Their dress was equally incendiary in a country that had weathered Nazi occupation within living memory, an austere non-specific totalitarian coding suggesting both Italian fascist and Nazi uniform, yet with essential signifiers such as the fasces or the swastika replaced with Malevich’s Suprematist cross.

In Slovenia, the popular press and veteran Yugoslav partisan groups were the most vocal in denouncing Laibach. By fusing references to Yugoslavian self-management Socialism, partisan imagery and audio recordings of Tito with Nazi

Kunst and frequent German translation, veteran partisan groups and the popular sense of Slovenian identity were guaranteed offence. As Michael Benson remarks, ‘in the early '80s, merely using German (which no NSK member actually speaks) was a provocation in a country founded on the mythology of Yugoslav resistance to the Nazi invasion’ (2003, p.57). In terms of further offending partisan sensibilities, Laibach recordings such as ‘Jezero’ from *Krst Pod Triglavom* (1987) and ‘Vojna Poema’ from *Nova Akropola* (1986), are perversions of iconic Yugoslav partisan anthems.² In both, untrammelled enjoyment of the original is frustrated by layered audio textures. ‘Jezero’ is interrupted by drumming and samples from Liszt’s *Dante Symphony* (1857), and ‘Vojna Poema’ is punctuated by discordant horns and atonal noise.

It was, however, their infamous appearance on the prime-time political news programme *TV Tednik* on Yugoslavian television in 1983 that propelled Laibach into overnight national notoriety. Laibach appeared starkly lit against a background of monochromatic iconography strongly reminiscent of European totalitarian propaganda, delivering pre-prepared responses to scripted questions in a deadpan manner. The presenter, Jure Pengov, ended the interview by denouncing Laibach as enemies of the people.

² See: ‘Jezero’, track one, CD one, and ‘Vojna Poema’, track two, CD one.



Figure 1.1, Screenshot: *TV Tednik* interview (1983b)

Perhaps less planned, but equally fortuitous in establishing Laibach and the NSK's scandalous reputation, was the Day of Youth poster affair. Dan Mladosti, or 'Day of Youth', was until 1987 an annual Yugoslavian state ritual in the Socialist Realist tradition. The design department of the NSK, the NK (New Collectivism), were commissioned to produce a poster for the event. The scandal broke when it was discovered that this poster was an adaptation of a Nazi propaganda poster by Richard Klein, entitled *Das Dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums*.



Figure 1.2, *Das Dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums*
Richard Klein (1936)



Figure 1.3, *Dan Mladosti*
NSK (1987b)

By re-deploying Nazi Kunst in Communist Yugoslavia, Laibach and the NSK demonstrated uncomfortable and hitherto hidden similarities between the two ostensibly opposed ideologies.

Despite Laibach's global success in popular music, and the NSK's recognition by the international art world, Slovenia's relationship with its prodigal sons has often been an uneasy one. As Laibach noted in 1991, 'today they hate us because they still love us!' (NSK, 1991, p.51). In 1986, at the award ceremony of the Golden Bird prize, the NSK delivered a speech which directly tackled their troubled relationship with their home nation:

The youth of a physically small nation such as ours must muster up greater creative energy than the youth of larger nations ... We are aware that we belong to that generation of Slovenes which does not have to waste precious energy on the struggles for the basic rights of our nation, but that we can entirely devote our time first and foremost to artistic production ... drawing fully on the Slovene program of spiritual, cultural and political liberation. We, therefore, do not understand the opposition to our public appearances, which we have recently encountered in some parts of the Slovene public (NSK, 1991, p.6).

Part of Slovenia's reluctance to recognise Laibach was their unapologetic claim to a central place within the Slovenian national space. Monroe suggests the phrase 'Oblast Je pri nas Ljudska' [our authority is the authority of the people] from the recording 'Država' (1982) is Laibach's declaration of a right to manipulate Slovenian national symbols (2000, p.174).³ In September 1990 this claim was restated, when Laibach entitled their Trbovlje concert *Ten Years of Laibach, Ten Years of Slovenian independence*.⁴ Yet although Laibach and the NSK are fundamentally fused to Slovenia's cultural identity, they problematise this by

³ See: 'Država', track three, CD one.

⁴ This concert was listed in *The Wire*'s 60 most important rock concerts, as it foreshadowed the demise of Yugoslavia (Kopf, 2007, p.30).

paradoxically simultaneously embracing and maintaining distance from Slovenian identification, treating Slovenia and its cultural signifiers as Duchampian ready-mades, which alienates many of their fellow Slovenians. For example, samples of Tito speeches occur throughout Laibach's recordings, and the track 'Panorama' is attributed *jointly* to 'Josip Broz TITO-LAIBACH 1958-1985' (Laibach, 1985, CD).⁵ Also, the diagram of the NSK's organisation, the *Organigram*, bears a striking resemblance to those in Yugoslav textbooks, which aim to explain the country's Kafkaesque system of Socialist self-management (Dunford, 1990, p.424). On the one hand, Laibach established themselves and a Slavic identity globally on their own terms, yet their 'militant classicism' is at odds with how Slovenia would like to be perceived on the global stage.⁶ More recently, however, as Laibach's image has become less martial and the furore over their initial impact in the 1980s has diminished, Laibach and the NSK have become more acceptable as Slovenian representatives. An indication of this may be the presence of the Slovenian ambassador to the UK at a Laibach performance in 2004 and a brief cameo appearance by Laibach in a mainstream Slovenian beer advertisement in 2009.⁷ Both these events would have been unthinkable in 1983, when Laibach were banned from using their controversial name for four years by the Yugoslavian authorities.

I have discussed Laibach's origins, their relationship with Slovenia, and their history of controversy. As part of this contextualisation, and at the heart of

⁵ See: 'Panorama', track four, CD one.

⁶ Laibach have employed the term 'militant classicism' to describe their music (Laibach, 2006, online).

⁷ The performance was at the Union Chapel in London. The advertisement is conventional and sentimental, shot in warm tones, with the exception of the four seconds in which Laibach appear. The sequence is shadowy and enigmatic, and not explained in the context of the love-story around which the rest of the advert revolves.

Laibach's early radical ambiguity, is their prime aesthetic system, that of Retrogardism. The NSK artist Eda Čufer wrote on Retrogardism to accompany the NSK's *Black Square in Red Square* action in June 1992, explaining that the 'Retro-avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts' (cited in Conover, 2006, p.356). Retrogardism is a process of bricolage, the artistic practice of montaging found objects. In Retrogardism, the iconography of Nazi Kunst is juxtaposed with that of Socialist Realism, religious imagery, icons of Slovenian national identity and Völkish sentimentality.⁸ Iconography associated with the Grand Utopian Narrative has no exchange value in late-capitalism beyond that of playfully offensive kitsch, and thus constitutes free-floating signifiers for Laibach to re-anchor, or re-mythologise.⁹ This re-mythologisation is key to Retrogardism, as it sustains the ideological power of the original symbols and tropes of the Grand Utopian Narrative, but re-codes them within the aesthetics of the Retro-avant-garde spectacle.

Research context

This thesis is a development of my Master's degree dissertation, *Shopping for Subjectivities: The Spectacle of Consumer Identity in Relation to the Practice and Ideology of the NSK* (2009). In that text, I compared a posited totalitarianism of late-capitalism with the monumental Retro-avant-garde spectacle of the NSK. Although I was already very familiar with Laibach's music, I was aware of the

⁸ The term Völkish is employed throughout this thesis, and is used to denote iconography and tropes associated with Nazi Kunst. Völkish imagery is predominantly sentimental in tone, combining nationalism with the idea of people, or race.

⁹ The Grand Utopian Narrative is a meta-narrative that guarantees cultural narratives, enabling them to acquire meaning and legitimacy (Taylor and Winquist, 2001, p.165). Typical examples are Marxism, fascism and Christianity, narratives marked by a utopian teleology.

NSK only incidentally, and like the overwhelming majority of Laibach's audience, came to the NSK through the music of Laibach.¹⁰ In 1987, whilst listening to the John Peel radio show, I heard my first Laibach recording: 'Krst' (1987).¹¹ The sound was unique in my experience and resulted in my immediate purchase of the albums *Nova Akropola* (1986) and *Opus Dei* (1987). My initial impression was that there had been something missing from European culture, and Laibach had filled that lack. Their music dealt directly with the unfinished narrative of European totalitarianism, something that had hitherto been either swept under the carpet or rejected out of hand, particularly in the West. This encounter with Laibach was accompanied by a response simultaneously visceral and cerebral. On the one hand, the music was galvanising, rousing and martial, yet on the other the complex iconography and audio codes posed a conundrum. Knowing only Laibach's music and nothing of the NSK at the time, my engagement with Laibach was one of attempting to decipher the esoteric system of symbols and obfuscating texts employed on their album sleeves, coupled with a transgressive frisson caused by their use of ideologically fraught imagery. For example, subsequent research into Laibach and the NSK has revealed that the swastika they used on the sleeve of *Opus Dei* (1987) is derived from John Heartfield's *Blut und Eisen* (1934).

¹⁰ This is substantiated by the results of my survey into Laibach's audience, as detailed in the appendix.

¹¹ See: 'Krst', track five, CD one.

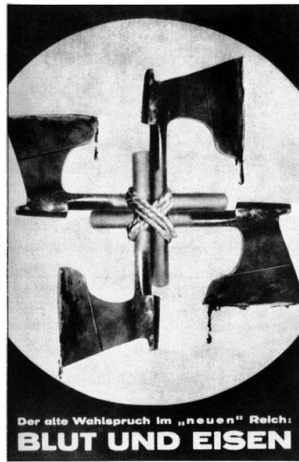


Figure 1.4, *Blut und Eisen*
John Heartfield (1934)

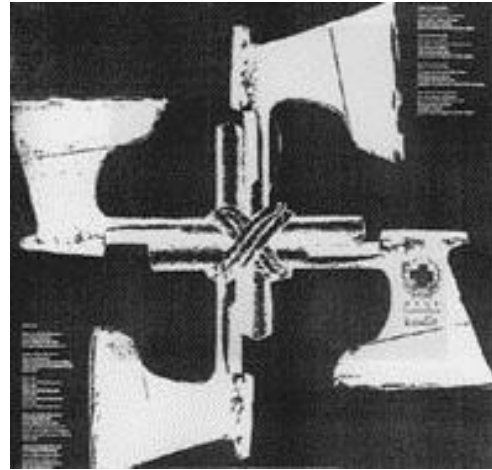


Figure 1.5, album sleeve (inner): *Opus Dei*
Laibach (1987)

John Heartfield's 1934 image is an anti-Nazi poster, yet Laibach do not point this out to their audience or explain their choice of image, which results in a radical ambiguity typical of early Laibach texts.

Although my first experience of Laibach is common to many respondents to the audience survey carried out for this research, appreciation of Laibach is often singular to the individual. In the chapter 'Interpellation', I argue that this is not only due to an emotive response to their music, but the open-ended nature of their texts, which demands the individual audience member establish their own subject-position in relation to Laibach, as conventional 'fan' identification with the group is problematic. I am able to relate this creative interpretive position to my own subjectivity, and this has shaped my research and partially provided the inspiration for embarking on this project. My cultural background is Western, and this has helped in understanding Laibach and the NSK as 'other', which is a crucial part of their role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. It has also helped in the analysis of Laibach's appeal in the West. I am British, but hold dual nationality in possessing an NSK passport.

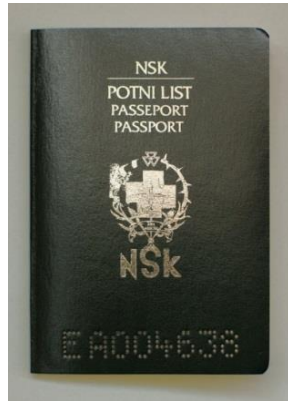


Figure 1.6, NSK Passport
(exterior)

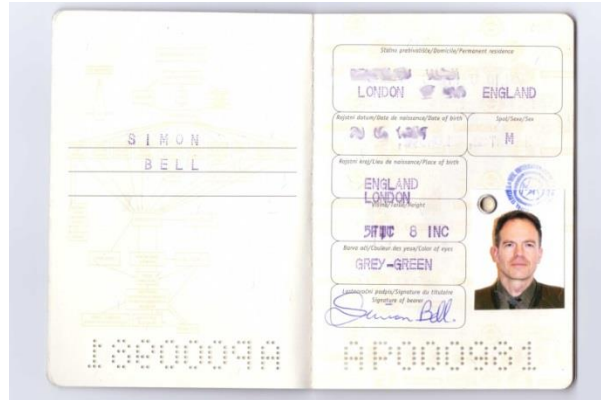


Figure 1.7, NSK passport (interior)¹²

The NSK passport does not enable international travel.¹³ However, it is a performative document of identity. In owning an NSK passport I am declaring myself a citizen of the NSK State-in-Time. My perception of Laibach as ‘other’ to a Western mindset and the concomitant appeal of this otherness has proved an important element as regards this thesis.

Laibach’s antlers and Hirst’s diamond skull

The following passage was taken from an article I wrote for the online magazine *Exeunt*, and is an excerpt from a review of Laibach’s performance in the Tate Modern, London in 2012:

On the 14th April 2012 Laibach delivered the Monumental Retro-avant-garde performance at the Tate Modern, London, celebrating over thirty years of Laibach Kunst machine. The Turbine Hall was split in two, on one side the Laibach stage, on the other a large black box. At the forefront of the stage was a stag’s head with antlers, inside the box was a diamond-encrusted skull. The antlers are a familiar Völkish motif occurring throughout the Laibach spectacle, the skull is Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God* (2007). The price of the mounted stag head is unknown, the price of

¹² The date of birth and the address is not obscured in the original, and the exterior image is of a separate passport.

¹³ The Slovenian Embassy website supplies a warning as regards the NSK passport: ‘We inform that a NSK Passport is not an official passport of the Republic of Slovenia. NSK Passport is a sort of a cultural project and has nothing to do with the official passports of the Republic of Slovenia’ (Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d., online).

the Hirst skull £50 million. It was possible to touch the antlers, to photograph them, and it would have been possible to remove them from their mount. The Hirst skull on the other hand was subject to the tightest security, only a few were allowed into the black box to view it at a time, it glittered under a glass case, and photographs were forbidden. Thematically however, the conditions of accessibility are reversed. Whilst the title, cost, and kitsch value of the Hirst skull is an arguably straightforward observation on the art world, consumerism, mortality, and their interrelations, Laibach's antlers remain obscure. The antlers might be a familiar trope, but re-encoded in the Laibach spectacle they simultaneously denounce and re-affirm their association with the Grand Utopian Narrative and a traumatic European historical. The Hirst skull is a novelty of its time, a playful pastiche arising from and in collaboration with late-capitalism. The antlers are archaic *Weltanschauung*, whose only currency in late-capitalism is as playfully offensive kitsch. It is in this discourse that Laibach's interventions are so vital, and why, after thirty years of provocations and controversy, the Laibach enigma remains as salient as ever (Bell, 2012, online).

The performance reviewed was the culmination of a day-long symposium organised by the Tate Modern on Laibach and the NSK, entitled *Neue Slowenische Kunst (1984-1992): A Historical Perspective*. The symposium was attended by members of the NSK and Laibach, as well as academics from Britain and abroad, and was part of a wider programme of NSK events in London over three months, with exhibitions and talks at the Chelsea Space and Calvert 22 galleries, and University College London. These events comprised a retrospective of the NSK's work, and papers delivered predominantly focused on their history and their impact in Slovenia. Although the symposium at University College London directly tackled the articulation of an Eastern European aesthetic discourse in the light of Western hegemony, this was through examining the work of IRWIN, the NSK visual artists, not Laibach.¹⁴ The issue of Laibach's function as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West was not represented in any of these colloquia. This is an issue consistently neglected in articles and chapters in the West that feature Laibach. Focus is usually on Laibach's totalitarian aspect, and the geo-political

¹⁴ The symposium was entitled *Archive as Strategy: Conversations about Self-Historicisation Across the East*, and was held at University College London on the 2nd June 2012.

and ideological context from which Laibach originate is neglected. Or if it is tackled, Laibach are contextualised in an East-West binary and not as a conceptual dialectical space. This conceptual space, a point of nexus of both communication and interpretation, is the issue addressed by this thesis, and is exemplified in the article excerpt above.

Comparative Research on Laibach and the NSK

This thesis is unique in being the first full-length work to address the manner by which Laibach and the NSK articulate the conceptual space between Eastern Europe and the West. This interrogation of Laibach's position as an East/West nexus also provides original research into Laibach's role as a strategy of resistance to late-capitalism.¹⁵ The aesthetic mechanism of Laibach and the NSK is often wilfully obscure, and my research examines how this process of ambiguity and misdirection resists appropriation by either an oppositional subculture or the academic establishment. As part of an analysis of this ideological non-alignment, which is a defining component of Laibach's interpellative quality, a unique study has been undertaken of Laibach's audience in the course of this research.

In terms of a research context, audio and visual material by Laibach is easy to come by, yet although unofficial fan websites abound, there is a paucity of written material, particularly in the West, where surprisingly little academic research has been conducted on either Laibach or the NSK. At present there are only two key texts on Laibach and the NSK: *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, written by the NSK collective themselves in 1991 and translated from the Slovenian, and

¹⁵ Frederick Jameson defines late-capitalism as the third stage of capitalism, following the stages of the market, and the monopoly: 'This new form of capitalism, in which the media and multi-national corporations play a major role, a shift on the technological level from the older modes of industrial production of the second machine Revolution to the newer cybernetic, informational nuclear modes of some Third Machine Age' (Jameson, 1996, p. xii).

Alexei Monroe's book, *Interrogation Machine* (2005), which is an extension of his doctoral thesis, *Culture Instead of a State, Culture as a State: Art, Regime and Transcendence in the Works of Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst* (2000). Monroe's thesis and book covers much of the history of Laibach and the NSK and their Slovenian context, but does not analyse Laibach's appeal in depth, or its reception in the West. Nor does it seek to address Laibach in the context of current performance theory. As regards secondary academic studies on Laibach and the NSK, articles in journals that deal with contemporary Central and Eastern European art and culture have featured their work, though these are predominantly of Eastern European origin. In the West, literature on Laibach and the NSK is often incidental, usually recounting the same cursory facts as part of a description of Slovenian culture or an exploration of avant-garde theory.

Moreover, it is important to point out that both key texts have been overtaken by Laibach and NSK developments. The NSK book was written in 1991, and *Interrogation Machine* in 2005. Since then, the NSK and its virtual state the NSK State-in-Time have developed significantly, with the latter passing into the NSK State of Emergence phase of 2010, and Laibach have released another eight years' of material and performances. Monroe's work does not cover these recent developments, nor analyses the increased appropriation of Laibach imagery by popular culture in the West, such as the Marvel comic character *Von Bach*, and the Laibach-scripted soundtrack to the Nazis-on-the-moon film *Iron Sky* (2012). Both of these latter incarnations are tackled in my thesis.

Methodology

In this thesis I posit that Laibach and the NSK practice a strategy of non-alignment with temporal, aesthetic, geo-political and ideological determinants, which enables them to operate as a nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. Besides the original Laibach and NSK texts, additional research was necessary in establishing a context for this position of non-alignment in each individual field. This additional research included such diverse fields as the historical avant-garde, European history, critical theory, cultural activism and Performance Art praxis.

Retrogardism is essential to Laibach's temporal and aesthetic non-alignment, and this entailed a study of the historical avant-garde, in particular Futurism, Constructivism, and Suprematism. The Suprematist icon of Malevich's *Square* (1913-1923) is ubiquitous in the Laibach and NSK spectacle, and study was undertaken as regards the context of the Russian historic avant-garde and its interrelation with totalitarianism. As part of this collusive relationship, the ideology of the Grand Utopian Narrative and the depiction of the aestheticised political was explored through writers such as Igor Golomstock and Boris Groys.¹⁶

Retrogardism, which is the process of re-coding signifiers associated with the Grand Utopian Narrative, is distinctly Eastern European in its relationship to the past and the politics and aesthetics of the process of historicisation. Accordingly, it is paradigmatic of Eastern European aesthetic discourse, which is examined in my thesis in opposition to a perceived hegemony of Western aesthetic discourse. In order to explore this discursive field, research was undertaken into

¹⁶ See, for example, Golomstock (1990) *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China*, Groys (2004) *The Irwin Group: More Total than Totalitarianism*, Groys (1987) *Stalinism as Aesthetic Phenomenon*, and Groys (1992) *The Total Art of Stalinism, Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*.

Eastern European art and performance. Eastern European gallery owners and art critics such as Wiktor Skok (Poland), Zdenka Badovinac and Igor Zabel (Slovenia) have written on the issue of an Eastern European aesthetic autonomy, and this proved invaluable in defining a discourse neglected in the West.¹⁷ In order to examine this unequal relationship between the West and Eastern Europe, reading on this subject provided a contextualisation of the geo-political and ideological East-West dialectic. This included literature on the issue of Balkanism and Balkan identity, and further studies of depictions of Eastern Europe in Western popular culture.¹⁸ Analysis of this discursive field generated research on unstable European histories and borders, and the subsequent importance placed on culture and national identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Literature focusing on Slovenia in the context of Eastern European national identity provided a framework for an analysis of Laibach's position of geo-political non-alignment and how this echoes both Slovenia's self-perception in Europe, and Marshal Tito's 1948 policy of political non-alignment with any major Cold War power-bloc.

My research into how Laibach interpellate their audience necessitated comparison with other popular music groups, with reference to Roy Shuker's work on popular music and Jacques Attali's theories on 'noise'.¹⁹ Particular attention was paid to those groups whose iconography referenced the fascist or totalitarian,

¹⁷ See, for example, Skok and Henning (2009) *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009*, Badovinac and Weibl (2001) *Arteast 2000+ Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West*, Badovinac (1994) *Fran Krašovec*, Zabel (1998) *We and the Others*, Badovinac (2009, online). *What Will the Next Revolution be Like?* and Zabel (2011, online) *Icons by Irwin*.

¹⁸ See, for example, Bakić-Hayden (2004) *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, Bjelić and Savić (2002) *Balkan As Metaphor: Between Globalisation and Fragmentation*, Hammond (2004) *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other 1945-2003*, Kaplan (1994) *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, Meštrović (1994) *The Balkanisation of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Postcommunism*, Ramet (1993) *Balkan Babel*, and Todorova (2009) *Imagining the Balkans*.

¹⁹ See, for example, Shuker (2001) *Understanding Popular Music*, and Attali (1996) *Noise: The Political Economy of Sound*.

and this resulted in a study of the nature of transgression in popular music and the ‘Industrial’ music genre. In order to substantiate my findings, and to establish the singular quality of Laibach’s appeal, I set up an ongoing dialogue with Laibach’s audience by email, questionnaire and on social media sites.

Research into Laibach’s ideological non-alignment required a study of those who have written on the practice of over-identification. Over-identification is the strategy of staging an ideology to excess, in Laibach’s case the totalitarian ritual, which results in ideological ambiguity. Laibach are the most well-known exponents of this strategy, and in order to assert that their radical ambivalence is ‘true’ over-identification practice, performative cultural activist groups such as the Yes Men and the Reverend Billy were examined. In the chapter ‘Over-identification’, I demonstrate its potential as a strategy of resistance to late-capitalism. In order to interrogate this further, I established a framework of critical and political theory, with reference to the work of Slavoj Žižek, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson.²⁰ This provided a foundation for an analysis of late-capitalism and its collusive relationship with current Western performance-art practice.

Primary source materials for this research are the audio/visual and written texts by Laibach and the NSK. These include audio recordings of albums and singles released, and films produced by Laibach and the NSK, whether on DVD or distributed online. Of equal importance are the sleeve designs, sleeve notes, and official photographs released by Laibach. The written texts include documents,

²⁰ See, for example, Jameson (1979) *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Baudrillard (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard (1993) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Žižek (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and Žižek (1991) *Looking Awry*.

press statements and interviews, either in their original formats or replicated on the official Laibach website. This website and the official NSK website was also invaluable direct source material.²¹ The ‘bible’ of Laibach and NSK texts is however the NSK monograph of 1991. This 288-page book contains a section on each ‘department’ that makes up the NSK, and is a collection of written texts and illustrations. It has proved an essential guide for cross-referencing iconography between the NSK departments and is a direct source for key texts such as the ‘Internal Book of Laws’ (p.4) and Laibach’s ‘10 Items of the Covenant’ (NSK, 1991, p.18). It is written by the NSK as a collective, with no introduction, editorial or commentary besides a list of contents on the final page. Other primary sources include live performances by Laibach and NSK exhibitions. Although I first saw Laibach perform in 1987, I have seen Laibach in concert many times since then.²² However, I was able to put the four performances attended during the course of this research to more applied academic use. NSK exhibitions as source material include the retrospectives at the Chelsea Space and Calvert 22 galleries in London (2012), the NSK seminar and art exhibition at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2012, and the NSK *Rendez-Vous* at the Horse Hospital, London, in 2011.

Secondary research sources comprise studies of Laibach and the NSK, and related subjects. Alexei Monroe’s doctorate thesis and his 2005 book *Interrogation Machine* falls into this category. Monroe’s work is thoroughly researched and proved a useful reference work for Laibach and NSK-related facts and figures which would otherwise have been difficult to verify. Monroe was also responsible for *State of Emergence*, a collection of articles and reports documenting the first

²¹ The NSK website was created by Harris Hararis in 2000, but was later adopted by the NSK as their official website (Harris, 2001, online).

²² My first live encounter was at the Riverside Studios, London, 28th July, 1987.

NSK citizens' congress in Berlin in 2011. This is an important source work as the contributors have a thorough understanding of Laibach and the NSK and regularly attend NSK events, as opposed to academics referring to the NSK or Laibach to explore their own research fields. The same positive value may be ascribed to *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009*, which is a collection of articles on a Laibach exhibition in Łódź in 2009. Further academic sources were articles in journals such as *Artmargins*, which specialises in Central and Eastern European art, and *Art-E-fact*. The former was particularly useful, and articles by academics and practitioners such as Inke Arns, Marina Gržinić, Aleš Erjavec and Eda Čufer were important sources, as they have contributed to other anthologies on art and performance in Eastern Europe such the seminal *East Art Map* (2006). This comprehensive publication is essential reading as regards Eastern European aesthetic discourse, as it is an attempt by IRWIN, the visual artists of the NSK, to articulate an Eastern European art history in the face of Western hegemony.

Arns, Erjavec, Gržinić and Čufer warrant particular mention, as their writings provide much of the research foundations upon which this thesis is based. Inke Arns is an independent curator, writer and theorist who has written on Laibach and the NSK, particularly on the strategy of over-identification, which she refers to as 'subversive affirmation' (Arns and Sasse, 2006, p. 444). More specifically, she has directly addressed the works of IRWIN, the NSK visual artists, in *IRWIN Retroprincip 1983-2003* (2004). Aleš Erjavec is a Slovenian academic whose texts on the relationship between postmodernism and post-Socialism were essential research, particularly as he cites Laibach and the NSK as symptomatic of

transitional post-Socialism.²³ His chapter 'Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art', in *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009* (2009, pp. 115-133), is a thorough account of Laibach, the NSK, and its departments. Erjavec also co-wrote *Ljubljana, Ljubljana: The Eighties in Slovene Art and Culture* (1991) with Marina Gržinić. This latter book proved a valuable research source, detailing as it does the Slovenian subcultural milieu of the 1980s, from whence originated the NSK. Similar material comprises Gržinić's chapter 'Total Recall – Total Closure', in *East Art Map* (2006, pp. 321-328). Other chapters and articles of Marina Gržinić's generated research in the wider contexts of Retrogardism and its relationship to the idea of the original in art, and how the NSK relates to issues such as globalisation.²⁴ Gržinić has been involved with the NSK from its inception. She was cultural director of ŠKUC, Ljubljana's influential Student Culture and Arts Centre, which championed Slovenian Punk and alternative culture in the 1980s, and co-signed *The Moscow Declaration*, which was the result of discussions between the NSK and Moscow artists and theorists at the *NSK Embassy Moscow* in 1992.²⁵ Also present at *The Moscow Declaration* was Eda Čufer, whose writing was a vital research source for me on Laibach and the NSK as performance art. Čufer is a dramaturg and co-founder of the theatre group Sestre Scipion Nasice. This theatre company were founded in 1983, and a year later

²³ See for example, Erjavec (2003) 'The Avant Garde and Their Context', in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant Gardes, and Post-Avant Gardes in Yugoslavia 1918-1991*, and Erjavec (2003) *Postmodernism and the Post-Socialist Condition*.

²⁴ See for example, *Aspects/Positions; 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949-1999* (1999, pp. 95-101), and 'Linking Theory, Politics, and Art' in *Third Text* (2007, pp. 199-206).

²⁵ *The Moscow Declaration* comprised a list of points addressing the question of Eastern European identity (Gržinić, 1993, online). The *NSK Embassy Moscow* action took place between 10th May and 10th June, 1992, in a private apartment at Leninsky Prospekt 12, Moscow. According to Arns, who has written on the event, 'The aim of the event was to confront the similar social contexts of the ex-soviet union and ex-Yugoslavia. The encounter of individuals with similar aesthetic and ethical interests and social experience revealed that the topic arousing the most enthusiastic and intense debate was the art and culture of the 1980s and the specific role they played in the transformation of Eastern Europe' (Arns, 2004, p. 58).

joined forces with Laibach and IRWIN to form the NSK. Čufer has been active throughout NSK development, and was instrumental in the creation of the NSK State-in-Time in 1992, and the *Transnacionala* project of 1996.²⁶ Of particular note is her description of an initial encounter with Laibach, in: ‘Laibach Stratagem: Two Stories by an Observer’, from *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009* (2009). In this, Čufer writes of her first impressions of both a Laibach concert and seeing Laibach’s notorious *TV Tednik* interview of 1983 from a contemporary Slovenian perspective. Moreover, Čufer writes in a theatre/performance context, which is rare in analysis of Laibach and the NSK.²⁷

Citing sources whose work is so interrelated with the NSK does, of course, problematise research, an issue Alexei Monroe has also noted whilst researching his thesis on Laibach and the NSK (2000, p. 46). The objectivity of practitioners so connected to the NSK as Gržinić and Čufer are, can be questioned, but this is tempered by their internationally recognised academic status. Therefore, in this respect, sources such as Erjavec, Gržinić, Čufer, and to a lesser extent, Arns, function as primary research material, as their experience of the NSK and its origins is both first-hand, and substantiated by their writing on the group in an academic context. For example, Gržinić’s neologism ‘Easthetics’, signifying an autonomous Eastern European aesthetic discourse exclusive of (Western) postmodernism, derives from Gržinić’s direct involvement with the NSK, but also her experience as an Eastern European visual artist and academic.

²⁶ *Transnacionala* (1996) involved Eda Čufer, the filmmaker Michael Benson, and IRWIN, journeying across America in two recreational vehicles, attending art events and meeting artists. ‘The aim, quite simply, was to discuss various issues during the course of the trip: art, theory, politics and existence itself – all in the context of the contemporary world’ (Arns, 2004, p. 69).

²⁷ For further texts by Čufer on Laibach and the NSK, see for example, ‘The State and its Double’, from *State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens’ Congress* (2011), and *NSK State in Time* (Čufer, 2011, online).

Other literature that was to play a significant part in my research included Boris Groys' 1987 article 'Stalinism as Aesthetic Phenomenon', which provided a framework for understanding the link between the historic avant-garde and totalitarianism, and Mikhail Epstein and Aleš Erjavec's writing on Eastern European postmodernism as being separate from the dominant Western variant.²⁸ Although ostensibly a music journalist, Biba Kopf is also included in secondary research sources, as his articles on Laibach for *The Wire* and the *N.M.E.* demonstrate an engagement with Laibach far beyond the remit of usual Western music press reportage. An indication of Kopf's relevance is that he supplied the sleeve notes to Laibach's *The John Peel Sessions* (2002), and, under his former name Chris Bohn, the narrative text to the film *Laibach: A Film from Slovenia* (1993). The writer I had most recourse to in this research was Alexei Monroe. Monroe is a cultural theorist and an acknowledged expert on Laibach and the NSK. He also occupies a unique position in terms of their critical analysis, in that his involvement with the group extends beyond the remit of the study of cultural theory. His book, *Interrogation Machine* (2005), is considered essential reading by many of Laibach's audience. He has organised conferences and symposia at the behest of Laibach and the NSK, and supplied sleeve notes to *Neu Konservativ* (released in the UK in 2003), and *Anthems* (2004). Such is his involvement that in many ways Monroe may be considered an unofficial spokesperson for Laibach. It is for this reason that references to Monroe for this thesis were considered an extension of Laibach and NSK praxis, the difference being that Monroe's observations are from an academic perspective, as opposed to the performative.

²⁸ See, for example, Epstein (1995) *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, and Erjavec (2003a) *Postmodernism and the Post-Socialist Condition*.

Monroe's writing therefore has proved an invaluable toolkit in deciphering Laibach and NSK strategies, and he is cited extensively throughout this thesis.

It would not however, be possible to conduct effective research on Laibach without the philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, who, in championing the strategy of over-identification, first brought Laibach to Western academic scrutiny. His texts on Laibach, totalitarianism, and the mechanism of ideology were essential to this research, and his provocations echo Laibach's challenges to the givens of liberalism.²⁹

Other secondary research sources were online contributions by Laibach's audience, whether that be as regards NSK Folk Art or more conventional 'fan' responses to the group. Donald Campbell's unofficial Laibach website, for example, is a comprehensive repository of Laibach and NSK related facts and articles (Campbell, n.d. online). Christian Matzke's Retrogarde Reading Room website and *NSK State News* webcast has also been a useful source of Laibach information, and provided a medium for reaching Laibach's audience as regards my audience survey (Matzke, 2003, online). The bulk of this survey data was used to substantiate findings in the 'Interpellation' chapter, and the results are detailed in the appendix. Respondents to this survey were found on the Laibach *Facebook* group, and at a Laibach performance in London, 2010.³⁰ This and other internet forums were useful for contacting Laibach's audience, and dialogue was maintained through individual email correspondence with those with more significant connections with Laibach and NSK work. Some had performed with

²⁹ See, for example, Žižek (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (1991) *Looking Awry*, (1997) *The Plague of Fantasies*, and 'Why are Laibach and the NSK not Fascists' (2002).

³⁰ This performance was at the Relentless Garage, 15th December 2010.

Laibach, others, such as NSK Folk artists Peter Blase and Lili Anamarija No, were exploring NSK aesthetics through their own artwork.

Other research sources included those of less reliable information, or incidental to research. Although the popular music press reviews of Laibach performances and album or single releases constitutes essential research for this thesis, they are non-academic and written within the limits of the mainstream popular music press. Music publications cited in this thesis, such as *Sounds*, the *N.M.E.* and *Melody Maker*, confronted by what is ostensibly a musical group, resort to superficial labelling according to their own agendas. Nevertheless, these sources were vital in demonstrating misconceptions and attempts to categorise Laibach within a Western discourse.

Laibach and the NSK as Gesamtkunstwerk

Laibach have been extant since 1980 and the NSK since 1984. As regards this timescale the focus of research becomes problematic. The NSK have undergone three distinct phases: inception (1984-1992), the NSK State-in-Time (1992-2010), and the State of Emergence (2010-present). Inception includes the creation of the NSK and the formulation of its basic principles, and the NSK State-in-Time was the creation of a spectral state, a state without territory, complete with its own passports, embassies and citizenship. The State of Emergence is the current manifestation and was marked by the first NSK citizens' congress and accompanying publication, *State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens' Congress*, in 2011. This third phase can be described as a reciprocal response by NSK's audience to the challenges posed by the NSK. The paradigm of

this is the advent of NSK Folk Art, in which artists explore the imagery and dynamic of the NSK with no direct input from the NSK themselves.

These developments of the NSK pose problems as regards a specific research focus, but a greater issue arises concerning Laibach's diverse manifestations. Each album release of Laibach's varies significantly from the last, often in contrasting genres. Although these abrupt changes are typical of Laibach, and as my research into their audience proves, part of their appeal, they occur within Laibach phases. Monroe describes the period of 1980-1992 as 'Classic Laibach' (2005, p.182). This period covers their inception in 1980 to the release of *Macbeth* in 1990, and is marked by its heavy oppressive martial tone and forays into the atonal. Although this underlying martial-industrial theme is represented in further works, it is moderated somewhat in the ensuing phase. *Kapital* in 1992 to *Laibachkünstlerfuge* in 2008, may be described as explorations in subjectivity, such as the treatments of national anthems in *Volk* (2006). The following, and current, phase has tended towards the retrospective, with releases such as *An Introduction to... Laibach* (2012), and *Gesamtkunstwerk 81-86* (2012), which both feature previously released material. The first phase, 'classic Laibach', correlates to their most controversial and influential period, when their radical ambiguity was at its most effective, as little was known of Laibach and the release of information was tightly controlled.³¹ Since then, Laibach's severity has relaxed somewhat, a spokesman is freely identified in live interviews, and the tone has moved away from the maintenance of enigma to an analysis of Laibach's history and cultural impact. This arc presents problems for a coherent research focus. The prime

³¹ For example, interviews were only given if the questions were submitted in writing beforehand, and Laibach discouraged the use of their names, instead supplying the fictitious 'Eber, Saliger, Keller and Dachauer'.

dynamic of Laibach and the NSK is Retrogardism. However, whilst ‘classic Laibach’ is certainly Retrogarde, can *NATO* (1994) or *WAT* (2003) be considered Retrogarde? What links all their work?

In order to address this question, Laibach must be analysed as a performative whole, in which the various manifestations all constitute the artwork that is the monumental Retro-avant-garde. Laibach are theatre, a ritualised staging of a spectacle, whether that be totalitarianism or capitalism, and this theatre is the performance of the mechanism of ideology. In the chapter ‘Conclusion: Resistance’, I refer to Laibach as a machine, and compare them to Sakshi Gupta’s sculpture *Abandoned Xerox Machine* (2008). Gupta’s sculpture is a functioning Xerox machine with its shell removed so the working mechanism is visible. As I argue in this thesis, it is in the way that Laibach expose the mechanism of the ideology of power that the analogy with Gupta’s work is relevant. The Laibach machine is the monumentalist spectacle of the Retro-avant-garde, an aesthetics machine whose workings are overtly visible, but the material produced by this machine is its own visibility, with no purpose but reflexivity. All of Laibach’s work must be understood in this way, as components of this machine. Every release is a complex mechanism that must be decoded and analysed in relation to all the other works. The individual cogs may be studied, but to understand how a machine works it must be seen as a whole.

Another factor that demands Laibach’s oeuvre be studied as a whole is that the entirety is bound together by the NSK’s Immanent Consistent Spirit. This elusive concept will need some unpacking. Laibach’s audience respond to the complexity and concomitant ambiguity in their works; pieces that are not closed or

finite, but act as questions, providing no answers. As I argue in the ‘Interpellation’ chapter, each proclamation or album release is a challenge to their audience to establish a subject-position. Whereas a ‘fan’ is interpellated by a conventional popular music group to identify with a certain subjectivity, often non-conformist and oppositional, Laibach’s audience are denied this comfortable position. Instead, the Laibach subject exists in a void, where he or she is the sole interpreter. This void has a name, the Immanent Consistent Spirit, which sits atop the NSK Organigram, the semi-fictional diagram of the organisational structure of the NSK.³² The Immanent Consistent Spirit is a fluid space of meaning that can be adapted to any NSK or Laibach process, whether that be the enigma generated by the wilful ambiguity of a Laibach or NSK text, or the dark visceral enjoyment at the heart of the Laibach spectacle. The Immanent Consistent Spirit binds these elements together. Therefore to return to my earlier point, although the aforementioned ‘classic Laibach’ period varies from later incarnations, this thesis focuses on the Laibach machine as a Gesamtkunstwerk whole.

It is for this reason that the chronological order of album release is not of prime relevance to this research, as this study does not concern itself with the development of Laibach over time. Although it is certainly the case that the technical expertise and production values of later recordings do indeed demonstrate development from the earlier more ‘raw’ recordings, the primacy of linear chronology as a value system is disrupted by the aesthetic strategy of Retrogardism. As discussed in the chapter ‘Retrogardism’, the Retro-avant-garde is a system of temporal non-alignment, in that it is a paradoxical simultaneous return to the past and looking forward to the future. In support of this temporal

³² The Organigram is discussed in detail in the chapter ‘Retrogardism’.

non-alignment argument, until the recent arrival of the retrospective phase of latter releases and interviews, Laibach and the NSK placed little emphasis on their own historicisation or linear development. The Laibach machine, infused as it is by the Immanent Consistent Spirit that is Retrogardism, is not therefore interrogated in this thesis in terms of linear development, but as a whole, with early texts having as much significance as more recent texts.

A similar process is at work in not privileging Laibach's musical output as a research source. Laibach are Slovenia's most successful and influential cultural export, having released twenty-six albums, and undertaking regular international tours.³³ Yet despite this success in the field of popular music, Laibach cannot be said to be a conventional music group, and it can be argued that music is incidental to Laibach, as stated by Igor Vidmar in Laibach's *M.B.21. December 1984* (1997, sleeve notes). From the outset, Laibach attracted critical attention that focused more on their spectacle and its effect than their music. Laibach started out as a visual arts group known as Laibach Kunst and music was chosen as simply being the most immediate conduit for their 'message'. Michael Goddard supports this view when he describes Laibach as 'a multimedia art collective using rock and pop music as a medium: an arena for investigating the relations between art, ideology, popular culture and totalitarianism' (2006, p.45). Hence analysis of Laibach's musical output alone is not sufficient. For this reason, Laibach's press statements, interviews, music and album sleeves receive equal analytical scrutiny in this thesis.

³³ For the sake of simplicity, the albums counted here are the primary releases (correct at time of writing). I have not included imports, or that there are three variations of *Kapital* (1992), for example. Moreover, Laibach are ongoing, and are releasing the album *Spectre* in 2014.

Laibach as Concept

With the same conceptual approach of not charting Laibach's development over time, my research is not concerned with Laibach as a concrete actuality, but as a concept. This is not a biography of band members or an artistic collective. For example, at only one point do I refer to any member of Laibach by name.³⁴ References to Laibach speaking in interviews will either be treated as Laibach as a collective, or if an individual member of Laibach is quoted in interview, they are referred to as a 'spokesperson'. This approach does two things; it maintains Laibach as a conceptual entity, as an art-form, and reflects Laibach and the NSK's collective ethos in which the individual is not a valid unit.

It is also important to note that maintaining a certain distance from my subject maintains its mystery, and this is a significant factor that has shaped my research. Cultural theorist and Laibach expert Alexei Monroe has spoken of not 'looking behind the curtain' if the mystery of Laibach is to be preserved (2000, p.23).³⁵ Although this appears counter to academic analysis, in Laibach's case it is not the enigma, or the mystery, that is the issue but the mechanism by which they construct it. This is the focus of my research. As I stated in my address to Laibach and the NSK's audience on the *NSK State News* webcast, announcing my questionnaire in 2011, I do not intend to answer Laibach's 'question' (Matzke, 2011, online). Although my thesis analyses the way their enigma is posed, the Laibach subject is the sole interpreter at the heart of this puzzle and each interpretation is valid, so no definitive answer may be reached. It is for this reason

³⁴ A founding member of Laibach is mentioned in the opening of the chapter 'Retrogardism'. Members are also named in the appendix by necessity.

³⁵ The reference here is to Monroe's thesis, where he repeats Eda Čufer on this subject. Monroe has himself reiterated this advice to me in person. It also came up as a concern expressed by some respondents to my Laibach audience survey.

that although I had access to Laibach, and was contacted by email by a member of the group, at no point was it necessary to approach them. In 2012, I met with members of the NSK during a programme of NSK-related events in London, and although I discussed with them the nature of the events, I did not ask for clarification of any texts. Asking about the meaning of a Laibach or NSK text would have indicated misunderstanding the nature of these texts.

It is this emphasis on the interpretive role of the Laibach audience that poses problems for the researcher as regards critical analysis. Establishing stable points of meaning in Laibach and the NSK is not only fraught, but fails to engage with the Laibach enigma, constructed as it is of obfuscation, misdirection and inconsistency. Statements or texts by Laibach that are unambiguous are rare. Their commemoration of the death of founder member Tomaž Hostnik is perhaps one such example, but even he has become part of the ritualised Laibach spectacle. Similarly, Laibach's pronouncements on the West's perceived cultural and political degeneracy are uncharacteristically direct, but the language used is couched in a fanatical and absolute phrasing that is as much about Laibach's militancy as it is East-West relations.³⁶ The researcher could look to Laibach's manifesto, the 'Ten Items of the Covenant', for a concrete statement of intent, but even this is a performative artefact (NSK, 1991, p.18). Point three of the covenant, which is the most cited of Laibach quotes in articles on the group, states Laibach's 'purpose': 'All art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this manipulation' (NSK, 1991, p.18). This is a reflexive statement, referring to the very nature of a manifesto. The medium is the message. The

³⁶ Laibach's direct critique of the West is analysed in the chapter 'Nexus'.

manifesto as a form is primarily associated with political parties and aesthetic movements. In Laibach's hands the manifesto becomes a statement of itself, whereby Laibach perform the role of both political party and aesthetic movement. This reflexivity illustrates the manner in which the Laibach and NSK audience are asked to examine not the machine but its workings. That is to say, how ideologies work, in particular the ideology of power, not power itself. This then is at the crux of the researcher's position. Examining Laibach's statements for contradictions and inconsistencies misses the point. Statements and texts contradict each other and Laibach rarely correct misconceptions as to their praxis. The Nazi salutes that have occasionally accompanied Laibach performances are valid readings. The lack of stable referents of meaning therefore, problematises the researcher's position, in that effective engagement with the Laibach spectacle *resembles* a degree of participation. Laibach and NSK praxis shares the [il]logical vocabulary of totalitarianism, in that Retrogardism's paradox of a simultaneous return to the past and movement forward to the future echoes that of fascists citing classical antiquity to create a utopian future. A critique of how this paradox and its appeal works, rather than needlessly pointing out its inconsistencies, reflects a more complete engagement with the subject, and this is the case with an analysis of Laibach and the NSK. I have discussed Laibach and the NSK as a machine whose only purpose is its reflexivity. Thus analysis must be of the workings, not the product, of the Laibach Kunst machine.

Laibach may be described as a reverse Rorschach test; instead of meaning arising from the chaotic pattern of the ink blot, Laibach's spectacle is of an impossible authority paradigm apparently laden with meaning but creating chaos. That is to say, the spectacle Laibach generate is constituted of emphatic ideological

signifiers, but these nodes do not constitute a coherent ideological field. This thesis deconstructs Laibach's impossible authority paradigm whilst leaving the aporia of its paradoxes intact. An example of this is the aforementioned Immanent Consistent Spirit. Point eight of the NSK's Internal Book of Laws states: 'Each membership candidate must believe in the hierarchical principle and existence of the supreme substance (ICS – the Immanent, Consistent Spirit), occupying the uppermost position in the hierarchy of the NSK' (NSK, 1991, p.4). Here the paradox at play is the NSK's demand for belief in nothing, a fluid space of meaning, something that does not and cannot exist. In the same way, a study of a cosmic black hole is not a study of the hole itself, which is invisible, but its effects.

Humour

Any study of Laibach and the NSK must take into consideration the problematic issue of humour. At no point do Laibach claim a sense of humour or indicate that any of their material is humorous. Nevertheless, in my questionnaire, humour scored very highly in the reasons for Laibach's popularity with their audience, and at face value many of Laibach's texts appear humorous. The incongruity of Laibach pushing shopping trolleys dressed as Nazis in a shopping mall in 2003 has a potential comic dimension.³⁷

³⁷ This was the *Einkauf* action of 6th April 2003 when Laibach, in the uniforms of Nazi officers, strolled about the City Park shopping mall in the BTC shopping district of Ljubljana. The swastika was replaced by the Laibach armband featuring the Malevich cross. Footage of this can be found in *A Film about WAT* (2004).



Figure 1.8, *Einkauf*, Laibach (2003a)

Similarly, the interpretations of well-known songs such as Queen's 'One Vision' (1987) or The Rolling Stones' 'Sympathy for the Devil' (1968) have an excessive triumphalist solemnity that suggests an excess of pomposity.³⁸ An identical factor is at work in the video to *Opus Dei* (1988), where the anachronistic seriousness of the overtly heroic posturing can appear comic.



Figure 1.9, *Opus Dei* screenshot (1987c)

The issue of humour in Laibach problematises the position of the researcher, as to laugh at – or possibly along with – Laibach, is to take a political-ideological position that fails to engage with issues Laibach are exposing. For example, the

³⁸ For Laibach's interpretation of Queen's 'One Vision', see: 'Geburt Einer Nation', track six, CD one. For 'Sympathy for the Devil', see track seven, CD one.

incongruous archaism of the heroic postures of ‘classic Laibach’ are only ‘funny’ in the context of the cynicism of late-capitalism, following the Grand Utopian Narrative’s fall from grace. Seen from another perspective, the ‘burlesque’ of Nazi uniforms in a shopping mall is no more or less funny than a group of teenagers in this same mall advertising for Nike by wearing the brand logo.³⁹ Moreover, humour is also one of the primary methods Western reportage uses to counter Laibach’s initial controversy, by not only finding Laibach funny but insisting Laibach find themselves funny.⁴⁰ Although the issue of humour in Laibach is addressed in my research, particularly as it is cited as an interpellative factor by respondents to my survey, nevertheless, humour is an interpretation of Laibach and the NSK located in the ideology of late-capitalism, one that does not take Laibach seriously, and therefore does not reflect the objective approach taken by my research.

The issue of humour, and in particular the notion of parody, becomes problematic in analysis of Laibach and the NSK. Superficially, Laibach appear to be parodying the iconography and tropes of both totalitarianism and Western popular music, but a closer reading reveals a more complex discourse of intertextuality. In order to interrogate this process, it is worth examining a photograph of Laibach that replicates the iconic Beatles’ *Abbey Road* album cover of 1969:

³⁹ This subjectivity shaped by branding is a feature of late-capitalism and is discussed further in the chapter on ‘Over-identification’.

⁴⁰ Examples of this reportage are given in the chapter ‘Nexus’.



Figure 1.10, Laibach: Abbey Road, London. Press photo for *Let It Be* (1988)

The image above is undeniably one of parody. It is not the Beatles using the zebra crossing, their positions have been usurped. However, the presence of Laibach acts to destabilise untrammelled systems of meaning, and frustrates a straightforward parodic reading. The image both is, and is not, parody. This paradox is the result of the image operating in two simultaneous contexts: conventional parody, and Retrogardism, which re-codes signifiers within its own aesthetic system. This parody paradox is in play with any Laibach or NSK trans-contextual text, whether that be their appropriation of Queen's 'One Vision' (1987) as the recording 'Geburt Einer Nation' (1987), or 'Vojna Poema' (1986), which is Laibach's recoding of a Yugoslav heroic partisan song.⁴¹ As Linda Hutcheon writes, 'parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation' (1989, p. 94).⁴² Laibach's appropriation of the *Abbey Road* image forces a reassessment of the process of textual reproduction, as it disrupts the linearity of the signifying chain. That is to say, in Retrogardism the chain of signifiers does not stem from an original, as originality is not recognised as a valid value system. In Retrogardism, the image of Laibach on a

⁴¹ See: 'Geburt Einer Nation', track six, CD one, and 'Vojna Poema', track two, CD one.

⁴² The italics are Hutcheon's.

zebra crossing in Abbey Road, London, is severed from its temporal, geo-political and aesthetic determinants, and its contextual origins. The Beatles' *Abbey Road* image becomes another de-contextualised and free-floating signifier in the spectacle of the monumental Retro-avant-garde. Thus, by exposing the ideological givens that claim the primacy of the original as a value system, and in resembling parody whilst not parodying, Laibach's appropriation of the *Abbey Road* image throws into relief the viewer's own ideological positioning and as a reader of text. It is this complex position that the researcher finds themselves in as regards issues of humour and parody in Laibach and NSK. It is indicative of this complexity that Alexei Monroe too gets caught in the parody/non-parody riptide, when he resorts to adapting the term 'over-identification' to describe Laibach's interpretations (or 'parodies') of existing recordings as 'over-simulation' (2005, p. 227). The researcher must certainly acknowledge these perspectives of humour and parody, but demonstrate that these are *interpretations* of Laibach and the NSK. Without an understanding of Laibach and the NSK praxis, much of their work will appear humorous, or indeed, ironic, but further investigation reveals an altogether more complex inter-textual system.

Laibach's music

As Laibach are Performance Art, my analysis of Laibach's praxis values their audio and visual texts equally. However, Laibach's prime and most immediate delivery system, and the means by which they are most well-known, is sound. As a founder member of Laibach has suggested, eventually all Laibach's controversies and provocations will fade away, and it is the recordings that will be remembered (Laibach, cited in Benson, 2003, p. 57). This latter point suggests a

possible end to Laibach, as it is arguable whether their music can be separated from its ideological militancy without becoming meaningless pastiche and imitation. For Alexei Monroe, Laibach's music is the essential conduit on which the associated conceptual art is utterly dependent: 'None of these conceptual art elements would have penetrated mass consciousness without a music that was equally disturbing ... Laibach's politicised sonority was the intangible equivalent and support of its brutally dense language and symbolism' (2000, p. 54). A musicological study of Laibach is not the remit of this thesis, that is the subject of possible future research, but what follows examines salient aspects of Laibach's music relevant to their interpellative and conceptual qualities.

A thorough analysis of Laibach's music is problematised by the diversity of musical genres they have explored in their thirty-year history. Nevertheless, what may be described as 'classic Laibach', from their inception in 1980 to the release of *Kapital* in 1992, a period seeing the release of fourteen albums, not only marks Laibach's most influential and controversial phase, but can be referred to as generating a definitive Laibach 'sound'. Varying from harsh discordancy and atonal noise to the strictly regimented triumphalist martial, the overall tone is one of unrelenting oppressive force. Laibach's music is militant in both the literal employ of march beats and the demands it makes on the listener, with jarring and aggressive chords married to heavy drumming, often in an irregular or ponderous rhythm. These tracks can be portentous and grinding, extended over time to tax the listener. Strident commands are barked out through megaphones, or otherwise distorted, with the vocalist growling in a stentorian manner, often accompanied by the choric. The overall effect is to dominate, to render totalitarian architecture in

sound. Yet Laibach's audio spectacle is more complex than an initial reading would suggest. The tone is both a mixture of the oppressive/aggressive and the triumphant. The grinding beats coupled with atonality are counterpointed by choral work and rousing fanfares. The track *Krst* (1987) is an example of this process.⁴³ The track can be said to be in three parts; it opens with low ominous strings, to which is added a steady single drum beat and a Slovenian text in a spoken monotone, culminating in a repeated two-chord fanfare which has a rousing triumphal quality. The low sawing bass strings of the opening section carry threat, whilst the latter horn section suggests imperial glory. Although monumentalist state power can be said to be represented in this combination of threat and triumphalism, what further diminishes the subject in this audio spectacle is the absence of the individual. Characteristic of Laibach and NSK praxis, the individual is not addressed other than belonging to a mass, and themes of conventional popular music that would anchor the texts to individual empathic response, such as for example, romantic love, celebrations of freedom or emotional pain, are not present.

Consistent employ of march rhythms in Laibach also suggest the collective mass. Carolyn Birdsall in *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (2012) writes of 'affirmative resonance', which she describes as referring to communal sounds that resonate in a space, to affirm the validity of a group's identity. Birdsall gives as an example of these communal sounds the synchronised march-steps of the Nazis (2012, online). This 'affirmative resonance' is represented in Laibach's use of massed voices and their repetitive

⁴³ See *Krst*: track five, CD one.

march rhythms, which finds a correlation in Klaus Theweleit's work on the coordinated mass display. According to Theweleit, fascism 'translates internal states into massive, external monuments or ornaments', where they can 'discover that they are not split off and isolated, but that they are sharing the violations of prohibitions with so many others' (1987, p. 430). Here the emphasis is on the unity of the group, one that cannot tolerate the presence of the individual, for the individual is not only refusing to participate, but what is worse, observing (Theweleit, 1987, p. 431). The observer, possessed of critical distance, disrupts the function of the gaze in mass display. Siegfried Kracauer in *The Mass Ornament* (1995) supports Theweleit's argument when he speaks of participants in the mass display relinquishing critical distance, as their performance can only be viewed from afar to be effective: 'the allure of the mass ornament is partly due to the relinquishing of the subject gaze' (1995, p. 77). It is here that the paradoxical subject-position inherent in Laibach's audio texts is apparent. The march rhythms, choric aspect, and the invalidity of the individual subject in Laibach's spectacle perform Birdsall's affirmative resonances and the concomitant surrender of critical distance, but simultaneously disrupt this reading. The visceral appeal of the oppressive-triumphalist audio textures in 'classic Laibach' demands a surrendering of critical distance, but a paradoxical simultaneous engagement with the cerebral in deciphering conflicting and enigmatic textual codes.

If Laibach articulate Birdsall's affirmative resonance as regards their staging of the totalitarian ritual, particularly in live performance, the vocal quality employed also merits discussion. In the audience survey conducted for this research, Laibach's vocals were consistently cited as a significant aspect of their

appeal.⁴⁴ This vocal tone is on the whole deep and growling, and although not always harsh, rarely resembles the singing found in conventional popular music. This vocal quality is directly connected to the commanding nature of much of Laibach's audio texts. Coupled with the oppressive-triumphalist quality of Laibach's music, in 'classic Laibach' the central voice takes on an excessive authoritarianism. The imperative tone emphasises the obey-command inherent in the words spoken, an effect increased by the difficulty in attaching this voice of command to an empathic individual persona. Although it is clear who the vocalist is, during the 'classic Laibach' phase, the vocalist was not credited or ever referred to by name. Moreover, in press releases and interviews, Laibach usually refer to themselves in the third-person, and in the syntax of totalitarian propaganda, thus associating Laibach with the teleological drive of the grand utopian narrative. The Laibach voice-signifier, employing monostatements in the imperative, and severed from individual persona, quotidian concerns, or any obligation to recognise the status of the individual subject, free-floats in the Laibach spectacle. Mladen Dolar stresses the performative power of the voice in *The Politics of the Voice* (2006). Dolar points out the importance of the voice in both legislature and sacred ritual:

One has, for example, to say prayers and sacred formulas *labialiter*, *viva voce*, in order to assume them and make them effective, although they are all written down in sacred texts and everybody (supposedly) knows them by heart. Those words, carefully stored on paper and in memory, can acquire performative strength only if they are relegated to the voice (Dolar, 2005, p. 107).

However, Dolar also writes of another kind of voice, one that does not enact, but becomes the law. This is the authoritarian voice, the voice that appears limitless, unbound, a voice that is 'the source and immediate lever of violence' (Dolar, 2006,

⁴⁴ See the Appendix for audience survey data.

pp. 113-114). To support his argument, Dolar cites Adolf Eichmann, who stated whilst on trial in Jerusalem, that Hitler's voice *was* the law (2006, pp. 113-114). Dolar illustrates his theory by comparing Hitler speeches with those of Stalin. With Hitler, the charisma of high performative hysteria generated immediate legislative power; the voice becomes will. With Stalin, the performativity of Hitler's speeches were replaced with a bureaucratic monotone, as if he is 'merely the executor of the text, just as he is the mere tool of the laws of history, not their creator' (Dolar, 2006, p. 118). The methods differ, but in both, the voice becomes the channel whereby the law is suspended. It is this second voice that Laibach articulate. This second voice is manifested by the use of monostatement, and by originating not from an individual but from an abstract concept (Laibach itself speaks).

I have spoken of the monumentalism of Laibach's music, which operates in collaboration with the disembodied authoritarian voice to diminish the validity of the individual subject. In many of the audio texts from Laibach's 'classic' period, another component merits investigation, that of noise. Laibach audio texts that date from the early 1980s were particularly noise-heavy.⁴⁵ In *Noise as a Musical Metaphor for Contemporary Aesthetics in Popular Culture*, Heinrich Deisl defines noise in music as generating an 'information overload unit, an excessive "too much", constantly producing 'its own simulacrum through its affirmation of "nothingness" and its rejection of "traditional western values" like rhythm, melody and cadence' (2010, online). Paul Hegarty describes noise as negatively defined; it is sound that is other, unwanted and unordered: 'It does not exist independently, as

⁴⁵ See in particular the albums: *Ljubljana-Zagreb-Beograd* (recorded 1982, released in the UK in 1993), *Rekapitulacija 1980* (released 1985), *M.B. 21 December* (released 1997), and *Laibach* (1985).

it exists only in relation to what is not' (2007, p. 5). In Laibach this can manifest itself in cacophony, whether that is made by musical instruments, or industrial machinery. It is this latter industrial element that is most relevant to their praxis and this thesis. The use of noise in the Industrial music genre is a defining component, and is identified as such by Jason Hanley when he writes of Industrial music as 'constructed from mechanical rhythms, harsh and distorted timbres, and dark minor key or modal harmonies, all of which contribute to the creation of a dystopian soundscape' (2004, pp. 158). Industrial music, according to Hegarty, becomes 'noise' because it turns ideas and power structures into music (2007, p. 114). In this way noise becomes a conceptual statement, a negation and site of opposition to hegemonic tonal music. Hanley traces the use of noise in Industrial music bands such as Cabaret Voltaire, Throbbing Gristle, DAF, and Einsturzende Neubauten, to Futurist sound pioneer Luigi Russolo's text *The Art of Noises* (1916), which embraced the violent mechanised soundscape of the twentieth century and made it a feature of the music, not an intrusion or interruption (2011, p. 105). This is supported by Douglas Khan in *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (1999), who points out that, for the first time, a generation of artists were exposed to the noise of industrialised war; cannon, engines, mud, and the sound of the dying (1999, p. 65). Here, noise as explored by the Futurists becomes a method for articulating a new morality in the era of industrialised progress. This celebration of noise as a form of music is exemplified in the work of the Futurist Russolo, who states: 'Ancient life was all silence. In the 19th century, with the invention of machines, noise was born. Today, noise is triumphant, and reigns sovereign over the sensibility of men' (1916, p. 23). However, although this use of noise was a counter-position to contemporary music, it was not nihilist but utopian

in drive, and Rossolo envisages a bright audio future: 'The motors and machines of our industrial cities can one day be given pitches, so that every workshop will become an intoxicating orchestra of noises' (1916, p. 29). In Laibach's context, the function of noise is simultaneously disruptive whilst referencing the utopian drive of the historical avant-garde. Although Futurist sonic experiments are cited as a creditable artistic precedent for many contemporary artists, as Monroe asserts, the more troublesome support of fascism and the glorification of mechanised war concomitant with Futurism is ignored (2006, online). In contrast, in Laibach's re-mythologising of the historical avant-garde, intertextual references to the Futurist use of noise characteristically retains its problematic ideological charge.

Noise in Laibach refers to both its disruptive effect in conventional music and its referents as a tool of the historical avant-garde. The Futurist's use of noise was part of an aesthetic exalting mechanised war, and by association, Laibach's use of noise references this aesthetic. Furthermore, noise lends itself to the more visceral elements of fascism, what Hegarty calls:

The non-rational, some form of sacred, giving yourself over into something beyond the individual, attaining some more authentic, lost sense of either body or mind, the notion of submitting, the control on the part of the noise producer, the power of the spectacle that is physically oppressive (Hegarty, 2007, p. 124).

Laibach's use of noise articulates all three aspects; its oppositional status, its referent in the historical avant-garde, and submission to the loss of self.

Yet as Hegarty observes, although Futurism's celebration of the sounds of war indicates fascist potential, in practice it is not noise that is associated with the extreme right, but 'state-sponsored, pseudo-traditional music' (2007, p. 124). This

correlates to Laibach's more conventional audio texts. These more accessible recordings perform a function for Laibach. The militant assault of overwhelming noise, whether by conventional musical instruments or industrial machinery, is of equal and dialectical importance to their militant 'pop' music aesthetic. For example, Laibach are specific about their use of 'disco' as a tool in their armoury:

The apparent techno-revolution of our music has parallels in the growth and multiplication of machines. We are fascinated by disco aesthetics and the introduction of disco elements in the production of our music is not a novelty. It only affects the purification and apostrophising of rhythm, which is – as regular repetition – the purest form of militantly organized rhythmic of technicist production and classicist beauty. Disco rhythm stimulates automatist mechanisms and co-forms the industrialization of consciousness according to the model of totalitarianism and industrial production (2006, online).

Many Laibach tracks contain elements of 'disco', or have similarly fast repetitive dance beats. This militant 'disco' is particularly apparent in their recording of *Sympathy for the Devil (Who Killed the Kennedys)* (1988), where the synthesiser-based dance rhythm is redolent of Giorgio Moroder sequencing epitomised in his iconic 1977 recording, *I Feel Love*. Thus, in Laibach, the cultural given that conventional pop music is a liberatory medium proclaiming free-expression, is re-coded to demonstrate its militaristic potential.⁴⁶ This echoes Jacques Attali's observation on pop music's hidden ideology: 'The rhythms, of exceptional banality, are often not all that different from military rhythms' (1996, p. 109). In similar vein, Laibach's appropriation of Bach fugues in *Laibachkunstderfuge* (2008) is less a straightforward treatment of a musical genre than a conceptual re-working of hidden ideological codes. This is an interpretation Brian Morton picks up on when reviewing *Laibachkunstderfuge* for *The Wire*, in 2008: 'The defining sound-symbol of National Socialism wasn't Gotterdammerung or Parsifal, but the

⁴⁶ For a more detailed analysis of Laibach and the perceived totalitarianism of Western popular culture, see the chapter 'Over-identification'.

new-order music of JS Bach. Counterpoint and counter-marching have their kinship: the art of fugue is an algorithm of control' (2008, pp. 59-60). In *Laibachkunstderfuge* (2008), Laibach interpret fourteen Bach fugues in a purely digitised and synthesised format. It can be argued here that Laibach are challenging both Bach and classical music's exalted status as a 'pure' and politically neutral art, pointing out a potential hidden ideological coding. The sleeve to *Laibachkunstderfuge* resembles a circuit-board, but in a Baroque styling.



Figure 1.11, *Laibachkunstderfuge* (album sleeve) Laibach (2008)

The sleeve also quotes Bach: 'It's easy to play any musical instrument: all you have to do is touch the right key at the right time and the instrument will play itself', adding words by Laibach: 'It's easy to play Bach: all you have to do is open the right program on the right computer and Bach will play itself' (2008, sleeve notes). In equating art and the genius of creativity with computer programming, Laibach are undermining art's claim to a spiritual or ineffable dimension. Here music is exposed as a system of codes rather than a transcendent experience. If Attali's

definition of harmony in Mozart and Bach reflecting the bourgeois dream more concisely than the whole of nineteenth century political theory is correct, Laibach's digital appropriation of Bach fugues reveals their concealed agenda as an algorithm of control (Attali, 1996, p. 5). In Laibach, music, whether 'low' or 'high' art, becomes a conduit for ideology, whether hidden behind a veil of art and the spiritual, or laid bare, as in Laibach's praxis.

I have discussed Laibach's music in terms relevant to its interpellative and conceptual qualities, and suggested that a more developed musicological analysis may be salient for future research. This thesis addresses the impact of Laibach's and the NSK's system of signification, and although it cites the experience of their audience, Laibach in terms of *affect* could be further suggested research. A reductive definition of a Laibach performance is that of a group who play loud drum-based music, and, described as such, they are identical to most popular music groups, particularly in the Industrial and E.B.M. genre.⁴⁷ However, Laibach's ideological emphasis, in combination with the power of a loud rock concert, changes the nature of their *affect*. Vincent Meelberg's text, *Touched by Music: The Sonic Strokes of Sur Incises* (2008), provides an analysis of what he calls 'sonic strokes', 'Sensations through which the listener's body is confronted with another body (the entity called sound)' (2008, p. 69). Meelberg's theories may be employed to shed light on how Laibach's ideological provocation is multiplied, or complimented by, the aural power of their performance. Meelberg tackles the *affect* of the sound on the listener, and challenges the dominance of signification in art theory: 'An understanding of musical affect as primarily motivated by

⁴⁷ E.B.M. stands for 'Electronic Body Music', and may be described as Industrial dance music.

signification, however, excludes the human body from the experience of listening' (2008, p. 62). Other texts that may be relevant in exploring Laibach's somatic assault on their audience are Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), *Sonic Meditations: Body, Sound, Technology* (Birdsall and Ennis, 2008), and Jacques Ranciere's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2000). Massumi's text addresses intensity as *affect*, but before it has been qualified by an emotional response. This may prove useful in interrogating the impact of Laibach's sound as a purely immediate and visceral response, prior to critique of its signification. Ben Anderson's chapter in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), examines the mobilisation of the masses in the twentieth-century phenomenon of Total War, in which the focus on morale prevents affective excess from collapsing in noise and panic, thus channelling the potentially overwhelming nature of Total War. An example of applying this to Laibach may be found in the recording 'Die Liebe' (1986), in which the hysterical and imperative voice repeatedly chanting 'Die Liebe, die Liebe, die alles schafft', both represents and channels Laibach's impossible authority paradigm.⁴⁸ Ranciere's aforementioned work may shed light on Laibach's *affect* as directly addressing politicised art, which Ranciere sees as a missing category for correlating politics and art (2000, p. 60). This may provide valuable research in how Laibach's visceral impact becomes a way of articulating what Žižek calls 'the unthinkable apolitical excess of politics itself' (2000, p. 78).

⁴⁸ Laibach's impossible authority paradigm is a spectacle constituted of emphatic ideological signifiers that do not constitute a coherent ideological field. That is to say, the command-to-obey signifiers are unequivocal, but disconcertingly centred around an ideological vacuum.

CHAPTERS

1. The European context

This chapter provides a context for an analysis of Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. I interrogate notions of an Eastern European cultural identity as defined by the West, and how this system of representation has resulted in an increase in Eastern European aesthetic autonomy following the collapse of Socialism. I examine the differing cultural perspectives of Eastern and Western Europe, and argue that Eastern 'postmodernism' differs significantly from that of the West. For this purpose, I adopt Marina Gržinić's neologism 'Easthetics' not only to categorise an Eastern postmodernism, but to define an approach to aesthetics that attempts to be independent of the Western discursive field (Gržinić, 2006, p.484). Effective understanding of Laibach and the NSK's aesthetic praxis is only possible within Gržinić's term 'Easthetics', and their aesthetic strategy of Retrogardism and its failure to be recognised in the West is paradigmatic of Easthetic discourse.

2. Retrogardism

This chapter provides an analysis of Retrogardism, the core strategy of Laibach and NSK praxis. I explore Retrogardism as a concept and how it functions as Marina Gržinić's 'new "ism" from the East' (2006, p.328). This chapter looks at examples of Retrogardism and the way it relates to the historical Russian avant-garde art form Suprematism, on which it is founded. This analysis of Retrogardism lays the foundations for a study of Laibach's most controversial strategy, over-identification.

3. Over-identification

This chapter explores Laibach and the NSK's strategy of over-identification as Retrogardism in practice. In Laibach, this constitutes an excessive staging of the totalitarian ritual, resulting in an ideological ambiguity. The radical ambivalence arising from Laibach's over-identification necessitates a problematic subject-position for Laibach's audience, in which identifying with Laibach means identifying with an excessive authoritarianism, a simultaneous demand to maintain critical distance and be immersed in the spectacle. Laibach's strategy of ideological non-alignment provides a useful analytical tool for understanding Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West.

4. Nexus

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Laibach and the NSK operate as a point of dialogue between Eastern Europe and the West. Through a strategy of militant non-alignment with any ideological or geo-political position, Laibach and the NSK provide a critique of both Eastern Europe and the West. As part of an analysis of this critique, I cite examples of Western reportage of Laibach's output. The nature of this reportage exposes a failure to assimilate Laibach's complexity within a Western discourse. This is symptomatic of a divide between Eastern Europe and the West, a rift that becomes text for Laibach, playing a significant role in their appeal to their audience.

5. Interpellation

This chapter is an analysis of the nature and mechanisms of Laibach's interpellative appeal, with a specific focus on their Western audience. The results of my two-part questionnaire of Laibach's audience are employed in this chapter to support my

findings. In order to examine the relationship Laibach has with its audience, comparison is drawn with other music groups in the West who are frequently labelled 'Industrial', or who have similarly employed totalitarian or fascist imagery. The nature of this transgression and its allure is then interrogated as regards Laibach and NSK praxis.

6. Conclusion: Resistance

In this chapter, Laibach's complexity is examined as part of a dynamic that operates as a site of resistance to late-capitalism. In particular, comparison is drawn with the perceived oppositional stance of Western Performance Art praxis. I interrogate how in the latter, the focus on the discourse of the body and individualism is a collusive vocabulary between late-capitalism and Western Performance Art, and compare this with the representation of the body and the individual in Laibach and the NSK. I conclude by arguing the spectacle of the monumental Retro-avant-garde of Laibach and the NSK constitutes an aesthetics machine whose function provides an alternative to the commodifiable oppositional narratives of contemporary Western Performance Art.

Laibach and the NSK interrogate a conceptual space between Eastern Europe and the West. Their articulation of an Eastern European aesthetic discourse such as Marina Gržinić's Easthetics within the hegemony of Western aesthetic discourse not only celebrates the difference between the two discourses, but celebrates the exclusion of the West. However, in Laibach's hands, the resulting inability of the West to comprehend Laibach and NSK praxis becomes a discursive field whereby the failure to converse becomes a constructive and fruitful text, generating a unique aesthetic discourse. In this way the obfuscating and radically

ambivalent praxis of Laibach and the NSK may be understood as positive, in that it generates a creative interplay of texts and aesthetic systems. The following chapters analyse this creative interplay and the processes by which it is achieved. In order to do this however, it is first necessary to examine the relationship of Eastern Europe to the West, their differences and resulting interrelation. The first chapter explores this discourse, and establishes a context for both the origin of Laibach and the NSK's praxis, and its subsequent operation.

THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The aim of this chapter is to provide a contextual analysis of Eastern European aesthetics in relation to the aesthetic praxis of Laibach and the NSK. This chapter interrogates notions of an Eastern European cultural identity as defined by the West, and how this system of representation has resulted in an increase in Eastern European aesthetic autonomy following the collapse of Soviet communism. I will examine the differing cultural perspectives of Eastern and Western Europe, particularly under Socialism and in a post-Socialist age, and argue that, despite superficial similarities, Eastern 'postmodernism' differs significantly from that of the West. For this purpose I have adopted Marina Gržinić's neologism 'Easthetics' not only to categorise an Eastern postmodernism, but to define an approach to aesthetics that attempts to be independent of the Western discursive field (Gržinić, 2006a, p.484). In conclusion I will argue that an understanding of Laibach and the NSK's aesthetic praxis is only possible within Gržinić's term 'Easthetics', and that this is an essential component of the *otherness* of Laibach's appeal in the West.

For the purposes of this study, a definition of both Eastern Europe and the West is required. The category of 'Eastern Europe' is as much an idea as a fact of geography. The definition of 'East' is not only politically charged but flexible according to geopolitical context. For example, Stuart Hall, writing in 1992, notes that technologically speaking Japan is thought of as Western, while Latin America is geographically in the west, yet was until recently considered to be Third World (1992, p.276). The boundaries of Eastern Europe as a category also vary according to political context; does Eastern Europe now begin in Poland, or the Ukraine?

Although for the West, Russia is considered Eastern Europe, in the Islamic world the entire Christian world, including Russia, is the West (Meštrović, 1994, p.62). Clear definitions of Eastern Europe are often nebulous and ideologically charged. Thus in order to provide a stable platform for analysis, in the context of this research the ‘West’ refers to those nations who were part of the post-war West and Eastern Europe primarily refers to the former Eastern Bloc. I have chosen these delineations as it is the dialectic between these two concepts that is the dominant text of Laibach and NSK praxis.

In 1992 the Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović exhibited an artwork bearing the legend ‘an artist who cannot speak English is no artist’:



Figure 2.1, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is no Artist*, Mladen Stilinović (1992)⁴⁹

Stilinović is making a point about the totalising hegemony of Anglo-American aesthetic discourse, and thus implying Western multi-culturalism is an ideological power structure of global capitalism. In similar vein, Goran Stefanovski in *Theatre*

⁴⁹ This title of Stilinović's work is also employed by Laibach on the sleeve of the album *Volk* (Laibach, 2006, sleeve notes).

and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene, writes on a perceived invisibility of Eastern European art when he claims:

There was a time when the East was screaming ‘Here we are!’ and the West replied: ‘We can’t see you. You’re not where we expect you to be. Be somewhere else so we can see you’ (Stefanovski, 2008, p.154).

Stilinović and Stefanovski’s comment on the impossibility of dialogue between Western and Eastern European aesthetic discourse was echoed by the Serbian playwright Biljana Srbljanović in 1999. In her acceptance speech for the prestigious Ernst Töller Award, Srbljanović added her voice to the Eastern European artists struggling to be heard under the dominance of Western cultural determinants:

Ladies and gentlemen, it is difficult for me to thank you for awarding me this prestigious award. For, who am I? My identity is stolen by world politics, national politics. It is definitely lost somewhere during the last war. I can’t find it, no matter how hard I try. I can’t find it at any “lost and found” office at any airport I have been to. I can’t find it in any language, in any culture (Stefanovski, 2008, p.164).

These Balkan artists are interrogating a missing vocabulary for articulating Eastern European art outside a Western contextualisation wherein they are forced to learn not only the language of the West, but the archetypes and stereotypes which structure that language. According to Stephen Mansbach, these givens are the result of Western art historians advancing Modernism as the consummate transnational aesthetic idiom, a vision that is incapable of incorporating the varied ways Eastern European artists embrace ‘local cultural legacies, national conventions, and individual character in creating a style simultaneously modern in its formal display and highly topical in its references’ (1999, p.4). This reductive strategy on behalf of the West has resulted in a misrepresentation of Eastern Europe, often in order to serve specific ends.

Before an analysis of the difference between Eastern and Western aesthetic discourse can be undertaken, it is important to examine how the East/West binary is structured. The East is the defining binary to the West, one of positive and negative, visible and invisible, presence and absence. 'The West' is a political-historical Enlightenment construct, which in the words of Stuart Hall, has come to mean 'a society that is developed, industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular, and modern' (1992, p.277). This definition must have a corollary opposite by which it is measured, and Eastern Europe serves this function. Hall traces the origins of the East/West binary to the Enlightenment age of exploration and conquest of new worlds, as a result of which Europe began to define itself by creating for itself an 'other'. Yet it is not simply the creation of an *other* to the Enlightenment that comprises the ideological field of the Western gaze, but its reductive understanding of Eastern Europe as a totality, wherein superficial similarities between cultures are picked out to create a commodifiable pattern. Eastern Europe, which Mansbach defines as stretching from Estonia southwest through Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the Czech lands, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Croatia, to Slovenia, is a far more complex collection of cultures than the simplifying label that the Anglo-American West employs would allow (1999, p.4). As Anda Rottenberg laments of the West, 'rarely does anyone take the trouble to investigate the origins of the political differences among the former Eastern bloc countries, or to consider not only recent history but also events that took place in the nineteenth century and earlier that determined the specific nature of each country' (1995, p.25). In both creating its defining *other*, and in failing to engage with the cultural-historical complexity of the East, the West is operating categories that function as power structures to shore up its sense of identity.

An example of this is the semantics of Eastern European stereotyping, one that can take a variety of forms. For example, the opening sequence of the film *Borat* (2006) depicts a rural village in Kazakhstan as an incestuous feudal barbarous place riven with medieval anti-Semitism. The stereotyping here is so broad that for a culturally aware Western audience the humour is in the stereotyping itself. Nevertheless, the coding has its origins in a popular Western conception of Eastern Europe. A more subtle coding is often at work in Western media. In the mainstream Hollywood science-fiction film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), to express exactly how freakishly cold New York has become, the ship that arrives in the flooded city is not only Russian, but over-run with wolves. This suggests a mythic cold from the fairy-tale forests of Eastern Europe. Such stereotyping has also been for more overt political purposes. In 1946, Churchill's 'Iron curtain' speech depicted the Eastern Bloc as a land of dark faceless terror, an image-coding filling the vacuum left by the sudden absence of the Nazi menace. This threat was consolidated by painting the Eastern Bloc in the politically expedient vocabulary of the Cold War as drab and grey, a sexless, desire-less uniform state of automata, where history stagnated. The countries behind this Iron curtain in all their myriad languages and peoples were thus conceived as a monolithic totality, bereft of cultural difference.

This coding, whether micro- or macro- political, functions as a hegemonic ideology that by definition privileges the West. The image the West has created of itself as modern, in contrast to the 'barbaric wilderness' of the East, acts as a catalyst for the East's function within Western narratives as an additional *other*; an 'other within'. In this formula the East becomes the West's alter-ego, a 'symbolic

dumping ground, a cultural landfill of externalised frustrations' (Moraru, 2009, p.63). This is supported by Slavoj Žižek's claim that what fascinated the Western gaze in the early 1990s is the reinvention of democracy immediately following the collapse of Soviet communism. Writing in 1992, Žižek posits that the West, having lost faith in a form of democracy it perceived as having become bureaucratic and reduced to mere show-business, a pastiche of its noble ideals, looked to the East for the lost origins of democracy (1992, p.193). For Žižek, the East functions for the West not just as the alter-ego but the ego-ideal. Žižek here employs the vocabulary of psychoanalysis in order to explain the way in which the West wishes to see in the East a reflection of itself as idealised, as worthy of love. In NSK founder member Eda Čufer's words, for the West the 'former East' was a glamorous 'work in progress' (2006, p.362).

This Western fascination with Eastern Europe takes on further aspects as its *other* as the site of the exotic, which for the disillusioned industrialised West has the allure of an imagined 'real'. In Western eyes, Eastern Europe is not only a liminal space where Europe meets the Orient but, and of greater relevance to Laibach and NSK praxis, a site seen as 'cursed with too much history per square mile' (Bakić-Hayden, 2004, p.2). In this context, the East has become a living generator of history and a white-hot crucible of historical narratives. Robert Kaplan reflects this popular perception when he notes in *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, that Nazism can claim Balkan origins, and that 'among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the Southern Slavic world, Hitler learned how to hate so infectiously' (1994, p.xxiii). For Kaplan, the Balkans are a region whereby politics becomes mythic. This raw source of history is expressed in a Western longing for an Eastern European realm

of legend and fairy-tales, a longing originating from a perceived lack in the prosaic 'Modern' West. The East became a refuge from increasing industrial alienation and a metaphor for the forbidden, but without the 'luridness and overtly sexual overtones of Orientalism' (Todorova, 2009, p.14). The romantic fictional kingdoms such as Anthony Hope's Ruritania in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), and the Balkan royalty of Laurence Olivier's *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957), are thus a return to fairy-tale but with the frisson of the possibility that these places might actually exist.

Cultural differences between Eastern and Western Europe

In living memory Central and Eastern Europe has experienced the cataclysms of total war and the trauma of two totalitarian political systems.⁵⁰ Its borders have been in a state of flux, whole nations have been founded and lost, and it has known mass refugee movements. This necessarily more direct understanding of the European traumatic historical differs from the perspective of Britain or America, whose version of events is primarily shaped by the dominance of the Hollywood film industry.⁵¹ This difference in approach to history is symptomatic of a cultural divide between East and West. In their anthology on Russian visual culture, Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich give as an example of this divide the use of the word 'constructivism'. Translated out of its Russian context (*Konstruktor*;

⁵⁰ In the case of Britain, separated symbolically and geographically from continental Europe by the English Channel, the difference is apparent. In living memory mainland Britain has not been occupied, it has not known total war nor a scorched-earth policy. The British public and media often recounts the bombing of Coventry on the 14th November 1940 as a cataclysmic wartime event, yet the death toll of 568 pales in comparison with the fire-storming of Hamburg, Leipzig and Cologne, for example. In Dresden over the two nights of the 13th and 14th of February 1945, allied bombing and the subsequent firestorm phenomenon killed an estimated minimum of 25,000, many of whom were refugees.

⁵¹ The battle of Kursk (1943) was the largest armoured battle in history, and despite ending in stalemate, served to turn the strategic initiative in Russia's favour. It can be argued the Second World War was lost and won at Kursk, yet it remains relatively unknown in the West, as neither the Germans nor the Russians had a dominant post-war motion picture industry.

one who constructs), it loses its intrinsic and defining association with engineering (Efimova and Manovich, 1993, p.xxiii). The West pre-eminently considers Russian Constructivism an art movement, yet in its original context it is an art-political movement inseparably connected to Soviet ideology. In the Eastern Bloc, industry was an ideological project as much as an economic expediency.

It is this crucial difference in cultural perspectives that concern this chapter. Boris Groys, who has written extensively on the relation of totalitarianism and art, notes that in the West art is considered an ‘activity that is independent of power and seeks to assert the autonomy of the individual and the attendant virtues of individual freedom’ (1992, p.7). This is not the Eastern European experience, constructed as it is from Socialism and its legacy. Socialist Realism was centred on the interdependence of art and power, with art being state sanctioned and state organised.⁵² As Stefanovski observes, in the West, artists had the luxury of remaining separate from politics and still had ample space for discourse, whilst in the East, because of the centralisation of society, failing to engage with politics resembles a retreat into autism (2008, p.154). Western artists could afford not to directly address the overtly ideological in their work. As an extension of this difference, Boris Groys when writing on IRWIN notes the difference between

⁵² Socialist Realism was a term coined in 1932 for the system of propaganda employed by the Soviet Union. Abram Tertz describes it as an art that serves the Soviet communist party:

Works produced by Socialist Realists vary in style and content. But in all of them the Purpose is present, whether directly or indirectly, open or veiled. They are panegyrics on Communism, satires on some of its many enemies, or descriptions of life ‘in its revolutionary development’ i.e., life moving toward Communism (Tertz, 1959, p.43).

Socialist Realism’s audio and visual coding dealt typically with factories, power plants and agriculture, and usually revolved around the cipher-figure of the ‘positive hero’. Tertz describes this figure as the ‘holy of holies of socialist realism, its cornerstone and main achievement ... (The ‘positive hero’) firmly knows what is right and what is wrong; he says plainly “yes” or “no” and does not confuse black with white’ (1959, pp.48-49). Although exact definitions remain elusory, Czeslaw Milosz describes Socialist Realism as: ‘The humanising of Marxism’ (1959, p.17). For further reference, see, for example, Tertz (1959) *On Socialist Realism*, Lahusen and Dobrenko (1997) *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, and Robin (1986) *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*.

Eastern and Western aesthetic discourse as articulated in the West's perception that art is primarily oppositional. The NSK, of which IRWIN are one of the founding groups, have never pretended to be oppositional to the state, in fact, quite the opposite: 'We are state artists, but we are aware of this and we include this peculiarity in our work. How can we be subversive, since we don't address a particular ideology, but a universal idea of ideology? (cited in Bourriaud, 1989, p.110). The NSK's history of political controversy in Slovenia would seem to contradict this, but with the above statement the NSK do not recognise their status as subversive. Gediminas Gasparavičius notes the complexity of this apparently contradictory position in a 2006 article for the art journal *Eurotexture*. In the West the NSK were perceived as ironic and critical of a corrupt Socialist system, yet in Yugoslavia they were understood as a far more complex construct, one able to simultaneously overcome the contradictions between Socialism, romantic nationalism and the aesthetic demands of artistic production (Gasparavičius, 2006, online). Groys points out that IRWIN question the modern art-world's given that the critical and affirmative positions in art are at odds. Groys writes: 'This breakdown of critical and affirmative positions, which in the context of Western culture seems entirely natural, looks rather different, however, in Eastern Europe' (2004, p.97). Groys traces the origin of this approach, alien to the West, to the Eastern historical avant-garde, where movements such as Suprematism and Constructivism fulfilled not only a critical function but an affirmative one. The Russian avant-garde was so firmly embedded in the aestheticised Soviet state that its utopian demands were not only one and the same with the state but also therefore in the process of being realised. This differs from the experience of the Western avant-garde, whose utopian demands were not to be realised in any

concrete form, and thus were consigned to a position of opposition to the reigning consumer society. In the East the avant-garde was connected to the totalising experience of Soviet communism; Soviet totalitarianism is conceived as a Gesamtkunstwerk, an artistic project, as well as a political one. In the West, the historic avant-garde remained grouped in artistic institutions, an epiphenomenon of the Western experience.

Further differences proliferate; in the West the art market dictates taste, in that the monetary value of an artwork is often inseparable from its perceived aesthetic value, and trends in art are arguably shaped by commerce and art-dealers. Under Socialism, the state was the prime arbiter of taste. Acts of dissent were punishable and driven underground, but it is the nature of the dissent that is most relevant. Following Stalin's 1934 clamp-down on the Soviet avant-garde, an abstract work could mean a clear challenge to the Socialist Realist model and constitute a direct oppositional statement. In this environment, the term 'abstract art' carried a political-ideological charge of greater import than in the West. After Stalin's clamp-down, the avant-garde was not considered official culture and certainly not representative of the state on the world stage. Dissident artists were condemned and punished as hooligans, and, as occurred in Slovenia in the 1980s, fascists. As a result, these artists were operating in isolation, unable to exhibit outside their regional environments. Thus the period between 1945 and 1989 is today, according to Aleš Erjavec, one of the least familiar periods of East European art for the West (2008, p.180). In this climate, every artistic act can be said directly to reference ideological power structures.

It is the ideological context of these individual artistic acts that best illustrates the difference between Western and Eastern oppositional aesthetics and explains why art in Eastern Europe carried a transgressive charge that more directly engaged with the ruling ideology. In *Body Art in Russia*, Joseph Backstein refers to the representation of the body under Communism as a more overt political discourse than in the West: 'Until the beginning of the 1980s, the subject of the human body and the body in general did not form an autonomous theme in Soviet mainstream culture' (1999, p.145). In the East, under Socialist Realism, the body was abstracted to a cipher of 'battle-readiness', whether as worker, mother, or soldier, whereas in the West the discourse of the body can be said to centre on issues of sexuality and individualism. Hence the representation of public nudity such as the performance artist Tomislav Gotovac running naked through the streets of Belgrade, and Ion Grigorescu's photographs of his genitalia – an activity banned in Communist Romania – comprised a direct political statement in dialogue with the ruling communist ideology. Similarly, Eastern European female performance artists represented their bodies in ways antithetical to the dogma of the asexual and androgyne female body of Socialist Realism (Backstein, 1999, p.16).

Yet the differences between Eastern European and Western aesthetic discourse are not confined to the years of Soviet control. With the collapse of Soviet communism, the art of Eastern Europe had to adjust to the sudden ideological vacuum. Socialist Realism and the state had provided the dynamic for direct opposition, and as such paradoxically supported this opposition. Thus artists and practitioners of the former Eastern Bloc were now left without their prime reason for creating art, whether it was in support of – or against – Socialism. Reactions differed as to this sudden absence. Some, such as the Hungarian artist

Attila Kovács, eschewed completely the legacy of the Soviet avant-garde, such as Constructivism or Suprematism. Others, such as the Romanian group SubREAL, contrasted the immediate past with the expected future. SubREAL's *Alimentara (the food store)* (1991) is an installation of stacked jars and carefully aligned bottles. SubREAL are referencing Western pop art in its repetition of assembly-line consumer objects, and expressing a Romanian collective aspiration for the material signs of freedom (Marcoci, 1995, p.18). Others expressed a sudden sense of fragmented national and state identity; for example, Mark Verlan in *World Map* (1998) and *The Creative Kingdom of Moldova* (1997), employed real territories as pieces of a puzzle, mixing them in with imaginary places (Dragneva, 2006, p.241). Aleksandar Stankovski explored similar themes in *Portrait of a Citizen from FYROM* (1998), which included historical maps from imaginary states such as Greater Albania, Greater Serbia and Greater Bulgaria (Milevska, 2006, p.256). Whilst in 1995, the title of an exhibition of Eastern European art in Chicago, *Beyond Belief*, referred to a 'post-revolutionary disbelief in the viability of doctrine, ideological structures, and belief systems after the establishment and subsequent dismantling of communism' (Consey, 1995, p.vi). It is a distinguishing feature of post-Socialist aesthetic praxis that it focuses on the ongoing legacy of the Eastern Bloc. Under Communism, art was directly engaging with a political ideology. Post-Socialist art is dealing with its echoes, and this remains a crucial difference to Western aesthetics. Failing to recognise this difference will entail a failure to adequately engage with Laibach or NSK aesthetics.

Eastern European aesthetic autonomy

Released from the Soviet meta-narrative in the early 1990s, the states of the former Eastern Bloc found themselves in a disconcerting ideological vacuum and

an uneasy transitional period. The West looked to the East at this time to reflect itself in an authentic birth of democracy whilst importing global capitalism and Western cultural imperialism. Under these attacks and unable to find a voice in the hegemonic discursive field of Western aesthetics, Eastern European artists and practitioners began to reject the dominant Western discourse in favour of one they could call their own. One of these initiatives was the NSK project *East Art Map*, the purpose of which was to address the problem of the absence of a coherent Eastern European aesthetic discourse. Arising out of the *Transnacionala* project of 1996, where members of the NSK travelled across America meeting with local artists and communities, *East Art Map* was an act of self-historicisation, an attempt to contextualise the work of the NSK and Eastern European artists in an art-history for the East. At the Tate Modern NSK symposium of April 2012 in London, the NSK spoke on this project, making the claim that prior to *East Art Map* there was no Eastern art discourse, just the 'local mythologies of Eastern Europe'.⁵³

Analysis of this increased emphasis on Eastern autonomy as exemplified in the Retro-avant-garde of Laibach and the NSK necessitates further study of an Eastern European crisis of identity. This crisis is central to the analysis of a perceived absence of a coherent Eastern European aesthetic discourse, and has provided significant impetus towards its creation. This crisis or struggle for identity is comprised of a variety of factors. For example, for many in Eastern Europe, the process of historicisation was interrupted in 1948 when the Iron Curtain fell. Thus, following Perestroika, history and culture not only had to be restarted but backdated. Eastern Europe can therefore not only be said to be a place of geopolitical borders in flux, but also historically so. This 'backdating' may perhaps

⁵³ I was in attendance at this conference and quote the NSK here directly.

be explained by analogy with post-war Germany. Although only half of Germany fell behind the Iron Curtain, the interruption to culture experienced in Germany by National Socialism and total war is comparable to the Eastern European experience of Stalinism. Ralf Hütter of the German synthesiser band Kraftwerk found this ‘backdating’ of culture reflected in Kraftwerk’s success:

The culture of Central Europe was cut off in the 30s, and many of the intellectuals went to the USA or France, or they were eliminated. We are picking it up again where it left off, continuing this culture of the thirties (cited in Bussy, 1997, p.31).

Kraftwerk’s unique sound is not a derivative of Anglo-American rock music, and this distinct autonomy remains an important inspiration to artists and musicians of Central and Eastern Europe, including Laibach.⁵⁴

A need for cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe arises from a continuing crisis of identity which pre-dates Soviet communism. Throughout history, continental Europe’s borders have been in flux and its peoples divided. In charting the rise of nationalism in Eastern Europe, Emil Niederhauser describes Central and Eastern European peoples as often split between empires.⁵⁵ These were ruled areas of mixed populations, whereby the urban population may differ from that of the rural population, and the landowner may be of a different nationality to the serf. Under these conditions, drawing precise and just frontiers between areas of settlement would have been an impossible task. Niederhauser gives the example of the Russian and Ottoman empires, which parcelled up their territories according to economic and political factors but not language (1982, p.21). Thus it can be argued

⁵⁴ In 1994, Mute Records released *Translovenia Express*; the title is a direct reference to Kraftwerk’s seminal *Trans-Europe Express* album of 1977. It features covers of Kraftwerk recordings by Central and Eastern European groups, with the exception of Laibach’s entry: *Zrcalo Sveta (Das Spiegelglas Der Welt)* which was written by Laibach. See: ‘Zrcalo Sveta (Das Spiegelglas Der Welt)’, track eight, CD one.

⁵⁵ For example, Poland was split between Austria, Russia and Prussia under the third partition of Poland in 1795 and the territorial arrangement adopted at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (Niederhauser, 1982, p.21).

that as a reaction to the often arbitrary division of a people, the importance of establishing and maintaining a coherent national identity becomes a pressing issue.

In a continent where borders are in a constant state of flux, and where military might is limited, culture as a conduit of national identity acquires a mythic status. Niederhauser compares the differing fates of the Slovenes and the Sorbs of Lusatia, in Saxony. Whereas the former eventually achieved nationhood, the latter were arrested at the stage of cultivating a mother tongue, and now cannot be said to have a nation (Niederhauser, 1982, p.96). Zdenka Badovinac writing in the *Arteast 2000+* catalogue notes: 'In small countries, national culture and art are frequently the very proof of their existence' (Badovinac and Weibl, 2001, p.16). In his study on the modern art of Eastern Europe, Stephen Mansbach uses Latvia and Estonia to illustrate this point, that Eastern European modern art was drawing on these countries' nineteenth century 'national-awakening' movements, which were also cultural movements manifested in a literature and music expressed in opposition to that of the German, Finnish, Swedish, or Slavic variants (1999, p.141). In Slovenia, the militant importance of culture gave rise to the idea of Ljubljana as the 'Slovenian Athens', a notion championed in 1932 by Slovenian theatre critic Josef Vidmar, for whom Slovenia could excel not in the spheres of economy or politics, but in culture and art. This concept is directly referenced by Laibach in the title of their 1987 album release *Slovenska Akropola*. The NSK continue to explore this notion in their NSK State-in-Time project, described by Aleš Erjavec as the 'architecture of nothing', a borderless state founded on artistic principles (2008, p.178). The NSK State-in-Time project can therefore be said to have its origins in a Slovenian national identity founded on the importance of culture as opposed to military might.

This permanent crisis of identity is manifested in what Achim Hochdörfer calls a 'forced identity' (1999, p.12). In this position, the permanent frustration that accompanies the never-ending search for a stable identity becomes an emotional necessity, a myth, an absolute, and the quest itself becomes the identity. To support this claim Hochdörfer points out the number of Central and Eastern European politicians who are more than just politicians, citing Václav Havel (playwright), Radovan Karadzic (psychologist and poet), and in Hungary, the far right party was led by István Csurka, writer and playwright. Hochdörfer goes further, in stating that political activity in the East, rather than being seen as a practical approach as in the West, is emotive, mythologised, and quintessentially moralistic (1999, p.12). In such a climate, history is not a rational play of expedient forces but a mythic conflict of ideologies.

In Eastern Europe, where politics is not necessarily a sterile tactical utilitarian game but an emotive play of ideologies, art can claim a stronger bond with politics than it can in the West, particularly when it is a means whereby a nation maintains validity. Stephen Mansbach sees in the importance of the ethnographic reference in Eastern European art a building block of modern national expression. He cites historical myths, events, heroes and folk styles as common in avant-garde art and design: 'Thus for example, painters within the context of a national modernist idiom have moved easily and without contradiction between constructivism and folkloric patterning, or between canvases depicting cubist still lifes and heroes from the national myth' (Mansbach, 1999, p.5). Mansbach thus notes a defining difference between the Modernism of Eastern Europe and the

‘absolutist purity’ of Western Modernism art and critics. In a climate of national self-preservation, history and myth are often confused and made one.

Music and poetry are commonly employed to channel Eastern European national identity, primarily that of resurrecting obscure national heroes from the middle-ages. Emil Niederhauser cites the Hungarian poet Mihály Vörösmarty, who valued these folk myths ‘more than diamonds’, and so urgent was this search for a nation’s authentication that falsifications and forgeries abounded (1982, p.58). As Matevž Kos observes, in *The Anxiety of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian Literature and the Globalising/Postmodern World*, a surviving stereotype of Slovenia is that it is a ‘nation of poets’, and that the Slovenian poet France Prešeren has been termed the ‘Father of the nation’ (2009, p.200). Eda Čufer, NSK artist, supports this position with her observation that it is poets not painters that decorate the Slovenian currency (2003, p.378). In music, a nation’s composers would turn to indigenous folk music, raising popular music to an art form. Thus elevated, folksongs and romances became imbued with a deeper meaning. In Hungary the *Verbunkos* derived from a popular type of music originally used by army recruiting officers, and Poland’s *Jeszcze Polska nie Zginęła* [Poland is not yet lost], and the Czech *Kde Domov Můj* [Where is my homeland?], are examples of revolutionary songs and airs being consolidated in the nation’s consciousness as national anthems (Niederhauser, 1982, p.68).

This vital importance placed on culture is expressed in romanticism as interest in the common people and folk poetry. In this way, romanticised folk culture shaped national unity through national sentiment. Perhaps the paradigm of folk culture as the conduit of national identity can be found in the German

‘Sonderweg’, a sense of a German superiority among the nations of Europe, as manifested in a special historical path or mission. Although not Eastern European, Nazism originates from the same Central European pre-occupation with national identity and mythic politics. Hans Kohn in his 1945 study on the notion of ‘Volk’ in German nationalism puts it succinctly when he writes on Völkish iconography:

It lent itself more easily to the embroideries of imagination and the excitations of emotion. Its roots seemed to reach into the dark soil of primitive times and to have grown through thousands of hidden channels of unconscious development, not in the bright light of political ends, but in the mysterious womb of the people, deemed to be so much nearer to the forces of nature (Kohn, 1945, p.331).

Kohn not only sees the Völkish ideology as expressed in Nazism coming from a romanticised idea of politics, but tellingly also as a reaction to the Western nationalism espoused by Anglo-American democracy and the French Revolution. Kohn’s language: ‘dark soil of primitive times’ and ‘mysterious womb’, has an animist tone at odds with Enlightenment rationalism.

The absence of military might in securing borders that are constantly in flux, together with a history of dividing peoples and culture according to political expediency and economics, encourages the bonds between art and politics, between culture and national identity. Yet this is from a Central and Eastern European perspective. Opening out the issue of identity to incorporate the West and its attitude towards Eastern Europe reveals a further dimension to Eastern European identity, one in which the West’s definition of Eastern Europe as its *other* necessarily deprives the East of an independent cohesive identity. In order to discuss this position of dependency on the ideological position of the West, Agnes Horvath’s notion of *nulla* proves useful. Horvath, in her *Mythology and the Trickster: Interpreting Communism*, equates the Eastern European experience with

the 'nulla'. In maths the nulla is the numberless number, and in Horvath's analogy a 'fluid state of non-being' where 'everything can happen without meaning' (2008, p.27). Caught in a liminal geopolitical space between the West and the Orient, and the transitional historical of post-Socialism, Eastern Europe as a fluid state of non-being is able to generate mythologies of national origin and identity without conflicting with any stable and established origin-narrative. Horvath goes on to suggest that any attempt to express the nulla in terms of politics through formal or institutional analysis focusing on 'practical' politics will fail, as these are concrete definitions in what is a space of flux and of myth. According to Horvath, it is only through analysing the trauma of Soviet communism that a framework for comprehending the nulla is viable.

This 'fluid state of non-being', a form not recognised in the hegemonic Western definitions of itself, is a catalyst for Eastern European aesthetic autonomy. In this sense, this position of nulla operates as a creative space of critical distance from the West, placing the East in a unique position of indirect critique. Marina Gržinić puts this position succinctly:

The East is a body that functions poorly; the West represents the perfect body. But the advantage of the poorly functioning body that is not fashionably and magnificently developed is that it is in a position to understand the perfect body. Our (poorly functioning) body is a far more progressive machine because we can integrate both positions in our consciousness, which makes us far more flexible than the body that has everything (Brigit Langenberger in conversation with Marina Gržinić, Langenberger, 2004, online).

By 'perfect body', Gržinić is here positing the West as conceiving itself as whole, or at least finished in its development, in contrast with the East's raw and developing state, emerging from the transitional period of post-Socialism. In the same article, Gržinić explains this viewpoint of the 'other': 'The view from outside

is often far clearer than that from within' (Brigit Langenberger in conversation with Marina Gržinić, Langenberger, 2004, online). The *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* exhibition in Chicago in 1995 was an attempt to demonstrate this position of 'other' in practice. Laura Hoptman, the editor of the book that accompanies the exhibition, writes that rather than meet the West's expectations that Eastern European artists would replace a defunct and discredited cultural system with a better one, the West finds these Eastern European artists attacking the very concept of ideological structures, old and new (1995, p.2). It is the construction of ideology that concerns Easthetics, and this is reflected in Laibach/NSK practice, in that their re-coding of totalitarian and Völkish signifiers is precisely an interrogation of the mechanisms of ideology rather than a replacement.

This position of 'other', which artists such as Laibach and the NSK have exploited to criticise the West and its hidden ideologies, is the core subject-position of Marina Gržinić's 'Easthetics'. It is a subjectivity imposed upon Eastern artists by being incapable of articulating the Eastern European experience in the Western discursive field. This Eastern European invisibility in Western aesthetic discourse has been the source of considerable comment among Eastern European artists and theorists. Piotr Piotrowski in *Arteast 2000+* challenges the ideology of universalism in aesthetics, which he deconstructs to mean the power of Western culture, pointing out that the dominant mechanisms of the art world such as galleries, collectors, magazines and critics are located primarily in the West, and that art, and art theory produced in Eastern Europe, must be validated by this system in order to be taken seriously (2001, p.24). Both Boris Groys and Slavoj Žižek take this further, with Žižek suggesting that Western multi-culturalist late-

capitalism results in a 'postmodern racism' where only an acceptable ethnic *other* is tolerated, such as its cuisine but not its politics (Žižek cited in Radosavljević, 2011, p.6). Likewise, Groys challenges the given of postmodern tolerance, claiming that it not only rejects the dull and uniform, but with it the totalising universalist claims of the historical avant-garde, separating it from its co-dependence on ideology (2008, p.151). This is demonstrable in the immediate post-war purging of political power from art in the West, where representational art was seen as a vehicle for propaganda, as it was the dominant aesthetic system of Socialist Realism and Nazi Kunst. As an example of this, Neal Ascherson reports that West German art galleries often refused to show figurative art in case it was pro-communist (1996, p.342).

This inability of the West to adequately comprehend Easthetics is reflected in the West's reception of Laibach and the NSK, which is often one of incomprehension bordering on hostility. Not only is Laibach and the NSK's ideological complexity more readily understood in Central and Eastern Europe because of the latter's stratigraphic complexity of national identities, but the West misunderstands Retrogardism as derivative, even theft. Aleš Erjavec, who has written extensively on both the NSK and Eastern European aesthetic praxis, gives the example of Retrogardism to illustrate the inability of Western discourse to comprehend Easthetics. Following the first and second-stage avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and the late 1960s, Erjavec notes a third generation, of which Retrogardism is a manifestation. In the East these were credible new art forms, yet for the West these were a pale shadow, or copy of the historical originals, which made them in the eyes of the West a travesty of the authentic

originals (Erjavec, 2008, p.25). A failure to understand Easthetics will result in a dismissal of this third-stage avant-garde.

Another factor to be taken into account when examining a perceived invisibility of Easthetics in Western aesthetic discourse is the unwitting contribution made by Eastern European artists and intellectuals to this very invisibility. Throughout the Eastern Bloc during the Soviet period, artists looked to the West for guidance and example, and as a result, the East copied the Western avant-garde as a 'defence against that tragedy of mass culture called Socialist Realism' (Peraica, 2006b, p.473). These copies are then presented as authentic East European historical product. Igor Zabel, who writes on IRWIN and East European aesthetic theory, suggests moreover that the discourse of the Eastern cognoscenti is often shaped by their status in the East/West binary (2001, p.30). He notes that as passive receivers of neo-liberal economics and Western theory, Eastern academics and intellectuals feel powerful when asked to reproduce original Western discourse, particularly in the light of the unstable and dysfunctional platform that comprises Cold War versions of culture in Eastern Europe. Easthetics is an attempt to counter misrepresentation, and to do so neither by importing artistic form nor apologising for their own.

In their efforts to establish an Eastern aesthetic autonomy, which often arose out of a self-inflicted sense of inferiority, Eastern European artists and intellectuals developed their own cultural nationalism, conceived in direct opposition to the West's liberal rational outlook. In the Czech Republic, the artist Jiří David was criticised for the internationalism of his art (Ševčík and Ševčíková, 1995, p.75). Indeed, a reaction to the West's perceived cultural imperialism is as

much a driving factor to Easthetics as the inarticulacy of Eastern art within Western discourse. This sense of inarticulacy helped create IRWIN's *East Art Map* project (1999-2005), which is the NSK's attempt to generate an art history for the East in the wake of Socialism. The reaction to a perceived Western cultural imperialism is exemplified in the foreword to *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*:

This anthology of essays reveals the contemporary state of a culture which will not acquiesce in the oversimplified views taken of it by the West, as far as the visual arts are concerned. The authors are too much immersed in the difficult business of stitching their own history together, for any exceptions to be made in the interests of a utopian dream (Bann, 1993, p.x).

Bann is positing an autonomous Eastern aesthetic praxis, one that is no longer dependent on Western expectations or representation. Nor is it dependent on Western expectations of post-Socialism.

As regards the drive towards an Eastern European autonomous aesthetic, Laibach and the NSK have proved paradigmatic. Slovenia's geopolitical position as threshold between East and West, Tito's non-alignment policy with Stalin, as well as the political and ideological positioning of Eastern Europe as the *other* to the West, has enabled the NSK to assume a position of non-alignment to state, ideology, aesthetic discourse or historical determinism. In 1992 the NSK opened the first NSK State-in-Time embassy in Moscow, within the framework of the APT-ART project.⁵⁶ This was an express attempt to connect with Russian artists within the context of a shared totalitarian past and a post-Socialist future. It was moreover, undertaken with little or no involvement of the Western art world, and Western reportage was incidental to the project.

⁵⁶ Between 10th May and 10th June 1992, *NSK Embassy Moscow* took place in a private apartment at Leninsky Prospekt 12. According to Inke Arns, 'the central event of the project was a one week program of lectures and public discussions, organised in co-operation with Irwin and Eda Čufer ... The aim of the event was to confront the similar social contexts of the ex-soviet union and ex-Yugoslavia' (Arns, 2004, p.58).

Eastern European Postmodernism

The argument for the difference between Easthetics and Western aesthetic discourse centres on approaches and definitions of postmodernism. This is particularly relevant to Laibach and the NSK's Retrogardism, which despite bearing many traits of postmodernism, I will argue is not postmodern in the Western definition. An analysis of the difference between Eastern and Western postmodernisms is therefore necessary.

In 2011 the Victoria and Albert Museum in London hosted an exhibition on postmodernism entitled *Postmodernism, Style and Subversion 1970-1990*. The Eastern European contribution was limited to one entry: *Columbarium Architecture (Museum of Disappearing Buildings)*, by the Russians Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the exhibition devotes a part of the display to the 1989 Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* [Magicians of the Earth], where postmodernism was criticised as being Western-centric. The panel to this section stated that European and American conceptual artists were featured 'alongside carvers, metalworkers, and painters from Africa, India, the Australian outback and Latin America' (Victorian and Albert exhibition display panel: author unknown). The Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition curators were making the point that the dominant understanding of postmodernism is not necessarily uniformly global, and does so with reference to non-European countries. The implication is that postmodernism was a Western creation, and its invisible other is the rest of the globe. Yet here there is another layer of invisibility, whereby it is assumed the Eastern Bloc was an artistic vacuum and not included in the discourse on a global

⁵⁷ The work of Czech artist Borek Šípek was also featured; however, as he migrated to the West in 1968, two years before the period covered by the exhibition, for that reason I have not included him here.

postmodernism. The Eastern European experience of the exhibition's 1970-1990 scope is located in the blind-spot behind the Iron Curtain. The 'uniform and dull' of the 'desire-less sexless' Eastern Bloc has no validity in postmodern discourse, it is absent both in the Western context and the visible absence of the Far East and Africa.

Postmodernism is, by definition, Western. Indeed, Mikhail Epstein, in positing a Russian postmodernism asks whether there can be such a concept beyond Western culture at all. Moreover, he asks whether there is just the one postmodernism, or are there as many as there are national cultures (Epstein, 1995, online). Stjepan Meštrović in his analysis of the confluence of postmodernism and post-Socialism argues that postmodernism, understood as a rebellion against Enlightenment narratives, took place in formerly communist countries as much as the 'chic and faddish' capitals of the West (1994, p.59). This, he points out, is a surprising hypothesis for the West, as Western Europeans popularly understand Eastern Europe as economically and culturally backward, therefore unwilling to rebel against what little modernity they enjoyed. The idea that postmodernism existed outside the West, and even extant prior to its formulation in Western cultural discourse, runs counter to received understanding, as the Western-orientated exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum attests.

Johannes Birringer in his book *Performance on the Edge*, finds himself susceptible to preconceptions as regards Western postmodernism, and echoes Marcel Cornis-Pope's observation that the paradigm of international postmodernism is fundamentally centred on the Western experience (Birringer, 2000, p.103). The West consistently neglects to factor-in the historical experience

of the former communist countries (Cornis-Pope, 2009, p.27). In his book, Birringer challenges himself as to whether his thinking about identity politics and the performing body is not over-determined by Western postmodernism. He questions whether his perspective on the 'de-centred post-Yugoslavian identities in the transitional space of new national formations' is not dictated by Western postmodern discourse (Birringer, 2000, p.103). Yet the use of the word 'postmodernism' is problematic if the word is synonymous with Western culture and it is to be argued that Eastern postmodernism differs significantly from the Western form. In this context Marina Gržinić's term *Easthetics* would appear to be more apposite. In order to argue the differences between the two forms of postmodernism, the superficial similarities must be illustrated first. Hence the word is here used in its Western context, not by way of analysis of postmodernism, but as a dialectic to Eastern 'postmodernism'.

Deeney and Gale define postmodernism as:

Post-holocaust and riven with ideological, technological, political and philosophical uncertainty. The nature of this uncertainty frequently centres around ideas of the end of progress, social and cultural fragmentation, and struggles with the failing utopian project of consensus and cohesion: typically framed by the idea, for example, that we are somehow now at the 'end of history' (Gale and Deeney, 2010, p.686).

Although their definition is necessarily broad, the Eastern European experience of 'postmodernism' is not here sufficiently reflected by Deeney and Gale. Indeed, due to cultural-historical forces neither familiar to nor experienced by the West, the similarities are superficial. For example, the fragmentation of subjectivities arising from a perceived uncertainty of the subject severed from a guarantor meta-narrative must in the former East have a different source to that of the West. The collapse of the Soviet meta-narrative is the collapse of an immersive totality for the Eastern

subject imposed by the state, whilst for the West it is rather the discrediting of the Grand Utopian Narrative and the absence of the reassuring absolutes of Cold-War binaries. A 'post-ideological' age may mean the neutralising of history for the West, but for an Eastern Europe emerging from the co-dependence of ideology and historicisation of the Soviet era, this post-ideological age may be considered a restarting of history, or even a backdating of ideology, as is perhaps evident in the rise of nationalism. Similarly, the totalitarian iconography employed by Laibach and the NSK has exchange value in Western late-capitalism only as kitsch, yet in a region where history and myth are often inseparable, linked by romanticism, these signs are not reduced to the mere currency of the parodic and playful.

In order to compare the postmodernisms of West and East, I shall draw on Mikhail Epstein's analysis of Russian postmodernism, in which he posits that contrary to received understanding, the Western idea of postmodernism was not an import to the Eastern Bloc as the latter had been operating within this structure since the advent of Soviet communism. Epstein sees Socialist Realism as neither avant-garde nor postmodern, but rather a lengthy transition between the two (Epstein, 1995, online). In being reified by Stalinism, the utopian project of the Russian avant-garde was negated, and thus Soviet communism becomes post-utopian. Epstein equates this post-utopian quality with postmodernism. Disillusioned by the unrealised utopian promises of the avant-garde, cynicism replaced revolutionary spirit, but this was a cynicism sustained by the gap between the simulations of the official state ideology and the quotidian experience of the Eastern Bloc subject. In refusing to acknowledge the difference between reality and the official party line, this gap acquired an absurd and unreal dimension. As Arpad Szakolczai writes in the aptly titled *The Non-Being of Communism and*

Myths of Democratisation: ‘Communism was not simply an oppressive regime and a clear-cut historical failure; it was even absurd to the point of being unreal’ (2008, p.47). Writing on the Hungarian experience, Péter György notes what he calls a climate of ‘sincere cynicism’ had developed among Hungarian artists, whereby the ruling Hungarian communist party did not expect these artists to believe in the ideas of officially sanctioned Socialist Realism, but just to abide by the rules of the game (2003, p.179).

It is this latter phrase that resonates with the perceived unreality of postmodernism, an unreality where the real has been replaced with simulation. John Zerzan describes Western postmodern daily life as being aestheticised by a saturation of images and music; the representation of representation. Zerzan develops this aestheticisation process in describing it as a void in which all meaning is lost (1990, p.125). In the Eastern Bloc, the Western process of media saturation is replaced by the conflation of public and private in the totalitarian structure. If the saturation of the meaningless image-noise of Western culture has undermined the real, imploded meaning and put everything in quotation marks, it can be argued this had already been achieved in Soviet culture. Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* describes the modern Western subject as a participant incapable of critical distance, one that lives ‘entirely within the aesthetic illusion of reality’ (1993, p.74). In the Soviet Union this absence of critical distance is achieved not by the domination of a market-driven media but by a totalitarian ideology of the merging of public and private, where statements are made either on behalf of the leader or the state, but never as self-expression. Under this ideology of thinking in general and impersonal ways, the subject’s thoughts are

imposed as the state's discourse, and as a result these are articulated in the form of quotations.

In both Western and Eastern systems, simulation does not replace reality but comes to stand in for reality. Epstein argues that for the West, with the advent of the media age, this is perhaps a relatively new process, yet for Russia this has been 'routinely accomplished throughout all of Russian history' (Epstein, 1995, online). Epstein traces this back to Prince Vladimir, who grafted Christianity into Russia in 988AD, and Peter the Great, who forcibly modernised Russia out of its feudalism. Peter the Great's universities and academies were immediate, unable to conceal their artificial 'non-organic' origins. This was an ersatz culture of ideas, schemes and labels, to which reality and organic processes of nation-building were subjugated. Epstein suggests this paved the way for communism in Russia, a country that 'proved to be especially susceptible to mistaking phantasms for real creatures' (1995, online). Following the Bolshevik revolution, simulation became the operative structure, whereby all social and private life was subordinated to an overt ideology which becomes the only generative force for historical development. The new reality, imposed on the Soviet subject, was designed to demonstrate the superiority of ideas over simple facts. What this generated in actuality was a Communism that was towards its end becoming, as Aleš Erjavec puts it, 'an absurdist work of art' (2003, p.4). The link between ideological signifier and social referent was irreparably destroyed. Erjavec points to the resulting abyss between signifier and referent as supporting an argument that the Socialist countries had entered the 'hyperreal' postmodern world before their Western counterparts. Epstein is keen to point out that simulation in this context is not however deception, as that would presuppose an external reality by which the lie may be

measured. Rather, simulation as practiced by Soviet communism dissolved the real world in ideological signs. Epstein gives the example of Subbotniks, volunteer labour days, which he describes as hyper-events ‘simulating “the celebration of labour” precisely in order to stimulate real labour’ (1995, online). Here the only labour recognised in the Soviet Union was this artificial Communist enthusiasm, labour that was only valid if it was conducted more with the ideology of the state as its reason for being than the actual task being undertaken.

Epstein supports his argument for a Russian postmodernism by referring to the increasing popularity of conceptual art in Russia as early as the mid-seventies; a conceptual art which he proposes arose from the perceived abyss between ideological signifier and social referent.⁵⁸ Conceptual art ‘plays upon the material devastation of concepts’, and the example he gives to demonstrate this is in the idea of a Soviet sausage, wherein the idea of the sausage confronts the absence of real meat in the sausage (Epstein, 1995, online). In the same way, in the Soviet model, a plan for manufacturing confronts the absence of actual production. Epstein refers to this as a ‘minus-system’ in which the Soviet subject lived; a system of signs that by the absence of the signifier demonstrate the empty meaninglessness of the sign: ‘Roads lead to villages which have disappeared; villages are located where there are no roads; construction sites do not become buildings; house-builders have nowhere to live’ (Epstein, 1995, online). This play of conceptualism differs from its Western counterpart by exemplifying emptiness. Western conceptualism will substitute a real object for its verbal description, whilst in Russia under Soviet ideology the object to be replaced is simply absent, it never existed to begin with.

⁵⁸ Epstein gives as examples of these conceptual artists and writers: Ilya Kabakov, Erick Bulatov, Dmitry Prigov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Lev Rubinstein, and Vladimir Sorokin (1995, online).

Although Epstein acknowledges that in the West postmodernism had achieved a greater degree of theoretical analysis as cultural form, it is significant that he draws short of finding parallels with a perceived Western playfulness, irony, or parody. This he refers to as typical of mature postmodernism, and in this he means that of the West, a postmodernism that has been defined in cultural theory. In not finding parallels between Eastern postmodernism and the playful or parodic of the Western form, there is correlation with a perceived ‘postmodernism’ of Laibach and the NSK, whose praxis makes no claims to playful irony, parody, or pastiche.⁵⁹

An argument for a difference in the fragmented identity of East and West postmodernisms can also be supported by reference to Sophie Nield’s argument that the continent of Central and Eastern Europe is an essentially performative space. Citing Central Europe’s cultural-political history as one of constant flux, Nield points to its borders as theatrical spaces. These are liminal spaces not only technically as thresholds between areas, but liminal in terms of identity. The fragmented subject is here not only in a state of flux, but also in a state of performing national identity: ‘Borders construct the outsider, but crucially for the theatrical imaginary – they also construct the nation and the idea of “belonging”’ (Nield, 2006, p.63). The border becomes the site at which identity, or its lack, is staged. In Central and Eastern Europe, culture is the key transmitter of national identity. Thus art and power, particularly the ideology of power, the mechanism by which power operates, are inextricably linked.

⁵⁹ Laibach and the NSK describe Retrogardism, as ‘emphatic eclecticism’, and never as ‘postmodern’.

The vital difference between Western and Eastern ‘postmodernism’ is in this relation between art and power, and this is central to an analysis of Laibach and the NSK. As Boris Groys puts it in his chapter on IRWIN, *More Total than Totalitarianism*:

The ideological, content-orientated motivation of artistic composition is a distinguishing trait of almost all Eastern art, which has never trusted those appeals, characteristic of Western art, to purely aesthetic formal criteria. For this reason, the originality of the art of Eastern Europe consists not so much of a specific repertoire of particular artistic forms, but is rather based in the idiosyncratic social and artistic-strategic application of already familiar forms, and in the special attention directed toward the mechanism of such usage (Groys, 2004, p.99).

Groys focuses on the work of the visual artists of the NSK, IRWIN, who exemplify this vital difference between the two postmodernisms. The driving dynamic behind much of Laibach and the NSK’s work as expressed in their prime aesthetic system, Retrogardism, is the relation between art and ideology; the mechanisms of power.

Eastern European post-Socialist postmodernism

I have discussed Eastern European postmodernism in the Soviet era, but in relation to Laibach and the NSK’s Retrogardism and its continuing relevance it is important to say that Eastern European postmodernism is also an essential dimension of post-Socialism. In support of this argument, Marcel Cornis-Pope in *Shifting Paradigms: East European Literatures at the Turn of the Millennium*, describes Baudrillard as the most popular postmodern theorist among Russian intellectuals of the nineties, citing the 1991 televised coup attempt as a ‘typical postmodern revolution’ (2009, p.28). Cornis-Pope goes on to demonstrate the stages of the real in post-totalitarian Europe, suggesting that the collapse of the Soviet meta-narrative did not mean a return to the real in the absence of the simulacra of the state and Socialist Realism, but rather a further dilution and

dislocation by the ‘hysteria of production and reproduction of the real’ (2009, p.28). Groys, in *Art Power*, describes the post-communist state as a kind of artistic installation, in which the artificiality of capitalism is demonstrated by presenting it as a political project of social restructuring and not as a process of organic economics. This process of social restructuring was also known as Perestroika (2008, p.166). Groys’ point illustrates the emphasis on the continuing role of simulation in replacing reality, from that of Socialist Realism and the totalising ideology of Soviet communism, to the simulacra required to make sense of the vacuum created by the disappearance of the legislative meta-language that lent coherence to Socialist reality.

Laibach and the NSK operate within this interplay of Socialist and post-Socialist simulacra. The NSK both originate from this climate of imposed realities and non-organic ideologies, and treat it as material. The phantasm of the Laibach/NSK construct is in perfect tune with the post-Socialist ideological situation, both its vacuum and its vestigial origins in the totalising ideology of actually-existing Socialism. For example, the hypereality of the aestheticised political that comprises the totalitarian ritual is the delivery system of Laibach and the NSK. Similarly, the paradoxes of the totalitarian state, which has the fascination and allure of the [il]logical, is the vocabulary of the Laibach and the NSK.⁶⁰ It is no wonder therefore, that Laibach and the NSK are taken more seriously in the ‘former East’, because the former East recognises and is familiar with the ideological-phantasm of Laibach/NSK.

⁶⁰ The neologism ‘[il]logic’ is an attempt to create a neutral space on the logic/illogic binary in order to deal with the rationale of an inconsistent and contradictory ideology such as totalitarianism, or faith.

The Eastern postmodernism of post-Socialism is expressed in Eastern European art, in particular conceptualism. Aleš Erjavec points out that what are today considered to be familiar postmodern techniques and practices also existed in post-Socialist conceptualism. In this art the universalism of Socialist Realist imagery, and national heritage and folk intersect in what he calls the ‘binary’ artistic approach, where two realities, ‘the aesthetic and the ideological, or the literal and the metaphorical, retain their mutual incompatibility’ yet co-exist within their own logic (Erjavec, 2003, p.4). This approach to aesthetics is a strategy for articulating the situation of Eastern European post-Socialist simulacra. This approach not only arises from the simulated reality of the post-Socialist experience but comments upon it. Erjavec cites the work of Hungarian artist Sándor Pinczehelyi, whose montage of political icons, pop art, folk art, national symbols and Socialist Realist iconography make him the first postmodern artist and practitioner of bricolage in Hungary.⁶¹



Figure 2.2, *Hammer and Sickle*, Sándor Pinczehelyi (1973)

⁶¹ Bricolage is the artistic practice of montaging found objects.

According to Erjavec, Pinczehelyi was the first artist in Hungary to realise that the ‘lack of a coherent cultural canon and ideological order in the political world had become an essential part of the art world’ (2003, p.182). In Albania, artists associating the myth of progress with Socialist Realism embraced the perceived subversive cynicism of postmodernism’s approach to history, corroding ‘the surface of their reality with the acid of irony and nonsense’ (Muka, 2006, p.134). Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjiev’s installation *Fortification of Faith* was based on the hypothesis that Jesus had a twin brother and thus were his miracles explained. Iara Boubnova in her contribution to IRWIN’s *East Art Map* project suggests Boyadjiev’s work is a reactive analysis to the emptiness of religious myth, and that this has acquired a central importance in a perceived crisis of European post-totalitarian national identity (2006, p.161).⁶²

It is the repeated emphasis on history, particularly that of the trauma of European totalitarianism, that is expressed in post-Socialist art. For example, Aleksandr Kosolapov’s painting, *Malevich Country* (1986), is a copy of a well-known Socialist Realist picture *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1939) by Aleksandr Gerasimov, with the word ‘Malevich’ painted across it in the manner of the iconic Marlboro cigarettes advertising image:

⁶² Under Socialism, Catholicism and religious practice in general gains an added political dimension as a strategy of resistance. In Poland for example, as Leszek Koczanowicz writes, Western visitors were often confused to see the worker’s protest channelled into mass support for Catholicism. The Polish Solidarity movement (*Solidarność*) made much of the Pope’s visit in 1979, and ‘Public high masses, collective prayers, singing church songs and the national anthem became an indispensable part of every demonstration in 1980-1981 and after Martial Law’ (Koczanowicz, 2005, p. 7). Similarly, in Lithuania, Communism forbade explicit religious symbol, but crosses continued to be planted on what became known as the ‘Hill of Crosses’, despite repeated attempts by the Lithuanian authorities to eradicate the practice. This site of resistance to Communism merited a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1993.



Figure 2.3, *Malevich Country*, Aleksandr Kosolapov (1986)



Figure 2.4, *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, Aleksandr Gerasimov (1939)

Although this interpretation of history has a playful quality in layering the ‘low’ culture of advertising over an image associated with serious utopian politics, and its pop-art conflation of consumerism with politics is a familiar Western postmodernist trope, the historical context is essentially different in East and West.

In the East, the figures in Gerasimov's original are not located in a comfortable geographical or political-historical distance, as can be said to be the case in the West; in the East the traumas of Stalinism are extant in living memory. Moreover, the use of an advertising slogan to disrupt the Socialist Realist images of power encapsulated in the heroic poses of Stalin and Voroshilov carries more resonance in the former Eastern Bloc, where the totalising ideology of Communism was defined by its opposition to capitalism.

Similar coding can be found in these two pictures:



Figure 2.5, *Self-Portrait With the Palace*, Zofia Kulik (1990)



Figure 2.6, *The Red Room*, Oleg Kulik (1999)

In both these works the legacy of Soviet communism is a dominant theme. Both feature bodies in the position of the cipher-body of Socialist Realism. In *Self-Portrait With the Palace*, the woman is central in an emblematic structure, a position strengthened by a deliberate, if obscure, play of symbolism. In *The Red Room*, although his face is not passive but expressive, the figure's dynamic pose is redolent of the heroic warrior-worker of Socialist Realism. In both images red is the only colour, and manifested through a star and a fluttering flag; staples of Socialist Realist imagery. In the above examples, the artists are exploring the legacy of Socialism with direct corruptions of the Socialist Realist template.

I have discussed the relative differences between Eastern European and Western postmodernisms through a comparative analysis of their superficial similarities. The former can be said to be embedded in the ideological simulacra of

Soviet communism, the latter in a perceived post-ideological age which is the result of a separation from the European traumatic historical. In an interview for *Audio Arts* in 1991, the NSK were asked if they thought of themselves as ironic artists. Their response expresses the difference between Eastern and Western postmodernisms, if irony can be said to be a defining element of the Western variant:

In our country we still remember the victims, the artists that were prosecuted for their art. Faculty professors, art theoreticians and critics, all of whom had an impact on our development, are not inclined to irony at all. To them, art has always meant hard work, studying, existentialist contemplations of great philosophers about the world through pictorial means (NSK, 1991, p.121).

The NSK here refer directly to oppressive measures undertaken against dissident artists under Communism, but also contained within their statement is the implication that their artistic practice is connected to a historical continuum. There is nothing in their statement that suggests the frivolous or playful; their work is conceived as a duty to honour the sacrifice of those who went before.

Eastern European transgressive postmodernism

It can be said whereas Western postmodernism has lost its political potential, the Eastern form has maintained its political-ideological charge and emphasis. The parodic qualities inherent in Western postmodernism may be accused of a certain narcissism that has eased its assimilation into becoming the cultural logic of late-capitalism, a position supported by Aleš Erjavec when he refers to postmodernism specifically in the West as corporate postmodernism. Erjavec claims that in the West this form of postmodernism takes the form of a ‘conservative backlash against the unfinished project of modernity’, whilst in the East it ‘designated pluralism and openness to new ideas’ (2008. p.183). This

combination of ideological charge and willingness to embrace the new, rather than the simply novel, contained a genuinely transgressive charge that enabled Eastern European postmodernism to play a vital role in the transition period of the 1980s. Kristine Stiles in her contribution to *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, also notes this difference between East and West postmodernisms when she contrasts the ‘highly commercialised, socially trivialised, and sceptical context in which artists in the West labour’, with a sustained belief in the East of the ‘recuperative value and human purpose of art’ as forged under adverse political and social conditions’ (1999, p.19). Stiles is not necessarily identifying all Western artists as trivialising and commercialised, but this nevertheless remains the context within which they operate.

Laibach and the NSK emerged in the early 1980s from this transgressive Eastern European postmodernism, and it has fundamentally shaped their output and reason for being.⁶³ Having their origins in Easthetics remains one of the core reasons they are so frequently misunderstood by the West, and it remains a barrier to Western perceptions of their work. Erjavec places the NSK in the context of a specific form of avant-garde art emerging from post-Socialist countries. He describes it as postmodern in its procedures but avant-garde in its agenda; this third-stage avant-garde:

Was eclectic, figurative and abstract, academic and conceptual, double-coded, simultaneously traditional and contemporary, nationalist and universal, totalising and revolutionary in its desire to change its social and political context and transform it according to its artistic ambitions, on the one hand, and a travesty and a simulacrum of the original avant-garde motifs, names, and activities on the other (Erjavec, 2008, p.24).

⁶³ Laibach were formed in 1980, the NSK in 1984.

Erjavec argues for the NSK's position as an alternative to Western postmodernism. Western postmodernism has disregarded totalising social and political changes in favour of a pragmatic opposition, whereas the Eastern European third-stage avant-garde, of which Retrogardism is paradigmatic, did not renounce totalising political aims. This was possible as in the former Eastern Bloc the vestiges of the Socialist meta-narrative were still operative, even if primarily in the symbolic realm. Thus, rather than diluting the political dimension of postmodernism, Eastern postmodernism retains it intact, and it becomes a form of dissent. Aaron Chandler in his contribution to *Postmodernism, Post-communism and the Global Imagination*, which examines post-Socialist postmodernism in the East, also notes a perceived difference in political emphasis between the two postmodernisms. Chandler notes critics of Western postmodernism will often refer to its complicit role in the hegemonic capitalist ideology, whereas the postmodernisms that developed behind the Iron Curtain 'usually carried with them the aura of dissent' (2009, p.8).

Laibach, the NSK and 'Easthetics'

I have charted the differences between Eastern European and Western aesthetics in a historical context, before, during, and after Socialism. In doing so I have discussed the difference between Western postmodernism and Eastern European postmodernism in order to demonstrate that Laibach and the NSK's Retrogardism must not be confused with (Western) postmodernism. Retrogardism, as analysed in greater detail in the following chapter, does not return to the iconography of history as signs stripped of ideological power. Signs that are stripped of ideological charge have the exchange value of mere image in Western postmodernism. Retrogardism, whose dynamic is derived from Easthetics rather

than Western postmodernism, returns to a traumatic iconography not severed from a historical continuum but re-encoded within Laibach and NSK aesthetics as an ideological construct. In other words, rather than de-mythologizing the iconography of Nazi Kunst and Socialist Realism, the NSK *re-mythologise* it, and thus expose the mechanisms of these ideologies.⁶⁴ Boris Groys describes a similar process at work in Russian post-utopian art, which re-mythologises and aestheticizes the Stalin period. Groys argues the aestheticised politics of totalitarianism can only be fully deconstructed by the employ of the same discourse (1992, p.115). This can be found in Laibach and the NSK's strategy of over-identification. With over-identification, a process of excessive over-emphasis on the signifying nodes of an ideological field exposes the mechanism of that ideology. An ideology relies on keeping its primary mechanism, its hidden ideological centre, unspoken. If that hidden mechanism is exposed by taking the face-value of the ideology to an extreme, to its breaking point, the smooth functioning of the unseen mechanism of the ideology is disrupted.⁶⁵

Both the strategies of Retrogardism and over-identification as practiced by Laibach and the NSK are focused on the re-mythologisation of iconography and tropes associated with the European historical trauma of totalitarianism. Retrogardism as a form may re-code its iconography and tropes by juxtaposition, dissonance and repetition, but paradoxically the ideology of their mythologies remain intact. By maintaining the mythology of their signifiers, Laibach and the NSK's re-coding through form is all the more powerful. By not severing their signifiers from the ideological power-coding of their historical meanings, Laibach

⁶⁴ Laibach and the NSK refer to this process of re-mythologisation as 're-capitulation'.

⁶⁵ Laibach and the NSK's strategy of over-identification is analysed in greater detail in the chapter, 'Over-identification'.

and the NSK cannot be accused of dealing in kitsch. It can be argued that late-capitalism can only relate to the NSK's iconography as such, but this would be from a Western perspective. From the perspective of Easthetics, still connected as it is to a historical continuum, these signifiers are not kitsch but still-active signifiers. The issue of kitsch is salient to positioning the NSK in the East/West postmodernism dialectic. Adorno describes kitsch as 'sugary trash', the beautiful without its ugly counterpart (1970, p.71). Although their use of propaganda tropes of Nazi Kunst and Socialist Realism can be said to possess a sentimentality apropos Adorno's 'sugary trash', the Western definition of kitsch in the NSK spectacle is in fact its very outdated quality; empty signifiers stripped of ideological power, the tawdry vanity of defunct totalitarian systems. In 1933 Goebbels banned the indiscriminate use of the swastika, on the grounds that it was being used to decorate all manner of domestic bric-a-brac, with its importance undermined by association with frivolous objects and the commercial sphere. Goebbels stepped in to preserve the self-referentiality of the swastika and prevent it from becoming a common icon for barter and exchange. The swastika still retains its charge, as employed transgressively by punks in the late 1970s. A market stall outside St. James's Church near Piccadilly Circus in London sells communist-era military badges and insignia, but in our post-ideological age, the Grand Utopian Narrative has accrued kitsch value in late-capitalism. As Lev Kreft wrote in his contribution to the 2009 Laibach Kunst exhibition catalogue: 'In old times a rose was kitsch – today Weltanschauung is kitsch' (1987, p.74).

An analysis of Laibach's reception in the West must involve an understanding of the difference between Western aesthetic discourse and Marina Gržinić's Easthetics. The former, in particular Western postmodernism, fails to

provide an adequate vocabulary for analysis and appreciation of Laibach and NSK texts. In contrast, the notion of Easthetics provides both a conduit for decoding Laibach/NSK texts and comprehending their position as a nexus between East and West, where misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Laibach and NSK coding acts as fruitful material for their interventions and provocations.⁶⁶ Moreover, an interrogation of the difference between the two aesthetic systems in order to analyse what constitutes Easthetics, provides the foundations for an analysis of the Laibach and NSK strategy of Retrogardism, as explored in the next chapter.

⁶⁶ Laibach and the NSK's vital role as a nexus between East and West is discussed at greater length in the chapter 'Nexus'.

RETROGARDISM

This chapter provides an analysis of Retrogardism, the core strategy of Laibach and NSK praxis. I will explore Retrogardism as a concept and how it functions in the context of the historical avant-garde, particularly as Marina Gržinić's 'new "ism" from the East' (2006, p.328). By drawing on specific examples of Laibach and NSK Retrogardism, and comparing these aesthetics with Retrogardism's founding precedent, Suprematism, I will argue that Retrogardism constitutes a 'new-Suprematism', in that by separating signifiers from their ideological field, Retrogardism free-floats these signifiers within the framework of the Retro-avant-garde. This is a paradoxical process, whereby although they are separated from their original ideological field, they retain their symbolic agency within the spectacle of the Monumental Retro-avant-garde. I will conclude by comparing Retrogardism with the work of theatre director Tadeusz Kantor, whose employment of the 'poor' object as a performance strategy correlates to Laibach and the NSK's re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual in the 'post-ideological' age.

In 1981 Dejan Knez, the founder of Laibach Kunst, distributed a photocopied New Year's Eve postcard interpreting René Magritte's *La Condition Humaine* (1933).⁶⁷ Knez replaced the exterior landscape in the Magritte original with a photograph of a Nazi rally taken during the Reichsparteitag in Nürnberg in 1934:

⁶⁷ Laibach Kunst is the original term for Laibach, who began as a visual arts group.

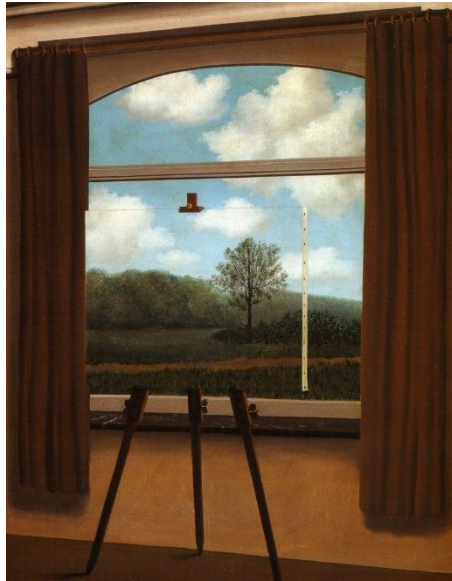


Figure 3.1, *La Condition Humaine*, René Magritte (1933)



Figure 3.2, *Artist Condition I. (from) René Magritte 1934*, Laibach (1981)

This artwork was dedicated to the Belgrade artist Goran Đorđević, whose *The Harbingers of Apocalypse* exhibition of 1981 at the ŠKUC Galerija in Ljubljana, Knez attended. The exhibition consisted of fifty copies of a painting Đorđević executed in 1969. Inke Arns, who has written extensively on the NSK, traces the roots of Laibach's Retrogarde practice to this exhibition (Arns, 2002, online). This

exhibition demonstrated the radical disruptive power of the copy and repetition, which are both central tenets of Retrogardism. However, it is in the re-welding of art and power in Knez's photocopied postcard that the focus of Retrogardism is found. Western post-war art severed itself from utopian narratives, exchanging the totalising utopian drives of the historical avant-garde to focus on individual freedom and expression. Retrogardism returns to a moment before this separation, and identifies with the historical avant-garde at the moment of its traumatic assimilation into totalitarianism. Through a strategy of repetition and dissonance that both disrupts and re-affirms the ideological power of icon, whether political, religious or aesthetic, Retrogardism is a self-conscious and reflexive strategy of reshaping time through contemporary works of art. The problematic nature of this iconography, concomitant as it is with the European traumatic historical, is not repressed in Retrogardism but rather brought to the fore. The central philosophy of Retrogardism is that traumas affecting the present and future can only be addressed by a tracing back to source, whether that be the unfinished narrative of Communism, the appeal of totalitarianism, or art's affirmative role in power.

Retrogarde iconography

By way of introduction into specific examples of Retrogarde iconography, it is worth analysing the 'logo', of the NSK itself. This symbol, created in 1984, is a typically complicated and eclectic collection of Retrogarde elements:



Figure 3.3, NSK logo (1984a)

The Malevich cross forms the centre-piece, itself disrupted by the imprint of John Heartfield's anti-Nazi image of crossed axes forming a swastika: *Blut und Eisen* (1934). Other disparate elements conflict within this crowded space; religion in the form of an arc of thorns is countered by the teeth of a cog, suggesting industry. These two conventionally opposed *Weltanschauungen* are united in antlers below and the *Noordung* symbol above. This is an eclectic collection of symbols unified in an ordered system comprising a complex statement of identity that cannot be ascribed any one religious, secular, or historical context. Tellingly, it resembles a state symbol or a coat of arms more than it does an artistic movement. This system of familiar archetypes unified to suggest a very complex and possibly mystifying ideology is, as Eleanor Heartney observes, 'as if one has entered a parallel universe where the signposts look familiar and seem readable, but point in completely

unexpected directions' (1989, p.36). The swastika, the thorns, the Zahnrad (cog), and the torches are all familiar tropes, but collected together the effect is disorientating, creating a complex web of potential and contradictory meanings. This dynamic is maintained throughout the Laibach/NSK spectacle; images of the Christian power system are juxtaposed with Communist symbols, and even within texts this ambiguous unity is manifested. The track 'Vade Retro (Satanas)' (1986) is one such amalgamation.⁶⁸ The words and title are taken from the Catholic exorcism ceremony, but delivered in a guttural emphatic manner, with a heavy oppressive beat and overlaid samples of braying stags. The context of Laibach's Retrogarde strategy and the addition of the stag maintain the religious connotations but hints at the trauma of European political history and a possible necessary exorcism of associated guilt, whether Slovenian or indeed European.

Three specific systems structure the iconography of NSK Retrogarde practice. These are the romantic folkloric, the specifically Slovenian, and the totalitarian. The first category is referred to in this research by the German term: Völkish. In the context of this analysis of Retrogardism this term is specifically used to denote a romantic folklore bound up with national identity. The Völkish is predominantly sentimental in tone, and combines nationalism with the idea of people/race. Relevant to Retrogardism, the term Völkish has come to be associated with Nazi Kunst and the sentimental romantic folkloric, and as such has currency in late-capitalism only as kitsch. Völkish signifiers are pan-European, in contrast to the second category, that of the specifically Slovenian. These signifiers are elements within Retrogardism that are not readily understood beyond the Slovenian

⁶⁸ See: 'Vade Retro (Satanas)', track nine, CD one.

cultural sphere, and have iconic status only within Slovenia. The third category, the totalitarian, is perhaps the most apparent dimension, and is the delivery system of the other two categories.

There are key symbols that recur throughout Retrogardism, and unite the three categories of the Völkish, the domestic Slovenian and the totalitarian. Alexei Monroe describes these as NSK 'Ur-symbols', such as antlers, the worker, the Zahnrad (cog), stags, the sower, the Kozolec and the Malevich cross (2007, p.50).



Figure 3.4, Laibach logo: Zahnrad (cog) with Malevich cross centre

The Stag

The stag is one such 'Ur-symbol' and is used extensively across the NSK Gesamtkunstwerk. These two examples are Laibach album sleeves from 1986 and 2003:



Figure 3.5, album sleeve:
Nova Akropola (1986)



Figure 3.6, album sleeve:
Neu Konservativ (2003d)⁶⁹

Both the above images of stags are taken from Sir Edwin Landseer's depictions. Other texts such as the IRWIN painting *Portrait of the Deer* (1986) and *Two Stags* (1988) feature stags that directly reference Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen* (1851).



Figure 3.7, *Portrait of the Deer*
IRWIN (1986)



Figure 3.8, *Two Stags*
IRWIN (1988a)

The choice of this referent to which they return in a variety of works is culturally specific, but it is the stag itself that carries the most significance within the Laibach/NSK monolith. The *Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* associates the stag with 'solar, renewal; creation; fire; the dawn' and denoting fertility in nature

⁶⁹ *Neu Konservativ* was re-released in 2003, but the recording is from 1984-1985; hence the use of the stag motif, which by 2003 was rarely used by Laibach.

(Cooper, 1978, p.13). In Celtic mythology, the stag is the attribute of the warrior, and of the gods Coidiu, Ossian and Cerununos (Cooper, 1978, p.159). It is a pan-European symbol associated with the pagan and the pre-Christian. Following the increasing dominance of Judeo-Christian traditions in Europe, and the industrial revolution, the stag's pagan symbolic power faded, and the image was re-coded as a symbol of rural idyll and natural majesty. This shift in meaning from a mythic-ideological resonance to apparently harmless Victorian 'twee' is fruitful Retrogarde text. Retrogardism deconstructs the stag image into denoting a power symbol deployed by ruling hierarchies. The oppressive and monolithic tone of Laibach texts, and the resemblance of IRWIN paintings to religious icons in which the stag features, strips away this image of rural idyll to expose a dark primeval charge of male power associated with natural dominance. In this context the stag becomes an NSK 'pure-form' signifying a combination of male potency and political will.⁷⁰

In performance in the eighties Laibach deployed antlers at the front of the stage:



Figure 3.9, Laibach performance (1986)

⁷⁰ On a more domestic scale, the stag in Laibach and NSK iconography would seem to suggest Slovenian heritage, yet there is no Slovenian stag. The indigenous population was eradicated in the late 1800s (source: in conversation with Alexei Monroe, 6th June 2012).

Typically in these performances, Laibach would return to the stage for the encore wearing antlers. At the Tate Modern performance in London in April 2012, a stag's head had pride of place at the front of the stage. This was in reference to early Laibach performances, and reflected the first half of the concert, which was a re-enactment of the iconic 1982 Novi Rock performance in Ljubljana:

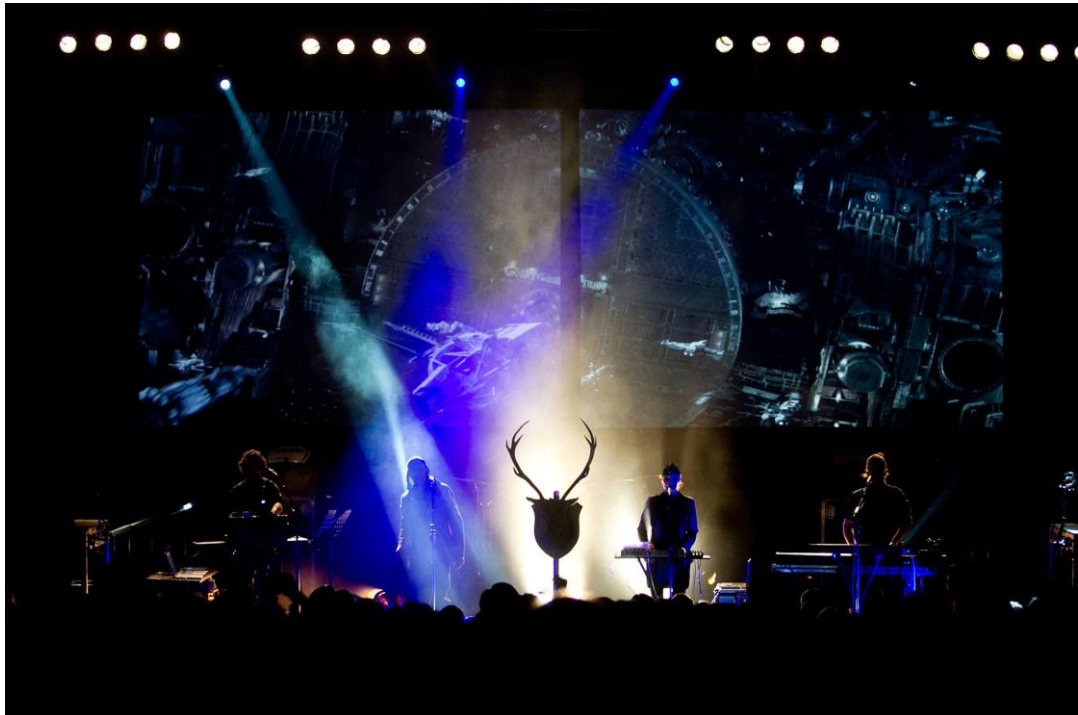


Figure 3.10, *Monumental Retro-avant-garde*, Laibach performance, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London (2012)

The stag is a key signifier in Laibach's system of hunting references. Laibach have worn the insignia of the SLD (the Slovenian Hunting Association) and when questioned on their use of hunting horns in performance and in recordings, Laibach responded: 'Hunting is the law of nature we are fascinated with and the hunting horns are the weapons of the hunt' (NSK, 1991, p.56). Laibach and NSK hunting

references reflect their strategy of identifying with hierarchical power structures such as ancestral order and feudal tradition.⁷¹

The stag is a key component of Völkish tropes Laibach and the NSK draw on alongside more overtly martial and religious imagery. The superficially sentimental Völkish such as the stag, the sower, the family, and images of rural idylls are treated by Laibach and the NSK as conduits of ideological power in the same manner as the more obviously ‘aggressive’ elements such as the soldier, industrial or war machinery, and flags. A prime example of the Völkish in Laibach can be found in the video to ‘Opus Dei’ (1987). Throughout the video Laibach stride across Alpine scenery in Tyrolean hiking gear, blowing horns and chopping wood. Low dramatic camera angles film Laibach singing in heroic poses and gazing at the horizon, striding through forest and across mountains, posing before waterfalls and intercut with footage of stags. Although key Slovenian symbols such as mount Kum, a commemorative World War Two partisan building and the Sava River feature significantly, the overall effect suggests a patriotism for a fictional European nation.

The Cipher-figure

The cipher-figure is another of Laibach and the NSK’s key Völkish motifs, and can be seen as part of a series of Retrogarde figures such as the sower and the metal worker. These are ciphers in the manner of totalitarian art, where people are presented not as individuals but, according to Frank Whitford, as ‘social prototypes, ciphers: the peasant, the warrior, the athlete, the factory worker – or the woman, gloriously productive either as mother or minder of machines’ (1995, p.4).

⁷¹ Monroe notes that in Austria, and to some extent Slovenia, hunters wearing antler symbols are seen as an inherently reactionary group (Monroe, 2007, p.50).

Igor Golomstock also refers to the soldier, worker or farmer, all of whom are considered equal in social production in totalitarian art, as the *tópos* of National Socialism (1990, p.256). The metal-worker, the sower, and the *Red Thrower* (1981) of Laibach and the NSK, are the abstracted individual equally bereft of individuality or personality:



Figure 3.11, *Red Thrower*, Laibach (1981)



Figure 3.12, *The Steel Worker*, Laibach (2010)

The Cipher-figure: The Sower

The NSK have employed the theme of the sower in several works, in a similar manner to their use of the stag, in that both are pan-European symbols and both signify an ideological power beyond that of the rural idyll. The NSK describe the sower in the memory of European culture as ‘the emblem of sowing and harvesting, sacrificing and giving, the soil and man, fertile matter and mortal beauty and power’ (NSK, 1991, p.140). The symbol of the Sower, as derived from Millet’s *Sower* (1850) and Slovenia’s own Ivan Grohar’s *Sower* (1907) occurs in IRWIN paintings and decorates Laibach album sleeves and posters.

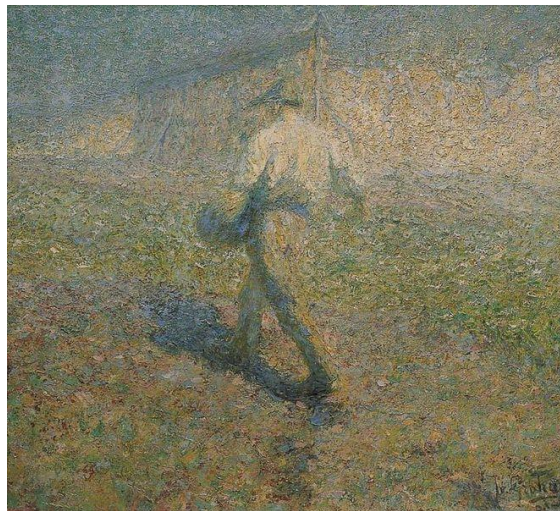


Figure 3.13, *Sower*, Ivan Grohar (1907)

As with the stag, the NSK celebrate the primal charge of such symbols, but provide a contextual dissonance that disturbs their original ideological field. In NSK texts, images of Landseer’s stag as rural idyll may be layered with Suprematist abstraction, or heavy industry; the latter popularly conceived as the ideological opposite of the organic. For example, in IRWIN’s *Red Districts: Sower* (1989) the

sower figure from Oskar Martin-Amorbach's Nazi-Kunst painting *The Sower* (1937) is layered over a reproduction of woodcuts of heavy industry in Trbovlje.



Figure 3.14, *Red Districts: Sower*, IRWIN (1989)

Inke Arns notes that in the art of the NSK's IRWIN, the sower image becomes a national icon, or 'Heimatkunst' allegory.⁷² In this framework, the sower becomes a symbolic substitute for tradition, continuity, and organic reconciliation (Arns, 2002, online). It is in its constant re-coding and repetition within NSK art and Laibach Kunst that this motif becomes monumental, moving from the 'quaint' and rural to an icon of ideological power and dominance. Arns equates this process with the operation of ideology: 'Ideology (both in politics and art) does not create the original, but through repetition of its own images produces power' (2002, online). The sower is part of a wider system within Retrogardism of repeating images and archetypes to suggest power generated in this manner. It is a process of monumentalising the apparently domestic folk image.

An example of this repetition of the sower motif and its subsequent shift from the domestic rural to an image of the monumental state can be found in the

⁷² 'Heimatkunst', or 'Homeland art' was a primarily literary form adopted in late nineteenth century Germany, and is anti-urban in tone.

NSK's Slovenian Athens project of 1987. The instructions from the NSK were specific: 'Authors from all over Slovenia, belonging to various trends and generations, shall paint only one motif: The Sower' (NSK, 1991, p.140).⁷³



Figure 3.15, *The Athens of Slovenia*, IRWIN (1987a)

In these monumental pictures five Slovenian environments are represented: the sea, karst, fields, forest and Alps.⁷⁴ At the top of each work are traditional religious paintings, whilst at the foot, a heavy marble plaque. Each work is imprinted with a semi-transparent sower-figure, suggesting this figure is at one or enmeshed with each environment. This is in contrast with the sower figure in *Red Districts: Sower* (1989), whose form is not united with the industrial environment (see figure 3.14). The use of the sower motif was to take on a more direct performative element when IRWIN planned to collaborate with Joseph Beuys on an action involving the sowing of Slovene fields. The action did not take place due to Beuys' death in 1986.

⁷³ The Slovenian artists who collaborated with IRWIN on this project were Bogoslav Kalaš, Ferdo Šerbelj, and Jure Dobrila.

⁷⁴ The Karst Research Institute describes karst as a geological landmark of Slovenia: 'Almost half the country is karstic with about 8000 caves registered' (Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2004, online)

The Slovenian in Retrogardism

Symbols such as the sower and the stag are pan-European. Operative in the militant aesthetics of the Laibach/NSK spectacle, they are also commandeered to serve as icons of a partly fictive Slovenia, that is, a representation of a monumental and spectral national identity that Laibach and the NSK construct as a dimension of Retrogarde aesthetics. Although the stag and the sower are recognisable beyond the Slovenian cultural sphere, other motifs occur throughout Retrogardism that are distinctly Slovenian in origin, and have limited semantic currency outside Slovenian culture. One such example is Ivana Kobilica's *Kofetarica* [the Coffee drinker]:



Figure 3.16, *Kofetarica*, Ivana Kobilica (1888)

This image is an iconic Slovenian painting, and was appropriated by Laibach to advertise the exhibition *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst*, at the SKUC Gallery in 1983:



Figure 3.17, Poster for *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst*, Laibach (1983a)

In 2011 Laibach reflexively referenced their own system of appropriation by advertising the *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Perspectives 1980 – 2011* exhibition at the Umetnostna Galerija, Maribor, with a poster featuring a coffee-cup bearing a swastika:

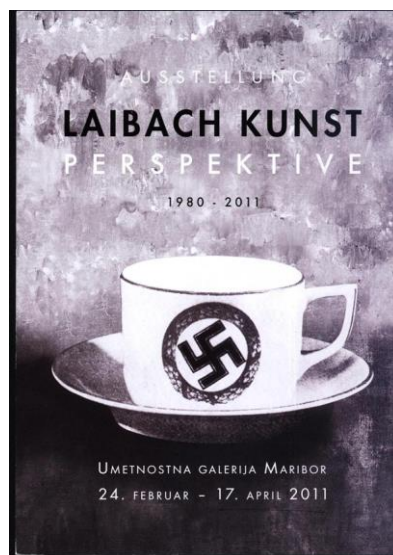


Figure 3.18, Poster for *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Perspectives 1980 – 2011*, Laibach (2011)

In this instance Kobilica's iconic coffee drinker has been reduced to a single signifier; that of the cup and saucer. Laibach are here simultaneously referring to

their original 1983 exhibition, their appropriation of a Slovenian national icon, and interrogating the idea of Weltanschauung as modern kitsch.

The kozolec is another singularly Slovenian image, and one employed primarily by Laibach. It is not used with the same significance in other disciplines within the NSK. A kozolec is a hayrack distinctive to the Slovenian countryside, and is a recognisable component of Slovenian national identity. Laibach reclaim the kozolec for their construction of the monumental phantasm of a militant and partly fictional Slovenian national identity. This image is also salient in the Laibach construct as founder member Tomaž Hostnik hanged himself from a kozolec. In this sense the kozolec binds Slovenian national identity with the foundations of Laibach, a discourse Laibach have consistently maintained. The kozolec features on the sleeve of the 1985 Laibach recording *Rekapitulacija 1980-1984*:

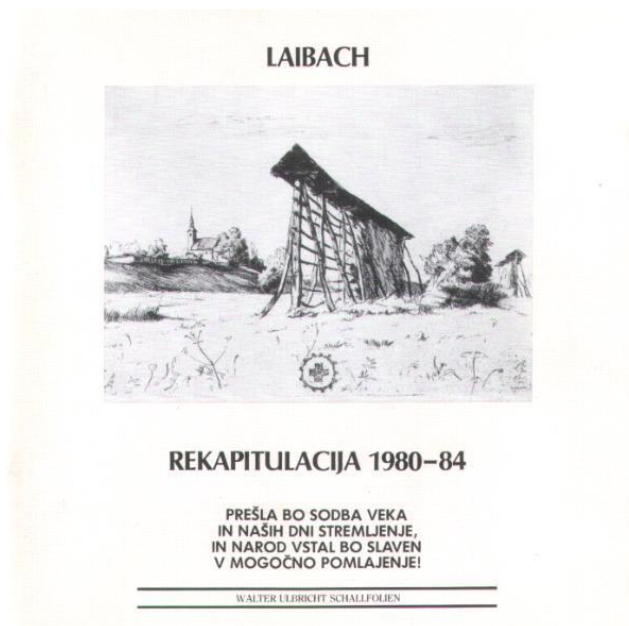


Figure 3.19, Album sleeve: *Rekapitulacija 1980-1984* (1985a)

Alexei Monroe in writing about this sleeve design illustrates the operation of these symbols of Slovenian or pan-European identity within Retrogardism by asserting that the presence of the Laibach logo within the borders of Božidar Jakac's painting of a kozolec compromises straightforward enjoyment of such folk symbolism (2000, p.173). However, within the framework of the monumental Retro-avant-garde of Laibach Kunst, no image or symbol may function without operating as a conduit of ideological power structures. Laibach and the NSK's re-coding of romantic folkloric images and Slovenian national icons suggests that beneath the apparent innocence of these signifiers an active and more insidious ideology is at work.

A further key signifier of Retrogardism whose meaning is operative only in the Slovenian sphere is that of Jože Plečnik's unrealised Slovene parliament design of 1947:

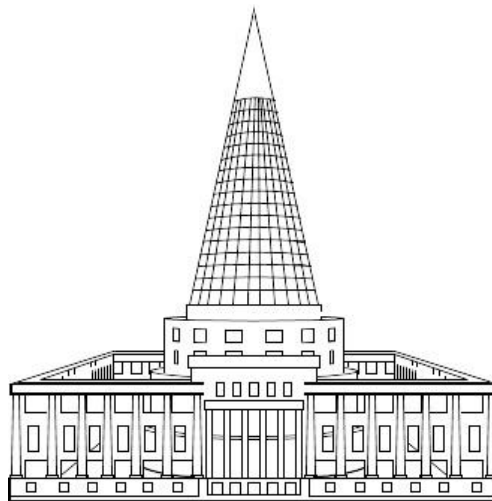


Figure 3.20, *Katedrala Svobode* [Cathedral of Freedom] Jože Plečnik (1947)

Laibach cite this image in a variety of texts. Its interior decorates the *Slovenska Akropola* (1987) compact disc, and the exterior of the design is featured on the

sleeve of the same album release. It is the final destination in the video to 'Final Countdown' (1994), and features atop the flag being carried by the figure in the Day of Youth (Dan Mladosti) poster of 1987. Created in 1947, forty-five years before Slovenian independence, Plečnik's unrealised design exceeds the fantasy of Slovene nationalism in a way similar to Laibach's projection of a monumental fictional Slovenian national identity. In an interview with Andrew Herscher, Slavoj Žižek has noted this parallel in Laibach's repeated use of Plečnik's design (1997, p.72). Žižek suggests that the fantasy of Plečnik's parliament 'might have become nothing other than the Nation-thing itself, the Nodal-point around which the Slovene nation constituted itself' (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.73). In the same interview, Žižek posits that the plan of the Cathedral of Freedom's enormous conical tower as printed on the *Slovenska Akropola* CD suggests a homology between the contents of the disc and the contents of the fictional parliament chamber.⁷⁵

Analysis of the *Red Districts* series of paintings (1985-1987) more closely links the second system of Retrogarde iconography (the Slovenian) with the third system, the totalitarian. In this series the NSK explore the legacy of heavy industry through Retrogarde practice. The paintings are based on original 1950s woodcuts by Janez Knez of industry around Trbovlje, Laibach's hometown. IRWIN return to the past for representations of this industry and reverse them, smear them with pigs' blood, and mount them in monumental frames covered in gold leaf in the manner of reliquary.

⁷⁵ Laibach's use of Plečnik's design was echoed in 1989 by the printing of an alternative Slovenian currency, and the first stamps issued by an independent Slovenia featured the tower's cross-section as seen on Laibach's *Slovenska Akropola* CD in 1987.



Figure 3.21, *Red Districts*, IRWIN (1987b)

The conflation of industry and overt political ideology as typified in totalitarian practice is brought to the fore in the interpretation of Knez's original woodcuts though elemental materials such as blood, coal, wood, gold and iron.⁷⁶ IRWIN describe these works thus: 'Glass on a wooden frame, a graphic work laid beneath it, coal and blood on paper. Monumentally sacral energetic charge of a relic. An atmosphere of eternal peace, slipping through the cracks of time into a magnificent crypt' (NSK, 1991, p.129). The language expressed suggests a quasi-religious ritual, something not conventionally associated with industry. The original woodcuts, in rendering the industrial in pictorial terms, mimic the Socialist Realist model of the glorification of industry, and the presence of the blood suggests a sacrificial dimension. The sacrificial dimension is here therefore bound up in the ideology of the state.

The Totalitarian in Retrogardism

It is not the remit of this chapter to discuss in detail the totalitarian signifiers within Laibach and NSK praxis, nor their re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual.

⁷⁶ These materials are listed by IRWIN as being the material components of the *Red Districts* series. They also include more prosaic materials such as aluminium and glass (NSK, 1991, p.128).

That is covered by the thesis as a whole. It is however important to discuss this act of re-enactment itself as the third category of Retrogardism. Retrogardism is the delivery system of the re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual as manifested in the construct of a monolithic Laibach and NSK aesthetically-realised spectral state.

Laibach were at their most totalitarian in appearance and sound between their founding in 1980 and the release of the recording *Kapital* in 1992. Performances within this period are typified by black floor-to-ceiling banners bearing the Laibach logo flanking the stage, uniformed drummers at the fore, and a delivery more akin to a militant political address than a rock concert. From 1987 many performances were preceded by a speech from the NSK's Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy; again a feature suggesting political rally rather than a celebration of music. Alexei Monroe takes this further by comparing this pre-performance speech to a speaker warming-up the crowd at a Hitler or Stalin rally (2008, p.189). This re-enactment/ritual is maintained in video releases such as *Pobeda Pod Suncem* [Victory Under the Sun] (1988), which features recurring footage of members of Laibach addressing the camera at a podium draped in the Laibach banner, making declarative statements such as: 'Violence is a bare necessity which we obey', to microphones and recorded cheering. Other key signifiers establish this re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual more specifically, such as the use of a design for the Nazi *Kraft Durch Freude (KDF)* [Strength Through Joy] organisation, which was re-coded for the artwork for the *Sympathy for the Devil* release in 1988:



Figure 3.22, *Kraft Durch Freude (KDF)*
Organisation poster (1930s)

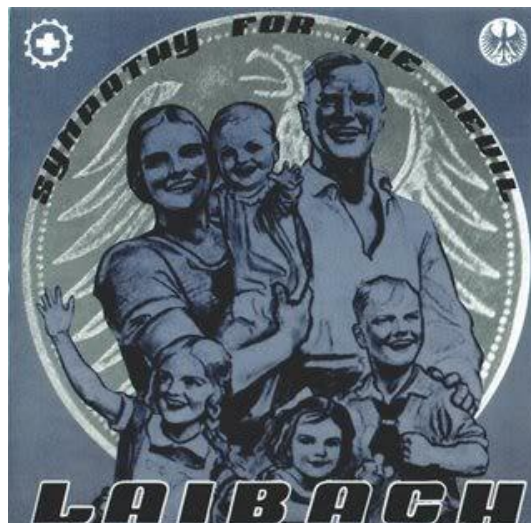


Figure 3.23, Album sleeve: *Sympathy for the Devil*,
Laibach (1988a)

Laibach's music is similarly totalitarian in tone. Their audio output from their inception in 1980 up until the release of *Kapital* in 1992, the period in which Laibach made their name, both domestic and abroad, is monolithic and oppressive,

designed to cower the individual and overwhelm with its relentless assault. Abrasive fanfares both discordant and triumphalist are prevalent, and rhythms are repetitive but often monotonously so. Martial or slow marching rhythms dominated by a heavy drum sound are overlaid with industrial noise. The vocals are often choral, suggesting mass, whilst individual vocal elements are declamatory and emphatic, dealing in mono-statements and absolutes commonly used by oppressive ideologies.⁷⁷

Although a simulacrum of the totalitarian ritual is the prime delivery system of Retrogardism, it is telling that more direct symbolism such as the swastika or the hammer and sickle is relatively rare in Laibach and the NSK, and the Italian fasces does not occur at all. The totalitarian spectacle of Retrogardism is therefore relatively non-specific. Where direct references do occur they are disrupted by juxtaposition and context. For example, the swastika that forms the centre-piece of the NSK logo was initially re-coded by John Heartfield as an anti-Nazi propaganda image before being appropriated by Laibach and the NSK in their system. Where these symbols are present in a less adulterated form it can be argued the non-specificity of the Retrogarde structure loses credibility. Such an example may be the use of the swastika on the coffee-cup image to advertise the *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Perspectives 1980 – 2011* exhibition in Maribor in 2011 (See figure 3.18), or the *Einkauf* shopping action in 2003, where members of Laibach went ‘shopping’ in the City Park shopping mall in the BTC shopping district in Ljubljana dressed as Nazi officers, with the Laibach armband in place of the expected swastika armband.

⁷⁷ Further analysis of Laibach’s sound and its function is dealt with in other chapters.



Figure 3.24, *Einkauf* shopping action, Laibach (2003b)

These actions and images have a more direct line to a specific totalitarian state, in this case the Third Reich, and it can be argued the shock value of the more immediately accessible imagery is at the cost of the aesthetics of ambiguity in Retrogardism. Nevertheless, they do serve to illustrate the anomaly of directly referencing any specific ideology within Retrogardism.

Retrogardism and Eastern Europe

Retrogardism is specific to Eastern Europe, and in the 1980s was termed the ‘new “ism” from the East’ by Slovenian cultural theorist and performance artist Marina Gržinić (2006, p.328). According to Gržinić, only one subject is topical for the East; that of history, particularly the re-appropriation of history (2006, p.484). In a Continental Europe of fluctuating borders, where national identity is in a state of perpetual crisis, the importance of history and its uses achieves mythic qualities.⁷⁸ In this system, history is not an absolute of the past, but is frequently employed as an agency of political expediency in the present. Michael Benson,

⁷⁸ The importance of history and culture as regards Central and Eastern European national identity is discussed in the previous chapter, ‘The European Context’.

director of the seminal Laibach/NSK film *Predictions of Fire* (1996), directly refers to this process of active historicisation when he compares the Retro-avant-garde process to the method used in the former Yugoslavia to trigger the Balkan conflict, whereby, for example, the Serbs exhumed their national hero Prince Lazar, who had been dead since 1389, and toured him around the countryside (2003, p.570). In Poland, in the Katyn massacre of Polish officers and intelligentsia committed by the Russian NKVD in 1940, identity papers were removed from the bodies, which were then bulldozed to hamper the retrieval of these identities. However, these identities were retroactively claimed for political purposes by both Axis and Allied forces. It is a retroactive identity politics Timothy Snyder refers to when he claims that the largest victim group in Poland during 1941 was neither the Jews nor the Poles, but Soviet prisoners of war.⁷⁹ By citing this as a hidden history, Snyder interrogates the composition of historical-political narratives through the categorisation of national and cultural identities.

History in post-Socialist Eastern Europe remains problematic. It is at once an unwanted irrelevance, a legacy of an uncomfortable past, and an essential component of identity. *Szobor Park* [Memento Park] near Budapest in Hungary expresses that uneasy dichotomy. The park houses forty-two gigantic memorials from the Communist era, including statues to Lenin, Marx, Engels, Dimitrov, Captain Ostapenko, and Béla Kun, whilst the gift-shop lists Communist-era items for sale in the 'Red-star store':

⁷⁹ Source: lecture given by Timothy Snyder at University College London on the 1st June 2011, entitled: 'Europe between Hitler and Stalin'.

Wristwatches, flasks, cigarette-lighters and other personal items. Fun t-shirts and mugs, postcards, posters depicting the ‘wise men’ of communism or their slogans. Trabant model-cars, Lenin-candles, authentic articles, retro-souvenirs from the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. Best of Communism – music CDs with communist movement marches. (Memento Park, 2010, online).



Figure 3.25, *Szobor Park* [Memento Park], Budapest

In this perspective the monumental within Socialist Realism has been reduced to historical kitsch, confined to a theme park of history. Yet these statues are, in Mischa Gabowitsch’s terms, the ‘hardware of memory’ (Gabowitsch, 2012, conference paper). In his paper, *Soviet War memorials as Colonial Import*, Gabowitsch speaks of the role of Soviet memorials, wherein the statues of dead soldiers are not just commemorative but functioning military machines with symbolic agency (these are not those safely contained within *Szobor Park*, but those still found in cities and towns across the ‘former East’). Gabowitsch suggests that these monuments therefore constitute a continual occupying force (Gabowitsch, 2012, conference paper).

The above examples all serve to demonstrate the presence of history as a political agent in Eastern Europe. The Eastern European paradoxical perception of history as both irksome irrelevance and core identity construct helped constitute the conditions within which Retrogardism was able to flourish in early 1980s Slovenia. In Retrogardism, history is likewise not an absolute, but text, in which history as having political agency is aestheticised.

Contextual origins

When history is not an absolute but a fluid concept subject to current political expediency, it provides a liminal position that enables Retrogardism to treat political and art history as text. Writing in 1987, Lev Kreft suggests another aspect that helped established conditions conducive to the creation of Retrogardism. Kreft suggests a sense of ‘lagging-behind’ Western cultural trends was a characteristic of the Yugoslavian and Slovenian social space. Being unable to catch up with the West meant that Postmodernism was skipped altogether and Slovenia created its own artistic form in the shape of Retrogardism (2009, p.76). Aleš Erjavec supports this view, albeit indirectly, when he posits that rather than follow the route of more conventional political opposition in art, whether by the straightforward criticism of Socialist Realism or with irony and parable, the third generation avant-garde of Socialist countries ‘created yet another way of enunciating such critique, a way which appears to transcend the notion of critique altogether’ (2008, p.30). Erjavec is here referring to the Retro-avant-garde, a next step following on from the historical avant-garde, and a form specific to Eastern Europe. Western postmodernism severed ties to the discredited historic avant-garde in an arguably over-compensatory manner, but Eastern European

postmodernism (Marina Gržinić's 'Easthetics'), more connected as it is to a historical continuum, proved fertile ground for Retrogardism.

The self-contained quality of the NSK Retrogarde aesthetic structure is enabled by its freedom from originality as a value system. In Marina Gržinić's analysis, the relation between the original and the copy in Retrogardism is always asymmetric, one of dominance and submission. Retrogardism inverts the traditionally privileged authority of the original over the copy by making the copy dominant, on the grounds that the original is subordinate to the laws of the art market and history, and therefore locked into its contextual origins (Gržinić, 2007, p.202). It is a practice that reflects the role of the copy under Socialism. Gržinić claims that in this system the notion of 'copy' fails as there were no originals:

We had no chance of seeing the decisive modern originals of Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Malevich. The power of the copy could only be partial, as state Socialism did not offer a counterpoint, and the copy was therefore displayed in a psychotic space of egalitarian ignorance' (Gržinić, 2007, p.202).

In this way the copy is not a poor substitute but a 'new original'.⁸⁰ This disloyalty to a point of origin activates history from within the present; the text is not thought of as copy but a 'new original', and is thus enabled to reflect upon the present, unfettered to charges of historical relativism (Pil and Galia Kollektiv, 2007, online). In celebrating the replica, Retrogardism inverts the privileging of the original, which Marina Gržinić describes as 'an essential civilisational norm and of vital value to both the capitalist art market and the contemporary institution of art' (2007, p.201). In this context the copy becomes a radical presence within contemporary art.

⁸⁰ The term 'New original' is here used specifically, as it comes from Laibach's description of their cover-versions of such recordings as Opus' 'Live is Life' (1987) and Queen's 'One Vision' (1985). Use of this term rather than 'copy' is indicative of their disregard of originality as value in itself.

Suprematism and the Retrogarde

Retrogardism's prime referent from which its aesthetic practice originates is the Russian avant-garde form Suprematism. Suprematism, created by Kazimir Malevich in 1913, sought a pure abstract art, reducing abstract painting to a new level of geometric simplicity.

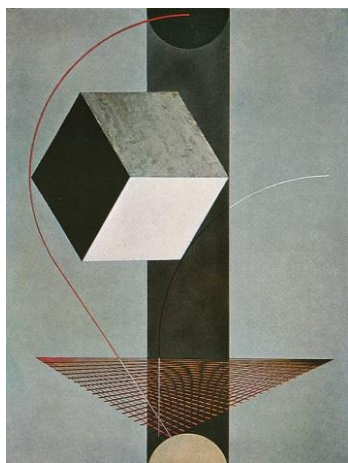


Figure 3.26, *Proun 99*
El Lissitzky (1924)

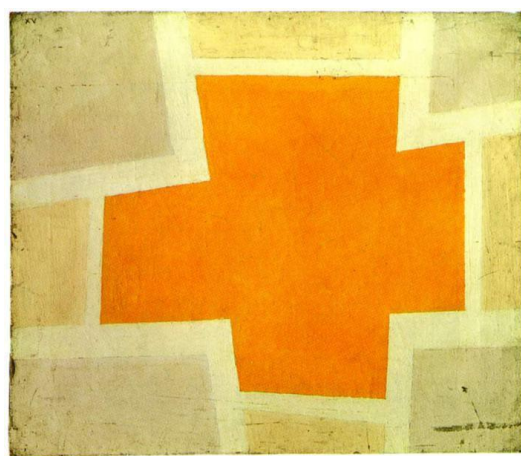


Figure 3.27, *Yellow Cross*
Lazar Khidekel (1923)

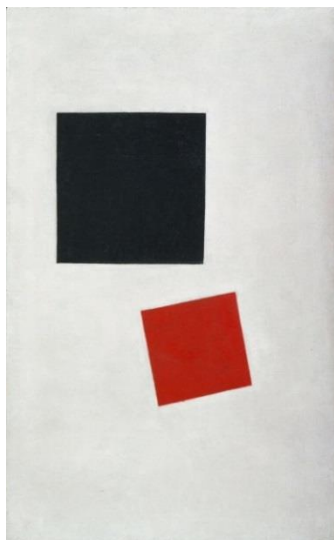


Figure 3.28, *Painterly Realism
of a Boy with a Knapsack*
Kazimir Malevich (1915c)



Figure 3.29, *Suprematism*
Kazimir Malevich (1915b)

From Suprematism Laibach and the NSK appropriate and re-code Malevich's *Cross* (1912-1923) and *Square* (1915). Both occur as repeated motifs throughout the Laibach and NSK spectacle and connect Laibach Kunst with the Suprematist movement prior to Stalin's 1934 clamp-down on the Russian avant-garde. Retrogardism thus utilises the dynamic of the trauma of art's collusion with power whilst referencing modern art's unrealised utopian ideals. It does not, however, intend a revival of past avant-gardism/s: 'All our work, present and future, must leave behind all past works, regardless of their greatness. The dead past should be no match for us, who are alive!' (NSK, 1991, p.47). Retrogardism is not inert re-enactment, and the NSK find in any unmediated revival of the past a 'creative lethargy' (NSK, 1991, p.47).

Suprematist shapes such as the cross, the circle, the square and the triangle occur throughout the NSK inter-disciplinary Gesamtkunstwerk. In the performance *Krst Pod Triglavom* [Baptism Under Triglav] (1986), the Suprematist motifs of a square, a cross and a triangle are heavily featured, and they also occur in Laibach's 'Opus Dei' video.



Figure 3.30, album sleeve: *Krst Pod Triglavom*, (1987a)

The Suprematist shapes of the cross, the circle and the square are also the framework to IRWIN's *Transcentrala New York, Moscow, Ljubljana* (1992-1997) actions:



Figure 3.31, *Transcentrala New York*, NSK (1991)



Figure 3.32, *Transcentrala Moscow*, NSK (1992)



Figure 3.33, *Transcentrala Ljubljana*, NSK (1997)

These are site-specific performances, whereby Suprematism is evoked in symbolic spaces. In the first, Malevich's cross, an icon of Eastern European art, is reclaimed from Western art by the NSK painting it on the roof of a New York skyscraper. Reclaimed, as it can be argued the West appropriated Malevich's cross as an Ur-icon of Western hegemonic Modern Art discourse. In the second, the NSK restore the Malevich square to Moscow, the heart of the Russian state. Restored, as Suprematism was denounced under Stalinism in 1934. In the third, members of the NSK dance in a circle with women in Slovenian national dress. This series of connected actions demonstrates the centrality of Suprematism to the NSK aesthetic.

It is however the Malevich cross that is the most frequently used Suprematist symbol in the Laibach and NSK aesthetic system:



Figure 3.34, 'Država' video still, Laibach (1984)



Figure 3.35, WAT publicity photograph (2003b)

The cross can be said to replace the swastika in the Laibach spectacle, both in its ubiquity and where it is worn. On one level it is simply the Laibach logo, on another, a symbol redolent of the German military cross of the Second World War. Yet for Laibach and the NSK, its potential meanings are more complex:

For us, members of a small nation, the cross simultaneously takes on a different, fateful meaning. Our culture nails us into the centre of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined but its significance has never been fully clarified. It is in here that we materialise our own ideas (NSK, 1991, p.122).

The *Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* lists the cross shape as the ‘cosmic symbol par excellence’, going on to describe it as a nexus between male and female, forming ‘the universal androgyne’, and relating this symbolism to the original swastika (Cooper, 1978, p.45). In the Retro-avant-garde all these various interpretations are valid currency, and the various potential meanings of each individual icon employed by Retrogardism, whether it be religious, historical, or an icon of the art-world, combine to sustain a system that is guided by Malevich’s Suprematist quest for a utopia of geometric form, a quest to attain an ideal abstract art, with universalist claims.

The spiritual dimension to Suprematism, as espoused by Malevich and the UNOVIS group, is a quest towards universal truths and absolutes. It is a utopian dynamic that the Retrogarde both restores and deconstructs. This utopianism is, moreover, a ready-made text that can be applied using the Retrogarde method to shed new light on the present. One such occasion took place on the 6th June 1992, when, as part of the NSK Embassy Moscow event, IRWIN unveiled *Black Square on Red Square*. An enormous black cloth square was rolled out in the middle of Moscow’s Red Square. NSK theorist Eda Čufer, who was present, states that initially it was thought this action made Russian artists uneasy as it appeared foreign artists were appropriating Russian art. In fact, the spiritual-utopian dimension of Suprematism as expressed in the square exposed the trauma of a secondary ideology. The restoration of the spiritual-utopian aspect of Suprematism

in the symbolic geographic centre of a secular ideology revealed a hitherto buried transcendental dimension of modernity by exposing the quasi-religious ancestor-worship of Lenin's remains.

Malevich's square has become iconic, and an iconoclastic *tabula rasa*. Natalia Avtonomova, writing on Malevich and Kandinsky, reports that Alexandre Benois (1870-1960), the patriarch of Russian art, declared a real fear when seeing the square for the first time in 1915, and is quoted as saying: 'This is one of those acts of self-assertion, a beginning that... reduces all to ruin' (2007, p.45). The year-zero of the Malevich square, in heralding a new world of abstraction, has charged it with considerable political and art-historical significance, one exploited both by the NSK and by the West. The square was welcomed in the 1920s by the Bauhaus of Weimar Germany, and the Dutch Modernist movement *De Stijl*, swiftly becoming a corner-stone of Western art. So influential was it that overuse stripped the square of the aura Malevich originally charged it with in 1915. Susan Buck-Morss traces its journey from the white-heat of utopian revolutionary spirit, to a bastion of American 'high culture', passing through cliché into kitsch (2000, p.95).

The spiritual/mystical qualities Malevich claimed to be expressed in his square are reflected in his exhibiting it crossing the corner of the room, a place originally reserved for Russian religious icons.

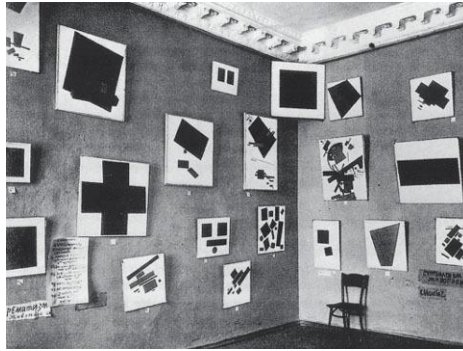


Figure 3.36, Photograph of work by Malevich in
The Last Futurist Exhibition '0.10', Petrograd (1915b)

This iconoclastic gesture both replaced religious authority with the absolutism of Suprematism, and asserted the Square's position as actual icon. Igor Zabel, in *Icons by IRWIN*, points out that the traditional religious icon attains its authority by adhering to strict precepts; an unbroken lineage between the figured image and the original, the saint (Zabel, 2011, online). In this conceit the black square collapses signifier and referent into a whole, what is given in the picture is what is true. The black square in the picture is only that, not representation, symbol, or anything else (Zabel, 2011, online). This is the essence of the pure-form in Suprematism, and the strategy Retrogardism applies to its iconography.

The painting as religious icon is a theme typical of the majority of IRWIN works. Not only does Catholic iconography feature frequently, but the dark oil paint, the use of gold, and the large heavy frames are all redolent of the religious icon.



Figure 3.37, *The Two of Us*, IRWIN (1988)

That IRWIN claim their works occupy the space of a religious icon is evident in two interventions in Graz in Austria, and Skopje in Macedonia in 2008:



Figure 3.38, Procession, Graz (2008a)



Figure 3.39, Procession, Skopje (2008b)

The celebrants in both these pictures are not NSK members or artists, but genuine priests and functionaries of the church. The picture they carry is IRWIN's *Malevich Between Two Wars* (1984). Both photographs are charged with the incongruity of the IRWIN painting, which is a meshing of Malevich, traditional portraiture and Nazi Kunst, being carried in the place of a religious icon in a conventional and ritualised religious setting. If the subject matter had been Catholic iconography, often employed by IRWIN, the result would not have been so arresting. The incongruity is jarring, and both draws attention to and befits the status of icon claimed by IRWIN paintings.

The absence of a three-dimensional spatial perspective in IRWIN works echoes the two-dimensionality of the orthodox religious icon. This has an important thematic point that further links Retrogardism with its founding aesthetic, that of Suprematism. Prior to the Renaissance, religious images existed as Marshal McLuhan's 'acoustic' space. 'Acoustic' space is ground as opposed to figure; it is the totalising and immediate environment in which the subject exists,

without continual conscious awareness. This is as opposed to figure, which is the focus of conscious attention (McLuhan and Powers, 1989, p.ix). Prior to the introduction of perspective into art, the issue of the viewer's relationship to the image was not relevant; the didactic totality of the orthodox religious icon collapses distance between the spectator and the image. However, the paradigm shift of the Renaissance brought about by the use of perspective introduced the question of the viewer's spatial relation to the image, thus enabling critical distance. Renaissance perspective created subject-position. In their paintings, IRWIN refer back to the pre-Renaissance religious icon and its didactic totality by replicating its form and thus totalise the subject into the 'acoustic' environment of the image, thus eliminating the subject. The absence of perspective and the use of the religious icon format, combined with imagery associated with secular, aesthetic or religious power, paradoxically demands a pre-Renaissance totality whilst simultaneously distancing the viewer by the historical context of the iconography. This reflects the complex subject position the NSK and Laibach demand, one of identifying with the immersive didactic totality of their visual and aural texts whilst paradoxically maintaining critical distance.

In constructing the Retrogarde aesthetic around Suprematism, the NSK locate Retrogardism in a specific art-historical context of a utopian avant-garde. The dynamic thus being exploited is not only its historical context, but the utopian drive expressed in the now-defunct avant-garde form that was Suprematism. Natalia Avtonomova in her study on Malevich writes of Suprematism that it comprised a new system, which 'allowed the construction of space in front of the surface, as well as deep into it, creating the illusion of an "irrational" space, with a

sense of receding into infinity and of pushing forward' (2007, p.48). It is the latter phrase that captures Suprematism's utopian drive, yet it was the play of geometric shapes within that surface that expresses this drive with greater clarity. Susan Buck-Morss claims that the utopian in Suprematism was the conviction that a pure geometry generated by industrial production could bring about a reconciliation between the modern human and the new industrial-ideological environment. In Suprematism, geometric harmony is conceived as the model for spiritual and social harmony (Buck-Morss, 2000, p.63). Zdenka Badovinac extends this purity of form into actual production, where easily repeatable forms would 'foster the greater democratisation of art by providing a universally accessible formal language' (Badovinac, 2009, online).

Retrogardism not only maintains the utopian narrative of Suprematism but in the creation of a monolithic aesthetic entity, echoes the utopian impossibility of its vision. Communism, to which Suprematism and Constructivism were initially integral, was both global in ambition and cosmic, often evincing a disregard of any practical considerations. Malevich did drawings for spaceships, and there was not enough iron in Russia to realise Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919-1920), which is indicative of its wider ambitions. The cosmic dimension is another aspect to the NSK's embrace of Suprematism, and warrants mention here as it has been directly realised by the theatre wing of the NSK with their Noordung project.⁸¹ *Noordung 1995–2045* is conceived as a fifty-year project and initiated with the idea that post-gravitational art is the condition under which art will be

⁸¹ Noordung is named after the Slovenian space engineer Hermann Noordung (1892-1929).

produced in the future.⁸² Johannes Birringer writes of the director Dragan Živadinov's method: 'Instead of dismantling the bankrupt belief in a transcendent Utopia, he is retracing the steps of a futurist art that is now, at the dystopian moment of Socialism's collapse within a European civilisation littered with destroyed metaphors, a vehicle for a prospective reconstruction of another world not a return to an imaginary or mythic Slovene centre or national consciousness' (2000, p.107). Here the NSK are again at once reflecting on the lost utopian avant-garde whilst restoring its original grand narrative. The cosmic theme is continued in the video to Laibach's 'The Final Countdown' (1994), in which the slogan 'Become a citizen of the first global state of the universe' appears in several languages. The setting of the video is cosmic space, and the final destination for the viewer is 'NSK Embassy Mars'.

Together with the return to the art-historical contextualisation of art's collusion with totalitarianism whilst restoring the original utopian narrative of the avant-garde, there is another layer of text contained within Retrogardism. This layer explains the centrality of Suprematism and the Suprematist object to Laibach and NSK praxis. The geometric abstract purity of Suprematism is a return to 'pure form', that is, an absolute rejection of the figurative. In Malevich's words, 'Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, Madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art' (cited in Harrison and Wood, 2003, p.173). The subject (figure) is thus the enemy of this pure form. The Suprematist artist Ivan Klyun (1873-1943) also articulates the dominance of the figure in art:

⁸² On December 15th 1999, Dragan Živadinov's *Noordung Cosmokinetic Cabinet Theatre* performed the parabolic art project, *Noordung Biomechanics*, in a Russian cosmonaut training aircraft over Moscow, the world's first weightless theatre.

Michelangelo carved a beautiful David out of marble – but in a purely sculptural sense this work is insignificant. In it is the beauty of youth, but no beauty of sculpture. Our sculpture is pure art, free from any surrogates; there is no content in it, only form (cited in Bowlt, 1976, p.114).

Klyun is both rejecting the figure and challenging the cultural given that art should be at all figurative. His claim is that art can only be made visible once the image ceases to convey a narrative through the subjective. In these terms Suprematism represents a superiority of the material over the spirit, in which the painting in its pure material form represents, as Groys puts it, ‘an epiphany of pure matter’. Suprematism spurns the ‘captivity of the deceptive novelty of earthly things’ represented by the figurative (Groys, 1992, p.83). This is the third text to the Retrogarde structure reflecting Suprematism. The first text is the art-historical context of Suprematism in its collusion with totalitarianism, the second is the utopian vision of Suprematism, and the third is in its play with form. In Retrogardism this is the iconography and tropes of ideologies of power, whether Socialist Realism, Nazi Kunst or the Catholic Church. In re-coding these signifiers within the NSK spectacle by a process of juxtaposition, dissonance and repetition, Retrogardism removes them from their original ideological context. Igor Zabel writes on this Retrogarde process, whereby ‘propaganda works can be purified into merely aesthetic objects’ (2006, p.319). NSK art operates in a system of intertextuality, where signifiers are employed as motifs across the NSK Gesamtkunstwerk, and in this way the signifier is purified of its context and treated as pure text, as a Duchampian ready-made. The NSK describe this approach to politically charged iconography thus: ‘We comprehend the signs which denote Suprematists, Nazi art, pop art, and Socialist Realism, in the way Cézanne treated his apples in his still lifes’ (NSK, 1991, p.125). Inke Arns refers to this process as a ‘dialectic between meaning and form, functionality and emptiness’ that remains

in ceaseless motion even in a single work (2004, p.95). Lacanian ‘Quilting’ is a useful analytical tool for analysing this purification method.⁸³ Lacanian quilting describes the constitution of a coherent ideological field as composed of signifying nodes, or buttons in a quilt, that fix the ideology to its meaning and guarantees its consistency. However, in the Laibach/NSK spectacle, the nodes are floating signifiers, and a coherent ideological field is denied. For example, the iconography of Nazi Kunst is juxtaposed with that of Socialist Realism, religious imagery, icons of Slovenian national identity and Völkish sentimentality. Similarly, although the re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual in Laibach appears complete, defining characteristics of a totalitarian ideology are absent. For example, there is no enemy, no other, in the Laibach spectacle, no promised utopia, and no cult of personality.⁸⁴ Monroe has written on the hollowness of Laibach’s supposed totalitarian or fascist ethic, comparing Laibach and the NSK with Orwell’s *1984*:

Nowhere in the NSK’s work is there any equivalent to Oceania’s demonization of the sexual or the orchestration of hatred. There is terror and fear in Laibach’s spectacle, but no enemy is shown or named and there is no equivalent to the daily hate sessions of *1984* (Monroe, 2000, p.44).

This void within the spectacle allows Laibach and the NSK to re-mythologise, or in their words re-capitulate, the image. God, nation, state, religion, hunting, are thus all restored to the power of Malevich’s pure object, and thus Retrogardism constructs its ‘new-Suprematism’.

⁸³ Psychoanalytic theory is not the scope of this thesis. However, terms such as Lacanian *Quilting*, *Che Vuoi* and the *Objet petit a*, prove a useful shorthand for unpacking Laibach and NSK praxis. The *Objet petit a*, which is referred to later in this chapter, is an expedient term for a conceptual void which causes effect, such as the Millennium-bug scare of 1999, and the *Che Vuoi* is a succinct way of dealing with the fascination of Laibach’s enigma. All three terms are used on occasion in this thesis and were sourced in Slavoj Žižek’s book *The Sublime Object Of Ideology* (1989, pp.89-118).

⁸⁴ Although a ‘Leader’ or personality cult is not a signifying node of Laibach or the NSK, the exception may be the repeated mention of Tomaž Hostnik. Hostnik was one of Laibach’s founder members and a driving force behind their early interventions. In 1982, Hostnik hanged himself from a kozolec, a distinctive Slovenian hayrack. His image, and references to him and the kozolec occur throughout Laibach and the NSK’s work, but at no point does he perform the function of a leader or inspirational figure. The celebration of his memory appears to suggest sentiment and is an interesting inconsistency within their oeuvre.

The Historical Avant-garde

Retrogardism returns to and identifies with the point at which the historic avant-garde was assimilated into totalitarianism. It is perhaps more correct to refer to this assimilation as collusion, as the historic avant-garde shared the totalising utopian drive of totalitarianism. This is at the heart of Retrogarde praxis, and is reflected in its form and its founding referents; Suprematism, Constructivism and Futurism. In form, Retrogardism has many of the trappings of historic avant-garde practice, such as shock tactics, provocations and manifestos. It also shares the declarative mono-statement format often associated with the historic avant-garde.

For example, this sample text is from the Futurist manifesto of 1909:

Let's go!' I said. 'Let's go, my friends! Let's leave! At last mythology and the mystical ideal have been superseded. We are about to witness the birth of the centaur, and soon we shall see the first angels fly! ... We have to shake the doors of life to test their hinges and bolts! Let's leave! Look! There, on the earth, the earliest dawn! Nothing can match the splendour of the sun's red sword, skirmishing for the first time with our thousand year shadows (Marinetti, 1909, p.49)

Compare this with the Laibach text, *Less – Yet More (Summary and Orientation)* (1987):

No one dare foretell our destiny! We come sinless, bestowing life on all things. Our blood is pure, promising many more births. What we are fond of repeatedly begins anew. We shall brace our anger and let iron rise. We shall not injure but shall let only the purity of our spirit cut like an axe, to preserve the purity of our images in sight and sound. Now and forever, in honour and in glory. Let it be (NSK, 1991, p.11).

Under Socialism, history had been effaced and re-categorised according to political expediency, and this included the historical avant-gardes, whose potential for ultimate manifestation had been politically repressed. The Retro-avant-garde is an attempt to re-appropriate an avant-garde past that has been denied the opportunity to play out its historical potential. Retrogardism is a strategy that reclaims the

avant-garde from history, challenging the prevalent contemporary view that the avant-garde is no longer extant as an agent, a view that reflects Leonida Kovač's assertion that the term avant-garde should not be applied to any art movement after World War Two (2003, p.272). As seen in this context, the avant-garde is defunct, and what remains are what Erjavec calls the 'auxillary notions of the trans- and post- avant-garde' that no longer attempts to conflate art and life (2008, p.22). It is not the aim of Retrogardism to resurrect the historic avant-garde, but to interrogate the interdependence of art and ideological power. Retrogardism does not invent a new sign language, but returns to existing traumatic texts to rework and re-encode specific historical moments when the genuine utopian aims of the avant-garde crystallised into traumatic experience. Inke Arns, in *IRWIN Retroprincip 1983-2003*, notes a dualism in the Retrogarde discourse when, in addition to articulating the original utopian meaning of the Grand Utopian Narratives of the historic avant-garde, there is a parallel discourse announcing the failure of these artistic utopias (2004, p.89). What distinguishes Retrogarde practice from a straightforward critique of the signs it reworks however, is that their original utopian meaning is left intact, and the tension between this utopian drive and the apparent re-encoding and re-contextualising of the utopianism constitutes the fascination of Retrogardism.

An examination of Retrogardism necessitates discussion as to the collusion between art and totalitarianism. Laibach and the NSK identify this collusion with totalitarianism quite clearly, stating: 'Art and Totalitarianism are not mutually exclusive' (NSK, 1991, p.21). Writing on the connection between the historic avant-garde and fascism, Mark Antliff notes a revision in the last two decades of

the complacent notion that fascism and modern art are opposed, claiming that an understanding of the interrelation between these two terms is essential for an appraisal of Modernism (2007, p.17). Modern art has become sullied by its involvement in fascism and totalitarianism, and this has resulted in a compensatory action whereby, for example, abstract art as expressed in Constructivism becomes post-war abstract expressionism; a move from setting a template for a new human to an indicator of individual freedom and expression. In this respect, the Nazi *Entartete Kunst* exhibition of 1937 re-affirms the popularly conceived gap between art and oppressive politics, the event creating, in Antliff's words 'an unbridgeable chasm between fascists and the European avant-garde' (2007, p.18).⁸⁵ This was noted by IRWIN in 1987 when they declared the avant-garde finished with the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition (Kent, 1987, p.39).

The paradigm of art's collusion with oppressive ideologies is found in the avant-garde's association with Soviet communism, which served to cement the avant-garde's contemporary association with the discredited Grand Utopian Narrative. This may perhaps be expressed in Slavoj Žižek's assertion that Malevich's square as Modernist icon has come to stand for the crimes perpetrated by Nazism and Stalinism (2010, p.251). As Igor Golomstock points out in his book on totalitarian art, current prejudice against Nazi Kunst or Socialist Realism neglects the fact that the avant-garde championed much totalitarian art in its beginnings, as it demonstrably shared the same utopian drive and teleological impulse (1990, p.25). Boris Groys supports this view by referring to 'the myth of the innocent avant-garde', a myth founded on the idea that totalitarian art was a

⁸⁵ The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition was held in Munich in 1937. 'Entartete Kunst' translates as 'Degenerate Art', which in this context refers to Modern Art that did not reflect National Socialist ideology.

regressive reaction to a new art unintelligible to the masses, and not a natural progression (1992, p.8).

In terms of demonstrating collusion between the avant-garde and totalitarianism, it is worth examining further Groys' notion of Stalinism as aesthetic phenomenon, in which Stalinism is conceived as an organic extension of the Russian avant-garde utopian narrative. Russian avant-garde artists aspired to become what Stalin claimed to be; an engineer of the soul. The goal of the avant-garde was the total conflation of art and life, which is the goal of the aesthetically manifested totalitarian state. Groys writes that both Suprematism and Constructivism were totalising aesthetics that sought to achieve a new harmony of nature and society by subordinating politics and technology to a single aesthetic project (1987, p.120). As Susan Buck-Morss demonstrates in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, the Russian avant-garde 'understood their work not as documenting the revolution but as realising it, serving (and also leading) the proletariat in the active building of a new society' (2000, p.54). Contrary to popularly held perceptions, pre-1934, the avant-garde were not considered to be a separate elite but an everyday reality. Buck-Morss gives the example of the Suprematist UNOVIS group, who were commissioned by the city of Vitebsk to apply Suprematist design to signboards, street decorations, buildings, interior decors, trams, and even ration cards (2000, p.55). The Russian avant-garde was a utility-art: 'What was perceived in the west as the ultimate nightmare of liberal individualism, as the ideological counterpoint to the "Taylorisation", to the Fordist ribbon-work, was in Russia hailed as the Utopian prospect of liberation' (Monroe, 2005, p.51). It was above all, the urge to create a new industrial humanity, and

through this, a new world. It was, however, the Russian avant-garde's very centrality to Soviet politics and the quotidian that proved its downfall. Golomstock writes that the Constructivist artist El Lissitzky ascribed Communism's triumph directly to Malevich's Suprematism (1990, p.3). Malevich himself demanded for his Suprematist UNOVIS group that they be accorded the status of a party, one that would shadow the official Communist one. It was not however a direct political challenge that was to instigate Stalin's 1934 strictures on the Russian avant-garde, but a metaphysical one. If the utopian spirit of the avant-garde in which humanity may be made anew replaces God, then the Russian avant-garde was in competition with Stalin for the role of godhead. It can be argued a similar situation occurred in Nazi Germany, where the paradigmatic aestheticised politics of Nazism could not tolerate an aesthetic not focused on the totalising Nazi spectacle. The Nazi state was an aesthetic totality. An additional aesthetic system, even if affirmative, would have challenged that totality with an alternative perspective, thus enabling critical distance and the potential for dissent.

Laibach and NSK Retrogardism

I have discussed Retrogardism as a concept, in its Eastern European historical context, and how Suprematism functions as the central axiology to Retrogardism. This lays the foundation for an analysis of how Laibach and the NSK specifically articulate the Retrogarde dynamic. The term 'Retro-avant-garde' was first used by Laibach in 1983 in the programme for their exhibition at the ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana, entitled: *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Monumentalna Retro-avantgarda* [Laibach Kunst exhibition – the Monumental Retro-avant-garde]. This exhibition was the public unveiling of the Retrogarde concept, and in

that sense can be said to be the first cohesive statement of artistic strategy in Laibach's development.⁸⁶

The practically realised origins of Laibach and NSK Retrogardism can be found in the IRWIN *Was Ist Kunst* project of 1985. The title refers to an artwork by Belgrade artist Raša Todosijević, who in front of an audience smeared his wife's face with paint, obsessively demanding 'Was ist Kunst?' [What is art?]. The NSK *Was Ist Kunst* project developed over time into a series of over a hundred framed oil paintings in relatively conventional mediums, with recurring archetypes already familiar in Laibach Kunst such as the metal worker, the sower, stags and antlers, the Zahnrad, and Malevich's cross. The materials employed, blood, tar, animal skin, coal, wood, gold and other metals, contributed to the material and metaphorical weight of the works. Some of these paintings were hung in the manner of the Eastern orthodox religious icon; crossing the corner of the room. The *Was Ist Kunst* project represents a coalescing of Retrogarde practice into an artistic system.

Establishing the methodology of Retrogardism as a coherent system is part of Laibach and the NSK's strategy of demanding the East confront itself. This notion is expressed by Inke Arns in *IRWIN Retroprincip 1983-2003*, when she equates it with the NSK *Transnacionala* (1996) and NSK *State-in-Time* (1991) projects (2004, p.86). It is the construction of an autonomic visual language, countering Western Modernism with the Retro-avant-garde of a fictive Eastern

⁸⁶ Although I have primarily used the term 'Retrogarde' throughout, each of the NSK's three main groups initially employed slightly different terminology. Laibach used 'Monumental Retro-avant-garde', IRWIN the 'Retro-principle', and the Scipion Nasice theatre group 'Retrogarde'. It is however essentially the same aesthetic form.

Modernism. The obvious artificiality of the latter structure demonstrates the arbitrary nature of Western art-historical narratives. It is a perspective that fragments linear narratives of art-history and in the process challenges the position of the subject in these narratives, by creating what IRWIN call a 'spiritual cubism', whereby 'we express different viewpoints simultaneously' (Bourriaud, 1989, p.110). By re-capitulating problematic iconography and abstracting it to a new-Suprematism, the NSK disrupt art-historical Eastern European and Western cultural givens.

Retrogardism has proved fruitful in attracting theoretical analysis. Marina Gržinić in *East Art Map* describes it as a process of montage 'on the basis of which iconographic and symbolic elements from the history of Slovene and world art are again constructed and deconstructed' (2006, p.324). Joanne Richardson refers to Retrogardism as 'dialectics at a standstill, repeating frozen fragments of the avant-garde image' (2003, online). She equates this effect to a record that skips, or of a film clip of a fragment of a slogan repeated until it is unbearable and meaningless. Slavoj Žižek, who is a member of the NSK's Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy, and who can be said to have introduced Laibach and the NSK to Western academic scrutiny, compares this process of repetition to the recurring musical refrain of 'Aquarela do Brazil' in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). The refrain is used extensively throughout the film until its fast-paced rhythm and upbeat quality becomes meaningless and the pleasurable effect of the music is negated (Žižek, 1991, p.129). Retrogardism is a process of montage whereby fragments of ideologies are similarly played out to exhaustion. Alexei Monroe refers to Laibach and the NSK's use of repetition as introducing a 'surplus,

excessive element that helps frustrate categorization and which is the responsibility of the spectator and not the artist to interpret' (2000, p.11). By itself, repetition risks confusion with a fetishized Western postmodern practice of repetition. However, combined with dissonance and juxtaposition, repetition is part of the Retrogardist process of the purification of ideological signifiers.

All the above interpretations by Gržinić, Richardson, Žižek and Monroe, are relevant to Retrogardism. Yet these interpretations neglect that Retrogardism is also the construction of a fantastical monolithic entity. Laibach and the NSK purify Völkish archetypes and problematic iconography by the processes of repetition and dissonance, and as floating signifiers severed from a cohesive ideological field they coalesce into the Laibach/NSK spectacle. To an extent it is a process of collusion with late-capitalism, in that in the latter these signifiers of the discredited Grand Utopian Narrative have no exchange value beyond playfully offensive kitsch. These free-floating signifiers are then free for Laibach and the NSK to re-anchor in their aesthetic construct. Igor Zabel notes this fluidity of content wherein the process of transmogrification into pure-form and thus abstraction as found in Retrogardism, 'demonstrates the endless oscillation of various forms and discourses, back and forth, between an ideological semantic content and an entirely formal, "emptied" manifestation' (2011, online). Creating a new-Suprematism from these pure-forms becomes an ideological field in itself, and this constitutes the fantastical monolithic entity that is the 'Monumental Retro-avant-garde'.

Retrogardism and the theatre of Kantor

This chapter has traced the foundations of Retrogardism as a process of identifying with the historical avant-garde at the moment of its traumatic assimilation into totalitarianism, a process expressed in Retrogardism's focus on Suprematism. Furthermore, by re-mythologizing iconography associated with the European traumatic historical, Retrogardism establishes a 'new-Suprematism' where these icons function as pure-form within the monumental Retro-avant-garde. In this recuperation, re-mythologisation, or as Laibach and the NSK have termed it, 're-capitulation', of the Weltanschauung 'kitsch' of history, there is correlation with the theatre of the Polish director Tadeusz Kantor. Retrogardism and Kantor's theatre are both memory-machines. Both attempt to restore the discarded detritus of history to a new aesthetic form, one that returns to the traumas of the past to cast new light on the present, and both Kantor and Laibach operate within Gržinić's Easthetics, employing a discourse removed from the Western experience of history, ideology, and national identity. Kantor addresses the question of what it means to represent, after the Holocaust. The figures in the performance of *The Dead Class* (1975) both living and mannequin refer directly to Kantor's school friends who did not survive Nazi persecution. It is also a response to the suppression of memory under the Iron Curtain. Kantor held that after the genocides of World War Two there is no work of art, 'there is only the object that is torn out of life and reality' (cited in Kobińska, 1993, p.259). Kantor's theatre as a response to the European traumatic historical echoes Laibach and the NSK's. Rather than develop an aesthetic system that seeks to refute art's collusion with totalitarianism by over-compensating and adapting the utopianism of the historical avant-garde to the localised individual politics of personal expression and freedom (as was the case in

the post-war West) Laibach and the NSK return to the past to reclaim and deconstruct that problematic utopianism. Laibach and the NSK counter the liberal illusions of the post-war West in the way Kantor's theatre counters the illusion of representation with the detritus of memory. Both are an attempt, through performance, to establish a truth behind a dangerously comfortable illusion.

Further analysis of Kantor's theatre of memory provides significant comparison with Laibach and NSK praxis. A recurring theme in seminal productions such as Kantor's *The Dead Class* (1975) is the use of repetition. The old people carrying the mannequins of the children they once were, process about the stage, each repeated sequence finally interrupted by a cleaning woman, possibly a metaphor for death. Michal Kobińska writes on this use of repetition in his study of Kantor's theatre, claiming repetition establishes an automatic quality which after some duration deprives the activity and object of its meaning, and that once removed from its original meaning it may be manipulated into other meanings (1993, p.69). This is the identical process of Retrogardism, which through repetition removes the signifier from its ideological field and manipulates it into the ideology of Retrogardism.

Further comparisons are apposite, such as the actor as machine-object, or mannequin, a central tenet to Kantor's theatre. Kantor saw the mannequin's 'uncanny' as being the absence of life, and that it was only through representing the absence of life that it was possible to express life in art. It is possible to view the Laibach performance in this manner. The automaton-like quality of the Laibach members on stage and their impassiveness in performance, which runs counter to

traditional rock-music concerts, connects with the absence of a human face behind the Laibach monolith. Laibach continue to operate as a collective, with no member being credited with any individual authorship, and Laibach's 'persona' maintained in press and television interviews is one of an unhuman totalitarian machine.⁸⁷ The machine-like quality of both Kantor's mannequins and Laibach eliminates any easily identifiable humanity and satisfying recourse to the psychological process in the Kantor actor or Laibach's performance.

It is however in Kantor's use of the 'poor object' that there is the most direct correlation between Kantor's theatre and Laibach's performance. Kantor's theatre revolved around the object that was historically and culturally displaced, that was 'embarrassing' and lacking dignity, what Kantor referred to as 'second-hand' objects belonging to the lowest rung of reality (Kantor, 1993, p.122). In *Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor*, Krzysztof Miklaszewski describes these Kantor objects as 'the artistically represented object, stripped of its expressiveness, its interrelations, its "attitude", its significance in some communicative scheme' (2005, p.37). Kantor's intention was to lift this object from the contempt of history and elevate it to poetry on stage. Kantor himself writes: 'One must juggle with objects that are ridiculous, shy, lacking dignity, embarrassing, almost "trash", nothing, almost a void' (Kobialka, 1993, p.30). In the same text, Kantor lists objects that are soiled: a cartwheel with mud, a rotting board, a rusty gun-barrel, a broken loudspeaker, dusty parcels. In *The Cuttlefish* (1956), for example, a simple iron stand served as the ornamental pulpit for the Pope. It is precisely the same process Laibach and the NSK employ with the discarded iconography of the Grand

⁸⁷ This stance has however relaxed somewhat in recent years, and Laibach often speak freely in unscripted interview.

Utopian Narrative. Retrogardism takes these discarded, ‘embarrassing’ second-hand objects and restores them to a new poetry, but it must re-code them within its system first. Kantor too re-codes his embarrassing objects. On creating a machine made of deckchairs connected with wire and put into motion, Kantor writes: ‘I created an object whose utilitarian character stands in opposition to the new function that creates this oppressive and brutal reality’ (Kobialka, 1993, p.45). With his deckchairs he creates an object that ‘elevated it to the plane of ambiguous meanings and disinterested functions, that is, to the plane of poetry’ (Kobialka, 1993, p.45). Kantor’s re-mythologizing of this discarded detritus creates a liminality in which new forms and meanings may operate, a process repeated in his choice of spaces, a bombed room, a café, a cloakroom, which he understood as ‘poor’ places of ‘unbelonging’, thresholds between existing and non-existing. This is Kantor’s description of the setting of *The Return of Odysseus* (1944):

The room was destroyed. There was war and there were thousands of such rooms. They all looked alike: bare bricks stared from behind a coat of paint, plaster was hanging from the ceiling, boards were missing in the floor, abandoned parcels were covered with dust (they would be used as the auditorium), debris was scattered around, plain boards reminiscent of the deck of a sailing ship were discarded at the horizon of the decayed decor, a gun barrel was resting on a heap of iron scrap, a military loudspeaker was hanging from a rusty metal rope (Kobialka, 1993, p.174)

Site-specific performance is key in Kantor’s disruption of illusion, illusion that sustains and is maintained by institutionalised theatre. The ‘poor’ object of Kantor’s theatre works in combination with his performances in non-theatrical spaces to counter this illusion. Again there is comparison here with Laibach performance, in that Laibach’s touring history has been one of performances in politically relevant spaces, and part of the impact of NSK exhibitions and interventions is their geographical location. In a sense, because of their ideological provocation as a state of being, every Laibach performance is site-specific, as

evinced in their naming their first German tour (1985), *Die Erste Bombardierung über dem Deutschland* [The First Bombing over Germany], or their 1983 tour of Europe, *The Occupied Europe Tour*. Laibach, an art-group from a small and militarily insignificant nation positioned themselves as the invaders and emphasised the militancy of their ideological assault. In 1989 Laibach performed in Belgrade, where they had not performed since Slobodan Milošević came to power in 1987. Before the performances Laibach projected Second World War German propaganda footage accompanied by extracts from Milošević speeches, and the *Occupied Europe NATO Tour 1994-1995* (1996) culminated in two concerts in a besieged Sarajevo.

The paradox of Retrogardism as the ‘Immanent Consistent Spirit’

Retrogardism is a paradoxical movement, which, according to Inke Arns is ‘moving forward into the future that takes place exclusively in reference to the past’ (2004, p.86). It is simultaneously a forward movement that paradoxically returns to the utopianism of the historic avant-garde, and a backward movement to the classicism of Socialist Realism and Nazi Kunst. This contradictory temporal flow is in itself Retrogarde, as it mimics the [il]logic of totalitarianism. This [il]logic is the fascination and allure of totalitarianism, and the appeal of Retrogardism. In arguing this [il]logic as an appeal of totalitarianism, Žižek draws a comparison with faith, in that for both, the power to coherently contain contradictions and apparent opposites is central to their allure (1994a, p.229). To possess and openly acknowledge inherent contradictions becomes a founding tenet of faith or the totalitarian system. This is certainly the case in theism; the more impossible the contradictions the greater the demonstrated belief. In Žižek’s model, a system that can negate the rational, that can create its own logic, can

therefore conquer death, and this has an immense power of fascination (Žižek, 1994a, p.229). This fascination for paradox and contradiction is at the heart of Retrogardism, and it is an irrational quality echoed in the words of the NSK:

The Retrogardist is an artist guided by the desire and ability to analyse with an unerring eye the relations of the beautiful, the raw, the exalted, the holy and the terrible in current events throughout the world (NSK, 1991, p.286).

This undefined dynamic of the ineffable is a thread that is present throughout the NSK Gesamtkunstwerk. It is the Lacanian *Objet petit a* around which the spectacle of Laibach and the NSK coalesces. It is the void at the heart of the spectacle, and the empty ideological field at the centre of Laibach's re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual. In NSK terminology it is the Immanent Consistent Spirit, which is allocated a node in the NSK Organigram:

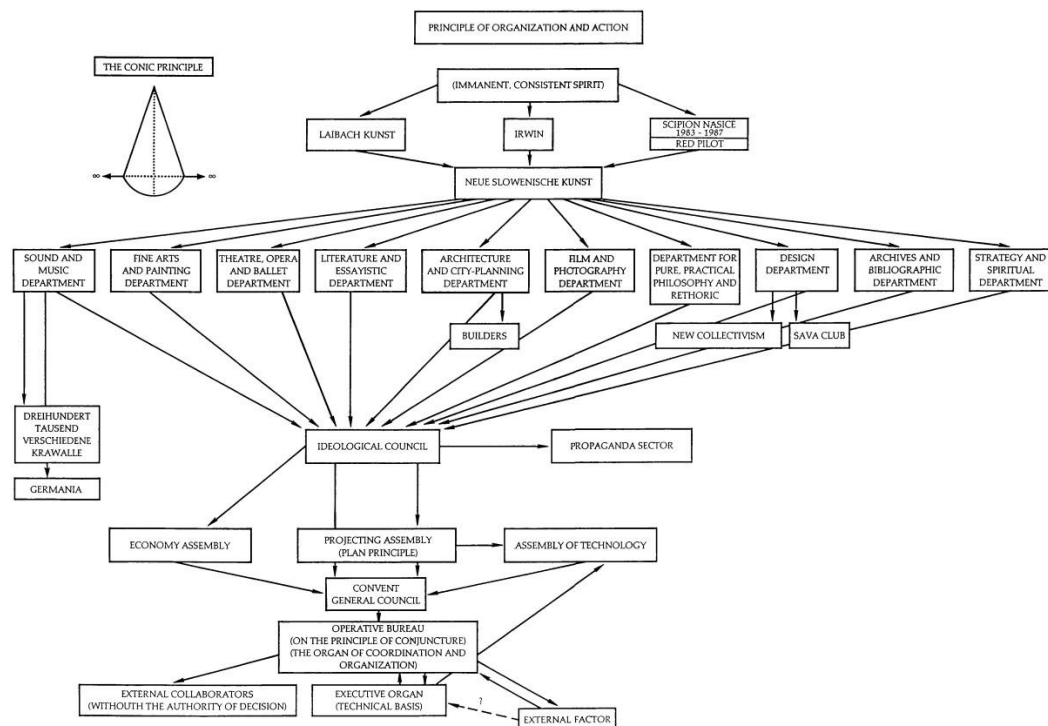


Figure 3.40, *Organigram*, NSK (1984b)

If the Organigram is to be read as a hierarchical schematic, the Immanent Consistent Spirit is clearly stationed above the three main groups of the NSK, and

arrows flow from the Immanent Consistent Spirit towards them. The Immanent Consistent Spirit may be said to be employed variously as the NSK's 'spiritual' dimension, or its 'energy'. Precise definition is irrelevant as the role of the Immanent Consistent Spirit is to provide a fluid space of meaning that can be adapted to any NSK process.

The Immanent Consistent Spirit is central to an analysis of Retrogardism as it replicates the role of aesthetics in 'papering-over' the cracks in totalitarian logic. The aesthetics of the Nazi state unified the [il]logic of its totalitarian system, lending it a coherence beyond the realm of the rational. In this sense the monumental spectral aesthetic entity that is Retrogardism echoes Eric Hobsbawm's notion of theatre-states. For Hobsbawm, totalitarian states were maintained by performance. Aesthetic-political states such as Soviet communism and the Third Reich die without repeat performance of ritual, themselves kept alive by constant innovation (Hobsbawm, 1996, p.13). Retrogardism as an aesthetic form uses the same logic to unify its paradoxical temporal movement back to the forward-looking progressive drive of avant-garde utopianism and forward to the regressive nature of totalitarian classicism.

Retrogardism is an attempt to reconnect with history, to maintain a historical continuum in a postmodern climate of fragmented time constituted as a series of perpetual presents. This climate is what Gržinić calls an 'instantaneous and obsessive (tele)-presence' whereby 'we are no longer in synch with the "stuff" of memory' (Gržinić, 2000, online). Pil and Galia Kollektiv in their analysis of modern re-enactment of past aesthetic forms, including the historical avant-garde,

refer to the dangers of ‘filling in the pixels’ in the magnification of the past beyond the remit of historical documentation (2007, online). In the digital age, where information is currency and is privileged to the exclusion of all else, the unknown becomes invalid and invisible. In their argument, concentration camps, Tiananmen Square and Guantánamo Bay are therefore all sites of potential invisibility. If in the digital age it is assumed the past is increasingly subject to total access, the aporia of concentration camps, Tiananmen Square and Guantánamo Bay will be neutralised, and the potential for meaning contained within these aporias will be lost. Retrogardism constructs its monumental phantasm out of fragments of history, re-coding them into a ‘new-Suprematism’, a spectral aesthetic state. In constructing this aesthetic, Laibach and the NSK demonstrate that the past is neither subject to total access, nor can it be digitally pixelated and stripped of its unknowns and aporias.

Retrogardism is a monolithic aesthetic construct within which a system of new-Suprematist forms cohere in a paradoxical movement both forward and regressive. By a process of dissonance, repetition and juxtaposition, Retrogardism interrogates ideology as the interdependence of aesthetical elements that constitute ideology’s *modus operandi*. By embracing and re-coding these ideological signifiers, the Retrogarde proposes that they cannot be overcome directly, but by demonstrating their aesthetic mechanism the power of these ideologies can be disrupted. In this sense, Retrogardism lays the foundation for an analysis of Laibach and the NSK’s secondary dynamic, that of over-identification, which is discussed in the following chapter.

OVER-IDENTIFICATION

This chapter explores Laibach and the NSK's strategy of over-identification as Retrogardism in practice. In Laibach this constitutes an excessive staging of the totalitarian ritual, resulting in an ideological ambiguity. I will explore how the practice of over-identification reveals a hidden agenda to an ideology, whether that be in revealing the mechanism of an ideology or its transgressive underside. I will also examine the difference between true and false over-identification strategies by looking at the work of some other artists and activist groups whose actions can be said to resemble over-identification practice. I will consider the practice of over-identification as having its origins in the trauma of European totalitarianism, and specifically the impact of Laibach and the NSK's over-identification praxis in their native Slovenia. The chapter concludes by asking the question whether over-identification is still operative in the late-capitalist 'post-ideological' age.

Stevphen Shukaitis defines over-identification as the practice of taking 'a system of ideology more seriously than it takes itself, and through doing so to unearth the hidden, obscene elements and social interaction which provide an unspoken function of social cohesion' (Shukaitis, 2011, online).⁸⁸ As I will argue below, an ideology may be supported by its obscene transgressive underside, which constitutes its secondary ideology. Over-identification performs this secondary ideology as the primary ideology, and in so doing impairs the ability of the primary ideology to function. Slavoj Žižek, who it can be said in his championing of

⁸⁸ Shukaitis has written extensively on the NSK, and in April 2012 organised the first NSK citizen's baptism; *Baptism Under Gustav*. His son, Gustav Shukaitis, was baptised as a citizen of the NSK State-in-Time in a 'baptism and naming ceremony' at the Marcus Campbell bookshop, London. The four founder members of IRWIN were in attendance, and Peter Mlakar of the NSK's Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy officiated. I was also in attendance.

Laibach brought over-identification to Western academic scrutiny, likens the tactic to the satire of Jaroslav Hašek's book *The Good Soldier Schwejk* (cited in Wright and Wright, 1999, p.99). Schwejk, the protagonist, causes havoc by taking orders literally and thus lays bare the absurdity behind a system that appears to be straightforward. Laibach's staging of the mechanism of ideology and the obscene transgressive as manifested in their stark automaton-like performance of the aesthetic-political, lays bare the command-to-obey of mass mobilisation, the urge to surrender individual free-will to the dictates of power, whether that be state, religious, or economic power.

Laibach and the NSK remain the most well-known and influential of the practitioners of over-identification, and it is they who have exemplified true over-identification through the radical ambivalence of their praxis. Laibach and the NSK's performance is a complete staging of the totalitarian spectacle, articulated throughout their audio-visual texts. These texts deal in absolutes and mono-statements that constitute a totality bereft of critical distance. Laibach and the NSK function as a collective; neither the self nor conventional notions of freedom of expression located in the individual are recognised as valid. For example, until recently IRWIN works were not signed by the individual artists, and the individual figure in Laibach/NSK audio/visual imagery is reduced to the status of an icon or cipher. Laibach and NSK imagery is monumentalist and directly channels the propaganda of Nazi Kunst and Socialist Realist models. Laibach's music is primarily triumphalist and martial in tone, with consistent use of choirs and fanfares. All the above examples are the trappings of totalitarianism for which Laibach and the NSK are most well-known. On one level, in performing to excess

the spectacle of power, this performs a function of over-identification in laying bare the nature of the obey command, yet closer analysis reveals in their employ of ostensibly opposed ideological signifiers such as Nazi propaganda imagery and Socialist Realist icons, not an interrogation of the ideology of totalitarianism or its logic, but an interrogation of the mechanism of ideology itself. Laibach are not over-identifying with totalitarianism, and to interpret their performance as such is to fail to engage fully with their over-identification dynamic. Laibach and the NSK's use of John Heartfield's *Blut und Eisen* (1934) picture as both the centre of the NSK 'logo' and on album sleeves may serve as an example to demonstrate the illusion that Laibach are about the logic of totalitarianism.⁸⁹

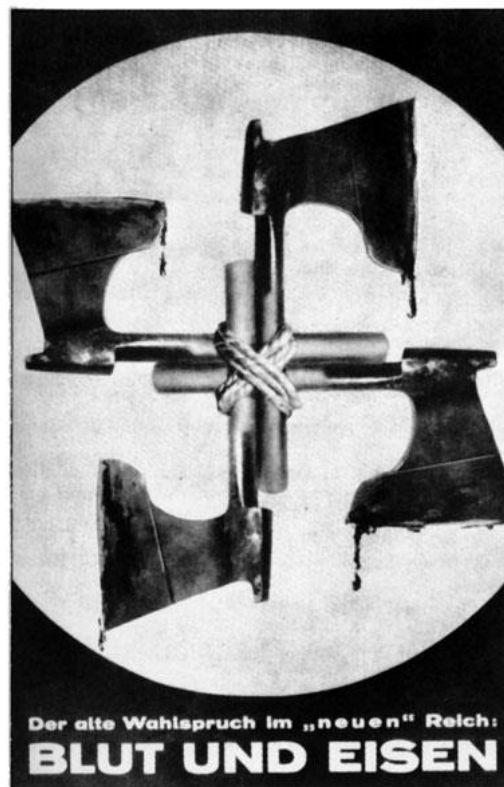


Figure 4.1, *Blut und Eisen*, John Heartfield (1934)

⁸⁹ The examples of the Heartfield and Laibach swastikas occur in the 'Introduction' chapter, and are repeated here for relevance.

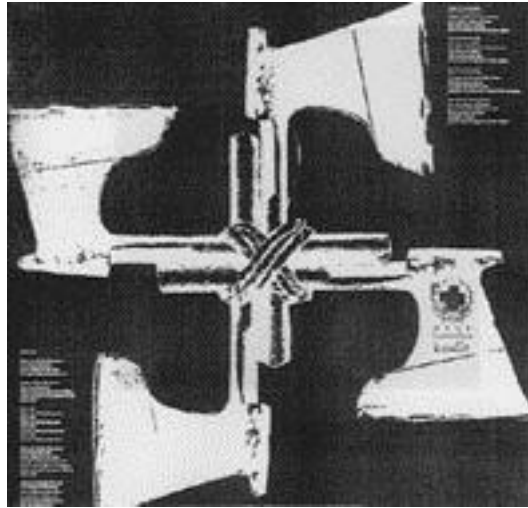


Figure 4.2, album sleeve: *Opus Dei*, Laibach (1987)

Heartfield's original photo-montage swastika is formed of four axes dripping blood. In hindsight this appears to be stating the obvious, as Nazism has become a synecdoche for evil, but Heartfield's anti-Nazi image was made four years before Kristallnacht, when the S.A. stormtroopers ransacked Jewish premises and synagogues, and one year before the virulently anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws were imposed. Both these events are watersheds in the history of the rise of Nazism and its associated violence, and in 1934 Heartfield's image served as a warning. Totalitarianism is synonymous with oppression and the subjugation of the individual to the mass. Laibach's audio and visual imagery is similarly unrelentingly dark and oppressive, and can be said to over-identify with the popularly conceived notion of totalitarianism. In comparison with a hindsight reading of Heartfield's image, this would therefore be a similarly pointless case of stating the obvious. Laibach are neither critiquing nor re-affirming totalitarianism by excessive mimicry, and to accuse Laibach and the NSK of either is to fail to fully engage with their discourse. The re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual is

merely a delivery system and not an end in itself. This is at the heart of over-identification practice and is analysed in this chapter.

Thus in the context of the strategy of over-identification, Laibach's totalitarian spectacle should be understood as an analytical tool and not a straightforward celebration of the surplus political-aesthetic. As Slavoj Žižek has written, Laibach and the NSK function as a question, never an answer, and Laibach and the NSK's over-identification tactic provides an analytical tool for engaging with the ideologies of power (2002, p.287). This system operates within four interconnected discursive fields: the notion of a secondary ideology; transgressive enjoyment as the obscene underside to oppressive power structures; Slovene national identity; and mechanisms of mass manipulation. These four factors are analysed below.

A Secondary Ideology

Over-identification is a process of making visible the invisible discourse that maintains the structure of an ideology by staging the invisible discourse. Žižek credits the 'extraordinary critical-ideological impact' of Laibach and the NSK in the eighties, both in Slovenia and abroad, with their articulation of the constitutive tension between public-written law and super-ego (2002, p.285). In an excessive staging of the totalitarian ritual, Laibach bring to the fore the transgressive charge of enjoyment in the command to obey. According to Žižek, society functions not so much by identifying with the visible law but with its invisible underside, its transgression, or suspension. He posits that a community is held together by association with the obscene element which supplements the overt law; the hidden reverse that contains the illicit charge of enjoyment (2002, p.287). Žižek gives the

example of the Ku Klux Klan in the American South, where the official 'public' law is accompanied, and validated, by its double – the 'unseen' terror of the KKK. A public official is recognised as one of the community, yet this official will be cast out if his or her KKK activities are made public, for then the hidden underside, in psychoanalytical terms the obscene enjoyment, is revealed. Thus the real conformism in this social system is a conforming to the unspoken public secret of the hidden transgression. In this formula it is not a simple case of de-masking, but of recognising that the constant potential for de-masking legitimises the ideology. To demonstrate, Slavoj Žižek compares the act of shouting 'the emperor has no clothes!' to shouting 'look, that man is completely naked under his clothes' (1989, p.28). Here what is being thrown into relief is not the vanity of the emperor and his court, but the potential for de-masking on which the concept of this vanity rests. For the law to remain a cohesive functioning entity, its validating inverse, the obscene element of enjoyment must remain hidden. Once this obscene underside is exposed, as in Laibach and the NSK's praxis, the primary discourse's ability to function properly is impaired. To put this another way, the allure of an ideology of domination and control may originate from the mystique of its [il]logic; from its enigmatic core. Over-identification reveals this 'mystique' for what it is; a machinery of contradictions and inconsistencies. According to Marina Gržinić, 'the very logic of legitimising the relation of domination must remain concealed if it is to be effective' (1999, p.103). An ideology may only be confronted if the mechanism of domination is laid bare, and exposed by being staged directly, as practiced by Laibach and the NSK.

Alexei Monroe refers to this process of staging the obscene fantasm as a 'rendering audible' the hidden codes and internal contradictions contained within an ideological power structure (2008, p.7). An example of this in NSK practice can be found in the Day of Youth poster scandal of 1987. Dan Mladosti or 'Day of Youth' was up until 1987 an annual Yugoslavian state ritual in the best Socialist Realist mass-as-ornament tradition:

Young people all over the country had to carry around a phallic symbol to celebrate Tito's birthday. After it was passed from hand to hand for two months, the baton was handed over to 'our dearest Marshal Tito' on 25th May in the JNA stadium in Belgrade, with thousands of disciplined young bodies prostrating themselves at the leader's feet. (Benderley and Kraft, 1994, p.101)

The design department of the NSK, the NK (New Collectivism) were commissioned to produce a poster for the event. The scandal broke when it was discovered that this poster was an adaptation of a Nazi propaganda poster by Richard Klein, entitled *Das Dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums* (see figure 1.2 and 1.3). In the NSK version, the swastika flag has been replaced with the Yugoslav flag, and the German eagle with a dove, a strategy only noticed long after the poster had been used to advertise the celebration. By having their poster design accepted by the Yugoslav authorities as representing the spirit of this state jamboree the NSK had exposed telling similarities between the Yugoslav Socialist regime and fascism, its apparent ideological adversary. The NSK's appropriation of a Nazi propaganda image to celebrate a central edifice of Yugoslavian national pride proved shocking to Yugoslavians. What was more revealing however, was the readiness of the authorities to adopt the image to represent the event, as this

demonstrated uncomfortable parallels between the two apparently opposed ideologies of Tito's Socialism and National Socialism.⁹⁰

This system of appropriating and juxtaposing the signifiers of apparently ideological opposites demonstrates the process whereby Laibach and the NSK emphatically and unapologetically employ traumatic and ideologically fraught iconography to reveal a hidden mechanism wherein power is exercised. An analogy of this dynamic may be found in the Paris exhibition of 1937, where the two pavilions, Nazi and Soviet, faced each other:



Nazi pavilion

Soviet pavilion

Figure 4.3, Paris Exhibition, 1937

Although ostensibly politically and ideologically opposed, the monumentalism of both structures illustrates the paradoxical similarities. Both these edifices evince

⁹⁰ Tomaž Mastnak, who has written on Yugoslavia at the time of the scandal, suggests the L.S.Y. (League of Socialist Youth) colluded in bringing about the scandal in order to discredit the *Day of Youth* event, which many in Slovenia by 1987 considered an anachronism (1994, p.101).

the necessity of their respective systems relying on an aesthetic surplus to sustain their inconsistencies. These two buildings faced each other across a causeway, and thus adjacent, the parallels become more apparent than the differences. This is Laibach and the NSK's process. It is not ideology itself but its mechanism that is their text.

The Obscene Transgressive: Enjoyment

The Day of Youth event ably demonstrates how over-identification works in revealing concealed secondary ideologies. However, Laibach's over-identification strategy is perhaps more apparent in exorcising the obscene element that supplements the ideology of power, namely the illicit charge of enjoyment. Kostis Stafylakis and Yannis Stavrakakis in *States Of Enjoyment: Questioning The Global Art Field With NSK*, express this as the surplus, the 'over-', in the over-identification dynamic; a 'jouis-sens highlighting the passionate investment underlying any successful ideological commitment' (2011, p.87). Laibach fully articulate to grotesque excess the aesthetic-political in order to expose the magnetic power of its most obscene figurations. This is a separate process to the strategy of revealing secondary ideologies, as it is concerned far more with the fascination for brute power and voluntary subjugation of the individual to the mass. Over-identification in this context re-mythologises the discredited and potentially taboo utopian energies and traumas of the past rather than repressing them. Rather than see these Grand Utopian Narratives and traumatic histories as Europe's shame, Laibach and the NSK embrace totalitarian rhetoric to the point of triumphalism. Turning away from these oppressive narratives leaves the problems and taboos untouched and the cracks simply papered over. Johannes Birringer puts it succinctly when writing on the subject of Laibach and the NSK's ideological

ambiguity, that 'fascism may have been defeated militarily in the last world war, but the West never deconstructed and destroyed it symbolically and politically' (2000, p.109). By celebrating the spectacle of fascism and excessive authoritarianism, Laibach expose the illicit charge of enjoyment at the heart of the ritual. An example of this may found in the reactions of the audience leaving a Laibach performance in Chicago in 1989:

Interviewer: Excuse me, can I have your statement about tonight's show, please?

Spectator: I think it was neo-fascist, but I'm not sure if it was a joke or not. So that's what I'm trying to figure out, do you know, are they...?

Interviewer: No, I don't, but why do you think it was neo-fascist?

Spectator: Umm, well I just had an incredible like, subconscious urge to march, and I think my friend did as well.... I felt pride in a country I did not belong to.

Interviewer: And you didn't like that?

Spectator: Oh no, I liked it, I just want to know if they are serious or not (Laibach, 2004, DVD).

Laibach perform only the shell of the spectacle of power, this leaves a void where its legitimising ideology should be. In its place, now exposed and unable to hide behind ideology, is the obscene enjoyment.

In order to interrogate Laibach's over-identification as a process of manifesting the obscene transgressive enjoyment at the heart of the spectacle of power and control, I must return to my earlier point on the deceptive nature of Laibach's performance. Superficially Laibach resemble the popularly conceived image of fascists. From their inception in 1980 up to the release of *Kapital* in 1992, Laibach performed in austere dress resembling military uniform both on

stage and off.⁹¹ This, their most controversial period, in which their strategy of over-identification was most active, was marked in performance by martial drumming on stage and floor-to-ceiling banners redolent of a Nuremberg rally.



Figure 4.4, Laibach (1980s)



Figure 4.5, Laibach (1980s)

⁹¹ Eda Čufer, a member of the NSK, writes that between 1980 and 1985 Laibach never took off their 'uniforms', 'For Laibach there was only acting, no offstage' (2003, p.391). Performances since 1992 have been less martial in appearance.

However, this process of over-identifying with popularly perceived fascist aesthetics creates a question as to the true nature of fascism. The brute elements of fascism laid bare by Laibach reveals what Žižek identifies as a fundamental error by opponents of fascism in trying to determine a set of properties that define its permanent essence (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.65). At the heart of the fascist spectacle are not brown shirts and jackboots, Žižek claims, but a transgressive jouissance. Laibach create that conceptual space by excessively over-stating the rhetoric of totalitarianism to an absurd degree, emphasising the spectacle's façade at the expense of a substantiating core ideology. For Žižek, Laibach are the conceptual apparatus that enables constructive dialogue with neo-fascism, nationalism, neo-communism, communism and fascism (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.62). Over-identification in Laibach's praxis is a process of acknowledging and embracing the illicit allure of totalitarianism, fascism, and Grand Utopian Narratives.

Over-identification is a strategy of dismantling a mythological ideological structure from within by articulating its own vocabulary to excess, a tactic also notably employed by the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid in relation to Stalinism. Their SOTS-ART, which began in the early 1970s, was a combination of Socialist Realism and Western Pop-art. Komar and Melamid saw in the West's moralistic criticism of the Soviet system not only a failing attempt to critique Soviet communism by *de*-mythologising it, but an attempt to replace this ideology with the West's (Groys, 2003, p.59). In response, Komar and Melamid

re-mythologised Stalinism in an attempt to overcome Stalin's legacy by utilising its own utopian impulse.

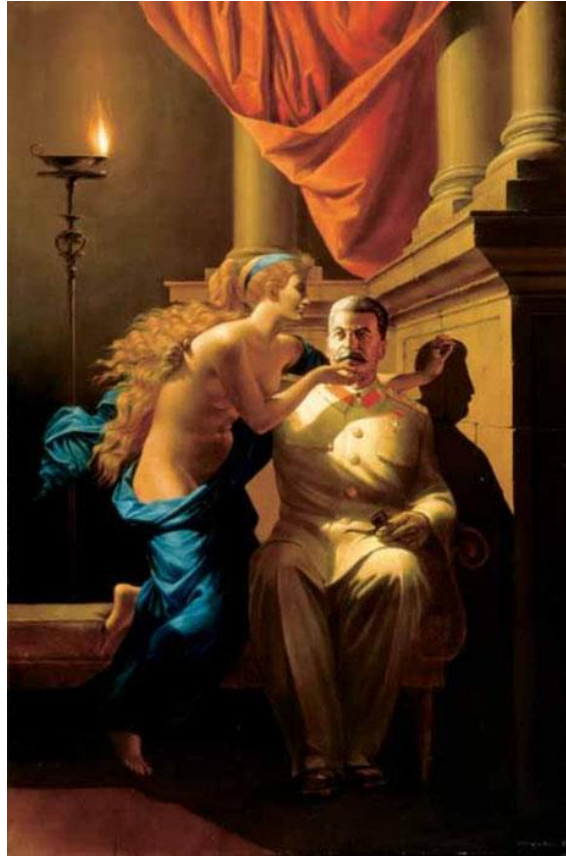


Figure 4.6, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, Komar and Melamid (1982)

Boris Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, holds that art that attempts to de-mythologise Stalin will fail, for it does not articulate the utopian impulse at the heart of the spectacle, which is left intact by direct critique (1992, p.115). A utopian ideology cannot be criticised for being utopian, as that is its prime discourse. Only by bringing to the light of day the secondary discourse, that of its allure, can this ideology be de-constructed. This strategy forms the core of Laibach's over-identification dynamic, so much so that it is listed as point three on the *Ten Items of the Covenant*, the Laibach manifesto:

‘All art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation’ (NSK, 1991, p.18).

Laibach and the NSK, Komar and Melamid, Groys and Žižek, are all articulating an unresolved issue at the heart of the Left; what Žižek refers to as an inability of the Left to confront what is ‘in psychoanalytical terms, the libidinal economy of fascism’ (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.63). Žižek finds this manifested in the French Left’s denunciation of Laibach in the 1980s, which Žižek claims originates from an unresolved Vichy guilt. Žižek maintains this guilt will remain unresolved unless the spectre of the ‘libidinal economy’ of fascism is properly addressed (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.63). Inke Arns posits it is the NSK, and by association Laibach, who bring this libidinal economy to the surface. In directly addressing the traumatic experiences of European as well as Slovenian history and breaking taboos by appearing to re-affirm these negative elements, Arns claims the NSK expose a ‘subcutaneous longing for voluntary subordination’ (1998, p.21). It is this latter phrase that is most salient to my argument. Contained within the absolutism and triumphalist command-to-obey of Laibach’s impossible authority paradigm, is the urge to respond positively, to submit to the onslaught. It is this submission that proves to be the problematic ‘impossible’ subject position as regards Laibach’s over-identification, an issue I shall return to at the end of this chapter.

Over-identification in Slovenia

Laibach’s initial and most effective impact was in their native Slovenia in the 1980s, where their excessive staging of the totalitarian fantasy was to signify altogether differently than in the West. In Slovenia, Laibach’s performance of the

totalitarian spectacle is a necessarily more direct identification with the myths and ideologies that comprise the Slovenian national *thing*.⁹² In the West, for example, unless they have some degree of understanding of Yugoslavian history and culture, Laibach's audience will be ignorant of the aspect of Laibach's over-identification strategy that directly addresses Slovenian and Yugoslav national identity. Laibach take the myths and ideologies that comprise this identity and treat them as ready-made texts. The three main elements of this strategy as explored below are Self-management Socialism, fascism, and Socialism, all of which played central roles in the construction of Yugoslavian national identity.

After the failure of collective farming in the immediate post-war years, Edvard Kardelj, Tito's ideologue, introduced what was termed Self-management Socialism to Yugoslavia. Described by Aleš Erjavec as incompetent populism and impossible bureaucracy, it was an attempt to locate a happy medium between the Western market economy and the unwieldy bureaucracy of 'actually existing Socialism' (2009, p.116). This ideology and its manifestation was exploited as ready-made text by Laibach, and it is this apparently complete replication of the governing system that made Laibach so difficult to either ignore or censure in 1980s Slovenia. Although fuelled by the populist outrage of the use of the name *Laibach*, with its Nazi occupation connotations, and driven by the powerful Yugoslav veteran partisans lobby, reasoned opposition to Laibach in Slovenia proved problematic. The political ideologues of Self-management Socialism found it difficult to establish critical distance between Laibach's over-identification with ideology and the government's Self-management Socialism system. Laibach's

⁹² The national *thing* is the Freudian *das Ding* (Materialised enjoyment) manifested in the way subjects of a given nation organise their collective enjoyment through national myths (Žižek, 1991, p.165).

spectacle replicated too well the semantics of Self-management Socialism for there to be effective rebuttal. For example, the NSK Organigram, which represents the mapping of the spectral NSK organisational structure, resembled diagrams in Yugoslav textbooks that aim to explain the country's complex system of political representation.⁹³ Also, Laibach's written text is often confusingly bureaucratic in the manner of Kardelj's self-management Socialist diction. In the latter, a business becomes an 'individual business organ', and a worker, an 'associated Socialist producer' (Monroe, 2000, p.72). Alexei Monroe likens this obtuse syntax to George Orwell's Newspeak from 1984, and asserts that François Thom's work on Orwell's Newspeak, *Newspeak: The Language of Soviet Communism*, is essential to an understanding of Laibach's written and spoken texts (2000, p.41). This obtuse and bureaucratic vocabulary becomes a text for Laibach, although not always through direct iteration. The following comparison illustrates Laibach indirectly referencing a Kardelj quotation:

Kardelj: 'No state, no system, and no political party can bring man happiness. Man alone can create his own happiness' (cited in Erjavec, 2009, p.116).

Laibach, in their infamous TV Tednik television interview of 1983, recode this:

Laibach: 'Happiness consists in the complete suspension of one's own human identity, in consciously giving up one's personal taste, conviction, judgement, in voluntary de-personalisation and the ability for self-sacrifice, identification with a higher, superior system – with the multitude, collective, ideology' (cited in Skok, 2009, p.35)

Laibach's over-identification practice of the 1980s replicated Self-management Socialism, which meant that if the Yugoslav authorities, advocates of Self-management Socialism, were to censure Laibach's discourse they risked putting

⁹³ The Organigram is also discussed in the chapter 'Retrogardism'.

themselves up for the same criticism. Here Laibach through over-identification eradicate the distance between the represented and the representation.

As the articulation of Self-management Socialism as text will have greater meaning in their native Slovenia than elsewhere, so too the representation of fascism in 1980s' Slovenia will convey an altogether different resonance if performed by native artists. Sabrina Ramet, who has written on the rock music and sub-culture of 1980s' Eastern Europe, notes the vital part fascism played in the political mythology of Yugoslavia. She writes that the communist press and government 'never stopped recalling their days of glory in the struggle against fascism in World War Two' (1994b, p.120). The capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, is known as the 'Hero City' for its resistance to Nazi occupation, and the veteran partisan groups held considerable political sway at the time of Laibach's greatest notoriety. Over-identification with a fascist aesthetic, as practiced by Laibach, will therefore assume the appearance of a betrayal of national identity, and frank ingratitude to national heroism.

Socialist ideology is another text Laibach interrogate by over-identification, and along with fascism and Self-management Socialism, one that carries a significantly greater charge in their native Slovenia than in the West. I have discussed the unrelenting humourless quality of Laibach's performance, which is automaton-like in performance and text, wherein the notion of the self is not recognised outside the collective. Here Laibach expose the hidden ideology of Socialist Realism. The Russian historic avant-garde of Constructivism, Futurism and Suprematism sought to reinvent humanity as a 'new man who gladly accepted

his role as the bolt or screw in the gigantic co-ordinated industrial machine' (Žižek, 2006a, p.492). Socialist Realism was to replace this austere automatism by putting forward a Socialism with a human face. The introduction of Socialist Realism as official Soviet doctrine saw the replacement of the stark de-personalisation of a utopia of geometric form, as advocated by Suprematism, with happy shining faces of individuals working for the state. Laibach aggressively reassert this austere automatism that was merely concealed by the happy shining faces of the Soviet worker. The warm and friendly surface of Socialist Realism serves to obscure the brute reality of state power, and Laibach invert this illusion.

Alexei Monroe sees another aspect of Laibach's over-identification strategy particular to the Slovenian cultural space. Monroe finds a spectral and fantastical quality in Laibach's militant statement of Slovenian national identity. Monroe has it that such extreme Slovenism has no precedent, in fact, quite the opposite, and Slovenians have often found Laibach's fantastical creation of a triumphalist and monumental Slovenia uncomfortable and misleading. Monroe takes this further, and suggests that Laibach, by pre-empting any such possible militant Slovenism, to some extent cauterise any potential extreme nationalism in Slovenia (2008, p.292). In this way, Laibach's over-identification with the image of an extreme Slovenism acts as aversion therapy for any excessive attachment to national myths. In the words of Monroe: 'By setting a paradigm of impossible authority which no existing Slovene state, Stalinist or catholic, could match, NSK may even have paradoxically (or symbolically) *forestalled* the creation of a state embodying any total doctrine within the Slovene space' (2008, p.112).⁹⁴ Monroe's point is included here in order

⁹⁴ The italics are Monroe's.

to support my argument that Laibach's form of over-identification is unique and multi-faceted, operating in both the domestic and universal fields.

Eastern European specificity

I have discussed in previous chapters the illusion that Retrogardism is postmodern, arguing that the postmodernism discourse is a form of Western chauvinism. In support of my argument, I proposed Marina Gržinić's term 'Easthetics' be adopted in order to articulate a space for Eastern European aesthetic discourse. The strategy of over-identification is part of these Easthetics, one that was gestated in the Socialist Realist discourse.⁹⁵ Under Socialism, the disparity between the official Socialist Realist doctrine and everyday reality created an official state ideology that was *other*, in that the Eastern Bloc subject was more aware of ideology as a construct articulated by the state than his or her Western counterpart. In this culture, ideology becomes text, which is the basic format of over-identification. Marina Gržinić has written on this awareness of ideology-as-construct, and finds in the absurdist practice of the Russian Oberiu group of the late 1920s-1930s an early precedent to the over-identification work of Laibach and the NSK.⁹⁶ In support of this argument, Gržinić compares the work of the Futurists with Oberiu. Whilst the former would create new words and innovate language coding, the latter destabilized the semantic and pragmatic logic whilst keeping the word units intact. Oberiu created an empty language that can articulate itself only through repetition of already existing formulations, a process Gržinić likens

⁹⁵ In *Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance*, Arns and Sasse go further, suggesting that current Western media activism was inspired by Eastern European artistic practices, claiming that tactics of subversive affirmation and over-identification, initially adopted by way of necessity in Socialist Eastern Europe, became an influential import from the East to the West in the 1990s (2006, p.444).

⁹⁶ Oberiu stood for *Association of Real Art*, and included the artists Daniil Charms and Aleksandr Vvedenskij. Gržinić states the Oberiu group were the last formation within the Soviet literary avant-garde before the abolition of all literary groups by Stalin in 1932 (2006, p.484).

directly to the work of Laibach and the NSK. Laibach and the NSK create nothing new; their texts are a bricolage of Duchampian ready-mades, whether this be Slovenian national identity, Nazi Kunst or ideology itself (Gržinić, 2006b, p.484). A similar process where an awareness of ideology-as-construct becomes text can be found in the work of the Russian artist Eric Bulatov. Boris Groys finds in Bulatov's work a collapse of what he calls the 'private three dimensional space of the realistic picture' and the 'social two-dimensional space of the ideological propaganda poster' (2003, p.81).



Figure 4.7, *Danger*, Eric Bulatov (1975)



Figure 4.8, *Red Horizon*, Eric Bulatov (1971-1972)

In these paintings Bulatov is expressing a world saturated with ideology, whereby immediacy becomes impossible as reality is mediated through a totalising ideology. In the above pictures, ideology intrudes on the illusionist scene as literal text, collapsing any spatial and critical perspective into a flat totality. These pictures could be read as images of desirable leisure activities, but the imposition of the text and the red stripe provides a framework suggestive of propaganda. The illusionist image ceases to be a representation of the real and becomes a vehicle for political message.

Further examples abound in the Eastern Bloc as regards tactics akin to over-identification. In Poland in 1987, the Orange Alternative staged an event in Krakow celebrating the communist revolution. Participants all wore red, chanted revolutionary slogans and came dressed as icons of the revolution such as the Battleship Potemkin and the proletariat. Tomaš Pospisyl, in his contribution to a source book for Central and Eastern European art, reports that the effect of this and other celebrations by the Orange Alternative was to cause confusion for the authorities, for whom these ludic acts *resembled* rebellion but on examination were simply an over-staging of Socialism (Hoptman and Pospisyl, 2002, p.257). In that same year, the Orange Alternative performed *Who's Afraid of Toilet Paper*, where sheets of toilet paper were solemnly handed out, with recipients being told: 'Let justice begin from toilet paper. Socialism, with its extravagant distribution of goods, as well as an eccentric posture, has put toilet paper at the forefront of people's dreams' (cited in Arns and Sasse, 2006, p.447). In Russia, the Moscow conceptualist art group TOT-ART staged their own version of a Soviet Subbotnik.

Official Subbotniks dated from the 1920s and were regular Saturdays of voluntary work in which whole cities took part. In 1982, Anatoly Zhigalov of TOT-ART organised what was termed a *Golden Subbotnik* in Moscow, calling on the residents of a particular housing block to paint the benches gold, rather than a more useful act such as weeding or picking up litter. The participants did as they were told, as under the Soviet system, being the kommandant of the block Zhigalov had the authority to organise a Subbotnik.⁹⁷ Between 1987 and 1988, the Russian group Chempiony mira, as part of the series *Preventive Geography*, organised further Subbotniks, such as the actions *Gigiena Poberezh'ja* [Hygiene on the Shore], and *Nostalgija po Chistote* [Nostalgia for Cleanliness]. In these actions, groups of Soviet citizens cleaned two kilometres of shoreline by shampooing the rocks, thus over-identifying with a Stalinist idea of purification (Arns and Sasse, 2006, p.446). In 1972, the artist Bálinth Szombathy carried out the work *Lenin in Budapest*, which involved carrying a large photograph of Lenin through the city. As Budapest was already saturated with official pictures of Lenin, it was the very superfluity of the action that generated critique. Moreover, as Branislav Dimitrijević observes, Szombathy's was the act of an individual rather than the celebrated collectivity of the communist state. Dimitrijević writes: 'The action appears as a legitimate but superfluous statement of enthusiastic identification with an ideology that the ideology itself cannot deal with' (2006, pp.291-292). All the above examples are of interventions that perform the political reality to excess, which, when stripped of its legitimising symbolic and ideological dimension, becomes a redundant absurdity.

⁹⁷ Zhigalov was arrested for this action and sent to a psychiatric hospital.

Over-identification as a strategy of resistance

Various critics and cultural theorists have championed over-identification as a tactic of opposition, which rather than comprise the conventional form of direct critique, follows a process of subversive affirmation of the hegemonic structure.⁹⁸ As Arns and Sasse point out: ‘In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite’ (2006, p.444). Arns and Sasse cite the work of Vladimir Sorokin, whose stories and novels replicate through exaggeration the Socialist Realist manner and thus collapse through their own over-serious realism. Through this process of what they call ‘imitative exaggeration’, Arns and Sasse find in Sorokin’s texts a process of alienating a totalitarian ideology through repetition (2006, p.445). Two further examples to illustrate the strategy of over-identification as potential site of resistance are demonstrated by the actions of Trillo en Breccia in Argentina, and the Romanian comedy group *Divertis*. In the case of the former, the comic book series *Buscividas* was produced in the early 1980s by Argentinian artists Alberto Breccia and Carlos Trillo during the oppressive regime of the Argentinian Junta. By anticipating the actions of the official censor with black spots in their comic strip and thus suggesting heavy censorship, Trillo and Breccia drew attention to state-imposed limits on freedom of speech, whether or not anything genuinely subversive had been censored (BAVO, 2010, online). Under the oppressive Ceaușescu dictatorship, the Romanian group *Divertis* applied a similar process in a comedy

⁹⁸ These critics and cultural theorists include the group BAVO, Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse, Slavoj Žižek, Stevphen Shukaitis, Alexei Monroe, Marina Gržinić, Eda Čufer, Kostis Stafylakis, Yannis Stavrakakis and Ian Parker, all of whom have posited over-identification as a valid strategy of resistance. In my research, Matteo Pasquinelli has been the lone voice of dissent. In *Communism of Capital and Cannibalism of the Common: Notes on the Art of Over-Identification*, Pasquinelli argues that late-capitalism is invulnerable to over-identification as a strategy as it is centred on spectacle, it has lost its externalised centre and become the totality, whereby the subject’s identity is defined as consumer, and is thus already over-identifying with itself (2010, online). Pasquinelli’s point is discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

sketch whereby the officially banned word ‘dollars’ was repeatedly replaced with the phrase ‘any other currency’ (Romanian censorship demanded that there be no mention of dollars, and that any other currency be used in its stead). With this act of pre-emptive self-censorship *Divertis* brought to the fore the perceived idiocy of Romanian Communist party dictates.

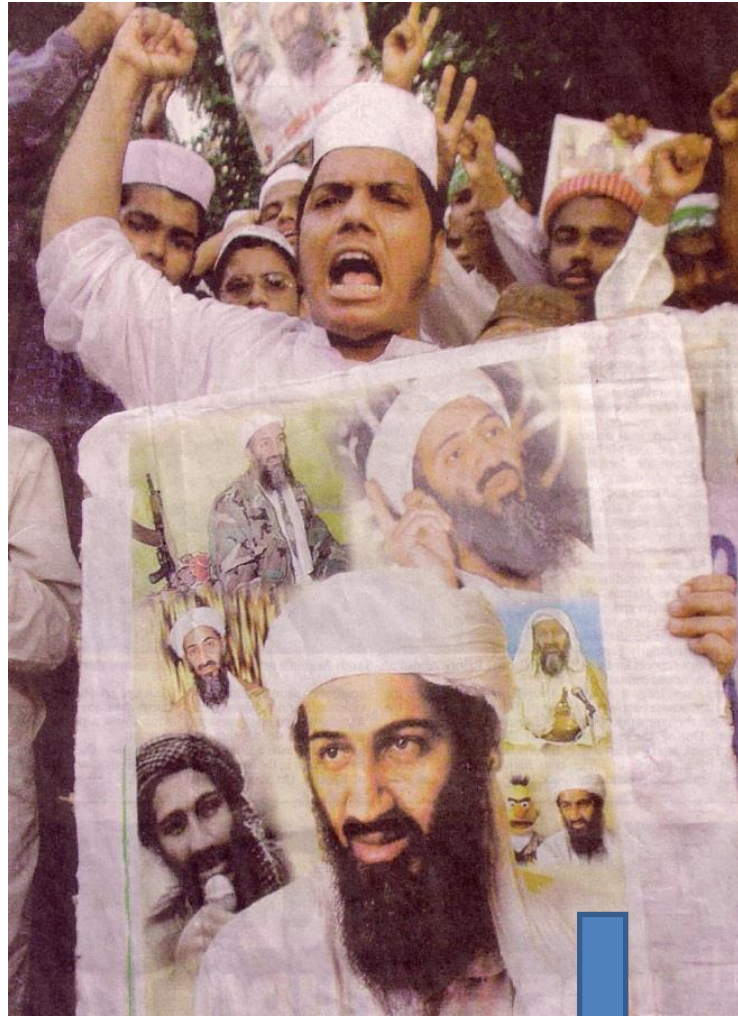
True and false over-identification practice

The above are examples of actions that disrupt official ideology by replicating the behaviour of the official ideology itself. Yet these actions are without the radical ambivalence of true over-identification as they are comfortably couched in an oppositional position. Stevphen Shukaitis finds over-identification as a strategy of resistance in the ‘culture-jamming’ activities of groups such as the Yes Men, the Reverend Billy, Billionaires for Bush and the artist-activist Christoph Schlingensief (Shukaitis, 2010, online). However, this comparison must be challenged, as differentiation must be made between true and false over-identification. Over-identification needs to be total if it is to be effective; it must contain a surplus authenticity of conviction to appear fully affirmative and not oppositional. Žižek illustrates this essential quality of authentic conviction in performance with a quote from the Marx Brother’s film *Duck Soup* (1933): ‘This man looks like an idiot and acts like an idiot, but this should in no way deceive you: he IS an idiot’ (cited in Žižek, 1991, p.73). Žižek’s point is that in order to work, over-identification must be taken at face value. In this respect Laibach and the NSK differ significantly from many apparent practitioners of over-identification, as neither Laibach nor the NSK claim an oppositional position,

indeed, quite the opposite.⁹⁹ It may be argued that in comparison, ‘culture-jamming’ activists such as the Yes Men, Reverend Billy and Billionaires for Bush are overtly oppositional, as their interventions are specifically targeted at capitalism and the state. Among their other activities, the Yes Men practice what they call ‘identity correction’ where they disrupt the operation of major corporations by impersonating figures in positions of corporate power. The Reverend Billy stages evangelical consumer meetings in shopping malls, drawing attention to the quasi-religious aspects of commodity fetishism. Billionaires for Bush are an activist group who pose as the super-rich in order to expose the inequalities of capitalism. All these examples are outspoken opponents of capitalism and right-wing politics. In contrast, Laibach’s emphatic re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual does not appear to share the targets of conventional opposition to Capitalism or the state, and in fact cannot be said to have any clear target at all.

In October 2001, a picture made the front page of *The Times* and was reported by various media including the BBC and *The New York Times*. It shows protesters in Dhaka angry about the US military strikes in Afghanistan and brandishing posters. What attracted the attention of the press in this particular instance was not the protest, but the incongruous inclusion of the puppet character Bert from the children’s television programme *Sesame Street*. On the poster Bert is depicted next to Osama Bin Laden:

⁹⁹ In April 2012 as part of the *IRWIN – Time for a New State* exhibition at the Calvert 22 gallery, London, members of the NSK held a panel discussion about their work. During the question-and-answer session an audience member referred to the NSK as dissident artists. Members of the NSK hastened to correct this assumption, pointing out emphatically that at no point have they ever claimed a dissident or subversive position. I was in attendance at this event.



Original



Enlarged section

Figure 4.9, *Evil Bert Laden*, Mark Poster (2002)

An article on the event reports that the militants hired a local graphics company in Bangladesh to produce a poster for the demonstration. The author writes that the

representative of the graphics company admitted that their employees did not notice Bert when they put together the images of Bin Laden (Poster, 2002, online). What lends the image of the protester and his poster its charge is not the image itself, but the fervour of those carrying it. The inclusion of an inoffensive children's television puppet character in this context lends the image a disruptive absurdity that is only truly effective because its vehicle is the furious intent of the militant protester. If, for example, Bert had been added in later digitally, the full effect of the image would be negated. It would remain an entertaining image, but one bereft of its absurd charge; it is its defining authenticity that gives it impact. I would suggest it is this difference that separates Laibach from many other practitioners of apparent over-identification. The radical ambivalence of Laibach's performance maintains a surplus authenticity of conviction that generates a genuinely disruptive ambiguity to their texts.

Laibach performed one such intervention of applied radical ambivalence in March 1989 in Belgrade, the centre of Serbian nationalism. Before the performance Laibach played World War Two Nazi propaganda footage of the bombing of the city, and Peter Mlakar of the NSK's Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy gave a speech. Delivered partly in Serbian, the speech called upon the audience to protect the purity and honour of the Serbs and defend Serbian territory, and was a direct appropriation of a speech by Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. This potentially incendiary text was delivered accompanied by the usual Laibach totalitarian aesthetics of the 1980s. Mlakar would occasionally slip into German throughout the speech, a language that was in Yugoslavia, as

elsewhere, historically associated with fascism. Here the rhetoric of Serbian nationalism was being delivered with the connotations of a Nazi rally.

What differentiates the majority of culture-jamming activities from true over-identification, as practiced by Laibach and the NSK, is critical distance. The Yes Men and the anti-consumerist evangelical performances of the Reverend Billy establish an accessible form of critique by having clearly identifiable targets and an unproblematic oppositional stance. Not only are their motives made abundantly clear, but any possibility of ambiguous identification with their opponents is disrupted by the use of overt pastiche or irony. However emphatic their performances may be, their motivation is located elsewhere and is clearly indicated in their press releases, accompanying texts and websites. In contrast, the closed statement of Laibach texts is a totality bereft of any oppositional binary, one that demands its audience surrender critical distance. As has been previously discussed in the chapter on Retrogardism, Laibach texts resemble IRWIN paintings in replicating the religious icon. The function is the same; to articulate the immediate totality of the 'acoustic' ground of the image, which can be said to be the didactic quality of the pre-Renaissance religious icon, rather than placing the viewer in a spatial relationship to the image, as was brought about by the Renaissance and the introduction of perspective. In Laibach's totality, a result of complete over-identification with the spectacle, there is no space provided for critical distance. At no point do Laibach or the NSK make a statement of meaning or political position that would comfortably position the subject. The subject is in the isolated position of carving out their own perspective. I will develop this issue of subject-position in regards to over-identification in the conclusion to this chapter.

Humour is another factor of critical distance often found in practitioners of a false over-identification, and one that provides reassurance. The use of humour in this context safely separates the subject from the object of ridicule. The Laibach spectacle is an unsmiling unhuman one, one that has no reassuring 'human face' behind the façade. There is no actor with whom the subject can identify, there is no 'performance' in the conventional sense. Laibach do not smile in performance, and their performances in the 1980s were marked by their static nature. Laibach and the NSK do not find humour in what they do, nor recognise it as valid behaviour.

An interview with *Time Out* is cited in the NSK monograph on this subject:

Time Out: 'Laibach, in sound, word and image, does not give off much warmth, humour, love, sunshine. This may be a bourgeois notion, but I demand that they be a part of the emotional range expressed by "art".

Laibach: 'Humour is a moral irresponsibility of a person in relation to the factual nature of actual relations between individuals and community; it is an alibi which permits all kinds of compromises, denies the demands set by reality and affirms the principles of satisfaction. According to Darwin, *laughter* is an expression mostly common to idiots and, according to English psychologist M.W. Brody, it represents the concluding part of aggressive usurpation. It is well known that the word "*humour*" springs from England and that the English are proud of it; however, it is also known that the English have nothing left to laugh at ... In art, we appreciate humour that can't take a joke' (NSK, 1991, p.56).¹⁰⁰

This automaton quality and absence of humour behind the structure denies Laibach's audience the option to be 'in on the joke', as may be argued is the case of the Yes Men and the Reverend Billy. Žižek compares Laibach's performance to the drill sergeant in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket* (1997, p.27). The character portrayal is unrelenting, at no point does Kubrick allow the audience to see the human being behind this abusive authority figure, and at no point do Laibach or the NSK reveal a reassuring human face behind the façade.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ The italics are Laibach's.

¹⁰¹ Laibach appeared as extras in the film *Full Metal Jacket*, although not as Laibach.

The Dutch cultural activist group BAVO, who have written extensively on over-identification as a strategy of resistance, compare the Yes Men with the artistic practice of Christoph Schlingensiefel when denoting what constitutes true and false over-identification.¹⁰² The Yes Men are Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, whose culture-jamming activities have included posing as representatives of the World Trade Organisation and giving bogus lectures in which the official discourse of the W.T.O. was presented in an unmediated form. In this guise, the Yes Men suggested a scheme whereby the world's hunger problem could be solved by reprocessing the faeces of MacDonald's customers into hamburgers for the third world (BAVO, 2007, p.29). Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (2000) was a shipping container located outside the Burgtheatre in Vienna. In the manner of the *Big Brother* television programme, asylum seekers could curry favour with Austrians, the least popular being voted off and deported back to their native country. Strung up in front of the container was the slogan *Ausländer Raus!* [Foreigners out] (BAVO, 2007, p.32). BAVO argue that the students who stormed out of the Yes Men lecture would have relented as soon as they discovered it to be a prank, and even enjoyed the cynicism of the intervention. In this way, the W.T.O. would escape censure, as the Yes Men's position was extreme, making the W.T.O. look moderate and therefore reasonable by comparison. Schlingensiefel's container, however, has the radical ambivalence as manifested in Laibach and the NSK, an argument supported by the container being stormed and the banner torn down by Austrian anti-fascists.

¹⁰² BAVO are a joint venture by Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels, who describe themselves as an independent research office focused on the political dimension of art, architecture and planning, whose mission is to enhance public debate by means of publications, symposia and interventions (BAVO, n.d., online).

Santiago Sierra's *245 M³* (2006) is an artwork of similar ambivalence, and like Schlingensief's shipping container of asylum seekers, tests the boundaries of popular sensitivities and taboo. Sierra sealed the interior of a synagogue in Stommeln, on the outskirts of Cologne, and pipes ran exhaust gases from car engines into the airtight space. Visitors were only allowed in one at a time, guided by fire-fighters and wearing breathing apparatus. As the Holocaust had depleted the local Jewish population, the building could no longer fulfil its religious function, so every year the authorities invited an artist to pay tribute to the victims. The work was intended to run every Sunday for six weeks, but press outrage and protests by the German Jewish community closed down the installation (Sierra, 2006, online). Here Sierra's *245 M³* finds itself halfway between the Yes Men's collusion with an audience in-the-know, and the total ambivalence of Laibach. The re-enactment of a gas-chamber in a manner used by the Nazis in a synagogue dedicated as a memorial to the Holocaust, resulted in shock, outrage and confusion. Is the artist turning the Holocaust into a theme park, with gas-chamber 'rides', or making a comment on the trivialisation of the Holocaust? Here, however, the comparison with Laibach ends, as Sierra has since stated in *The Guardian* newspaper that the installation was a protest against the 'banalization' of the Holocaust (Sierra, 2006, online).

Over-identification and the 'Cynical Reason' of late-capitalism

BAVO's research into the tactic of over-identification specifically relates it to the wider context of late-capitalism, and they propose the strategy of over-identification as one that is currently the only genuinely effective site of resistance. BAVO hold that late-capitalism is fully assimilatory, that it has not only

assimilated the rebel but relies on opposition for validation.¹⁰³ Jean Fisher in *Embodied Subversion* notes that historical avant-gardist transgressive practice has become mainstream, and that this challenge to the established order is a mere inversion which still privileges the terms conventional opposition seeks to oppose (2004, p.59). In this formulation the structure of the hegemonic discourse is left intact. Artists and activists have absolute freedom of expression but what they say has no actual effect; nothing will be changed. BAVO extend this, claiming that it is expected, even demanded of artists, to perform a critical function, as long as they remain within their allocated sphere. BAVO observe that late-capitalism has anticipated all marginal positions and accommodated dissent as part of the system. As long as it appears the system is being criticised, the system is allowed to continue untouched. The semblance of freedom of expression and liberatory behaviour can be found in the mainstream acceptance of personal appearance hitherto considered oppositional and extreme, such as body piercings other than the ears, and an increased tolerance of the *other* and the unconventional. In contemporary Western society, apparently rebellious behaviour has the illusion of oppositional practice, and this illusion allows the structure of late-capitalism to continue unmolested. In 2009 a major telecommunications company ran a series of advertisements playing to the individualism of the late-capitalist consumer:

¹⁰³ Examples of this assimilation include erstwhile rebels such as Johnny Rotten and Iggy Pop, who have featured in major advertising campaigns selling butter and car insurance respectively. A further example of assimilatory practice may be found in the adoption of the 'flash mob' for advertising purposes by the T-Mobile telecommunications company in 2009. The flash-mob is an event whereby, prompted by social media internet sites, crowds would gather for ludic behaviour such as pillow-fights and dancing in public spaces.



Figure 4.10, Advertisement, Finsbury Park tube station, London (2009)

The figure in the advert is heavily tattooed and pierced. He is casually dressed, his hair is unkempt, he is unsmiling and his arms are crossed. He is a maverick, an outsider, and his attitude is that of someone who knows what he wants, and what he wants is a good internet provider. In this image, the ‘outsider’ or rebel has been fully assimilated into late-capitalism. Therefore, when the system is relying on critical distance for self-validation, conventional opposition no longer suffices. It is thus the structure itself that must be challenged, not its surface manifestations, and BAVO claim that this can only be achieved by a collapse of this critical distance by a fanatical over-identification with the structure itself.

Žižek uses Umberto Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* to express the illusion of resistance to late-capitalism through critical distance. Žižek finds that in contemporary societies, the cynical distance provided for example by laughter and irony are what he calls ‘part of the game’, supporting the notion that the ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously (1989, p.28). In Eco’s novel, laughter is considered the greatest threat to the established order, but Žižek points out that

the character of Jorge the librarian, in taking the dogma seriously, becomes a tragic outdated figure locked in the past. Jorge, in his excessive attachment to dogma, is his own critique. Žižek's point is that in contemporary society, what is seen as apparently healthy cynicism and irony actually allows a space for those who laugh to collude with the ideology that is the object of their ridicule. This is at odds with Simon Critchley's view of humour-as-resistance, wherein humour sees power as a case of the Emperor's new clothes (2002, p.5). That may be so, but in late-capitalism the emperor stands in the crowd laughing at himself; advanced capitalism anticipates its own critique. In 2011 the coffee chain Puccino's sold coffees accessorised with a wrapped biscuit, on which was written: 'Stupid little biscuit'.



Figure 4.11, Puccino's 'stupid little biscuit' (2011)

Puccino's are asking the consumer to laugh along with their 'stupidity' whilst buying their product. Many contemporary car adverts deconstruct the car advert itself, inviting the consumer to be aware that they are being sold a car and a lifestyle. The consumer buys the car and the coffee with the understanding that

they are 'in on the joke'. Late-capitalism does not so much sell to the consumer as collude with them.

As I have previously discussed in this chapter, Laibach and the NSK in a fanatical exaggeration of ideology of state are employing over-identification to reveal the obscene underside of the ruling system. However, in their fanaticism they are also exposing the flaws of contemporary cynical distance. If cynicism is now no longer the marginalised outsider position but the default position of late-capitalism, as claimed by Peter Sloterdijk in *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, it can be said that the capitalist discourse has reversed the dialectic between the law and its obscene underside (Sloterdijk, 1988, p.4). In this system ideals and utopian drives are the dirty secret, not the other way around. To this BAVO posit a notion of *positive* over-identification, which may operate as an effective strategy to this cynical distance. In this formula, it thus becomes subversive to identify with idealism. BAVO give the example of Michael Moore in his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). In the film Moore exploits the stated ideals of his opponents, such as freedom and democracy, to expose them. He suggests that members of Congress who voted for the war in Iraq send their own offspring to war, and thus set an example (BAVO, 2007, p.37). The fact that they resist this suggestion allows Moore to expose the shortcomings in their idealism.

Laibach operate in both BAVO's categories of *negative* and *positive* over-identification. In a fanatical identification with the ideology of power they can be said to be practicing *negative* over-identification. Negative over-identification takes the more immediate and obvious form in the Laibach spectacle, as Laibach

and the NSK's output is often heavy and oppressive in tone. This overtly performs the hidden obscene subtext to an ideology. On the other hand, the identification with idealist utopian drives contained within the Laibach and NSK spectacle can be said to be *positive* over-identification. By resurrecting the utopian drives of the historical avant-garde they are challenging the cynicism of a post-ideological age.¹⁰⁴ Laibach simultaneously articulate both positive and negative, which is part of their mechanism of contradiction and [il]logic, which in turn constitutes the structure of their re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual.

Over-identification and the 'Post-ideological' age

Can over-identification be truly effective in the culture of late-capitalism? Stafylakis and Stavrakakis ask whether a strategy generated within the framework of Socialist Realism can still be effective as a critical tool in an age of consumerism (2011, p.97). I have discussed over-identification in the context of 'Cynical Reason' in late-capitalism, but not whether it can operate fully in the 'post-ideological' age. If over-identification is a system whose origins are located in the ideology-as-text culture of Socialist Realism, can it be operative in the late-capitalist 'post-ideological' age? Stafylakis and Stavrakakis cite the example of the proliferation of what they term 'liberated' companies who encourage criticism in the workplace and the business tycoons such as Bill Gates who are known for their philanthropy (2011, p.97). More saliently, late-capitalism is proving manifestly adept at the strategy of over-identification itself. In 2003 the manufactured pop group Fast Food Rockers released *The Fast Food Song*, whose chorus celebrated fast food outlets and made no pretensions to being other than a bubble-gum pop song directly marketed at the pre-pubescent. In similar vein, Las Vegas can be said

¹⁰⁴ By 'post-ideological' I am here referring to the perception of contemporary late-capitalism, which sees itself as having moved on from the age of the Grand Utopian Narrative.

to revel in its own neon hypereality, whilst Dubai's material excesses of artificial islands and the largest indoor shopping mall in the world is a naked paean to excessive consumerism.

It is also in the structure of late-capitalism itself that the strategy of over-identification may find scant purchase. Matteo Pasquinelli in *Communism of Capital and Cannibalism of the Common: Notes on the Art of Over-Identification* raises this issue. Pasquinelli argues that late-capitalism is invulnerable to over-identification as a strategy as it is focused on spectacle and has no centre. Capitalism has lost its externalised centre and become the totality, whereby the subject's identity is defined as consumer. In late-capitalism, the consumer in the shopping mall is, in Geraldine Harris' words 'Shopping for subjectivities' (Harris, 1999, p.132). Harris' point is that capitalism has become a state of being rather than an ideology. Differing from first and second stage capitalism (the market and monopoly), the operative locus of third stage, or advanced, capitalism is located in the individual subject, as opposed to an externalised centre of commerce, industry, or elites. Pasquinelli calls this the 'communism of capital' (2010, online). This is the democratising of capital, in which no longer the preserve of the elite, capitalism has eased to be an obvious ideological spectacle for contemplation external to the subject, and has itself been practicing over-identification with the obscenity of labour and value production. However, Pasquinelli's argument, and the apparent self-over-identification of the excessive consumerism of the Fast Food Rockers, Las Vegas and Dubai, do not reflect Laibach's singular use of over-identification, which is not concerned with ideology per se but networks of domination and control. Laibach refute the term 'post-totalitarian', not only on the grounds that in

terms of population China alone outnumbers the entire ex-communist world, but that Western liberal democracy is itself a totalitarian system, at best a ‘polite expression for developed totalitarianism’ (Laibach, 2006, online). Laibach are uncharacteristically outspoken on the correlation between totalitarianism and the late-capitalist culture industry, seeing in the West a totalising and systematic targeting of desires. For example, they cite Hollywood as part of a totalising culture industry:

The Star system has its own rational foundation: in the fascist form of totalitarianism, it helped the people to transcend their immediate traumatic existence by identification with the leader. The Hollywood principle awakens belief and recognition that there is a world in which the fulfilment of dreams is reality (Laibach, 2006, online).

Here Laibach find a direct correlation with mainstream Hollywood cinema idols and the utopian promises of a totalitarian leader. Laibach are even more forthright on the music video channel MTV, which they describe as ‘radically brainwashing millions of young people, altering – in substance and essence – their psychosomatic structures in the direction of monstrous mutations, thus implementing the totality of rock’n’roll music and the TOTALITARIANISM of its determinants’ (Laibach, 2006, online).¹⁰⁵ It is important to note that the capitals in this quotation are Laibach’s.

It is however, in Laibach’s most immediate medium, that of music, that they most directly posit the totalitarianism of Western culture. This they do by over-identifying with the manipulative dynamic of pop and rock music, and thus expose these forms as systems of mass mobilisation and control. In support of this theory, Alexei Monroe notes that Laibach’s fusion of totalitarian rally and rock

¹⁰⁵ This attack on MTV and an associated Western cultural imperialism is part of Laibach’s direct critique of the West, which is analysed further in the following chapter.

concert suggests totalitarianism is extant and not historical (2008, p.184).

Laibach's anthemic treatment of Queen's 'One Vision' is one such over-identification process. The lyrics are already utopian in scope, before being appropriated by Laibach:

One flesh one bone,
One true religion,
One voice one hope,
One real decision.

I had a dream,
When I was young,
A dream of sweet illusion,
A glimpse of hope and unity,
And visions of one sweet union,
But a cold wind blows,
And a dark rain falls,
And in my heart it shows,
Look what they've done to my dream.

Give me your hands,
Give me your hearts,
I'm ready,
There's only one direction,
One world and one nation,
Yeah one vision.

'One Vision', Queen (1985)

The upbeat fast rock tempo of the original is transformed by Laibach into a triumphalist march accompanied by martial drumming, with Laibach barking out the lyrics in German. In this way Laibach change the uplifting utopian rhetoric of the original into a brute command to obey a single totalising will. Stevphen Shukaitis writes that Laibach do not bring a fascist aesthetic to this anthemic Queen song, but illustrate the 'underlying dynamic between totalitarian mass mobilisation and capitalist mass consumption' (2011a. p.604). Laibach's text is again not totalitarianism itself but the desire to conform and be subjugated.

A similar technique is applied to The Beatles' *Let It Be* album, which Laibach appropriated in 1988. Each track is excessively orchestrated, saturated with heavy drumming, fanfare and choral work. The semi-improvised guitar-based feel of the original, with its studio banter between tracks, is replaced in the Laibach spectacle with a grandiose inflexibility and monumentalism. Here Laibach replicate The Beatles' recording as a Socialist Realist work, where every nonsensical or whimsical lyric of the original acquires a new and terrible import.¹⁰⁶ Laibach also refer to this strategy of excessively staging the command/conform codes in Western rock and pop in their prognosis on disco, which they see as the audio machinery of mass manipulation:

We are fascinated by disco aesthetics, and the introduction of disco elements in the production of our music is not a novelty. It only affects the purification and apostrophising of rhythm, which is – as regular repetition – the purest form of militantly organized rhythmic of technicist production and classicist beauty. Disco rhythm stimulates automatist mechanisms and co-forms the industrialization of consciousness according to the model of totalitarianism and industrial production (Laibach, 2006, online).

In this example, Laibach's language is sterile and technical, alien in tone to conventional discourse on popular dance music, which may be said to celebrate the ludic and liberatory. Alexei Monroe writes on this approach of Laibach's to its music in *Deca-Disco – Electro Disco Revivalism as Political Symptom*. Monroe finds in popular music that even when it is not to be taken seriously, a basic disco template is in play of 'monumental and militant characteristics' (2009, online). The 'disco heaven' of 137 beats per minute in Laibach's discourse is thus revealed to be a means of industrial mass manipulation.

¹⁰⁶ These cover versions, or as Laibach term them, 'new originals', perform another function beyond an over-identification with a perceived totalitarianism of globalised Western culture. This function, which is as a nexus between Eastern Europe and the West, is discussed in the following chapter.

Problematic over-identification

Ian Parker in his contribution to *The Truth of Žižek* has specified two approaches to the use of over-identification. One is to see it as a way of mobilising what he terms ‘anarchic and unreasonable symbolic forces’ to disrupt a hierarchical power structure with fixed points of authority; the other is to see it as a problematic involvement with the chaotic and irrational (Parker, 2007, p.144). Given the totality of Laibach’s over-identification strategy, the question must be raised as to whether Laibach actually affirm the ideology of extreme right-wing politics. In other words, are they too successful in their re-enactment of the totalitarian ritual? It is interesting to note this is a concern also raised by Marina Gržinić, herself a collaborator with the NSK and someone who has written in support of the NSK and its methods. Although Nazi salutes have been seen in the audience at Laibach performances, particularly in the 1980s, at the centre of the Laibach totalitarian spectacle is a void that frustrates complete identification.¹⁰⁷ Interviewed by *The Times* in 1994, a spokesperson for the group expressed the difficulty the far right were having in appropriating Laibach for their own purposes: ‘They cannot really abuse it. It’s a difficult group to abuse because nobody is very comfortable in our system of signs, logic and content. They have to work hard to go through them’ (cited in Marshal, 1994, p.37). Anticipating this issue, Slavoj Žižek maintains that although Laibach have the semblance of some hidden totalitarian truth, at the core is not an analysis of totalitarian logic itself but the dissolving of this logic as an active social bond, ‘leaving only the uneasy kernel of its limited enjoyment’ (2009a, p.91). The emphatic ideological signifiers Laibach and the NSK employ

¹⁰⁷ At a Laibach performance at the Astoria, London, in 1992, an altercation broke out between members of a far-right group and others who took offence at how this group were responding to the performance. The argument, although not coming to blows, was of significant duration. If Laibach on stage were aware of the incident they did not acknowledge it. Source: Alexei Monroe in conversation.

such as the martial audio and visual imagery, and totalitarian iconography, are not anchored in a coherent ideological field. A process of dissonance and repetition disrupts the ability of this imagery to cohere, and the nodal points that constitute the ideological field such as the mono-statement, the banners, fanfares, or quasi-military uniforms, remain floating signifiers. Although the totalitarian signifiers are certainly emphatic, crucial defining nodes are missing from the Laibach spectacle, thus 'our work is pure because our symbols are pregnant without any meaning' (Laibach, 2006, online). This is a viewpoint put forward by Slavoj Žižek in his interview with Andrew Herscher; that Laibach make strange the ideological field by being 'purely appropriative, purely reflective, because there is no new 'nodal point' around which the pieces of the different discourses can re-coalesce (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.67).

A further aspect of the strategy of over-identification to frustrate a straightforward identification with the Laibach construct is located in the oppressive and overwhelming nature of the Laibach performance. Kostis Stafylakis and Yannis Stavrakakis in their contribution to the publication that marked the first NSK citizen's congress in Berlin in 2010, find in Laibach's praxis a call to enjoy the command itself, and by doing so Laibach and the NSK draw our attention to command's 'performative, tautological, masturbatory enjoyment' (2011, p.103). Stafylakis and Stavrakakis' point is that Laibach and the NSK expose the mechanism of the command, and thus our voluntary involvement with networks of domination. In concentrating on the mechanism rather than formulating an ideology, Laibach reveal these rituals of domination as senseless automatism. This methodology is present in the structure of Laibach's audio texts,

in that many recordings are hypnotically repetitive. ‘Herz-Felde’, from the album *Opus Dei* (1987), collages audio samples from Carl Orff’s *De Temporum Fine Comoedia*, in which phrases from the Orff original are looped until they become meaningless.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, tracks such as ‘Sredi Bojev’ from the album *Rekapitulacija 1980-84* (1985) and ‘Tovarna C19 (Factory C19)’ from *Ljubljana-Zagreb-Beograd* (released in the UK in 1993), directly replicate the oppressive atonal rhythmic monotony of heavy industry.¹⁰⁹ In the context of Socialism, where industry and ideology are inextricably conjoined, this rhythmic monotony of machinery becomes the rhythmic monotony of ideology. The Polish theatre director and artist Tadeusz Kantor also supports this strategy of repetition to disrupt meaning in his performances. Kantor writes:

The nature of an automatic activity is defined by its constant repetition. After some time this repetition completely deprives both the activity and the object of their meaning. Their ‘life’ meaning of course. Now they can easily be manipulated (1993, p.69).

Laibach’s over-identification, whether it be repeating until meaningless the iconography of totalitarianism, or converting a dance beat to a driving march, similarly employs repetition in order to free the signifiers from their contextual ideological field, and thus reveal in the act of repetition the inert automaton quality of the command itself.

The paradox of an analysis of over-identification

If true over-identification is to work as a strategy it must be total, it must identify to excess with the structure of the ideology it seeks to replicate, and not just the trappings of the ideology. However, positing Laibach’s over-identification as a strategy of resistance, as in this chapter, risks negating the very radical

¹⁰⁸ See: ‘Herz-Felde’, track ten, CD one.

¹⁰⁹ See: ‘Sredi Bojev’, track eleven, CD one. For ‘Tovarna C19 (Factory C19)’, see track twelve, CD one.

ambivalence that makes true over-identification effective. The act of analysis, in demonstrating how over-identification works, can prevent over-identification from functioning fully. Even referring to over-identification as a 'strategy' implies a position on behalf of Laibach and the NSK. True over-identification must destabilise both oppositional and affirmative positions. At this point therefore, a division must be made between Laibach and the NSK praxis and interpretive research. Laibach do not proclaim themselves as politically subversive, and attempts by critics and audience to assign this label to either the NSK or Laibach are met with neither denial nor assent. The study of over-identification as a strategy of resistance is therefore a subject position available to Laibach's audience, and, in this case, the researcher. Slavoj Žižek, in 'Why are Laibach and The NSK Not Fascists', complains that Laibach's public, and particularly intellectuals, are obsessed with whether Laibach are totalitarian or not, and they fail to notice that Laibach function as a question, not an answer (2002, p.287). Thus, although this chapter has approached the use of over-identification as a site of opposition, this is an interpretation of Laibach and the NSK. Focusing on this particular aspect of over-identification is in danger of neglecting that over-identification is an aesthetic system in itself, and one that operates in concord with Retrogardism to comprise the construct that is the Monumental Retro-avant-garde. Over-identification is Retrogardism in practice, a direct result of an emphatic and unapologetic staging and re-mythologizing of Retro-avant-garde signifiers. Political activism, or 'culture-jamming', is not Laibach and the NSK's stated purpose. Laibach and the NSK approach politics, culture and history as ready-made texts, as raw material for art: 'We understand politics as an integral part of culture and as the highest, all-embracing form of art' (NSK, 1991, p.6). Through a

process of repetition, dissonance and juxtaposition with these texts, Laibach and the NSK demand of the subject a position, whether that be affirmative, oppositional, or an impossible position of Orwellian double-think. This Orwellian double-think is constructed of an impossible subject position of simultaneously identifying with the Laibach spectacle and articulating detachment. Full identification with their impossible authority paradigm negates detachment. Moreover, if the subject identifies with the Laibach spectacle, they must deal with the void at its heart. Deprived of a cohesive ideological structure, the subject is left with the limited masturbatory enjoyment of the empty ritual. In the latter, a detachment from Laibach's performance results in a failure to engage fully with Laibach's discourse. Through a strategy of over-identification, Laibach articulate an impossible subject position that leaves the subject in a state of moral suspension, with Laibach and the NSK providing neither answers nor guidance. It is this principle of ideological non-alignment that provides an analytical tool for understanding Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West, the subject of my next chapter.

NEXUS

In this chapter I intend to demonstrate how Laibach and the NSK operate as a nexus, a point of dialogue, between Eastern Europe and the West. I will discuss how this is established through a strategy of militant non-alignment with temporal, ideological, geo-political and aesthetic determinants. I will examine how this position enables direct and indirect critique, primarily of the West, and discuss the nature of this critique. The indirect critique I will analyse with reference to Western reportage of Laibach and NSK and its attempts to categorise them within a Western discourse. The direct critique is supported by Laibach and NSK texts and excerpts from interviews that directly address both Eastern Europe and the West, and their dialectic.

Marina Gržinić writes that the NSK ‘proclaims itself to be an abstract social body situated in an intense socio-political space that is simultaneously a phenomenon of both West and East’ (2006a, p.324). IRWIN themselves have stated: ‘You have to realise that we come from a very different space existing between East and West – within a paradox’ (cited in Kent, 1987, p.39). This paradox is that of performing the discourse of both Eastern Europe and the West simultaneously: ‘Since we work with the political opposition that exists between the East and the West, it’s clear that we have a double point of view’ (cited in Bourriaud, 1989, p.110). This artistic policy is one generated from a combination of their use of the political-aesthetic as Duchampian ready-made text, and a realisation of Tito’s non-alignment policy in artistic form. In 1948 Tito broke with Stalin by joining other nations in the non-alignment movement who declared themselves to be neither aligned with or against any major cold-war power bloc.

For Laibach and the NSK, Tito's policy constitutes an articulation of their discursive position, as expressed in a 1989 interview: 'We consider ourselves as transnational, a transnational group ... part of the non-alignment movement' (Laibach, 2012, online). This connection is demonstrated in the track 'Panorama', from the album *Nova Akropola* (1985), which includes a spoken translation of a Tito speech on Yugoslavian non-alignment from 1958:

Both those in the East and those in the West should be clear with the fact that we are not moving away from our road that we beat the path for in '48. That is to say we have our own way. We always bravely say what is right on this side and what is not. And what is right on the other side, and what is not. It should be clear to everyone that we cannot be no one's appendage of nobody's politics. That we have our own point of view and that we know the worth of what is right and what is not right (Laibach, 1985, CD).¹¹⁰

The translation is delivered in steady tones over a march beat, fanfares, and ominous driving chords. This martial arrangement reflects the militancy of Laibach's non-alignment, their refusal to be appended to any political or aesthetic position. This posited non-alignment is a conceptual space untethered from temporal, ideological, aesthetic, and geopolitical determinants or affiliations. These are discussed as follows.

Temporal non-alignment

Laibach and the NSK's temporal non-alignment is a strategy of independence from the process of historicisation and the teleological. In this sense, Laibach and NSK praxis reflects the transitional period of post-Socialism; a stage of emergence from a perceived hiatus in the process of historicisation instigated by the erecting of the Iron Curtain. Post-Socialism presented the opportunity to start afresh. A parallel may be found in Kraftwerk, who have proved the most important

¹¹⁰ In the recording, behind the spoken translation Tito's original speech can be heard. The same track, 'Panorama', from the album *Laibach* (1985), has no spoken translation. See: 'Panorama', track four, CD one.

musical influence on Laibach, not only for their pioneering approach to sound, but for their success in claiming autonomy from Anglo-American rock music.¹¹¹ The cultural trauma of National Socialism and the subsequent need to create a cultural identity effectively enabled Kraftwerk to restart German popular music anew and even backdate it, thus generating an original musical form.

A severance from a responsibility to temporal continuity provided by the transitional period of post-Socialism may also be found in Laibach and the NSK's structuring of their history narrative. As Alexei Monroe notes, 'it might well seem that NSK arrived on the scene as a pre-formed or "ready-made" entity, but as IRWIN see it the NSK structure was expressly designed to encourage, receive and form such retro-projections' (2000, p.154). Here the operative term is 'retro-projection', where temporal continuity is not a valid discourse. Monroe sees in the NSK's disinterest in correcting misconceptions about their own output and aesthetic practice a deliberate policy of refusing to be accountable to historical or cultural determinants (2000, p.153). In this way, the NSK simulate the totalitarian practice of controlling both past and future, a process of collapsing the past-future dynamic to serve the present. For example, both Nazism and Italian fascism attempted to design a future in which the past was an agency of the present, drawing on the aesthetics of classical antiquity to shore up political inconsistencies and contradictions. A further parallel with totalitarianism's fluid interpretation of a linear past-future dynamic is Retrogardism itself, which is both forward and backward looking simultaneously. Forward, in that it re-mythologises the utopian

¹¹¹ As Laibach stated in 1989: 'All other groups we have reservations about, not Kraftwerk' (Laibach, 2012, online). Significantly, Kraftwerk's 'Ohm Sweet Ohm' provides the backing for Igor Vidmar's announcement of the suicide of Laibach's first vocalist Tomaž Hostnik on the track 'Hostnik' (1987). This recording features on the vinyl LP *Krst Pod Triglavom* 1987, but not on the CD version. See: 'Hostnik', track thirteen, CD one.

energies of the historical avant-garde, and yet backward as its iconography is that of discredited Grand Utopian Narratives.

Laibach and the NSK can also be said to operate beyond temporal determinants in not recognising the status of the original. The ‘device’ of the Immanent Consistent Spirit, which functions as the Lacanian *Objet Petit a* in the NSK structure, provides a void in which the NSK is able to free-float its ideology much as it free-floats the sense of the author/artist in its devaluing of origin. In other words, Laibach and the NSK sever their work from its origins in the same way that their ideological signifiers are severed from their meaningful ideological field. For example, although for copyright reasons The Beatles are credited on the sleeve to Laibach’s *Let it Be* (1988), Laibach recognise no aesthetic or cultural debt to these artists. The notion of the original suggests the first in a sequence, yet Laibach and the NSK do not acknowledge this as a viable position. The act of referring to their cover-versions as ‘new originals’ is indicative of this policy.

Ideological non-alignment

The radical ambivalence of much of Laibach and the NSK’s output as well as the lack of a coherent ideological field in their spectacle prevents affiliation with any clear ideological position. This issue was directly tackled by the music magazine *Rock* at the height of Laibach’s controversy in the early 1980s, and is cited in the NSK monograph:

Rock: From an ethical standpoint, your performances were several times branded as immoral. What is your comment?

Laibach: In art, morality is nonsense; in practice it is immoral; in people it is a sickness’ (NSK, 1991, p.44).

Laibach here identify morality as an ideological position, and refute its validity. The moral dimension can also be said to be circumnavigated by Laibach by the absence of any individual corporeal victim in their spectacle. Although the idea of victim is present, it is abstracted, in that it is implied in their extensive referencing of the European traumatic historical. Up until and including the *Kapital* tour of 1992, Laibach were projecting in their performances film of black and white woodcuts of German atrocities borrowed from the Slovene national film archive, yet the victim is generalised and individual narratives do not feature. Thus a moral dimension is also to a degree abstracted, in that the absence of a corporeal victim negates direct empathic identification. This process separates Laibach and the NSK from the individual narratives that structure traumatic memory, and also indirectly relinquishes them from any archival obligation or function. The absence of a perpetrator-victim discourse located in any posited cohesive ideological field in the NSK spectacle prevents a direct engagement with moral issues around remembrance, accusation, or trauma, thus frustrating appropriation by national or ethnographic narratives.

Aesthetic non-alignment

Aesthetic non-alignment demonstrates the difficulty of locating NSK praxis in a recognised aesthetic discourse. As has been previously discussed in this chapter, the NSK and Laibach disrupt the status of the original, and thus distance themselves from narratives of art-historical continuity. This dominant art-historical narrative is Western, which provides a context for Marina Gržinić's suggestion of the term 'Easthetics' to articulate an invisible Eastern European aesthetic discourse. This provides a framework within which Retrogardism operates. Retrogardism is a process of refuting primarily Western aesthetic determinants. It is also a

paradoxical position of opposition to, and affirmation of, postmodernism, albeit a superficial affirmation. Similarly, Retrogardism both emphatically rejects and embraces the historical avant-garde. Moreover, as I have proposed in the ‘Retrogardism’ chapter, Retrogardism constitutes a ‘new-Suprematism’. By a process of repetition, dissonance, and removal from a coherent ideological field, traumatic iconography is re-coded and re-mythologised as pure-form within Retrogardism. This new-Suprematism does not belong to the Russian historical avant-garde, nor is it recognised in Western aesthetic discourse. *The Guardian* review of an IRWIN exhibition in Manchester in 2004 described Retrogardism as ‘a systematic programme of replication and reproduction, which they refer to as ‘the retro-principle’, which might equally be known as ‘copying’ (Hickling, 2004, p.5).¹¹² The *Palm Beach Post* reviewed an IRWIN exhibition of 1989, describing the work as having ‘a deliberately kitschy quality’ (Schwan, 1989, p.11). Both these journalists use the vocabulary of Western aesthetics in accusing the NSK as (respectively) employing kitsch and copying. *The Observer’s* take on the IRWIN exhibition at the Air Gallery in 1987 is equally dismissive of IRWIN’s work, with its inability to categorise it:

This force for good or whatever from Slovenia takes upon itself all sorts of firework functions. The targets are anything from the totalitarianism from the left to the totalitarianism of the right. It’s all the same, it seems, to them. Icons come in for a bit of stick, as do Suprematist graphic devices (the exploding cross) and, for local relevance here in little old England, ‘the monarch of the glen’ (Feaver, 1987a, p.19).

Nicholas de Jongh in *The Guardian* similarly finds himself unable to bracket NSK work in his review of the Red Pilot Cosmokinetic Theatre performance *FIAT* at the

¹¹² The author in the same article describes Laibach as ‘shouty fascist rockers’ (Hickling, 2004, p.5).

Riverside Studios in 1987.¹¹³ He identifies the group's inspirations to be Dada and Surrealism:

Not that this company would agree. They believe their performance piece *Fiat*, challenges any pigeon-holing; 'this is not theatre at all, it is, according to Red Pilot, an observatory located outside any recognisable frame of history or culture' says the official LIFT Programme note. Well, somehow the location of Fiat does not seem quite so alien or revolutionary as its begetters confidently imagine.' (de Jongh, 1987, p.10).

De Jongh here rejects the NSK's claims for aesthetic non-alignment in ascribing to them Dada and Surrealist forms, but in doing so fails to engage with the nature of Retrogardism. He reveals his position as one arising from incomprehension when he concludes: 'It is as if to show that nothing at all has happened in the space of seventy minutes. And I doubt whether it has' (de Jongh, 1987, p.10). Michael Ratcliffe in *The Observer* reviewing the same production echoes this level of incomprehension when he writes:

When the noise stops, the six actors – three playing Jason, three playing Medea, converse with apparent irony, but since the conversation is in hermetic and untitled Slovenian, I have nothing of value to say about it ... What all this has to do with the history of Slovenia under the Italians and/or Teutonic heel – the main obsession of NSK's work – I haven't a clue (Ratcliffe, 1987, p.17).

Both these instances illustrate examples of the Western press struggling to both interpret unfamiliar aesthetic systems, and communicate their meaning to their Western readers. The examples also serve to support my argument that Laibach and the NSK's aesthetic non-alignment is partly based on an aesthetic autonomy. This issue is discussed later on in this chapter as part of an analysis of Laibach's indirect critique of the West.

¹¹³ Red Pilot Cosmokinetic Theatre were previously named Sestre Scipion Nasice, and then in the 1990s, Noordung Cosmokinetic Theatre. These are manifestations of the theatre division of the NSK.

A strategy of aesthetic non-alignment is also represented in the Malevich cross, a motif ubiquitous throughout the NSK.

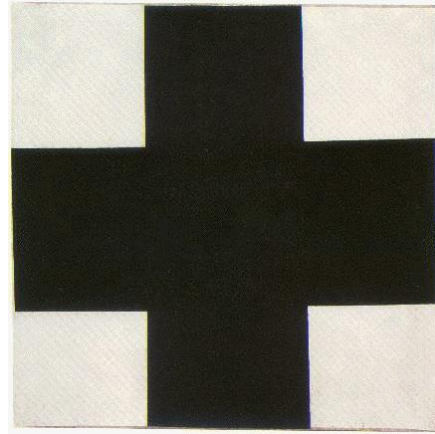


Figure 5.1, *Cross*, Kazimir Malevich (1923)

The NSK has referred to this function of their axiomatic icon directly:

To us the cross, with all its meanings and connotations it has gained by now, stands for one of the symbols from the picture book of European culture. The cross on a painting by IRWIN is therefore a method of translating this culture into consciousness. Nevertheless, for us, members of a small nation, the cross simultaneously takes on a different, fateful meaning. Our culture nails us into the centre of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined, but its significance has never been completely clarified. It is in here that we materialise our own ideas (NSK, 1991, p.122).¹¹⁴

The Malevich cross as employed by the NSK not only represents art history discourse and a perceived appropriation of the historic avant-garde by the West, but also functions in a more literal sense as a diagram of Slovenia and the NSK's position as nexus. Slovenia conceives itself as a geo-political threshold between East and West, whilst the NSK sees itself as being an aesthetic-political point of dialogue between Eastern Europe and the West.

¹¹⁴ An excerpt from this passage also occurs in the 'Retrogardism' chapter. It is repeated here for relevance.

Geopolitical non-alignment

Geopolitical non-alignment in Laibach and the NSK's context reflects their position of non-affiliation to any particular country or politically defined region.¹¹⁵ Horvath's *nulla* posits Eastern Europe as a liminal space in geopolitical, historical and cultural terms, and provides a useful analytical tool to explore liminal Eastern European national identity.¹¹⁶ Within this space Slovenia is itself a nexus between East and West. As Slovenia is central to Laibach and NSK praxis, the role of Slovenia's self-perception as being an East-West threshold warrants further investigation.

Politically, as part of the 'former Eastern Bloc', Slovenia is in the East but culturally located in the West. *Yugoslavia: The Rough Guide*, describes Slovenia as 'the richest of the republics, Austrian in flavour' (Dunford, 1990, introduction). Adrian Dannatt, in his article *We'll Take Ljubljana*, echoes this perceived separation from Slavic peoples when he writes: 'The most important thing to understand about Slovenia is that it's not some provincial Balkan kingdom, but rather a European cultural nexus, a vital part of the European avant-garde' (Dannatt, 1991, p.36). In conceiving itself as the most Western of the former Yugoslavian republics, Slovenia posits itself specifically as a crossroads between the East and West. This is expressed in a concerted effort to distance Slovenia from the Slavs, resulting in what Alexei Monroe calls an 'over-compensatory

¹¹⁵ Although their involvement with Slovenian national identity is undeniable, in treating Slovenia and its iconography as text for creative interpretation, Laibach and the NSK can claim to be sufficiently detached to warrant being termed non-aligned to their native country. For example, Laibach and the NSK's employ of the iconography of Slovenian national identity is of an excessive militancy, creating a fantastical Slovenia so far removed from the reality as to resemble a non-specified Central or Eastern European nation.

¹¹⁶ Horvath's *Nulla* is explored in greater detail in a previous chapter; 'The European Context'.

Germanophilia' (2000, p.187).¹¹⁷ This aspirational national identity has proved fruitful text for Laibach and the NSK, both in overtly articulating the Slav aspects of Slovenian culture, and performing a Germanophilia that is rendered problematic in a country occupied by Germany during the Second World War. As Monroe points out, the NSK 'manipulated the key structural contradiction of Slovene identity: between the Germanic and South (Yugo) Slavic cultural spaces and identities' (2005, p.17). Thus what was most disturbing to Slovenian culture of the early 1980s was not so much the totalitarian elements of Laibach's spectacle but the Germanic.

The employ of key Slovenian signifiers of national identity in Laibach and NSK praxis does not contradict their strategy of geo-political non-alignment. The video to 'Opus Dei' (1987) contains Slovenian icons such as Lake Bohinj, a chapel commemorating Russian First World War prisoners who died in the area, and footage of the iconic Savica falls playing in reverse, in specific reference to a Tito proclamation that Yugoslavia would crumble when the Savica falls flows backward. Yet although this iconography is specifically Slovenian, it belongs more to Laibach than to Slovenia. This is the result of the fantastical nature of the monumental Retro-avant-garde NSK construct, and Laibach and the NSK's use of these Slovenian symbols as text. The excessive militancy of Laibach and the NSK's Slovenism is a fiction that prevents any authentic attachment to the real Slovenia.

¹¹⁷ Monroe also suggests this aversion to a Slavic identity manifests itself in 'the Etruscan fantasy', whereby some Slovenes claim to be a remnant of the pre-Roman Etruscan civilisation (2000, p.31). At the *Cultural Memory* conference in Skopje in 2013 I was corrected by two Slovenian academics when I referred to Slovenia as being in Eastern Europe. They were emphatic that Slovenia is in Central Europe.

For Monroe this militancy was essential; a ‘necessarily violent sonic encoding of certain ambivalent archetypes constituting Slovene identity’ (2005, p.275).¹¹⁸ This is a militancy that was necessary in order to avoid being marginalised as a producer of ‘quaint’ ethnic art or a mere follower of Western forms. Thus, part of Laibach and the NSK’s early controversy was the disruption of the expected method of exporting folk culture. This controversy works both ways. To the rest of Europe and the West, Slovenia seemed to be aggressively exporting a martial and ideologically fraught folk culture, whilst to Slovenians, Laibach’s militant representation of their homeland was an equally problematic misrepresentation. For instance, in the stamping of the Laibach Zahnrad and cross on Božidar Jakac’s painting of a kozolec from the sleeve of the album *Rekapitulacija 1980-1984* (1985), the moral authority of national poets and folklorists is para-militarised (Monroe, 2000, p.173). A similar device is applied to an image of Slovene ducal chair in the poster *Trieste - Ljubljana - Klagenfurt* (1987):

¹¹⁸ Laibach remain Slovenia’s most famous and influential cultural export. As John O’Brien writes in *Ljubljana Goes International*: ‘The country of Slovenia did not, until recently, exist on most people’s map of the contemporary arts’ (1996, p.41). It is safe to say Laibach and the NSK may take significant credit for this change of view, as is reflected in Slovenia’s current support for its prodigal sons.

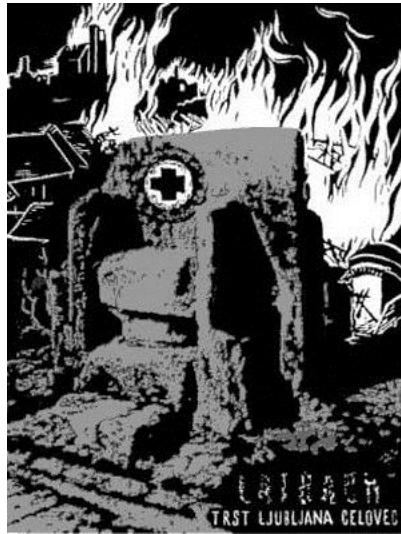


Figure 5.2,
Trieste - Ljubljana – Klagenfurt
NSK (1987a)



Figure 5.3, Vojvodski prestol
[Duke's chair]

Both the kozolec and the chair are key Slovene national symbols and both have been branded with the Laibach Zahnrad and cross. In the former Laibach are appropriating the bucolic, and in the latter political history, for Laibach's singularly militant Slovenism.

In support of my argument that the excessive militancy of Laibach's Slovenism enables geo-political non-alignment with Slovenia, further examples are worth examining. Although the militancy of Laibach's spectacle is literal in actual performance, audio-visual recording, and written text, there are however other modes of militancy in operation. An example of this can be found in Laibach's appropriation and representation of Germanic signifiers. This militancy is found not only in the re-mythologisation of Nazi Kunst within Retrogardism, but also in the fact that German is one of the three main languages used in Laibach recordings (the other two being English and Slovene). The harsh timbre of Laibach's vocals and the traumatic historical associations of the German language do indeed add to

the aggressive tone of Laibach's delivery, but it is in Germany that this appropriative act has a particular resonance. This is the reversal of the dialectic between victor and vanquished. Tuomas Nevanlinna writes on the impact of Laibach as a Slovenian group performing an apparently taboo ideological spectacle: 'In Germany, neo-rightists and liberals were equally bewildered to hear "an ethnic other" openly perform their archetype (counter) fantasies' (2003, online). It is the very fact that Laibach are not from Germany but from a previously Nazi-occupied country that lends greater currency to their militancy. An example of this is the poster for their 1985 German tour; *Die Erste Bombardierung über dem Deutschland*.



Figure 5.4, *Die Erste Bombardierung über dem Deutschland*, Laibach (1985b)

Within this occupation-and-invasion narrative Laibach asserts a superiority over Germany, inverting Slovenian Germanophilia: 'We have already stated that the

contemporary Germans are an inferior sort of Slovenes, so it doesn't surprise us if they took us for their own' (NSK, 1991, p.54). In 1988, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi annexation of Austria, the NSK delivered a speech from the balcony of the Graz University Palace, which had been at one time Nazi party headquarters.

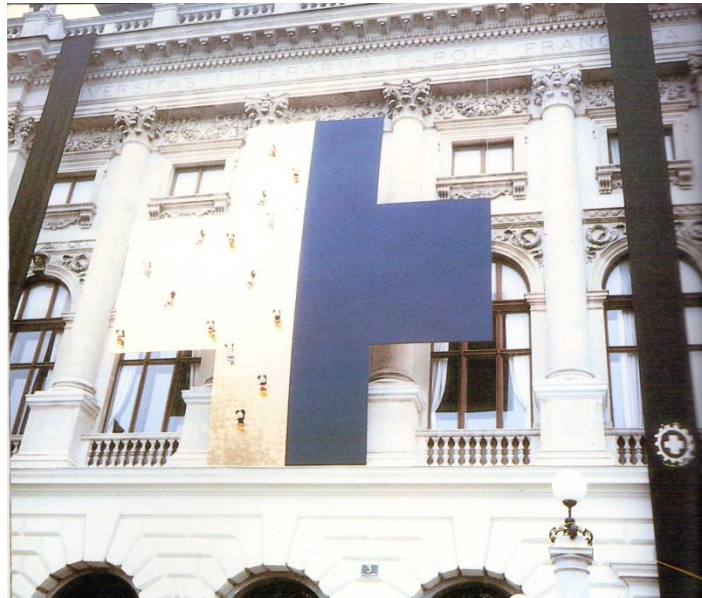


Figure 5.5, Graz University Palace, NSK installation (1988b)

The NSK addressed the people of Austria in a speech that conflated the Christian cross with the cross of the swastika throughout. For example: 'Austrians! As Germanic people, you are consecrated to the Christian cross and serve it faithfully; as Germanic people, your love belonged to the swastika' (NSK, 1991, p.150). Here the NSK's strategy of militancy is manifested in the site-specific nature of this performance.

Nataša Kovačević in *Late Communist and Post-communist Avant-Garde Aesthetics: Interrogations of Community* claims that in the use of Slovenian signifiers that often exclude non-Slovenes, the NSK risk global marginalisation (2009, p.214). However, it is the re-coding of Slovenian national signifiers within

the monumental Retro-avant-garde that prevents this. Kovačević writes that ‘the ubiquitous deer antlers, Malevich-type black crosses, Alpine skiing, and folk costumes both are and are not “essentially” Slovene’ (2009, p.215). Laibach express their conceptual approach towards their use of overt Slovenian signifiers when they write: ‘LAIBACH was bred in Yugoslavia, so it fits perfectly into any political picture, although we believe that our true place is in the framework’ (Laibach, 2006, online). In this formulation, where Laibach are the picture frame and not the picture, Slovenian elements operate as readymade texts, analytical tools applicable to all ideological power systems.

Indirect critique

Michel Foucault argues that power relations can be analysed by examining resistance, rather than a direct analysis of its internal rationality (2000, p.329). In this way, the presence of Laibach and the NSK within the West can be said to function as indirect critique. Laibach and the NSK’s indirect critique is a strategy of a posited *other*. This otherness is exemplified in Sašo Podgoršek’s 2004 film of Laibach’s tour of America, *The Divided States of America*. A recurring motif is Laibach’s vocalist walking alone in American urban environments dressed in his stage costume, which emphasises his alien status. This position of *other* makes strange the environment and the ideologies at work in that environment. In one sequence, Laibach’s vocalist is depicted eating alone in a diner saturated with American flags, (including the tablecloths).



Figure 5.6, screenshot: *Divided States of America*, Podgoršek (2004)

His incongruous dress casts this overwhelming stars-and-stripes environment into stark relief, particularly as he is effectively the protagonist of the film and thus can be said to carry the viewer's point of view.

Laibach employ this position of *other* to challenge Western dominant cultural givens. For example, Laibach have defined the West as 'the Western part of Asia', which is a pointed inversion of the hegemonic view that Eastern Europe is appended to the West (NSK, 1991, p.49). However, Laibach utilise the position of *other* in more specific ways. It is in the guise of the fantasy of the Eastern European exotic *other* that Laibach 'makes strange' the West by reflecting it back upon itself. To this purpose, Laibach assume the persona of the 'barbaric' East in the narration accompanying the recording of 'Now You Will Pay' (2003) from Podgoršek's *A Film about WAT* (2004):

Arabs, Negroes, Jews, Turks, Mexicans, Gypsies, Slavs. They are barbarians. Not sophisticated enough to know the difference between enjoyment and pleasure. We must admit that Laibach belongs to them as well. In fact we have always proudly considered ourselves true barbarians coming to the rich west from our secret eastern hide-outs' (*A Film about WAT*, 2004, DVD).

This text directly relates to the lyrics for *Now You Will Pay* (2004):

Barbarians are coming
Crawling from the east,
With their eyes wide shut
And nostrils full of longing,
Epic and powerful,
Wild in a group,
Barbarians are coming
From the east.
They'll come out of nowhere,
They'll enter your state,
The nation of losers,
The tribe full of hate.
With knives in their pockets
And bombs in their hands,
They'll burn down your cities
And your Disneyland.
(Laibach, 2004, CD).¹¹⁹

In the video for 'Sympathy for the Devil' (1988), Laibach play out the role of feudal overlords in a Teutonic hunting lodge, wearing furs and feasting beneath mounted stag heads. As Monroe suggests, 'the luxuriousness of the feast confirms and denies Western stereotypes of impoverished, oppressed East Europeans who can access only pre-modern forms of enjoyment' (2005, p.235). In the video, Laibach have cast themselves not only as the 'devil' of the track but as the barbaric and feudal Eastern European overlords of the Western imagination. Here Laibach's performance reflects Western stereotypes of Eastern Europe as commonly articulated in Western reportage. In 1987, *The Guardian* listed Laibach's Riverside performance as 'morose Slavs' (Sweeting, 1987, p.17). In

¹¹⁹ See: 'Now You Will Pay', track fourteen, CD one.

1992 the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote: 'Laibach comes from one of the quieter corners of the strife-torn Yugoslavian republics. That may explain an ugly and relentless sense of despair that pervades Laibach's sound' (Snyder, 1992, p.2). Although this stereotyping is common shorthand in reportage of Laibach, what is more relevant is that at no point do Laibach do anything to counter these stereotypes, and in their monolithic and deadpan performances can even be said to re-affirm this perception.

Western ignorance, Eastern European stereotyping, and the fascination of the exotic are all part of the spectacle of Laibach's agency in the West. This is an essential factor in their role as nexus. Laibach operate within the framework of a Western representative economy that validates artists or performance groups hailing from the Eastern Bloc as obsessed with ideology, over-identifying with this ideological surplus that Eastern European artists are deemed to possess. As Miško Šuvaković writes, the position of artists such as Laibach and the NSK is complex, 'for they deconstruct not only post-Socialist culture and history, but also the wish of the Western art system to see and identify the artist in such a culture as an asymmetrical and exotic *Other*' (2003b, p.96). Laibach at once deny and re-affirm this prejudice, by exploiting the need of Western culture and its art institutions to see the post-Socialist artist as a caricature or degeneration of Socialist Realism and Socialist culture. Zdenka Badovinac in her article on Eastern European performance art *Body and the East* writes that 'just as Western art has mainly presented itself to the relatively isolated East as reproduced in magazines and books, so the East has been presented in the West with a small quantity of poor-quality documents, with white spots in retrospectives of European art, and with the

myths of official art and the suffering dissidents' (1999, p.5). In this dialogue, the West is dominant, with the power to create new trends and dictate the boundaries of the visible. Badovinac claims the only way Eastern art can remain viable in this representative economy is by an expressed ideology. Laibach and the NSK operate autonomously from this system of Western preconceptions and yet simultaneously over-identify with this ideological surplus that art from the East is deemed to possess. In the eyes of the West, Laibach's performances of the early 1980s were the nightmare of the monolithic totalitarian East made flesh. This fulfils a Western fantasy of the totalitarian East, but the incoherence of Laibach's ideological field caused by the dissonance and repetition of disparate signifiers creates a void at the heart of this spectacle. The more excessive the performance of Laibach's totalitarian ritual, the more the fantasies and projected desires of the West are magnified and laid bare. Laibach confront the West with its own fantasies. In this formula what then is the West's subject position in relation to Laibach's gaze? Here Laibach are passive, its critique is indirect; it is the West whose gaze is reflected.

Indirect critique: music

Laibach's primary method of interpellation is music.¹²⁰ Thus the importance of this manifestation of Laibach Kunst in the West warrants investigation as regards indirect critique. As popular music is dominated by Western forms, this indirect critique is necessarily geared towards the West.¹²¹ In

¹²⁰ In my research into Laibach's audience, music is predominantly the way respondents were first drawn to Laibach. Rare exceptions, such as the art collective Pil and Galia Kollektiv, were drawn to the aesthetics first and the music second. Laibach's interpellation of its audience is explored in the following chapter; 'Interpellation'.

¹²¹ Laibach are often categorised as 'Industrial' music which is a separate category to 'pop'. Laibach are not solely 'rock', or 'techno', 'classical', or 'world music'; they have exploited all these genres. Indeed, as I have argued previously, music is paradoxically incidental to Laibach Kunst. However, for the sake of my argument the phrase 'popular music' is used here for convenience.

this section, selected reportage from the Western popular music press is cited as examples of how Laibach are interpreted. Although necessarily partisan and lacking in analytical rigour, the reviews and articles cited nevertheless clearly indicate the difficulty the Western press has with Laibach's complexity.

In the sleeve notes to Laibach's *John Peel Sessions* recording of 1987 (released in the UK in 2002), Biba Kopf writes that Laibach 'were the first ever group from a communist state to make a significant impact in the West' (2002, sleeve notes).¹²² This is supported by Hugh Linehan of *The Irish Times*, who wrote in 2004 that Laibach were 'arguably the only band from the (now) post-communist societies to make an impact in the West as well as the East' (2004, p.4). According to Monroe, that Laibach's impact in the West was conducted entirely on their own terms proved an inspiration to Eastern European musicians in the 1980s (2005, p.232). Laibach successfully competed in Western markets without being bracketed under 'world music' on the shelves of music shops. Moreover, 'a group from an obscure Slav nation who did not even sing exclusively in English sold back to the West its own supposedly global, borderless product with a distinctive and unapologetic national element' (2005, p.232). Laibach challenged the notion of Eastern Europe as a passive market rather than a source of cultural product, and compounded this challenge by re-inventing various rock anthems of the 'free West'. Michael Small's review of Laibach's interpretation of The Beatles album *Let It Be* in 1988 puts it succinctly: 'As if it weren't enough of a surprise that Yugoslavians care about The Beatles and know how to play rock music, Laibach

¹²² Biba Kopf (also known as Chris Bohn) as a journalist for the *N.M.E.* and editor of *The Wire*, has written extensively on Laibach as a journalist and toured with them.

goes a step further and reinterprets the original songs with an inventiveness and humour that make most of the U.S. avant-garde seem tame' (1989, p.17).

European rock music is often popularly labelled 'Euro-rock', a pejorative term denoting a bland and inoffensive copy of Anglo-American forms, in which Central and Eastern Europe is deemed incapable of producing indigenous rock music of quality or originality. This may perhaps be typified in the 'Guitariads' of Socialist Yugoslavia, in which musicians competed to perform Western rock and pop (Tomc, 2003, p.443). Karen Fricker, in *Performing the 'New' Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* (2013), finds an ideological subtext to the Western chauvinism towards the music of Central and Eastern Europe. Fricker cites the frequent derisive tone of the British media towards the event, suggesting that this expresses 'feelings of unprocessed anger, frustration, and loss about the country's changing relationship to Europe and the rest of the world' (Fricker and Gluhovic, 2013, p. 54). This Western chauvinism as regards music from Eastern Europe is expressed in a *New York Times* article of 1990, tellingly entitled, *Rock Music of Eastern Europe: So Western, so Familiar, so Old*, in which Jon Pareles writes in connection to Laibach's *Macbeth* (1990): 'It is clear that the British and American rock of the 1970s – with a leisurely pomp that was rendered obsolescent by punk and dance music – lives on in the Eastern bloc, though with a very Slavic penchant for minor keys' (1990, online). Pareles goes on: 'With quicker and more open communications, some Eastern-bloc bands will doubtless try to latch onto British-American rock's recent trends; I'm betting on a Slavic Madonna clone within the year' (Pareles, 1990, online). Len Brown of the *N.M.E.*, reviewing Laibach's *Let It Be* in 1988, expresses a similar point of view

when he asks: 'Have the heady days of post-Paris '68 bedsit radicalism finally arrived in Yugoslavia? Well, times are-a certainly changing for Tommy commie and his furry-hatted friends' (1988, p.42). This dominant Western perception of music under Socialism in the 1980s can also be found in an *N.M.E.* review of Laibach's *Opus Dei* in 1987: 'Their thudding rolling dirges are wrapped in the Slavic truth that "it's like hardcore and rap never happened" in the mining villages of Northern Yugoslavia' (McRae, 1987, p.29). These journalists have interpreted Laibach recordings not as original creations but as both epitomising the 'morose Slavs' stereotype, and lagging behind Western trends.

It can be argued that Laibach's interpretations of the corner-stones of rock music illustrate the transgressive nature of their assault on the hegemony of Western popular music. It is however, in the militancy of Laibach's 'new originals' that their work is most operative, and this includes their transgressive impact. This militancy is expressed in arrangements that transpose guitar-based rock to monumentalist drum-based marches. In their delivery Laibach are unapologetic in the presentation of these reworkings, neither recognising the status of the originals nor acknowledging any debt whatsoever to Western music. Kopf acknowledges Laibach's unapologetic militancy when citing their 'new original' of Opus' 1987 European hit 'Live is Life': 'Their trick is to take the weary language of Western pop at face value and treat it with absolute straight-laced seriousness. They instil hollow phrases with an extraordinary power, daring you to laugh at their audacity' (Kopf, 1987, p.24). With its fanfares, drumming, and rhythms reduced to their elemental stirring nature, Laibach does rock music better than rock itself. In this way a marginalised *other*, whom the West has popularly depicted as incapable

of creating original culture other than ‘ethnic’, has demonstrated the quintessence of a form the West popularly champions as a symbol and conduit of freedom and democracy.

As regards their position in Western culture, Laibach see themselves as a ‘pain-inducing foreign body in the decaying bowels of a voracious animal’ (NSK, 1991, p.49). In his sleeve notes to Laibach’s *An Introduction to... Laibach* (2012), Alexei Monroe describes this function as a reverse Dorian Gray: ‘The Laibachian picture usually kept hidden in the attic of the music industry attains more dignity and character while simultaneously degrading and ageing the youthful picture of the pop industry’ (2012, sleeve notes). Laibach’s musical agency in the West functions as a disruptive element preventing an uncluttered view of dominant Western forms and the cultural given of rock music as an antithesis to authoritarian power-structures.

Yet it is not only in the transgressive nature of their appropriation of Western popular music that Laibach generate indirect critique, but in their capacity to frustrate assimilation. To this purpose Roy Shuker’s dimensions of popular music as listed in his *Understanding Popular Music* text of 2001 provide a useful analytical tool. Dimensions such as market-cycles, the artist/creator, image, politics, individualism and sexuality are all operative in deciphering Laibach’s role as indirect critique within Western popular music, and are discussed below.

Shuker identifies marketing as a central component of popular music, but it is in the ‘market-cycle’ component that Laibach’s interventions are most evident.

According to Shuker, the market-cycle, which is dominated by Anglo-American forms, is the record industry latching on to an original music idea or style then popularising it into orthodoxy, against which the next creative trend must rebel (2001, p.43). The market-cycle is based on the constant re-invention and subsequent commodification of the rebel, yet Laibach claim an ultra-orthodoxy and over-identify with authoritarian power-structures. Laibach are certainly not mainstream, but neither are they part of Shuker's market-cycle sustained by fluctuating trends. In an interview for *Melody Maker* in 1988, Laibach liken the market-cycles of Western popular music to a machine, one not driven by ideologies of liberty and free-expression but economics:

If you analyse what The Beatles really were. The machine behind them. We are building this positive consciousness, of how the reality is different to structures, different levels, and most bands work only on the one level. We try to cover different surfaces, take each problem at a different angle. In the west, all is closed down to selling. Economy. The market (cited in Gittins, 1988, p.8).

Laibach are equally outspoken on this aspect of popular music in an interview with Louise Gray of *The Wire* in 1997, where they comment on genres within popular music:

You've got techno mags and inside that further separations: rave, Hardcore, TripHop, BritHop. And these things don't talk to each other. Then Heavy Metal, then 'crossover' as a special genre. And it's all uniform, absolutely uniform (cited in Gray, 1997, p.26).

Although Laibach are here referring to the uniformity of popular music, it correlates to Laibach's reasoning behind their choice of military uniforms on stage. In discussion at the Tate Modern NSK symposium in London in 2012, Laibach charted the birth of the rock group from the brass band, to jazz band, to later incarnations as realised in The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, the point being that

despite their (later) long hair and jeans, these were nonetheless military formations whose function it is to sell their audience an ideology.¹²³

Shuker's concept of the artist/creator in relation to popular music is also undermined by Laibach. Shuker posits the ideal of the artist/creator thus: 'With its romantic notions of creativity and authenticity, composition is at the heart of discourses surrounding authorship in popular music' (2001, p.101). Laibach's disregard of the status of the original, as well as not crediting individual artists within the NSK, runs counter to the celebrated status of the artist/creator. Laibach's oeuvre is a bricolage of readymade text, which challenges issues of original composition. Sampling has become mainstream, but in the 1980s was still in its infancy, and from the outset Laibach made no pretensions to playing musical instruments but used sampled recordings and soundscapes from Trbovlje's industrial environment as it was the easiest way for them to make music.

Image is also described by Shuker as central to popular music, so much so that it becomes reflexive and becomes a series of subjectivities the performer wears, such as the frequent re-inventions of David Bowie or Madonna. Nevertheless, at the core of the image is the performer, the corporeal figure. However, Laibach do not celebrate the corporeal figure in their spectacle; there is no human being behind the mask, they are the image itself. Members of Laibach are recognisable, although the line-up changes, and in latter years the Laibach audience community has referred to the lead vocalist by name on social media sites and in response to research surveys, but Laibach themselves do not actively reify

¹²³ I was in attendance at this symposium (14th April 2012). Laibach's views were expressed in panel discussion with Alexei Monroe.

the Laibach spectacle in a personality. Laibach and the NSK are a collective, which is at odds with the emphasis on individualism in popular music.¹²⁴ The current Laibach vocalist is recognisable on the sleeve to *Opus Dei* (1987), but it is a grotesque representation:



Figure 5.7, album sleeve: *Opus Dei*, (1987)

In an interview with *Melody Maker* in 1988, Laibach refute that the Laibach image can be substantiated by individual artist-creators: ‘The individuals who create Laibach at this moment are not important. One day our sons will go on to create Laibach’ (Laibach cited in Doc, 1988, p.13). Perhaps the closest Laibach come to featuring an individual personality is in their commemoration of Tomaž Hostnik, the group’s first vocalist, yet even he has been mythologised into the ritual.

The lack of a corporeal figure in the Laibach spectacle may also be said to confound expected formulations of sexuality, which Shuker identifies as also central to popular music. Sexual energies may be said to be channelled through the

¹²⁴ The artists Pil and Galia Kollektiv regularly perform as ‘We’, in which well-known pop songs are performed in a deadpan manner, dressed identically and with their faces obscured. The anti-individualism of their performance is a comment on the excessive individualism of pop. They cite Laibach and the NSK as a direct influence on their work. I interviewed the Pil and Galia Kollektiv 21st January, 2012.

aggressive martial quality of Laibach's music, but in the manner of the totalitarian ritual, whereby the libido is cathected to a powerful and destructive spectacle. Susan Sontag picks up on this idea when she notes that the 'fascist ideal is to transform sexual energy into a "spiritual" force, for the benefit of the community' (1983, p.93). In *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Klaus Theweleit takes this further, suggesting that the excessive control of the marching columns in totalitarian mass display was a conversion of the threatening 'soft' flowing feminine of the crowd into the rigid 'masculine' of the organised mass (1987, p.429). In this formula, Laibach's totalitarian subjection of the libido to the mass is antithetical to conventional modern popular music's excessive display of individual libido. Perhaps most indicative of the absence of conventional sexual display in Laibach is the apparent incongruity of the pornography projected at their live performances. In April 1983, it was juxtaposing Tito with pornography that caused the police to interrupt a Laibach concert and expel them from the Zagreb festival of New Music (Monroe, 2005, p.180). In more recent years a looped clip of the act of fellatio has been projected on twinned screens during the performance of 'Brat Moj'.

Although overt political statements have been a feature of popular Western music, these are often categorised as 'protest songs' or from artists with a clear political stance such as Billy Bragg or the anarchist group Crass.¹²⁵ In this sense the overt political statement has a place in Western popular music provided it is from an anti-authoritarian point of view. Laibach's ambiguous ideological

¹²⁵ Western popular music can contain outspoken political views provided the artists are categorised as such. Bono of U2, for example, is often lampooned in the popular media for making political points, as is Sting's ecological politics. In 2003, the Country and Western group The Dixie Chicks received widespread condemnation in their native Texas for criticising President Bush and the war in Iraq.

discourse thus has no place in Western popular music, particularly as it appears to represent an excessive authoritarianism. Similarly, political speeches are included in Laibach recordings, and these risk excluding Western audiences by being both relatively obscure in language and subject matter. In 1992, *Melody Maker* in reviewing a Laibach performance demonstrated a clear unwillingness to engage with Laibach's political remit: 'Apparently they want to make dance music, even if it's only to make the point that, uh, it's all a product of the capitalist military-industrial complex, and all culture is a means of social control, and oh, check the reading list for more details' (Nine, 1992, p.14). The reviewer goes on, expressing their displeasure at a perceived intellectual pomposity in Laibach's performance:

Laibach are indisputably very clever men who think hard about big issues, speak twelve languages and have read every difficult book in the world. They're much cleverer than you or I or any of the frivolous little bands merely making music, putting on a show. Unfortunately, Laibach are putting on a show, for whatever convoluted political reasons, and the result is faintly silly (Nine, 1992, p.14).

The *N.M.E.* in reviewing *Krst Pod Triglavom* in 1988 wrote: 'Curiously packaged, it comes with copious notes in German and Yugoslavian which I'm assured by a colleague amount to "no more than pretentious bullshit" (Barron, 1988c, p.4). These examples of a derisive attitude to Laibach's discourse are here cited as indicative of a wider attitude towards an 'appropriate' application of political discourse in Western popular music. Laibach's ambiguous political discourse of monostatements remains an incongruity within conventional Western popular music and the paradigms allowed in its music press.

Although Laibach consistently frustrate conventional methods of consuming their output, they have been embraced by the Industrial music scene, and are considered founding members along with Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret

Voltaire (among others). Nevertheless, although this represents assimilation into Western popular music and its markets, they remain *other*. This status of assimilated and yet *other* is expressed in a review of a Laibach performance in *The New York Times* in 1992:

As with a lot of industrial dance music, Laibach's presentation had one trick – the presentation of alienation – which was emphasized by the costumes, the lack of interplay with the audience and the mechanical, repetitive music. None of it was enough to get the audience dancing, after each tune there was a round of applause, but that was it. And as for political coherence or explication, it wasn't there (Watrous, 1992, p.16).

These frustrated expectations are echoed in the *Boston Globe's* analysis of another performance that same year. According to the reviewer:

Things picked up slightly near the end, but Laibach's brand of synth-based disturbance came off as oddly anonymous and their cold Teutonic posing made them seem like unwitting guests on 'Sprockets', the *Saturday Night Live* parody of Germanic art-for-art's-sake posing. Lyrics were indistinct and the music was frustratingly static (Sullivan, 1992c, p.30).

The first reviewer expresses their dissatisfaction that Laibach neither explain their politics nor managed to excite their American audience into dance, whilst the second relates Laibach's interaction with their audience, or lack of it, to a popular television parody. Both reviews illustrate elements of Laibach's performance that prevent a complete assimilation into Western popular music.

Indirect critique: autonomy

I have discussed Laibach's presence in the music industry and in Western culture as a source of indirect critique by re-coding Western forms, that is, appropriating elements of Western culture and selling it back to the West as an original creation. Boris Groys has noted that this will appear aggressively subversive to the West in that all of the 'images, objects, symbols and styles' of Western art today originally circulated in a market dominated by private interests,

hence appropriation will appear piratical (2008, p.168). He goes on: 'Post-communist art, by contrast, appropriates from the enormous store of images, symbols and texts that no longer belong to anyone, and that no longer circulate but merely lie quietly on the garbage heap of history' (2008, p.168). Laibach's appropriative practice takes this further and establishes an autonomy that inverts the Western hegemonic binary by excluding the West in its discourse. In making little or no attempt to pander to a Western audience, Laibach risk alienating the West, yet exclusion and autonomy is a component part of Laibach and the NSK's indirect critique. Jack Barron of the *N.M.E.* cites Laibach's *Krst Pod Triglavom* (1988) as a failure as 'a) they make no concessions to English language speakers and b) you can't buy it in your local high street store' (1988c, p.29). Barron's complaint is that Laibach are not commercial enough in attempting to reach a mass market: 'They can use Nazi/Stalinist imagery to exploit our democratic fears until their jackboots wear out, but until they can penetrate mass consciousness they'll never be as provocative as Tiffany' (Barron, 1988c, p.29).¹²⁶ Laibach's aesthetic system is resolutely esoteric, and to much of its Western audience Laibach's sign system is impenetrable, a result of retaining and affirming an Eastern European identity. This Eastern European subjectivity is something Wiktor Skok refers to when he states Laibach had been a presence in Poland from its earliest days. He notes that during the 1983 *Occupied Europe* tour:

Laibach played concerts here that challenged the tense political awareness, heavily provoking the ideological sensitivity of the audience. Ever since, a series of analogies between Laibach and the work of particular Polish artists in terms of praxis and attitude make the Slovene project a phenomenon that feels particularly close to us (Skok, 2009, p.6).

¹²⁶ Barron is referring to the pop singer Tiffany, who in 1986 had a hit with *I Think we're Alone Now*,

According to Skok, Poland recognises in Laibach a platform for Eastern European identification. Monroe too writes about the appeal of Laibach to Eastern Europe identity in the context of Western hegemony, in that Laibach Kunst is an aesthetic form unique to the East, even if that form effectively re-mythologises totalitarianism (2005, p.60). The Anglo-American West does not have a Laibach, and without a totalitarian past, will never fully understand Laibach's context, itself a source of pride in Eastern Europe (Monroe, 2005, p.224). A Bosnian respondent to my research on the subject of Laibach's potential alienation of its Western audience refers to this exclusivity in terms of Laibach's political agenda, which he describes as that of the victim. This he suggests is a specifically European phenomenon, thus Americans and/or others unused to this subjectivity are likely to misunderstand Laibach and NSK praxis.¹²⁷ In like vein, British and American respondents who helped with my research evinced a tendency to qualify any criticism of Laibach's practice they expressed with the observation that the fault may be with them for being ignorant of Laibach's signifiers or intentions. It was a common theme among these respondents to refer to an outsider status in the Laibach system of references, particularly among the American respondents. Richard Cromelin in the *Los Angeles Times* reviewing a Laibach tour of 1992 finds this exclusiveness daunting:

Sometimes you feel as if you should study before you go to a Laibach concert. The group comes from the Yugoslav republic of Slovenia lugging a heavy baggage of political and aesthetic ideology that's all but incomprehensible to anyone who's not up on contemporary European avant-garde philosophy (Cromelin, 1992, p.3).

Even as late as 2005, when Laibach and the NSK were more forthcoming in their press-releases, and interviews were no longer in the pre-scripted format, NSK texts

¹²⁷ The respondent is a 25 year-old male Bosnian forestry technician. My research correspondence with Laibach's audience guarantees anonymity.

were still regarded as impenetrably Eastern European: ‘Despite the more forthcoming artworks, mostly I felt left out. The very obscurity that cloaks NSK’s political stance and philosophy also makes it something of a private club’ (Farr, 2005, p.47). In an article entitled *On Cultural Ownership and the Migration of Symbols*, Jerry Cullum cites IRWIN as an example of the problematic migration of symbols in the context of the globalisation of culture: ‘Placed in juxtaposition with symbols that looked creepily right-wing, the language problem led many to believe that NSK was a bunch of neo-fascists in the making’ (1997, p.34). In this article Cullum singles out the American audience as particularly susceptible to this interpretation.

Confronted by an obscure system of references and signifiers, Laibach’s Western audience may be denied a full appreciation of Laibach and the NSK. Thus, they may simply respond to Laibach’s ‘brutal theatricality’, as suggested by the *Chicago Sun-Times* in a review of the *Divided States Of America* DVD (Stamets, 2007, p.24). Tom Popson in the *Chicago Tribune* of 1989 echoes this sentiment when finding himself unable to locate Laibach’s point of view: ‘But either way – sincere socio-political sentiment or tongue-in-cheek exercise – it’s certainly possible to enjoy Laibach’s music without worrying too much about any political baggage’ (Popson, 1989, online). Len Brown of the *N.M.E.* in a 1987 review of ‘Geburt Einer Nation’ expresses this position clearly when he writes:

The heavy press guff about ‘the revolutionary mining village of Irbovlje [sic] in Northern Yugoslavia’ and their ‘Our freedom is the freedom of those who think alike’ quote, made me expect something much more impenetrable and mentally taxing. But hell, this has brilliant beer commercial vocals, lots of ‘Yahs!’, and the organic power of a Slavic Reginald Dixon. Great stuff! (Brown, 1987, p.15).¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Reginald Dixon is a famous British theatre organist, primarily associated with the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool, England.

It is important to note that although this approach of responding purely to Laibach's 'brutal theatricality' and its music is common among respondents to my research into Laibach's audience, it is not the experience of the majority. Most respondents demonstrated a degree of understanding that exceeded simply enjoying Laibach's music. Indeed, most found that a level of understanding into Laibach and the wider context of the NSK increased their enjoyment. It is also interesting to note that the frequency of those respondents who simply enjoyed Laibach for the music was significantly higher in America.¹²⁹

Direct critique

I have discussed how enabled by a strategy of non-alignment, Laibach's position as *other* in popular music, coupled with a sustained Eastern European autonomy, function as indirect critique of the West. On the other hand, the direct critique, rather than challenge Western hegemony by operating within its system, is comprised of statements by Laibach that challenge the West directly. Laibach's inversion of a popular Anglo-American perspective on the Second World War provides an example of this, when they describe it as 'the greatest vindictive genocide in the history of mankind, when American aircraft, assisted by other Allies, systematically bombarded and demolished Dresden and other German cities' (Laibach, 2006, online). Here Laibach are challenging the cherished historical given of Allied moral superiority. By way of further example, in Seattle in 2008, Laibach asked performance artist Heather Duke to set up a soup kitchen outside the venue where Laibach were to perform:

¹²⁹ Details of the questionnaire and the response are included in the appendix.

The Slovenians want us to serve soup on their behalf to suffering, starving Americans in front of the venue. Kind of like one of the bread lines of the Great Depression. They ask for things like black and white bread to be symbolic of the presidential choices. They request that the soup be “not a very good Soup” (Duke, 2011, email).

Duke paints her face white, her companion’s black, and they carry a sign that reads: ‘\$uffering Brothers, We can spare some soup’. Here Laibach are pointing out the irony inherent in America’s claim to be the richest nation on earth when it cannot feed its own people. That this challenge should come from a country of only two million, and one that most Americans have never heard of, is a familiar Laibach inversion.

These challenges, according to Monroe, ‘have the character of corrective pragmatism rather than fascistic mobilisation’ (2000, p.278). Yet they are nevertheless outspoken, and the phrasing employed in this critique suggests a fanaticism and an absolutism at odds with a perceived Western liberalism. Laibach’s discourse can be thus said to be a continuation of the Socialist Realist critique of Western cultural imperialism, something Monroe claims is partly to account for Laibach’s popularity in former Socialist states (2005, p.224).

Laibach finds in the West a cultural and political degeneracy, and their critique is characteristically militant and wilfully provocative. In the early 1980s, Tomaž Hostnik, Laibach’s original vocalist, cited the pop-music fashion of the New Romantics as symptomatic of this cultural malaise: ‘Old dandyism has been reduced to a pile of old rags’, providing a hermaphroditic and narcissistic image of the ‘alienated man’ (NSK, 1991, p.28). This reflects Laibach’s trenchant claim that Western culture has ‘in the phase of economic degeneration, lost connection with the primary sense of reality’ (NSK, 1991, p.50). Laibach state this as the reason for

their existence: ‘The degraded and rejected values have created an empty space where Laibach situated itself’ (NSK, 1991, p.50). This perceived cultural degeneracy is also a political one. The collapse of Socialism brought about the ‘soft’ capitalism of late-capitalism, once that capitalism no longer functioned as a diametrically opposed ideology, and according to Laibach, this has led to a ‘fear of political excommunication amongst the old, now totally decimated, Left. In the process of losing its political identity, it has become an advocate of both Euro-centralism and soft liberalism’ (Laibach, 2006, online). The absence of clearly defined ideological binaries entails confusion between left and right political parties, and this confusion is manifested in Western democracy as it is currently practiced:

Due to the ‘autonomisation’ of interests and aims of the individual and the community, the homogeneity of the unity is disappearing. The ties of interdependence, which are the basic condition for the survival of the community of mankind, are being torn apart. This leads to the dissolution of society, its vitality and harmony, in which individual interests and aims are subordinated to the universal common aim. The ideological and practical basis of the regressive process is parliamentary democracy (Laibach, 2006, online).

In the recording *Satanic Versus* (2003), as a development of this critique, Laibach appear to challenge the very corner-stone of democracy, free-speech. The phrase ‘express yourself’ is repeated throughout the track, which ends with:

Express yourself as the leading nation
The first, the second, third world domination
Impress with stars and stripes forever
Conspiracy of terror and salvation
(Laibach, 2003, CD).¹³⁰

The lyrics seem to suggest that under the guise of freedom of speech American cultural imperialism is at work, this being the driving force and hidden agenda behind Western democracy. In the film *Laibach, a Film from Slovenia* (1993),

¹³⁰ See: ‘Satanic Versus’, track one, CD two.

Laibach speak directly to camera, couching Western democracy in the vocabulary of disease:

Democracy ensnares people through the Utopian injection of desires and fantasies into a social bloodstream. Its hypodermic needle is the entertainment culture industry. It's a shared needle, and a shared needle leads to the spread of disease. In democracy there is no cure against its own disease (*Laibach, a Film from Slovenia*, 1993, DVD).

Here Western cultural and political degeneracy is depicted as an illness, an infection, and Laibach cite Western pop art as indicative of this malaise: 'POP art is linked through a distant artificial irony to a certain aspect of social nihilism; LAIBACH KUNST rises above such tendencies and wants to show the truth as it should be, restoring to things and people their unadulterated meaning' (Laibach, 2006, online).¹³¹ Laibach's edicts are radical, and are redolent of the National Socialist ban on 'Entartete Kunst' [Degenerate Art], arguing for a purity of spirit in art. In an interview with the *Toronto Star* in 1989 entitled, *Jackbooted Laibach Never Smiles While Stomping Rock in Your Face*, Laibach posit an Eastern Europe 'spirit' as an antithesis to Western materialism:

Lech Walesa made a good point when he came to Paris and said, 'The West is economically wise and free, but it lacks the spirit the East'. He meant that the difference between us is the difference between materialism and spirituality, and I see his point. I tried a meal at McDonald's in New York and I was ill for three days. It was a taste of America (cited in Potter, 1989, p.8).¹³²

In the above, McDonald's becomes America, and as the synecdoche for Western materialism, America receives the most criticism from Laibach. In the film *The Divided States of America* (2004), which documents Laibach's 2004 U.S. tour, the footage of America is primarily that of urban decay. This is a lost and despairing land, where lone figures in puffer jackets stand on street-corners in the middle-distance. One particular sequence of this repeated motif is followed by the caption:

¹³¹ The capitals are Laibach's.

¹³² The 'I' in this quote is a Laibach spokesperson.

‘The “American dream” is for Americans only. We sleep better without it’ (*The Divided States of America*, 2004, DVD). In the film, America is depicted as a divided nation (hence the title); a ‘balkanised’ country. The oppositional Left-orientated viewpoint is delivered in interviews with local people and the audience at Laibach’s performances. Its opposite, capitalism, remains a silent *big other*, as footage of right-wing political slogans, billboards, television, advertising and the mainstream media has no live medium in the film but nevertheless remains a ubiquitous and dominant presence throughout. In the same film, Peter Mlakar of the NSK’s Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy is seen giving a speech from the stage before a Laibach performance in Seattle, and his attack is uncompromising: ‘Moral values in America today are nothing, pure nothing’. In a system of inverting power narratives similar to how Slovenia’s Laibach challenged Germany, Mlakar casts America as culturally inferior: ‘You appear to us, who have a chance to see you up-close and personal, a third-world country. A clumsy child filled with fear and prejudice’. Further attacks label President Bush ‘the opposite of Christ’, and include a direct insult to the audience: ‘Americans in general are not too intelligent, for that reason we can in part forgive you, and overlook some of your sins’ (*The Divided States of America*, 2004, DVD). The audience cheer in apparent support throughout.

Laibach’s notion of a spiritually ‘purer’ East set up in opposition to the West is also a construct that demonstrates the failure of the East to see the emergence from Socialism as an opportunity to create an alternative to both Socialism and capitalism. For Laibach this opportunity was provided by the difference between the two systems: ‘In Socialism the abyss between subject and

superstructure was large enough to produce scepticism; in capitalism there is no abyss between the subject and the superstructure, because superstructure and subject are brutally melted together' (Laibach, 2006, online). Laibach find post-Socialism has squandered this opportunity:

The East collapsed because it blindly believed in the Western Utopian definition of freedom of the individual. The West only survives because it slyly established a system which insists on people's freedom. That is to say, under democracy, people believe they're acting according to their own will and desires (*Laibach, a Film from Slovenia*, 1993, DVD).

Thus the 'former East' has allowed itself to be seduced by Western promises. However, Laibach see this as an aggressive move on the part of the West: 'Eastern states are not adopting the Western model but the model gradually dictated by the West' (Laibach, 2006, online). This Laibach see as Western cultural imperialism, in other words, globalisation. In 1989 Don McLeese of the *Chicago Sun-Times* reported that at their performance Laibach projected sports scores, headline news, Coca-Cola and hair product commercials, all overlaid with World War Two audio reportage celebrating victory, with: 'The flags of freedom fly all over Europe' (McLeese, 1989b, p.25). The *Volk* (2006) album sleeve contains quotes from various sources dating from 1941 to 2002 that state English will eventually become the world language. Laibach themselves pointedly misuse English in the sleeve notes: 'When we speak English, we make no favour to it' (Laibach, 2006, sleeve notes). On the rear of the *Occupied Europe Tour 1985* sleeve (released 1991) Ronald Reagan is also quoted: 'It is my fervent wish that in the next century there will be one Europe, a free Europe, a United States of Europe' (Reagan cited in Laibach, 1991, sleeve notes). In the context of Laibach's interrogation of American cultural imperialism, the latter phrase acquires greater significance.

Globalisation, or 'McWorld' as it is termed by Lechner and Boli in their book *The Globalisation Reader*, is Westernisation by another name (2008, pp.9-10). Laibach have spoken out against globalisation in this context:

Europe is not North America. It has marinated in blood several thousand years of political and cultural differences between regions, each with its own powerful traditions. It cannot turn itself into a characterless melting pot without causing pain, frustration and conflict (Laibach, 2006, online).

There is no customary ambiguity by Laibach here. Laibach remind the West that ideas of nationalism and its concomitant ideologies are fundamental to the Eastern European experience, and cannot be ignored. These ideas are not necessarily inimical to ideas of democracy, but certainly to a democracy Laibach perceive as Western cultural imperialism in disguise. In an interview with the television programme *Network 7*, Laibach characteristically invert the interviewer's question as to whether they are fascinated by the trappings of fascism, into a diatribe on the way democracy has become the cover for capitalism:

'Fascism is sexy!' is the commercial slogan of those manufacturers in the West who still produce fascist accessories for the 'Carnaby-street-like' market. For us, Nazi-fascism is an open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist and imperialist elements of the financial capital. Nazi-fascism under the guise of democracy is the rule of financial capital itself (NSK, 1991, p.57).

This inversion is a repeated device within the Laibach ritual, whether that be to reverse the power/culture relations between the ethnic (Slovenian) and mainstream American culture, or to use an interviewer's own question to demonstrate the interviewer's prejudice and preconceptions. In their equating of Western liberal democracy with totalitarianism, Laibach are again inverting the formula. They have described pop culture as the Socialist Realism of the West, challenging the cultural given that pop music is liberatory and manifest free-expression.

Pop culture is the Social Realism of the West. It is the social theatre. Why we deal with Socialist Realism and Nazi Kunst so much is because the relationship between art and ideology is so clear. The basic problem is that westerners believed that they were – in contrast to those in the East – free, and that they alone were doing pure art and pure music whereas Easterners had to make ideological art. It's not true. It's basically the same model, except it's more sophisticated in the West (cited in Aulich and Sylvestová, 2000, p.80).

In 1997 Laibach were interviewed in *The Wire* describing Michael Jackson as a trademark and a collective wish, with as little difference between him and Prince as there is between Coca-Cola and Pepsi (Gray, 1997, p.27). The connection made between pop music and capitalism is made apparent in this comparison.

Categorisation

Laibach's policy of non-alignment is a strategy that frustrates assimilation through categorisation and thus maintains their status of *other*, a position central to their role as nexus. Assimilation through categorisation is a structure that reaffirms Western hegemonic ideology, whether that be an aesthetic discourse or that of the market, and the West finds itself unable to process the monumental Retro-avant-garde of Laibach and the NSK. Laibach and the NSK's aesthetic discourse is not recognised in Western reportage. This is not only due to the exclusivity of many of the Slovenian and Eastern European references, but the apparent re-mythologizing of signifiers the West has consigned to either history or postmodern kitsch. Ian Gittins of *Melody Maker* in 1988 demonstrates this inability to process the *other* beyond an ethnographic narrative when he dismisses Laibach's output: 'Laibach's non-interventionist, retrogradist [sic], re-evaluating, political stance is fine as an aesthetic viewpoint. In the real world, it doesn't mean a fig' (1988, p.9).¹³³ Gittins is revealing a default West-centrism by referring to 'the real world' as being the

¹³³ Gittins repeatedly uses the term 'Retrogradist' instead of the correct term Retrogarde. It may be a spelling mistake, but he makes the same mistake later in separate articles written in 1990 and 1992.

West, for in 1988 Laibach and the NSK's political impact in their native Slovenia was of great significance, and their championing of an autonomous Eastern aesthetic discourse ('Easthetics') was inspiring other Eastern artists to emerge from under the shadow of the West. A similar dynamic is at work in William Feaver's review of IRWIN at the Riverside Studios in 1987, when he writes: 'IRWIN failed to convince, largely because the attempts at shock tactics seemed old-fashioned in a scene that jumps faster than any collective can manage' (Feaver, 1987b, p.224). Feaver ascribes an intention to shock to IRWIN, a skewed perspective of IRWIN's work that more tellingly betrays the reviewer's expectations as regards the value of novelty. The reviewer is pointing out IRWIN cannot keep up with Western trends, and is thus prizing this quality above the work itself. The value of shock and novelty is arguably a Western market-driven notion, and does not reflect an Eastern European aesthetic value system of the late 1980s.

Laibach and the NSK prove hard to classify, they cannot be comfortably categorised in any one subject, as indicated by the diverse nature of colloquia attended as part of this research. These include music, history, art, politics, sociology, performance art and theatre, all of which are applicable, yet none alone is specific to Laibach or the NSK. In record shops they are usually found on the shelves labelled 'Industrial', yet they could as easily be filed under 'World Music'.¹³⁴ Of Laibach's audience polled as part of my research, 44% categorised Laibach as 'Industrial/martial', 8% as 'artists', and 13% refused to categorise them at all.¹³⁵ Jonh [sic] Wilde in *Melody Maker* finds himself in a similar quandary

¹³⁴ The music shop HMV categorise artists on their shelves according to the record company's recommendation. (Email correspondence with HMV head office, 24th November 2012).

¹³⁵ The remaining 35% labelled Laibach in a miscellany of other terms, such as 'Slovenian', and 'pranksters', for example.

when reviewing Laibach's performance at London's Town and Country venue in 1988: 'The greatest panto of the season? Wallpaper in a gas chamber? Academic nihilism? Aesthetic terrorism? Hermann Goering doing the Lambeth Walk?' (Wilde, 1988, p.19).¹³⁶ The tone is flippant, but nevertheless expresses the confusion the Western press often has in pigeonholing Laibach. Part of the issue was that Laibach's performance in the West was deprived of its identifying social context, Laibach did not appear to originate from a familiar milieu. Rather, they appeared to be thrown up from Western fantasies of the totalitarian East, and for the more culturally-aware reviewers the stereotyping was too obvious to be taken at face value. Identifying social contexts structure the understanding of popular music, such as for example, the origins of British Heavy Metal being in the disaffection of 1970s youth in the industrial Midlands, or the hedonism of rave culture in the early 1990s arising from Thatcherism and a cynicism with direct political action. To be valid within the discourse of musicology, an identifiable social context must be extant, yet if this discourse is dominantly Western, Laibach will evade easy assimilation.

Faced with the difficulty in categorising Laibach, much Western reportage withholds judgement and refers to Laibach's ambiguity, or admits to a potential multiplicity of readings, such as Neil Strauss of the *New York Times* in 1997:

There are two ways to listen to Laibach ... One is to believe the band's own rhetoric; that it is an art-and-politics collective using music as a vehicle for turning the masses away from capitalism, Christianity and the entertainment business and toward its own ideals of Brutism, crypto-totalitarianism, industrial art and Neue Slowenische Kunst ... The other way is to view Laibach as a novelty cover band, turning pop songs into militaristic marching anthems (Strauss, 1997, p.16).

¹³⁶ The pantomime reference is presumably because this review appeared in the Christmas Eve edition.

Stephen Holden in the same paper a year earlier advocates a shift of perspective as a valid reading:

The notion that art and politics are profoundly intertwined may seem remote to most Americans, give or take the occasional controversy over government support for the arts. But in Europe, where totalitarian states have trampled on free expression and appropriated the myths and rituals of art to serve their oppressive ends, it is a very different story (Holden, 1996, online).

Other journalists warn of potential mis-readings, such as Len Brown of the *N.M.E.*:

Taken superficially, Laibach's *ironic* flirtation with Nazi imagery would have seen them buried already. But, in the context of their cold militaristic origins, exploring the depths of their philosophy, and taking into account the cathartic humour and original power of their music, it would be churlish to dismiss them (Brown, 1988, p.42).¹³⁷

These examples of Western reportage engaging with Laibach's complexity are however relatively rare, and very few articles are of sufficient length to tackle the subject with any degree of accuracy. Writing within the limited remit of the mainstream popular music press, confronted by what is ostensibly a musical group, Western reportage often resorts to superficial labelling. These fall primarily within three perspectives: the fascist/Wagnerian, the humorous, and the xenophobic. The latter I have already discussed in relation to how Laibach reflect the West on itself by articulating the West's Eastern European fantasy, but the remaining two also demonstrate Laibach's non-assimilatory status.

Reportage: fascist/Wagner

This perspective focuses on what is the most apparent aspect of the Laibach and NSK spectacle; reportage that references Wagner, fascism, or its popularly associated trappings. It warrants inclusion here not only for the frequency of its occurrence but in constituting a categorisation that operates to frustrate more

¹³⁷ The italics are the reviewer's own.

complex readings of Laibach and NSK praxis. In 1989 Don McLeese of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, who begins his review with the phrase ‘Laibach über alles’, articulated this issue:

Though the music had some of the fans down front slam-dancing, it seemed that goose-stepping would have been a more appropriate response. Some partisans of the band claim it is impossible to understand Laibach out of context, a context that pre-concert video did its best to supply (McLeese, 1989b, p.25).

Others are more definite, such as for example Jann Parry of *The Observer*, who describes Laibach as a ‘neo-fascist rock band’ (Parry, 1986, p.26). It must however be said that these unqualified assertions of the group’s political stance are relatively rare and usually occur in newspaper listings of events as one or two lines, rather than reviews or articles. Far more frequent are interpretations that associate Laibach’s performance with the aesthetics of Nazi Germany, and to this purpose I include the Wagnerian references. *Melody Maker* of 1996 finds ‘Valkyrian choruses and rhythms like jackboots marching across gravel’ (Stubbs, 1996, p.48). In 1988, Edwin Pouncey of the *N.M.E.* referred to *Let it Be* (1988) as a ‘Wagnerian grand opera’ (1988, p.69). Adrian Dannatt of *The Guardian* in 1991 describes Laibach as the ‘NSK’s hard rock division, who wear Slovenian hunting clothes and play Wagnerian heavy metal’ (Dannatt, 1991, p.36). Further examples are too numerous to include here, and in 1989 Laibach responded emphatically to these Wagner comparisons: ‘Wagner is ideologically too exploitative, we are not interested in Wagner ... We don’t want anything to do with Wagner. We never took anything, no sample, anything from Wagner’ (Laibach, 2012, online).¹³⁸

Although Wagnerian references are frequent in Western reportage, they are

¹³⁸ Now that Laibach are no longer so frequently accused of being Wagnerian, they have since changed this stance. The soundtrack to the film *Iron Sky* (2012), penned by Laibach, features frequent Wagnerian motifs, and in 2009 in collaboration with the RTV Slovenia Symphonic orchestra and composer Izidor Leitinger, Laibach performed *Volkswagner* at Ljubljana’s prestigious Cankarjev Dom venue.

comparatively rare in academic analysis of Laibach, which is indicative of an effort to interrogate Laibach's work beyond superficial labels.

Other popularly conceived Nazi and fascist signifiers are referenced with equal frequency. Common are mentions of goose-stepping, storm-troopers and jackboots, such as the *N.M.E.* in 1988: 'You feel sure that with each chorus of "Nothing's gonna change my world", the stamping jackboots and Germanic belches are never far away' (Brown, 1988, p.42). Roy Wilkinson of *Sounds* in an article entitled *Slavs to the Rhythm* describes Laibach thus: 'The front trio – a gravel-throated vocal dictator flanked by two sweat-clad, drum-beating Übermensch' (Wilkinson, 1987b, p.36). Reviewing the single 'Tanz Mit Laibach' in 2003, John Walters of *The Guardian* writes: 'Laibach still sound as if they're in the process of annexing Poland, their backbeats scrunching like boots across gravel to disturbingly bracing effect' (Walters, 2003, p.25). References to Nazi imagery are dominant and provide an immediate and expedient point of reference for a Western audience. These labels are also revealingly sensationalist, as considerably less frequent are allusions to Socialist Realism or totalitarianism in general. To illustrate this point, accompanying the release of the album *WAT* in 2003, the press were offered photos of Laibach posing in American uniforms and Nazi uniforms. According to Laibach, the press always chose the Nazi uniforms (Underyourskindvd, 2011, online).



Figure 5.8, Laibach in American uniforms, WAT press release (2003a)¹³⁹

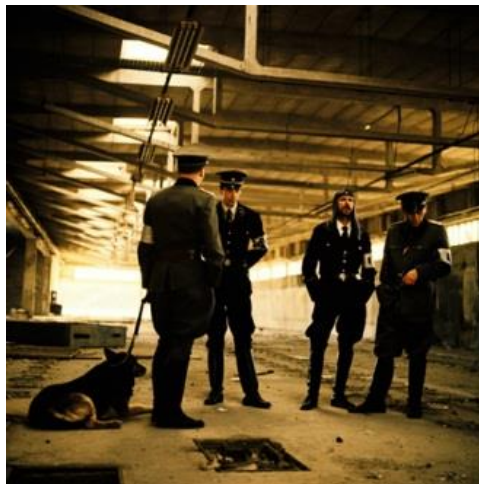


Figure 5.9, Laibach in Nazi uniforms, WAT press release (2003c)

Although these are two separate uniforms, Laibach appropriate and re-code each uniform design with the Malevich cross, thus re-capitulating the two disparate ideological signifiers within the monumental Retro-avant-garde.

Reportage: humorous

The other dominant perspective in Western reportage of Laibach is the humorous. In the film *Pobeda Pod Suncem* (1988), the British dancer and

¹³⁹ This is a rare official photograph in which Laibach are depicted smiling. They are playing a game of four-handed chess. From above, the board is the shape of the Malevich cross.

choreographer Michael Clark is interviewed as to why he chose Laibach to perform with: ‘I chose to use their music because it’s very strong, stark, and frightening. But the strongest reason that I use their work is the humour in it, which I think Laibach might deny’ (Interviewed in Gajic, 1988, video online).¹⁴⁰ Much Western reportage finds Laibach either amusing, or ironic. This is an express attempt to render comfortable the provocation of an incongruously overt Grand Utopian Narrative form that refuses to admit to the use of irony or pastiche, leaving this reading to the viewer. For example, in Louise Gray’s article on Laibach for *The Wire* in 1997, an image of Laibach was accompanied by a fist clutching a cross, another a hammer, and a third a dead plucked chicken (Gray, 1997, p.26). The incongruous banality of the chicken can be said to add a disruptive comic absurdity to the image. Other reviews opt to treat Laibach’s output as a comic tour de force:

They are unintentionally hilarious. When shouter Number One, Milan, strides on in his silk Huckleberry Hound ears (or ‘traditional head-dress’, take your pick) his disgusted *Il Duce*-like shakes of the head make us feel like degenerate, coke-drinking, leather-jacketed scum (Price, 1992, p.13).

The same reviewer continues: ‘I try very hard not to laugh. But I can’t help remembering that “Springtime for Hitler” musical in Gene Wilder’s “The Producers”’ (Price, 1992, p.13). Mat Smith of *Melody Maker* writes in 1994: ‘I kept expecting the ghost of Graham Chapman to come on, in full Sergeant Major uniform, baton under his arm, bellowing, “Stop all this, it’s too silly!”’ (1994, p.17). Other journalists are more direct in their ridicule, for example Andrew Mueller of *Melody Maker*:

¹⁴⁰ In 1987 Laibach accompanied Michael Clark’s dance performance *No Fire Escape in Hell* at the Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London. They were unable to tour to America with Clark on the grounds that ‘they might be radical communists’ (Henning and Skok, 2009, p.189). Michael Clark declined to be interviewed for this research.

It's easy to laugh at Laibach, which is why we so often do. They are epically silly, uproariously deluded. They stamp about on stage in big boots pointing at things and spend perfectly good time and money recording pompous, portentous, cod-operatic and often daffily magnificent cover versions (Mueller, 1995, p.34).

Mike Goldsmith reviewing *Jesus Christ Superstars* (1996) in *Vox* dismisses Laibach thus:

Are they Billy-Goats Gruff industrial types trying to subvert society with their iconoclastic cover versions and funny Viking hats, or are they just humourless twats? Well *Jesus Christ Superstars* finally settles the argument. And the answer is 'Who the fuck cares?' (Goldsmith, 1996, p.106).

He continues: 'Laibach's intent is to scare a change of underwear out of you ... New pants are, indeed, required. You'll have pissed yourself laughing in the ones you're wearing' (1996, p.106). Faced with the incongruity of Laibach's unrelenting commitment and fanaticism in a cynical 'post-ideological' age, Goldsmith's derision echoes the reaction of many Western commentators.

A development of this interpretation of Laibach's provocation as humorous is to understand them as a deliberate practical joke. Jennifer Nine of *Melody Maker* is forthright when writing about Laibach's interpretation of Europe's 'Final Countdown' (1994):

Absolutely hilarious, and that's before the Dalek voice-over, Cruella de Ville operatic chorus, Transylvanian accents and synths even kicked in. Anyone listening to this cover of the Europe 'classic' without realising the biggest Laibach piss-take of all is the po-faced pretence that this stuff is actually subversive agit-prop, or whatever – and that they're not really the Frank Sidebottom of Slavic art-terrorism – is either naïve on an unmeasurable scale, or possibly a band member. Somewhere in Ljubljana, Skrk, Wurst and Zsnasby, people are really f**king pissing themselves (Nine, 1994, p.36).¹⁴¹

An extension of this interpretation of Laibach in Western reportage is the insistence that Laibach find *themselves* humorous. This is another way to defuse the

¹⁴¹ Asterisks are the reviewer's own.

provocation of Laibach's apparent problematic identification with the Grand Utopian Narrative. In July 1986, *Melody Maker* ran a two-page spread on Laibach, which both interviews Laibach and reports on the interviewer's experience of the interview in equal measure. Here the writer meets a Laibach spokesperson the day after the interview:

Shirt and tie replaced by a T-shirt. He smokes and laughs over a mineral water and cups of coffee ... He is human after all, and somehow he is stranger than the super-political automaton we had met before (The Stud Brothers, 1986, p.31).

Ian Gittins in a similarly substantial piece also seeks the reassuring human face behind the spectacle: 'Laibach wrap themselves in the utmost seriousness for the sombre photo-session. When it's all over they huddle and laugh like kids' (Gittins, 1988, p.8). Throughout this piece Gittins continues this tone, insisting on the humanity of Laibach to the point of infantilism.

Attempts to humanise Laibach are attempts to render Laibach's spectacle palatable within a cynical 'post-ideological' Western discourse. However this is frustrated by Laibach, who neither acknowledge any humour in what they do nor recognise it as a valid discourse. Responding to *Melody Maker's* Sgrifennwr Afiach's suggestion that Laibach are comic, Laibach responded: 'Most people don't find any humour in our performances, in our songs, and so on. But, if you do, it's good for you' (Afiach, 1987, p.34). Laibach are clearer in response to Ian Gittins' question, 'what if Laibach went on stage in antlers, and the whole hall burst out laughing? Would that anger you?' To this Laibach responded: 'If the audience laugh, finally they are laughing at themselves' (Gittins, 1988, p.9). In 1987 at a performance at the Riverside Studios this was indeed the case; Laibach

emerged for the second half of the concert wearing hats with antlers attached, which was greeted with laughter from some of the audience.¹⁴²

Nexus as the celebration of difference

I have cited examples from Western reportage of their performances and audio-visual output to illustrate the West's attempts to assimilate Laibach within a comprehensible discourse, whether that be as 'Wagnerian rock', 'Eastern European pranksters', or 'humourless twats'. However, Laibach frustrate these categories by existing in a conceptual space beyond geopolitical, temporal, ideological and aesthetic determinants. This non-alignment enables them to operate as direct and indirect critique of both Eastern Europe and the West. This is a position at odds with late-capitalism, which in the increasing commodification of information and culture finds labels expedient. Journalists reviewing Laibach revert to a shorthand that references Nazis, Eastern European stereotypes and Fozzie Bear.¹⁴³ These are limited and ineffectual attempts to render Laibach's *otherness* palatable and comprehensible, whether that be an otherness within the codes of popular music or an Eastern European identity. As Biba Kopf noted in 1987, 'The West is no longer used to dealing with an art of Laibach's complexity' (1987, p.24). As I have argued in this chapter, Laibach's systems of over-identification and its associated radical ambivalence, coupled with the iconography of Retrogardism which late-capitalism can only relate to as playfully offensive kitsch, combine to create a structure that frustrates assimilation.

¹⁴² I was in attendance at this concert.

¹⁴³ Laibach's vocals have been compared to those of the muppet character Fozzie Bear in more than one instance by separate writers. The comic effect of such an incongruity destabilises the potential to take Laibach seriously.

Notions of categorisation, and indirect and direct critique, are all bound up in Laibach and the NSK as a point of dialogue between Eastern Europe and the West. The NSK is a place where, as Regina Römbild puts it, the ‘imaginary geography of East and West collapses’ (2011, p.26). Their performance apparently panders to the Western fantasy of Eastern Europe whilst simultaneously asserting an exclusive Eastern European aesthetic autonomy. This rift is fruitful text for Laibach, and is not bridged but celebrated and actively maintained by them. In an interview with *Melody Maker* in 1986, Laibach refer to this divide: ‘We talk of differences in attitude, of differences in cultural background, and we do not understand’ (cited in The Stud Brothers, 1986, p.30). Tackling the issue of the translatability of art, Jerry Cullum gives IRWIN as his example: ‘Nobody in America has all of IRWIN’s sources in their visual repertory, and this illustrates the dilemma of international art generally’ (1997, p.35). However, this difference is core to Laibach’s role as nexus. NSK theorist Eda Čufer refers to this difference as a counter-ideological social structure, which forms ‘the common identity of the living cultural identity of the new east’ (1998, p.39). Referring to Western artists she writes:

We tried to enlighten our Western colleagues by making them realise that someone else lived at their side, someone who was different. Someone who was trying to speak the language of modernity, but was able to do this only by simultaneously developing the awareness about the social and historical difference that had been separating Europe’s East and West for seventy years (Čufer, 1998, p.39).

Laibach and the NSK are Čufer’s Difference; celebrating Eastern European aesthetic autonomy whilst simultaneously playing the West at its own game. Čufer’s Difference is the point of dialogue (nexus) between Eastern Europe and the West. In his review of Laibach’s 2012 London performance at the Tate Modern for *The Quietus*, Luke Turner writes succinctly on Laibach’s role as nexus:

This is a reminder that the never-ending cultural obsession with British or American art school groups is a sideline to far more radical achievements elsewhere in the world. Laibach are born out of what they are made of – cement – and hold no respect for taste or the market. Not only are Laibach an extra-state entity, they're a collector-proof art construct and label-drop-resistant band. They survived and adapted and redeployed for post-Tito, post-Yugoslav, post-Communist and now, perhaps, they offer new thoughts as we stand teetering on the brink of a post-capitalist and possibly post-Euro world. Where once they offered a parallel to the communist state, Laibach and NSK give us a mirror and critique to late capitalist life and art (Turner, 2012, online).

This independence from the commodifying narratives of late-capitalism Turner references and current trends in aesthetic discourse, is at the heart of Laibach's interpellative agency, which is discussed in the following chapter.

INTERPELLATION

This chapter analyses the nature and mechanisms of Laibach's interpellation, with specific focus on their Western audience.¹⁴⁴ I will argue that the complexity of Laibach's praxis and their position of non-alignment in terms of ideology and aesthetic discourse constitutes its interpellative appeal. This non-alignment is predicated on a creative-interpretive subject-position for Laibach's audience. This chapter discusses the allure of this interpretive subject-position and the concomitant response, artistic or otherwise, to Laibach's enigma. In order to examine the relationship Laibach has with its audience, comparison is drawn with other musical groups in the West who are frequently labelled 'Industrial', or who have similarly employed totalitarian or fascist imagery. The nature of this transgression and its appeal is interrogated as regards Laibach and NSK praxis.

Findings for this research are supported by data gathered from a survey of Laibach's audience. 656 members of Laibach's audience were contacted directly through a social media site dedicated to Laibach and through email addresses gathered at a Laibach performance.¹⁴⁵ Of the 225 that responded, each was sent a questionnaire on their cultural background and their experience of Laibach, followed some months after by a follow-up questionnaire based on the results of the first. The data gathered was not statistically regulated and constitutes secondary research used as an indicative guide only.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Althusser's theory of interpellation is that an ideology 'hails' or interpellates the subject, and this ideology, in interpellating the subject, validates the subject by affirming their subject-position. (Althusser, 2008, p.48).

¹⁴⁵ The performance was at The Garage, London, on the 15th December 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Details of both questionnaires and the results are listed in the appendix.

Audience

Laibach can be said to attract a non-mainstream audience. Clothing at their performances is predominantly dark, with a high proportion of army surplus wear. Alexei Monroe has described Laibach's audience as: 'a mixture of the pre-converted plus sensation-seekers, artists, intellectuals, and more "political" individuals' (2008, p.188). In the 1980s, Laibach described their audience thus:

The LAIBACH audience is any audience which accepts the extreme position of contemporary (post)industrial production. Identification with our positions is possible by means of the intellect or the intuition in a schizophrenic subject, who is, in the process of degeneration, totally alienated from society (mobilisation of unstable individuals) (NSK, 1991, p.46).

Although this typically cryptic statement is more concerned with Laibach's praxis than a concise analysis of their audience, Laibach do not specify a target audience within an identifiable genre of popular music. This statement by Laibach does not specify a target audience within an identifiable genre of popular music. Neither was there a typical respondent to the questionnaire for this research. The widest band were male, British or American, aged between thirty-one and forty, working in the creative arts or media, and educated to a degree level or equivalent (six of the 225 had doctorates). Almost all respondents were aware of NSK itself, and twenty-five of them were passport-carrying citizens of the NSK State-in-Time.¹⁴⁷ Twenty-eight described themselves as familiar with the origins of the iconography used by Laibach, such as the kozolec and Malevich, and forty-six had read Alexei Monroe's book on Laibach: *Interrogation Machine*. More indicative, however, were the comments supplied by respondents into the nature of my research and their subjective relationship with Laibach. On the whole, regardless of their educational level, profession or nationality, respondents were erudite and enthusiastic about

¹⁴⁷ The NSK State-in-Time has its own passports, indicating citizenship of the spectral NSK state.

taking part in the research, with the prime motivation evinced being to increase awareness of Laibach.¹⁴⁸

Subject-position and Identification

Almost all respondents to the questionnaires considered the complexity of Laibach to be an essential component in their appeal, and no respondent expressed dissatisfaction with any potential associated ideological ambiguity. Alexei Monroe has written on this complexity and its relationship to the Western audience, suggesting a division between those who simply accept and enjoy Laibach's images of Slovene partisans or Aryan gymnasts as 'so much Eastern/totalitarian exotica', and those who attempt to decipher the semantics (2005, p.192). Monroe gives a further example of the plurality of subjectivities when he divides Laibach's audience into the 'ideological and the aesthetic', wherein the former is represented by the political far-right looking for affirmation, and the latter are engaging with the spectacle (2005, p.188). It is this potential for ideologically opposed readings in Laibach's audience that Ian Parker notes when he writes: 'One of the politically disturbing aspects of Laibach concerts in the West is that Leftists and fascists will sometimes find themselves together near the stage and puzzle about what it is that the other finds compatible with their politics' (2005, p.105). On the *Kapital* tour in 1992 when Laibach played 'White Law', Monroe reported a 'Pavlovian response from a small group of fascists at the front who took it upon themselves to give Nazi salutes' (cited in Campbell, n.d., online). What is axiomatic of the Laibach spectacle and central to my argument is that either audience position is valid, and exemplifies the creative-interpretive position of the Laibach audience.

¹⁴⁸ Of the 225 who responded, only four objected to the research, two of whom withdrew their participation on the grounds that they were concerned I was a member of an anti-fascist organisation.

The inherent ambiguity of an unfixed subject-position is a creative process in which the Laibach audience is actively engaged with not only deciphering the aesthetic systems in place but establishing a valid subject-position. The artists Pil and Galia Kollektiv put it succinctly when they suggest that Laibach and the NSK do not have ‘fans’ but collaborators (Pil and Galia Kollektiv, 2010, interview). In comparison, the position of the subject is not problematised in conventional popular music, and in this sense the end-product is to an extent finite and closed; the ‘fan’ is asked not only to consume but to identify with a cultural and political context. In contrast, Laibach’s texts function as a challenge to the subject to engage effectively with the material, even if that position entails problematic identification with issues of subordination, power, and ideologically fraught iconography. In this sense, Laibach’s audience are not passive consumers of end-product but active subjects, engaged not only in dealing with Laibach’s challenge but in deciphering the nature and mechanism of that challenge. This is a major contributory factor in explaining the loyalty of the Laibach audience, for whom each album released differs considerably in genre, a tactic that has caused frustration with some respondents but nevertheless remains a defining part of the allure. For example, the oppressive martial-industrial of *Nova Akropola* (1986) and *Opus Dei* (1987) is very different from the digital sampling of *Kapital* (1992), the heavy rock of *Jesus Christ Superstars* (1996), and the digitised interpretations of Bach fugues in *Laibachkunstderfuge* (2008). Neither can these stylistic swings be ascribed to the linear development in style of a conventional popular music group. For a band to explore such a wide range stylistically and yet maintain a loyal fanbase would suggest that appeal operates at a level other than simply the music.

Addressing this issue, respondents to the questionnaire cited as part of Laibach's appeal that they were unique both in popular music and counter-cultural practice. This was the most common response, with complexity/depth being the second most valued attribute. Other criteria were listed, such as courage/commitment, aesthetics, continuous re-invention, humour, and controversy, in that order. Only a small minority of those polled claimed to enjoy the music without any other attached value.

The interpretive subject-positioning required from Laibach's audience centres on issues of identification. Roy Shuker, in *Understanding Popular Music*, illustrates the role of identification in the consumption of music with reference to the popularity of reggae, soul and rap music with Polynesians and Maori, in that these musical genres have become synonymous with black culture (2001, p.199). Shuker posits the role of popular music as cultural capital and is thus 'a source for the construction of identity' (2001, p.193). Yet the key identification nodes in the Laibach spectacle are those of totalitarianism. Hence in Shuker's formula, it would seem that political extremists such as the far-right would be an overwhelming majority rather than the minority at a Laibach performance. Of the 225 respondents to the research questionnaires, none indicated Laibach as having a right-wing political agenda. The most frequent response was to categorise any perceived political agenda of Laibach's as 'oppositional'. The second most popular categorisation was to class Laibach's politics as 'unknown', or 'they don't have one'. Only twelve of the 225 stated Laibach's politics as Left-wing outright. Therefore, on the level of identification, other mechanisms must be in play driving Laibach's interpellation.

It is in the awakening of taboo desires that Laibach interpellates its audience in the context of an impossible subject-position. In order to engage with Laibach's audio-visual onslaught, the subject must to some extent take part in the spectacle as part of the mass audience Laibach addresses. As well as the appeal of a transgressive frisson, this raises uncomfortable truths in the audience about the willingness of the individual to subordinate themselves to a libidinal overwhelm of power. This uneasy self-knowledge is a factor mentioned by many respondents in discussing Laibach's allure. NSK theorist Eda Čufer has described this moment of understanding as a revelation. In 1982 Čufer saw Laibach live for the first time at the Novi Rock performance and describes her experience thus:

What I learnt from that experience was a shocking epiphany: the enemy, the oppressor, the evil against which I wanted to revolt in my late teenage years was not outside, was not out there in the abstract realms of the state authority, etc. It was actually right here inside of me (2009, p.143).

In a *Melody Maker* review of December 1988, Jonh [sic] Wilde writes of simultaneously being seduced and violated by a Laibach performance:

Watching the images of mass suffering flicker on the backdrop, you cannot help feel uncomfortable with the weight of this momentum. You cannot help but feel you are being swept up into a whirlpool that is steeped in evil. A realm that is foul, bruised, bitter and rotten to the core. Yet it feels *glorious* (Wilde, 1988, p.19).¹⁴⁹

He continues in the same review with: 'I've witnessed some magnificent spectacles at this venue over the last year ... But I've never felt so violated as this' (1988, p.19). Four years later, Simon Price remarked on an involuntary effect he experienced at a Laibach performance: 'Laibach may toy with Nazi chic to (and perhaps beyond) the point of acceptability. All I know is that after three songs, I suddenly realised I was standing to attention' (Price, 1992, p.13). In 1987, *Melody Maker* located the reviewer's combination of 'elation' and 'unease' as regards the

¹⁴⁹ The italics are Wilde's.

album *Nova Akropola* (1987), and consequently labelled it the ‘first dangerous album of the 1980s’ (The Legendary Stud Brothers, 1987, p.29). This review articulates the riptide of attraction and repulsion in Laibach’s spectacle, whereby Laibach’s interpellation resides not in either poles, but in the space between. Žižek notes this defining duality in *Everything Provokes Fascism*: ‘Laibach confronted us with a phantasmic logic, with fascist enjoyment, and simultaneously, they presented this in such a way as to de-familiarise it and enable us to keep our distance from it’ (cited in Herscher, 1997, p.63). The oppressive monumentalism of Laibach’s music and iconography has no dialogue with individualism, and the absolutism of their monostatements posits only one will; that of Laibach. Yet the absence of a coherent ideological field at the heart of the spectacle prevents complete identification and establishes a degree of critical distance.

Che Vuoi as Interpellation.

The aforementioned creative-interpretive subject-position may also be analysed in terms of the enigma of the desire of the *other*. In Lacanian terms, this is referred to as *Che Vuoi*, which provides a useful analytical tool for understanding the allure of enigma. That the enigma is not understood does not alone account for its allure. Rather, it is the enigma of the other’s desire; what does the other want from us, that generates fascination. In the chapter ‘The European Context’, I explored the notion that for the West, the otherness of the East is a fantastical structure. This fantasy serves as an answer to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the *other*, and thus provides what Žižek calls the ‘co-ordinates of desire’ (1989, p.118). These co-ordinates are those of fascination, and the same process is at work in Laibach’s interpellation. Laibach’s enigma is the positioning

of the subject, the puzzle of their esoteric references, and their inherent contradictions and inconsistencies.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, this is conducted in the context of the Western fantasy of Eastern Europe; one of a demonic other locked in feudal totalitarianism, a context Laibach exploit and superficially appear to re-affirm. This dynamic of obfuscation and misdirection generates enigma and thus, in Lacanian terms, Che Vuoi. Shakespeare's character Iago in *Othello* is a prime example of the power of Che Vuoi to enthrall. Arguably Shakespeare's most malevolent character, Iago never reveals a coherent set of motives for his actions, or when he does it is to directly taunt the audience to keep them guessing, and Iago takes his secret to the grave. Iago merits inclusion here because he mirrors Laibach's praxis in three ways; he seduces the audience whilst simultaneously repelling them by his actions, as an enigma he generates fascination, and both Iago and Laibach are fictional creations by artists articulated in performance.

Obfuscation as a mechanism that generates Laibach's Che Vuoi warrants further analysis in the construction of the enigma. Aleš Erjavec places the enigma of Laibach's discourse on a par with the power of Laibach's music and aesthetics in attracting their audience (2003, p.143). Monroe is more specific, pointing to Laibach's monostatements that appear to have only one meaning but in fact result in mystification and confusion rather than certainty. He describes how the contradictions inherent in Laibach's aesthetic discourse and texts fascinate their audience, encouraging speculation as to the 'true' meanings behind these works, and that there must be a hidden mystery to their pronouncements that only Laibach know (2008, p.65). This corresponds to Baudrillard's theory of the 'enchanted simulation' of Trompe L'oeil, in that the fascination of the illusion is to be found in

¹⁵⁰ This esotericism is necessarily heightened for a Western audience.

the missing dimension; reality appears as a principle only. Baudrillard describes Trompe L'oeil as having the properties of 'pure appearances, they have the irony of too much reality' (1990, p.61). The particular missing dimension in Laibach is the coherent ideological field. The audience is confronted with an absolutism of an oppressive audio and visual triumphalist overwhelm, but the missing dimension is the coherent ideological field that would supply a reason for this over-emphatic display. In this analogy Laibach's over-emphatic texts correspond to the over-realistic illusion of Baudrillard's Trompe L'oeil; the more emphatic, or real, the surface, the greater the felt absence of the missing dimension. It is an aspect Monroe describes when he refers to the most 'brutal psychic effect' of Laibach in performance being that this 'mobilisation of will and the senses is not consummated by any climactic disclosure or explanation' (2008, p.200). The lyrics to 'WAT' articulate this strategy; the recording is typically monumental, with male and female choirs, but this soundscape pauses for these lines to be spoken in relative silence:

We shall give you nothing
And in return we'll take even less
But when the beat stops
And the lights go out
And when we leave this place
You will be left here all alone
With a static scream on your face.¹⁵¹
(Laibach, 2003, CD).¹⁵²

Here Laibach illustrate their tactic of brutalising an audience with a display of audio and visual power, but ultimately frustrate their audience by leaving these energies unresolved.

¹⁵¹ The music diminishes for the first four lines of this verse; the last three are spoken in silence.

¹⁵² See: 'WAT', track two, CD two.

Further analysis of how Laibach generate *Che Vuoi* reveals a process of *otherness*, where the audience is prevented from relating to Laibach on any level of equality. The audience must find a way to relate to Laibach, but the exchange is not reciprocated as the process of communication is one-way. I have previously written about the absence of the human face behind the façade of Laibach and the NSK's performance, supported by the invalidity of the individual or personality in Laibach's spectacle, but neither have Laibach released unmediated songs of romantic love, a staple of conventional popular music, and their subject matter does not deal with personal or domestic issues.¹⁵³ In doing away with the individual in the spectacle, Laibach channel a central tenet of their axiological Suprematist aesthetic. In order to establish itself as autonomous in art, to establish itself as a pure art and bring about a utopia of geometric form, Suprematism had to break from the shackles of figure and representation. Malevich associated figure with impurity in art, what he called 'little corners of nature, Madonnas and shameless Venuses' (cited in Harrison and Wood, 2003, p.173). Through Retrogardism, the 'new-Suprematism', Laibach and the NSK replicate this dynamic in doing away with the figure in their spectacle.¹⁵⁴ In Laibach and the NSK's formulation, the absent figure is not only the individual and personalised subject but the empathic subject, one that may be addressed in a personalised context, such as the aforementioned romantic love. Instead, the audience is hailed in universal terms or in terms redolent of propaganda, and the use of the first-person occurs only in their reinterpretations of other artists' material, which is mediated and re-coded through Laibach's discourse. The Laibach audience is thus not able to empathise with the

¹⁵³ A rare exception may be for example *Steel Trust* (1992), the lyrics of which apparently reference romantic love. The recording occurs only on the cassette version of *Kapital* (1992). See: 'Steel Trust', track three, CD two.

¹⁵⁴ My proposal that Retrogardism constitutes a new-Suprematism is analysed in detail in the chapter on Retrogardism.

individual subject, whether one created as a fictional character or as themselves addressed personally. The effect of this can be likened to McLuhan's 'acoustic' environment, in which the totality of the Laibach spectacle paradoxically both negates the individual and makes visible this absence, creating a void the Laibach audience must fill.¹⁵⁵

This impersonal edifice is supported by Laibach's apparent indifference towards their audience in performance. Early performances were markedly static, and although the vocalist has become more animated since the 1990s, neither he nor the other performers move from their places. Monroe writes about this imbalance in performance: 'The audiences' compensatory response suggests that Laibach's impassivity is somehow an implicit rebuke, as well as a stimulus for the audience to display greater animation' (2008, p.198). Monroe here indirectly supports the argument that it is the audience who must come to Laibach, rather than the other way round.

Laibach's dynamic of apparent indifference and self-sufficiency is echoed in their output, which in terms of popular music conventions appears obtuse. Having established themselves in the West with the albums *Nova Akropola* (1986) and more significantly *Opus Dei* (1987), the diverse styles of subsequent releases appeared to have little regard for building on this fanbase. This plays an important role in Laibach's interpellation of its audience, and is supported by answers supplied by questionnaire respondents on the issue of so frequent changes of style. The majority enjoyed the diversity or surprise element to each new release, with

¹⁵⁵ Marshal McLuhan's 'acoustic' space is ground as opposed to figure. Acoustic space is environment heard constantly without being consciously aware of it, whereas the eye perceives and is conscious of, the figure (McLuhan and Powers, 1989, p.viii).

many admiring the way Laibach were not shackled to 'fan' expectations. The following are responses that deal directly with this issue:

'Laibach treat different styles as if they were countries they are invading.'

'The differing styles mean that each album is a complete conversation between the band and the listener.'

'I don't have problems with style as long as the message remains the same.'

'Laibach are too complex an artistic phenomenon to be bound by styles or genres.'¹⁵⁶

Although many respondents found this variation frustrating, and some complained the quality of releases to be variable, this was often accompanied by admiration. Laibach's courage and commitment to their work, including a refusal to build safely on previous success or repeat themselves, was consistently listed as a reason for loyalty to the group. As *Melody Maker* observed of Laibach in July 1986, 'Like their ideology they are uncompromising and all-pervasive; unlike other groups they do not expect or hope for some magic change of heart that will make us love them' (The Stud Brothers, 1986, p.31). The desire towards Laibach on the part of the audience is forever unrequited, but this constitutes an essential part of Laibach's interpellative quality.

As a result of Che Vuoi, the enigma of Laibach becomes 'what does Laibach want from us, how best can we relate to their unknown desires'. A structure of fantasies arises in the audience to fill the gap created by the enigma and thus establish a valid identity within Laibach's discourse, without which effective engagement with this discourse is impractical. In the film *Divided States of*

¹⁵⁶ Names are not included as respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

America (2004), audience members are interviewed leaving a Laibach performance:

‘It was an orgasm waiting to happen, and it finally happened, and it was beautiful.’

‘It was fucking amazing. It was like a religious experience.’

‘They’re interested in the same things as me, conspiracy theories, Illuminati, Freemasonry, a whole lot of stuff.’

A member of the audience dressed in psychedelic clothing describes Laibach thus: ‘They’re a psychedelic band.’

Each member of the audience has interpreted Laibach’s discourse in their own manner. The validity of their interpretations is not the issue, it is the individuality of each interpretation that articulates Laibach’s interpellation. For example, respondents to the questionnaires often expressed a very personal sense that it was as if something had been missing from culture until they discovered Laibach. This contributed greatly to the high value respondents put on Laibach’s originality as regards their appeal. Responses were often emphatic in tone when asked to describe what Laibach meant to them:

‘The first time I heard them it felt like home.’

‘I felt like there should be music like this but had never heard it before.’

‘I’d always heard it in my dreams and finally somebody made it real.’

‘In their absence would be only silence.’

‘My first album was *Nova Akropola* and the music that came out of the speakers was a revelation to me. I had no idea such music existed.’

‘*Krst* and other early Laibach works like it have a primal draw that is unparalleled for me. I feel that they are nearer to the religious music I was raised hearing in churches than to the music I heard on the radio.’

These responses are of a uniquely subjective nature, whereby each individual’s dialogue with Laibach is constructed of their own desires and fantasies. Avi Pitchon, NSK citizen and cultural theorist, found a similar process at the NSK

Citizen's Congress of 2010 in Berlin. Pitchon describes a hidden inverse of the congress, that behind the façade of the cerebral lay 'an ungovernable, irrepressible will to power and its corresponding desire to be overcome and penetrated by myth – a will to enchantment' (2011, p.181). In reference to himself and the other delegates he writes:

What we all truly want, what we all always wanted, the beacon that drew us all to the NSK in the first place: the desire to find out that the legend is true, that this enchantment must be much more than a mere taste in art and music, that we have truly stumbled upon a portal to a knowledge that transcends individuality, time and space (2011, p.181).

Pitchon is describing the desires of the delegates for the congress to fulfil a lack, but in his use of words such as 'myth' and 'enchantment', he also hints at the empty fantasy at the heart of the Laibach spectacle, the Lacanian *Objet petit a*, what Žižek calls a certain 'nothing at all' which nonetheless 'like the eye of a storm, causes a gigantic commotion all around' (2001, p.256). At the congress this always-already failure, or void, was acknowledged in the reading of the *Atomic Declaration of Dependence*, which was co-signed by some of the delegates and read out on the last day, denouncing the congress and its findings:

The state is the manifestation of Kitsch. We hereby disassociate ourselves from your coffee-scented dog-breathed manifestations and unilaterally declare the dissolution of ourselves and the elimination of time through the timelessness of Kitsch. We find your bourgeois adoration of time and form repulsive and degenerate (cited in Monroe, 2011, p.166).

Present at this reading, and writing on the effect it had, Stevphen Shukaitis points out that this document displayed 'a greater understanding of the event than any other made during that entire event' (2011, online). This document was an acknowledgment of the impossibility of the utopian NSK State-in-Time and a direct confrontation of the void of fantasies at the heart of the spectacle.

Reified Identification with Laibach.

This section concerns the manner in which Laibach's audience manifest identification with Laibach in actuality, whether that be in their clothing, in tattoos, in replicating Laibach in Lego, or in artworks. Tattoos and replicating visual codes of a group by its 'fanbase' are familiar conventions of popular music. Less familiar perhaps are the artworks inspired by Laibach and the NSK that comprise what is known as NSK Folk Art, which is discussed later in this section.

I have argued that identification with Laibach's discourse is problematic and that this is an essential part of their interpellation. In comparison with conventional forms of identification with popular music groups this issue becomes more apparent, particularly in the practice of replicating visual codes. Although non-specific army surplus clothing is usual among alternative popular music culture, and certainly in the Industrial music genre, replicating the signifiers Laibach employ in personal attire is a degree closer to popularly conceived fascist uniform. Of the 225 polled, ninety-six of those who responded to my questionnaire have at some time worn Laibach merchandise, the predominant item being a shirt with a Laibach design.¹⁵⁷ Badges and belts also feature, and twelve have worn the Laibach armband. The latter item in combination with paramilitary wear may be perceived as the most ideologically charged, yet only a small minority of respondents mentioned any negativity from those unaware of either Laibach or the

¹⁵⁷ The designs on these shirts are not particularly provocative. Other merchandise is, however, such as the cap bearing the slogan 'Arbeit Nicht Frei', redolent of the Nazi concentration camp slogan 'Arbeit Macht Frei', and the Laibach condom packets branded with the phrase 'Anti-Semitism'.

NSK.¹⁵⁸ For Monroe this voluntary adoption of a ‘uniform’ at Laibach performances reflects Laibach’s position, in being a ‘plausible and honest form of the uniformity instinct’ (2008, p.187). Thus, in wearing a uniform, or overtly military attire, Laibach’s audience are actively engaging with the ideological discourse of Laibach’s spectacle.

Since 1992 there has been a merchandising stall at Laibach performances, selling the usual T-shirts and badges, but with less familiar merchandising such as condoms, stamps, ceramics and shoe-shine kits (Monroe, 2008, p.186). Less conventional are the ways in which Laibach’s audience often manifest identification with Laibach’s discourse. As I have discussed previously, this discourse is not finite, Laibach’s audience are actively engaged in establishing a subject-position as well as deciphering textual codes. This dynamic thus becomes a resource for their audience to materially explore this identity. The following pictures are from a German respondent, directly referencing Third Reich uniforms:¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ For two years of this research I personally wore the Laibach armband and belt, combat trousers and boots, military shirt and tie, and a Tyrolean jacket at every research-related event or colloquia. The most common response at these events and among the public was curiosity.

¹⁵⁹ Later photographs of the same respondent reference the costume design of the Nazis from the film *Iron Sky* (2012). The soundtrack to the film was penned by Laibach.



Figure 6.1 (Name and details withheld)

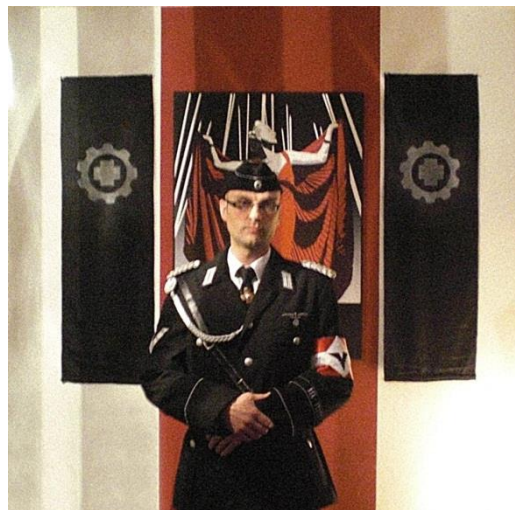


Figure 6.2 (Name and details withheld)



Figure 6.3 (Name and details withheld)

The respondent describes himself as a graphic designer and ‘handy-craft’ worker, and that he created the banners and costumes in the pictures himself. He describes those who challenge him on his use of the swastika, which is forbidden in Germany, to be ‘irritated’ when they realise it to be something else; a Laibach Zahnrad and cross. This misconception he directly relates to Laibach and the NSK praxis, and in particular how Laibach and the NSK ‘help us to heal our 3rd-Reich-Trauma’ (*Facebook* correspondence, 2013).¹⁶⁰ Christian Matzke, who runs the NSK Retrogarde Reading Room in America, has designed a uniform similarly redolent of World War Two German military attire, which was exhibited as part of the NSK Folk Art exhibition at the Calvert 22 Gallery in London in 2012.

¹⁶⁰ Name and details withheld.



Figure 6.4, *NSK Commissar Uniform*, Christian Matzke (2006a)



Figure 6.5, *NSK Commissar Uniform*, Christian Matzke (2006b) detail



Figure 6.6, *NSK Commissar Uniform*, Christian Matzke (2006c) detail

Matzke describes this uniform thus:

The NSK Commissar uniform is constructed from 100% genuine Communist surplus. The only items that give it a Nazi veneer are the embroidered bits (collar tabs, eagle, and the name on the sleeve) and I had those made myself. The point of that piece for me was to confront folks with the knee-jerk reaction of an extreme right wing image and then explain how it is actually (nearly) identical with an extreme left wing image. That totalitarian grey zone is of great interest to me (Matzke, 2012, email).

Matzke has also made toys in the image of Laibach:



Figure 6.7, Laibach figurine, Christian Matzke



Figure 6.8, Lego Laibach, Christian Matzke

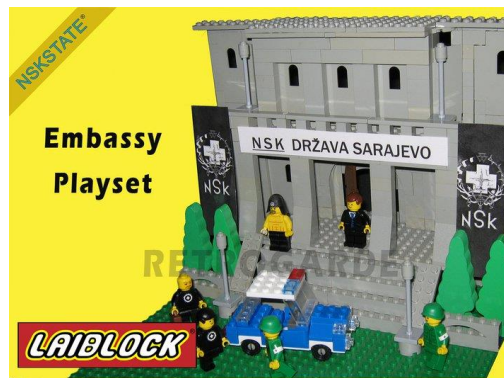


Figure 6.9, Lego Laibach, Christian Matzke ¹⁶¹

Matzke admits to being inspired by the work of the artist Zbigniew Libera and his controversial artwork: *Lego. Concentration Camp* (1996).

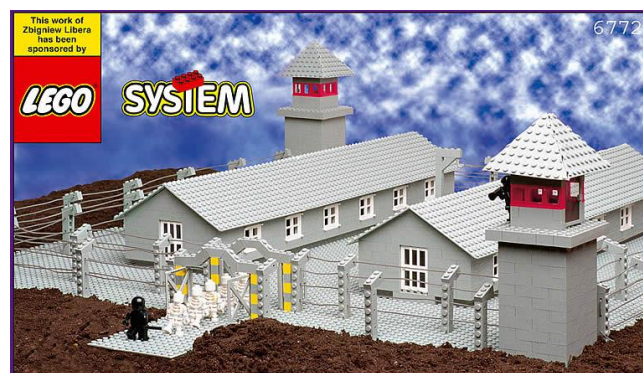


Figure 6.10, *Lego. Concentration Camp*, Zbigniew Libera (1996)

¹⁶¹ Laibach's vocalist currently owns Matzke's Lego version of his figure.

Matzke finds a thematic correlation in subject matter between Libera's work and his. Both interpretations infantilise and re-contextualise material that references the European traumatic historical.

Matzke's Retrogarde Reading Room is another research project inspired by Laibach and the NSK. Founded in 2003, the Retrogarde Reading Room is a private project unaffiliated to any educational establishment. It claims to contain the largest documented collection in English of reading matter on the NSK and related subjects (Matzke, 2003, online).



Figure 6.11, *Retrogarde Reading Room*, Portland, Oregon, Christian Matzke (2003a)

Matzke also runs the *NSK State News*, a regular webcast detailing global NSK events, exhibitions and performances.



Figure 6.12, *NSK State News*, Christian Matzke (2011)

The format is based on a CNN news broadcast and each webcast runs for under five minutes. According to Matzke, the inspiration behind both the Retrogarde Reading Room and the webcast is to increase awareness of Laibach and the NSK (Matzke, 2012, email). His concerted response to Laibach's challenge has in effect resulted in his webcasts and reading room becoming an unofficial branch of the NSK.

Other respondents have made similar personal commitments to Laibach and the NSK. Laibach and NSK tattoos were indicated by respondents to the questionnaire for this research, and other Laibach/NSK referencing tattoos feature on footage at a Laibach performance in the *Divided States of America* film of 2004. However, unlike conventional identification with popular music groups, Laibach and NSK tattoos do not reference the image of any band members but consist of symbols associated with Laibach and the NSK.¹⁶²

¹⁶² In my research I have come across only one example where the faces of Laibach's line-up in the 1980s feature alongside the Laibach symbol.

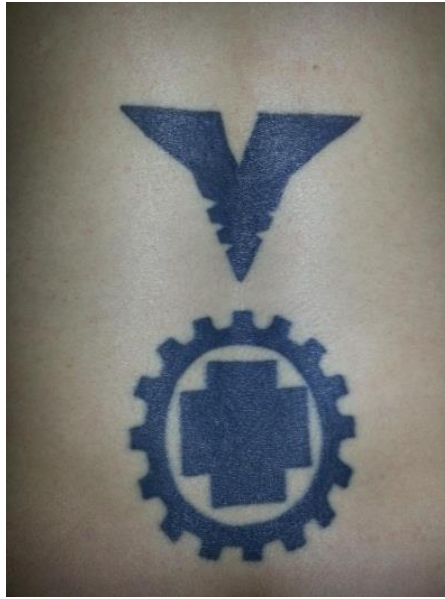


Figure 6.13, *Volk* symbol above Laibach Zahnrad and cog (name and details withheld)¹⁶³



Figure 6.14, NSK logo, with additional antlers (name and details withheld)

¹⁶³ With the release of *Volk* in 2006, Laibach introduced this additional 'V' symbol to their spectacle.

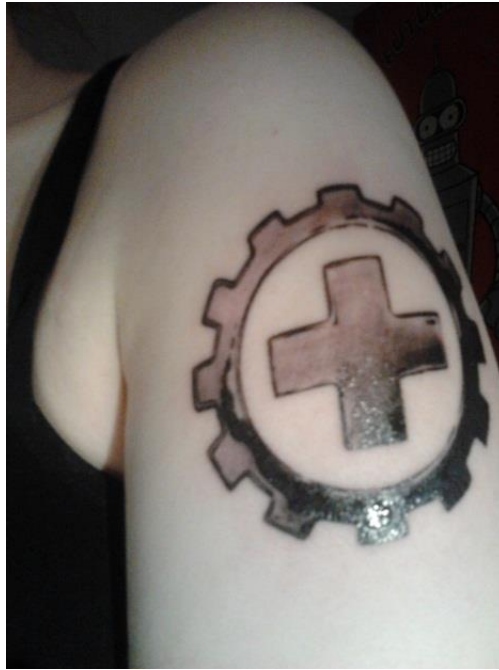


Figure 6.15, Laibach Zahnrad and cog (name and details withheld)



Figure 6.16, NSK logo (name and details withheld)



Figure 6.17, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Avi Pitchon (1993)

The last tattoo belongs to Avi Pitchon. Pitchon is an Israeli national and NSK citizen who has published articles on the NSK State-in-Time and staged NSK related events. Although not depicting either an NSK or Laibach symbol, the word ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ in gothic script refers to the NSK, and is here photographed beside the Star of David (Pitchon, 2013, email).

NSK Folk Art

That Laibach and the NSK’s discourse is not finite has resulted in more artistic endeavour. The rise in recent years of NSK Folk Art is the most important manifestation of this, and marks the third phase in NSK history. The first two phases were the creation of the NSK, and then in 1992 the NSK State-in-Time, whilst the third phase has been termed ‘NSK State of Emergence’ by Alexei Monroe, and was accompanied by a publication, *State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens’ Congress*, in 2010 (Monroe, 2011, p.10). NSK Folk Art is artwork created in response to the challenge posed by Laibach and the NSK, what Christian Chrobok, a professional artist who has exhibited works that directly reference the NSK, refers to as a ‘dark energy’ (Chrobok, 2012, interview).



Figure 6.18, *Suprematistische Ikone*, Christian Chrobok (1995)

Monroe traces the emergence of NSK Folk Art to the ceramic work of the American artist Charles Krafft (2011, p.11).



Figure 6.19, *Disasterware*, Charles Krafft (1994a)



Figure 6.20, *Disasterware: NSK Plate*, Charles Krafft (1994b)

Krafft's *Disasterware* art is to make models of items such as grenades, guns, Hitler and Charles Manson, references to war and violence, as Delftware. This is a ceramic medium traditionally associated with the domestic and the sentimental, and in this sense the re-contextualising of NSK signifiers is a continuation of Krafft's oeuvre.

Krafft and Chrobok are professional artists whose work is inspired by the NSK. However, Monroe notes the staging in Reykjavik of an *NSK Garda* action as marking the first time NSK citizens generated autonomous artistic action, as these citizens were neither professional artists nor connected to the NSK. Members of Iceland's navy stood in uniform beside an NSK banner with a warship behind them (Monroe, 2011, p.11).



Figure 6.21, *NSK Garda Reykjavik*, Halldor Carlsson and Olafur Thorsson (2007)

The event was inspired by the *NSK Garda* project of 2000, in which the NSK hired army personnel from selected countries to pose in front of an NSK banner. Three examples are given below:



Figure 6.22,
NSK Garda Tirana
Albanian army
National Gallery
Tirana (2000a)



Figure 6.23,
NSK Garda Prague
Czech army
MXM Gallery
Prague (2000b)



Figure 6.24,
NSK Garda Zagreb
Croatian army
Museum of Contemporary Art
Zagreb (2000c)

Although subject matter and forms of NSK Folk Art vary, they are linked by NSK icons such as the Malevich cross or square, and usually echo in some way the art of European totalitarian regimes. The following are examples from prolific NSK Folk artists:



Figure 6.25, *IRWIN in Front of Black Slate Square*, Peter Blase (2011)

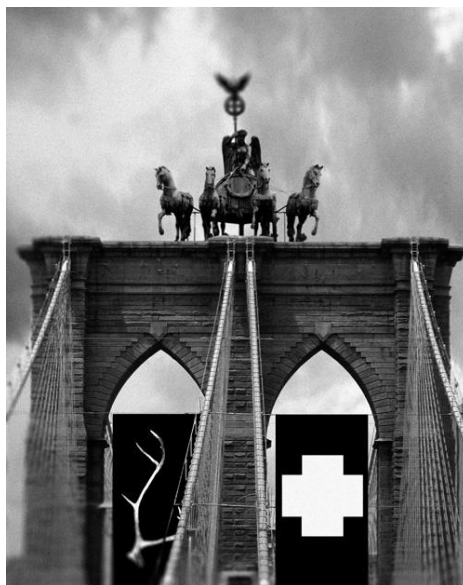


Figure 6.26, *Untitled, Brooklyn – Berlin*, David K (2009a)



Figure 6.27, *Untitled, Mauer – Malevich*, David K (2009b)

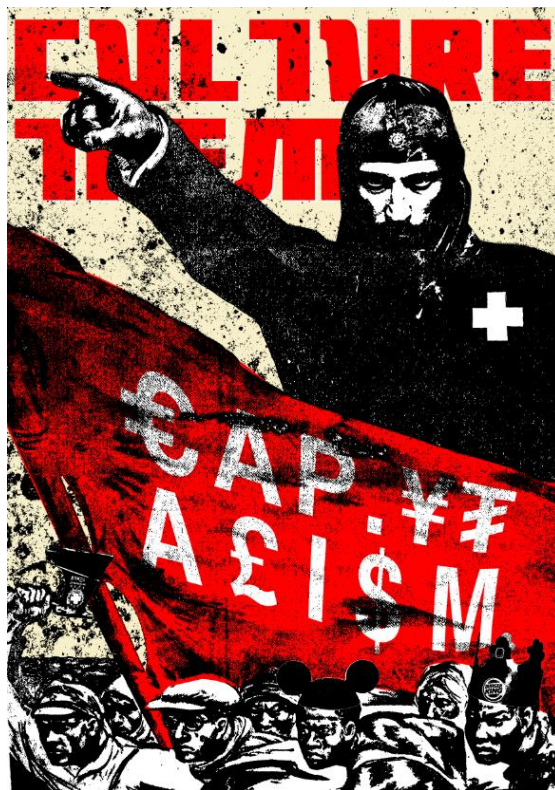


Figure 6.28, *Culture Them*, Brianvdp (2013)



Figure 6.29, *Kultureller Wettbewerb-Ostunek Plakata Za EPK*, Boris Faric (2012)



Figure 6.30, *Rorschach Inspired Map of the World*, Bertrand Benois (2010)

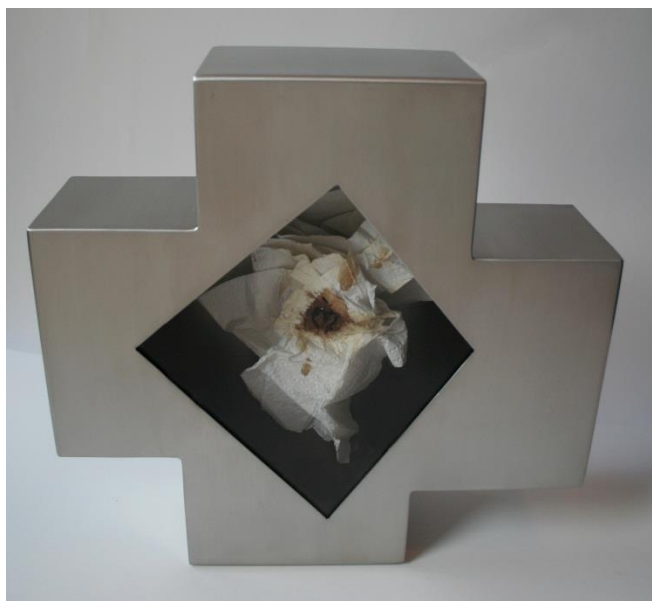


Figure 6.31, *The Tabernacle of Love*, Lili Anamarija No (2008-2009)

The above piece, Lili Anamarija No's *Tabernacle of Love*, merits special attention as it is unique within NSK Folk Art in that it directly references the corporeal individual, and in particular the female corporeal. At the centre of the hollow Malevich cross of brushed steel is a tissue containing the artist's dried menstrual blood. Anamarija No refers to the blood as NSK territory, but claims to make no overt statement on gender politics within the NSK discursive field (Anamarija No, 2013, email).¹⁶⁴

As the third stage in the NSK's history, NSK Folk Art is increasing, and earning its own exhibition status despite only 20% of NSK Folk Art being by professional artists (Monroe, 2012, interview). In 2012 the upper floor of the

¹⁶⁴ A full transcript of Anamarija's communication as regards this artwork can be found in the appendix.

Calvert 22 Gallery in London housed the *NSK Time for a New State* exhibition, whilst the lower floor was dedicated solely to NSK Folk Art, and the first NSK Folk Art Biennale is currently planned for exhibition in Leipzig, Germany, in April 2014. In this sense, NSK Folk Art is becoming an entity autonomous from the NSK, and as such warrants separate research beyond the remit of this thesis. The examples included here suffice to demonstrate the importance of the active-interpretive nature of Laibach and the NSK's discourse.

Comparative Popular Music Groups

Respondents to the questionnaire for this research listed Laibach's originality more than any other attribute in their reasons for appreciation of their work. Analysing this prized originality necessitates comparison with other groups who have also been labelled 'Industrial', and bands that have similarly employed totalitarian or fascist iconography.¹⁶⁵ The latter are usually 'alternative' music groups, yet more mainstream bands have employed such imagery, groups such as Spandau Ballet, whose *Journeys to Glory* (1981) album sleeve is redolent of fascist aesthetics:

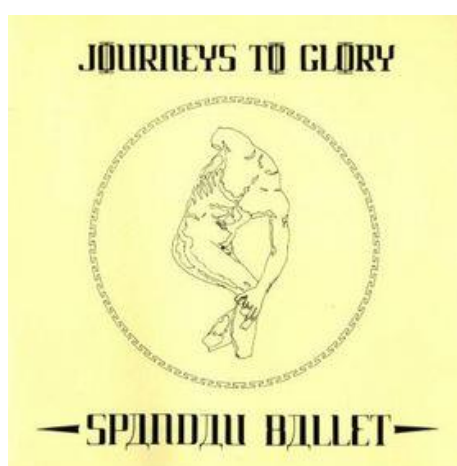


Figure 6.32, album sleeve: *Journeys to Glory*, Spandau Ballet (1981)

¹⁶⁵ Industrial music as a term in Laibach's context is explained later in the chapter.

Writing on this album cover, Simon Reynolds in *Rip it Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978-1984* quotes the sleeve notes:

Picture angular glimpses of sharp youth cutting strident shapes through the curling grey of 3am. Hear the soaring joy of immaculate rhythms, the sublime glow of music for heroes driving straight to the heart of the dance. Follow the stirring vision and the rousing sound on the paths towards journeys to glory (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.327).

In linking the cover art and the sleeve notes to a fascist aesthetic, Reynolds quotes the neo-fascist magazine *Bulldog*, who praised Spandau Ballet for their ‘musclebound Nordic art’ (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.327). Although described by Paul Hegarty in *Noise Music: A History* as ‘politically neutral’, the less mainstream group Nitzer Ebb also reference totalitarianism on the sleeve of *That Total Age* (1987) (2007, p.121):



Figure 6.33, *That Total Age*, Nitzer Ebb (1987)

Other bands such as Nachtmar deny any direct political message whatsoever, and employ this imagery simply as a form of popular transgression that associates

Nazism with an excessive and unconventional sexuality in popularly perceived de-politicised kitsch.¹⁶⁶



Figure 6.34, *Veni, Vidi, Vici, Nachtmahr* (2012)

In the 1980s, Germany's D.A.F. accessed a fascist aesthetic that crossed over into homo-eroticism, their most notorious track being 'Der Mussolini' (1981), which swiftly became a milestone of early E.B.M. (Electronic Body Music).

Klatscht in die Hände	[clap your hands]
Und tanz den Kommunismus	[and dance the communism]
Und jetzt den Mussolini	[and now the Mussolini]
Und jetzt nach rechts	[and now to the left]
Und jetzt nach links	[and now to the right]
Und tanz den Adolf Hitler [x2]	[and dance the Adolf Hitler]
Und jetzt den Mussolini [x2]	[and now the Mussolini]

D.A.F. *Der Mussolini* (1981)

Reynolds writes, 'DAF's cut of muscularity strayed into that ambiguous zone where fascist-leaning Futurism and Communist-leaning constructivism collide – the aestheticisation of physical perfection and physical force' (2005, p.340). Reynolds quotes Gabi Delgado, co-founder of D.A.F., as regards the harsh militancy of their vocals: 'The singing... isn't like rock 'n' roll or pop singing. It's

¹⁶⁶ 'De-politicised' in this context refers to politics directly associated with states and nations. The image supplied is certainly political, but not in the context employed here.

sometimes like a Hitler speech, not a Nazi thing, but it's the German character, that CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! Way of speaking' (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.340). Laibach have interpreted D.A.F.'s 'Alle Gegen Alle' (1994), but more directly acknowledged this influence with 'Tanz Mit Laibach' (2003), whose rhythm and lyrics are comparable to 'Der Mussolini'.¹⁶⁷ D.A.F. exhort their audience to 'dance the Adolf Hitler' and 'the Mussolini', whilst Laibach do likewise with Ado Hinkel and Benzino Napoloni, two fictional characters from Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator* (1940), based on Hitler and Mussolini respectively. In Laibach's *A Film about WAT* (2004), D.A.F.'s full name (Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft) is directly referenced when the narration intones: 'We believe that good relations between Germany and America are extremely important in these difficult and sensitive times' (*A Film about WAT*, 2004).

Other groups 'flirt with fascism' in their audio/visual output in order to make a political-ideological point. In 1976 David Bowie caused controversy with an apparent Nazi salute to the crowds greeting him at Victoria Station, London. Although the gesture was fleeting enough to be open to (very) liberal interpretation, that this was portrayed as a fascist salute by the media is indicative of the potential correlation between fascism's affect and popular music. In exploring this correlation as text, alternative popular music groups have often employed fascist signifiers for reasons other than titillation or kitsch fancy-dress. Joy Division for example, have had to defend themselves from accusations of having fascist sympathies. Their name refers to concentration camp brothels, the *Freudenabteilung*, or 'joy division', and their first recording, *An Ideal for Living* (1978), featured a Hitler Youth drummer on the sleeve.

¹⁶⁷ See: 'Alle Gegen Alle', track four, CD two, and 'Tanz Mit Laibach', track five, CD two.

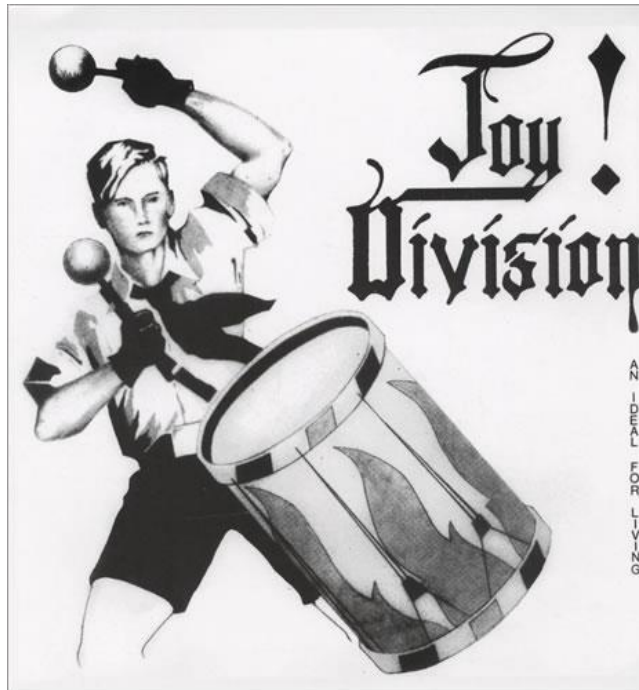


Figure 6.35, *An Ideal for Living*, Joy Division (1978)

Barney Sumner of Joy Division has spoken on a positive use of this problematic imagery: ‘If you hide something away and cover it up, people are going to want it more and it’s going to appear better than it is. But if you get it out in the open, it all seems so obvious’ (cited in Neal, 1987, p.247). Here Joy Division are demonstrating a tactic shared by Laibach. Yet there was another use of fascist imagery by Joy Division beyond transgressive kitsch or ideological enlightenment. Sumner explains that associating an alternative popular music group such as Joy Division with excessive authoritarianism was a test of the notion of anarchy in the alternative music culture: ‘We were being anarchists by using Nazi symbols, but we were a bit too anarchistic for all the anarchists who were around at the time’ (cited in Neal, 1987, p.247). Industrial music pioneers Throbbing Gristle also spoke on their use of fascism in this respect:

In truth there's a slippery zone where anarchism (or at least that libertine and libertarian brand of anarchism less about workers' councils than a near-solipsistic individualism, in which we're each despots pursuing our every desire) flips into a curious appreciation and affinity for certain aspects of Nazism. The meeting point was that whole Gnostic side of Nazism that concerned the pagan and the primordial (cited in Reynolds, 2005, p.238).

Here Throbbing Gristle and Joy Division engage with fascist and Nazi aesthetics in order to examine the idea of resistance through transgression in a (British) post-Punk climate. The energy of British Punk in the mid-to-late seventies revealed its nihilism to be bereft of a cohesive political agenda, and British post-Punk alternative music was seeking ways to generate an equivalent agency of resistance in 'a culture that during the 80s in the UK was beginning to become intellectually depthless and insipid' (Webb, 2007, p.80). Although Punk had certainly deployed the swastika for a shock value that had little to do with politics, post-Punk's transgressive use was to take the ideological implications behind the symbol less frivolously. Thus Nazi aesthetics proved an ample resource, providing a powerful agency of transgression against the mainstream and against the inert obsolete nihilism of British Punk. In this respect however Laibach differ, both in the way they use totalitarian ideology and in the dynamic driving the group's reason to be. As Monroe notes, 'Unlike in Britain, where the class-conscious anti-intellectualism of most punk militated against complex theoretical stances, the Slovene debate over punk was marked by the extreme articulacy of punk's protagonists' (2008, p.205). The corresponding alternative music subculture in Slovenia aimed not to destroy the state, as was the rallying call of British Punk, but to replace it with a better one. The Slovenian Punk dynamic, from whom Laibach sprung, maintained its intellectual and political context, whereas in Britain, following the tabloid media sensation over the 1976 Bill Grundy interview, Punk quickly became a parody of

itself.¹⁶⁸ As Jon Savage writes in *England's Dreaming*, 'The Grundy scandal made the Sex Pistols but it also killed them. They were now frozen in time, leaders of a movement which had been wrested out of their control' (Savage, 1991, p.288). In contrast therefore, unlike British post-Punk, Laibach's use of fascist, Nazi or totalitarian iconography is not a direct development from the lost promise of Punk, where ideologically problematic imagery is used for transgressive purposes alone.

Laibach cannot be pigeonholed with those who 'flirt with fascism' for the sole purpose of exploring the possibilities within transgression. This is reflected in responses to the questionnaires for this research. Respondents indicated that any potential controversy surrounding Laibach and their use of totalitarian imagery added little or nothing to their appreciation of the group. More specifically, the majority considered the fascist or totalitarian elements to be merely a device, and a significant number considered this aspect to have no relevance to their appreciation of Laibach. In an interview with Vse Slovenski Kulturni Odbor (VSKO), Laibach themselves define the difference between groups with a superficially similar aesthetic and Laibach's output. In response to the interviewer's question if they were bothered that artists such as David Bowie, Joy Division, Throbbing Gristle and New Order appear to receive less condemnation for their crypto-fascist imagery, Laibach responded:

In a way, we are a more serious threat. For the other bands, they know that they are just, basically, entertainment. They are just part of the entertainment industry. With us, they are not entirely sure. Are we part of the entertainment industry? Or is it, maybe, something else? What is it? They are not entirely sure (Ferfolja, 2004, online).

¹⁶⁸ The Sex Pistols swearing on the Bill Grundy television show in 1976 made headlines across Britain the next day.

That 'something else' is indicated in an *N.M.E.* review of 1985 that compares Laibach's performance of the totalitarian ritual with those who simply look the part. Don Watson writes:

Laibach play with the myths, emotions and ironies of totalitarianism with a power and conviction that makes the juvenile dabbling of a set-up like Death in June look as hollow as they are. Wearing clothes that are loosely associated with the period of Nazism is no more important in one direction or another than buying your T-shirts at Marks and Spencer's, but to call up in music the power, frustration and excitement that lies at the heart of the totalitarian beast – now that really is playing with fire (Watson, 1985, p.40).¹⁶⁹

Steve Hochman of the *Los Angeles Times* also finds in Laibach a more authentic aesthetic that illuminates the facile transgressive of other 'alternative' artists or groups: 'By comparison, Marilyn Manson's current use of church and Nazi imagery seems like mere bratty nose-thumbing at authority' (1997, p.17). Similarly, Biba Kopf in the *N.M.E.* in 1984 isolates the difference between Laibach and those who merely perform the trappings of totalitarianism: 'Laibach Kunst is not the first to explore rock's unholy reliance on the principles of staging totalitarianism ... But by making totalitarianism central to their being, rather than subconsciously embodying it they've gone furthest in exposing its mechanics' (1984, p.3). Kopf has stated the difference, but not articulated in depth the manner of this difference. As has been previously argued on the chapter on over-identification, although Laibach can be seen to identify with the totalitarian ritual, this is a misleadingly superficial reading. Rather, totalitarianism is an analytical tool by which Laibach interrogate the mechanism of ideology, and not a costume they wear on stage.

¹⁶⁹ Death in June are a Neo-folk band with a fascist aesthetic and tracks that include references to Treblinka and Paganism, for example.

Comparative Industrial Music

Of the 225 respondents to the questionnaire, ninety-nine categorised Laibach as martial-industrial, which was by far the largest choice of category.¹⁷⁰ In terms of alternative popular music, Laibach's audio-visual texts fit the signifiers of the Industrial music genre, and early recordings were particularly industrial in sound. Tracks such as 'Rdeči Molk' [Red Silence] (1982) and 'STT (Machine factory Trbovlje)' (1982) are constructed atonal machine noise.¹⁷¹ 'Industrial Ambients' (1980-1982) is an ambient recording of machinery in Trbovlje, 'alluding to the cacophonous rhythms of the area's decrepit industries' (Monroe, 2008, p.214).¹⁷² However, within this genre Laibach can claim to have a unique status. The origins of Laibach's audio texts are actual industrial, as opposed to belonging to the Industrial music genre. The term 'Industrial Music' was coined by British band Throbbing Gristle. It is music that was inspired by the way 'modern technologised industrial society controls our minds, acting on a limiter of expression and attainment of potential' (Hegarty, 2007, p.108). Industrial music in this context features 'harsh electronics, loud volume, tape cut-ups, badly played instruments and non-instruments' (Hegarty, 2007, p.108). Although this description may also apply to much of Laibach's early recordings, the difference between them and Western Industrial music groups is at the heart of Laibach's interpellation of its audience. Genesis P. Orridge of Throbbing Gristle describes Throbbing Gristle's imagery of barbed wire and factories as having added 'a kind of romance to the urban landscape – urban decay in factories has become a kind of romance' (cited in Savage, 1994, p.11). Paul Hegarty writing on the history of

¹⁷⁰ The second largest category was a refusal to categorise them at all, which I have argued may be a more appropriate reading.

¹⁷¹ See: 'Rdeči Molk', track six, CD two, and 'STT (Machine Factory Trbovlje)', track seven, CD two.

¹⁷² See: 'Industrial Ambients', track eight, CD two.

noise music develops this notion of a ‘negative romance’ in Western Industrial music: ‘The link to Romanticism’s rejection of the rationalisation of society is clear, an aesthetics of decay replacing the heroic symbolism of the ruined tower or the crushing sublime power of violent nature’ (Hegarty, 2007, p.109). Laibach however, reject this romantic aesthetic of the industrial, and refer to groups who employ this as ‘fashionably industrial’ (cited in Campbell, n.d., online). Laibach go on to point out that whilst these bands reference Constructivism and Socialist Realism, they have no direct experience of this culture. Laibach are from Trbovlje, whose existence is centred on its mines, a cement factory and a thermo-electric power plant. Although Industrial music progenitor Richard H. Kirk of Cabaret Voltaire describes lying in bed and listening to Sheffield’s drop-forges in the distance, British industry of the late 1970s was not the totalising state-ideology of industry under Communism. There are however comparisons: ‘One of the first British cities to become industrialised, Sheffield rapidly acquired a proletariat in the classic Marxist sense: human beings reduced to appendages of flesh attached to machinery’ (Reynolds, 2005, p.151). Nevertheless, Trbovlje’s claim to a direct involvement in politics and ideology is reflected in its turbulent history with the state. As Laibach have stated, ‘This town has built us and we continue its revolutionary tradition’ (cited in Kermauner, 2009, p.61). Laibach’s claim to have direct experience of a totalising conflation of industry with state ideology is supported by their origins in Trbovlje.

In terms of an authentic industrial spectacle, Laibach have more in common with the British Industrial music group Test Department, whose use of machinery and scrap as musical instruments echoes Laibach’s sampling of local ambient machinery noise. Yet whilst Test Department’s politics are unambiguously

Socialist, supporting the miners' strike of 1984-1985 for instance, Laibach's political ambiguity lends their discourse an interpellative complexity. As *Melody Maker* noted in 1986, Laibach are more than a Yugoslavian Test Department: 'Their records are political and cultural statements of the most dubious kind, their live appearances are a full frontal assault of noise and propaganda that sears the eyes and ears, frightening, but absolutely exquisite' (The Stud Brothers, 1986, p.30). It is the ambiguity of Laibach's performance of the mechanisms of power-ideology that generates their interpellative complexity.

Interpellation: Transgression

In their staging of the totalitarian ritual Laibach are indeed transgressive, yet as I have previously discussed, this transgression is not an act of rebellion. In replicating an ultra-orthodoxy, particularly between their founding and the release of *Kapital* in 1992, Laibach operated beyond conventional counter-cultural politics. In Roy Shuker's terms, subcultures offer the opportunity, albeit at what he calls a 'magical' level, for 'structural dislocations through the establishment of an achieved identity' (2001, p.206). In this 'magical' space, norms are transgressed and moral codes suspended. Although Laibach's aesthetics can be said to fulfil this formulation, this is a by-product of their spectacle and not the reason. In comparison, bands such as Whitehouse can be said to provide a space of transgressive amorality whose remit involves confronting all conceivable taboos. Whitehouse include among their repertoire tracks entitled 'I'm Coming Up Your Ass', and 'Cock Dominant'. Hegarty describes the music from their album *Buchenwald* as 'piercing electronics alternate with hums, oscillations, and occasionally screamed vocals' (2007, p.121). In 1983 Whitehouse combined

forces with the magazine PURE, a publication featuring articles celebrating infanticide, the mutilation of women and similar subject matter. Throbbing Gristle have likewise explored boundaries of conventional mores. In *The Industrial Culture Handbook* Jon Savage lists Throbbing Gristle's material as consisting of 'tortures, cults, wars, psychological techniques of persuasion, unusual murders (especially by children and psychopaths), forensic pathology, venereology, concentration camp behaviour, the history of uniforms and insignia, Aleister Crowley's magick' (1994, p.9). In the following, Genesis P. Orridge of Throbbing Gristle describes one of his performances with fellow Throbbing Gristle member Cosey Fanni Tutti:

Then I got a ten inch nail and tried to swallow it, which made me vomit. Then I licked the vomit off the floor and Cosey helped me lick the vomit off the floor. And she was naked and trying to sever her vagina to her navel – well she cut it from her vagina to her navel with a razor blade, and she injected blood into her vagina which then trickled out, and then we sucked the blood from her vagina into a syringe and injected it into eggs painted black, which we then tried to eat. And we vomited again, which we used for enemas (cited in Savage, 1994, p.17).

Whitehouse, Orridge and Tutti perform the abject, and in this context norms and moral codes are transgressed regardless of the content. The important element is the transgression itself, which challenges the cultural boundaries that define identity.¹⁷³

In 1988 Jonh [sic] Wilde of *Melody Maker* described Laibach as 'surely one of the very last taboos' (1988, p.19). Yet as I have argued, transgression for its own sake is not in Laibach's discourse. How then does their transgression interpellate their audience? Wiktor Skok describes this transgressive appeal as an 'affirmative infatuation' on the part of Laibach's audience; a dynamic wherein 'the

¹⁷³ This is a necessarily brief analysis of Orridge and Tutti's performance; it is included only as a means to discuss the nature of Laibach's alternative transgressive interpellation.

psychological mechanism has been interpreted as a pleasure inseparably intertwined with intellectual fear' (2009, p.8). Participation in Laibach's spectacle brings with it a transgressive jouissance, whereby 'Laibach's audience wishes to find itself in the Laibach micro-cosmos, discarding political correctness and other intellectual servitudes' (Skok, 2009, p.8). Kopf in 1986 puts it succinctly when he writes:

To be at a Laibach concert is to be drawn deep into the heart of their negative utopia, where, held in thrall of their exciting and exacting tyranny of march-beat and disco rhythms, you're knocked off-kilter by a barrage of brutal yet arousing noises meant to both frighten and reassure you. So unbalanced, you're flattered into thinking you're part of something bigger than yourself. What's more, you're happy to be a cog in the machine of things to come (1986, p.44).

In the immersion within the spectacle Kopf describes, Laibach fully explore the fascination of the subjugation of self to the mass and the libidinal overwhelm of power. The defining difference between this and, for example, a rock concert in an arena of thousands is that whilst participating, the subject is simultaneously made aware of the forces at work. Michael Taussig defines taboo as not simply prohibition, 'but as the prohibition that secretly contains hidden yearning, an appeal, even a demand, within itself to transgress that which it prohibits' (1999, p53). Laibach disrupt the taboo by identifying with the hidden transgression and in this way do not deceive, and I would suggest that this clarity is a significant factor in Laibach's interpellation.

The alternative to kitsch as an interpellative factor

In the clarity of their dismantling of the hidden apparatus of aestheticised power, Laibach prove themselves better armed than mainstream Western culture to deconstruct the still extant trauma of Nazism, which has eclipsed all other totalitarian regimes as the synecdoche for evil. Western popular culture is not

possessed of the adequate analytical tools to deconstruct the allure of Nazism, both infantilising and making Nazism *other* with the use of words such as ‘evil’, to the extent that Nazism has acquired a patina of kitsch. Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) can be seen as an exploration of Western popular culture’s impotence in effectively dealing with Nazism. The film’s hollow revenge-fantasy is laid bare in the sequence in the cinema, where Hitler is riddled with machine-gun bullets. Tarantino dwells on this moment with a close-up on the Jewish assassin’s crazed face as he continues to shoot Hitler’s already dead body. In a later sequence, having tracked down the Nazi villain they were hunting, the protagonists do not kill him, but brand his forehead with a swastika. In this act the swastika becomes a mark of shame, and the Nazi must labour under the shame of his punishment. The film acknowledges the impossibility of the Nazis paying for their crime, and in its fiction demonstrates the ongoing trauma of Nazism. That the Nazis continue to elude a closed historical narrative is a theme also explored in Timo Vuorensola’s *Iron Sky* (2012), for whom Laibach scored the soundtrack.¹⁷⁴ In the film the Nazis escaped to the moon in 1945, where they have been building an invasion force of flying saucers. The film is tongue-in-cheek with a strong comic flavour and satirical bent; the Nazis are defeated but the film ends with the world’s nations destroying each other in a nuclear war. For the director, Laibach were the obvious choice as soundtrack: ‘Something in the wicked, dark comedy of Nazis on the moon stroke me [sic] directly in the same nerve as Laibach does’ (Vuorensola, 2011, email).¹⁷⁵ *Iron Sky* does not however reflect the complexity of Laibach. For example, the deliberate kitsch quality of the film is echoed in

¹⁷⁴ The film is an independent Finnish production and was financed partly by an online campaign. It received a limited international release in selected cinemas.

¹⁷⁵ English is not the director’s first language, it is probable he meant ‘struck me’. A full transcript of Vuorensola’s email correspondence as regards this research can be found in the appendix.

Laibach's use of popular Wagner motifs throughout. In this sense the use of Laibach affirms rather than deconstructs the ongoing popularity of Nazism as an apocalyptic space and a source of a popularly conceived narrative of evil. However, I would argue the presence of Laibach's discourse within the 'B-movie' conceit of *Iron Sky* serves to point up the fiction of this conceit. In *Iron Sky*, the complexity of Laibach's discourse functions as a meta-narrative that illustrates the facile nature of the depiction of Nazis in popular culture.

Thus for their audience, Laibach's direct and unflinching engagement with ideologically fraught tropes such as Nazism represents a mature and intelligent alternative to conventional reactions towards these tropes in popular culture: the *reflex*, the *kitsch* and the *historical*. The *reflex* constitutes a knee-jerk reaction to the subject which disables analysis, and is often accompanied by an emotional reaction. The *kitsch* denies intelligent dissection of the allure of fascism and totalitarianism by consigning it to the sphere of entertainment or making it a shorthand for sexual perversity. The *historical* is an approach that associates it completely with the discredited Grand Utopian Narrative. Laibach supply a reading which for their audience provides a refreshing alternative to the *reflex*, the *kitsch* and the *historical*, yet the fact that this is not a sterile academic study but a channelling of irrational forces is at the core of their appeal, and one that warrants further investigation.

Interpellation: The Sacred

The sacred in this context not only refers to the aforementioned irrational forces, but to Laibach's employ of mimesis as sympathetic magic, and the return of the repressed, as discussed below. The irrational forces at work in Laibach's

appeal are explored by Monroe when he claims that pre-1987 performances by Laibach were particularly ritualistic, and that critics spoke of a ‘demonic aura’ at these events: ‘The concerts constituted an audio-visual pandemonium within which the same demonic, terrorising regimes present in spectral form on the recordings’ (2000, p.270). Laibach themselves have described their work as having ‘a *purifying* (EXORCISM!) and *regenerative* (HONEY + GOLD) function’ (NSK, 1991, p.44).¹⁷⁶ ‘Krst’ (1987) references baptism, and the track ‘Vade Retro (Satanas)’ (1986), with its spoken Latin passages, refers directly to ‘Vade Retro Satanas’, the Catholic exorcism ceremony, whilst at the heart of the NSK structure is the spectral Immanent Consistent Spirit.¹⁷⁷ Although ostensibly ‘mystical’, these examples have a meaning firmly located in the mechanics of politics and ideology. ‘Vade Retro’ can be said to reflect Slovenia’s Catholicism or legacies of Socialist Realism; ‘Krst’, as used in the theatre production and subsequent recording *Krst Pod Triglavom* [Baptism Under Triglav] (1986) refers to the forced conversion of the pagan Slovenes to Christianity; and the NSK’s Immanent Consistent Spirit functions as a Lacanian *Objet Petit a*; a void around which meaning coalesces. Nevertheless, in Laibach’s spectacle of fascination these apparently ‘mystical’ elements acquire a potent agency that transcends analysis of the mechanisms of ideology. This ‘irrational’ agency can be likened to the power of sympathetic magic such as voodoo. In his book on the power of mimesis, Taussig depicts Cuna Indians carving figurines of Europeans which are then imbued with totemic magic: ‘The making and existence of the artefact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed’ (1993, p.13). In enacting the totalitarian ritual, Laibach are similarly practicing mimesis as sympathetic magic. Thus correlation

¹⁷⁶ The capitals and italics are Laibach’s.

¹⁷⁷ See ‘Krst’, track five, CD one, and ‘Vade Retro (Satanas)’, track nine, CD one.

can be found between the irrational allure of totalitarianism and that of sympathetic magic, which originates from ‘a world we have lost, a mimetic world when things had spirit-copies’ (Taussig, 1993, p.100). This correlation represents a way for Laibach to access and directly channel the [il]logical dynamic of totalitarianism and fascism’s allure.

Yet I propose Laibach’s irrational appeal in the discourse of the ‘sacred’ or ‘magical’ also operates within the notion of the sacred as defined by Michael Taussig in his book *Defacement*. Here, Taussig argues that ‘sacred things are defined in many Western languages by their astonishing capacity for pollution, danger and filth, the Latin root *sacer* meaning both accursed and holy’ (1999, p.52). To illustrate this point, an analogy may be drawn with Žižek’s explanation of the fascination of cinema, which he describes as the return of faecal matter. In Žižek’s theory the subject’s desires are excrement flushed away to a ‘nether world’, and the fascination of cinema is the return of this repressed dimension (Žižek, 2006, DVD). Both Taussig and Žižek’s formulas can be applied to Laibach to support the argument that Laibach operate in the dimension of the sacred. In resurrecting the repressed, in playing with the rejected faecal matter of European history, Laibach fulfil the function of Taussig’s sacred. The West have ‘flushed away’ the European traumatic historical, but are fascinated by its return in popular culture and as a synecdoche for evil.

Interpellation: The Fascination of Power

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to recall their first impression on encountering Laibach. On *hearing* Laibach for the first time, the majority of respondents listed awe, astonishment or shock, coupled with the power, force or

energy of the performance. *Seeing* Laibach for the first time, either live or on video, the results were approximately the same. The monumentalism of Laibach's visual and audio output is a representation of overwhelming state power through a paradigm of impossible authority. The effect is deliberately violent, and performances, particular those of the early 1980s, featured extreme volume, monotonous repetition and blinding of the audience with lights. Laibach justify this militancy thus: 'Violence is not a system of aesthetics and even less so entertainment. Violence is a brutal necessity, to which we have submitted ... Laibach practices sound/force in the form of a systematic (psychophysical) terror as therapy and as principle of social organisation' (NSK, 1991, p.44). However, as Monroe states, the brutality of the sensory assault alone is not sufficient; it is in combination with an ideology of power that it achieves its true effect (2008, p.192). Laibach combine sensory assault with the absolutism of an impossible authority paradigm and the [il]logic of totalitarianism, in which the rational is eschewed and inherent inconsistencies celebrated. Laibach's spectacle contains its own logic, one of dissonance and impenetrable enigma, in which any core 'message' of their spectacle must forever elude the audience. The effect is described by Monroe as an 'ambivalent fascination produced by the suggestion of catastrophic and relentless force' (2008, p.184). Mat Snow of *Sounds* reviewing 'Geburt Einer Nation' in 1987, described the recording in terms of this fascination: 'Hitlerian Heavy Metal, barked German declamation, slave-beat rhythm and heroic trumpets imperially hoist aloft combining in music whose uncompromising sense of purpose is queasily attractive' (1987, p.33). Jim Shelley of *Melody Maker* is more fanciful in his analysis of the *Occupied Europe Tour 1985* album (released 1986): 'What's in these raw screams? A frightening loyalty, despising, devotion, triumph, valour,

fear and fascination, ritual terror, necessary torture, war poems, homeland paeans, worship of the beast, tyranny of the heart. It's all here' (1986, p.29). *The Guardian* reviewed Laibach's *Macbeth* (1990) in terms of a perceived enormity of spectacle: 'The music is often huge and terrifying, suggesting a grotesque gothic opera with a cast of millions and scenery made of beetling granite. Despite its overt hostility, it's often extremely impressive' (Sweeting, 1990, p.27). Jonh [sic] Wilde describes a performance at London's Town and Country Club venue in 1988: 'There's an ungodly chill in the air. Fists punch the air. Eyes come over glazed, extinct. It's bloody enormous. A thunderous cruelty' (1988, p.19). This same enormity was transferred to the vocalist in a 2007 review: 'The singer, a towering giant with shaven head, appears in uniform, flanked by two percussionists dressed like Valkyries' (Schwab, 2007, p.30). In actuality the vocalist is of average height, nonetheless the reviewer has conflated the stage figure with the monumentalism of the performance. A parallel may be found in Adorno's notion of King Kong or the Loch Ness monster as collective projections of the monstrous total state, in which 'people prepare themselves for its terrors by familiarising themselves with gigantic images' (1978, p.115). Continuing this analogy, in popular culture the excessive display of power in Laibach's spectacle has been personified in a fictional superhero, Von Bach:



Figure 6.36, Von Bach: *Kingdom Come*, Alex Ross (1996a)



Figure 6.37, Von Bach: *Kingdom Come*, Alex Ross (1996b)

The Laibach signifiers are unequivocal; Von Bach sports a Malevich cross on his chest and on his back are the inverted interlinked triangles of the Noordung symbol. He wears the vocalist's distinctive headgear, and his dialogue is written in a gothic font. Alex Ross spoke of the reasons for creating this character in 1996: 'This German-speaking superhuman and would-be dictator is the example of the Hitleresque villain that had so much symbolic importance in the Golden Age of superheroes' (cited in Robo, 2008, online). The character Von Bach in this context can be said to represent a popular conception of Laibach and their appeal; a combination of excessive superhuman power and the threat of a realised Übermensch.

Interpellation: The Romantic.

A further aspect to Laibach and the NSK's interpellative qualities is that of the romantic, whether that be a nostalgia for a perceived lost role of art, a political-ideological fanaticism and a belief in the possibility for change, or a nostalgia for history as active agency rather than late-capitalist entertainment. This romantic appeal is touched on in Monroe's sleeve notes for the album *Anthems* (2004): 'For some, it seemed that nowhere in either half of 'Occupied Europe' was there a phenomenon quite as absolute or romantic as what Laibach seemed to offer – all 'actually existing' ideological and cultural systems seemed compromised and anaemic in comparison' (Monroe, 2004, sleeve notes). Chrissie Iles, curator of the IRWIN exhibition at the Air Gallery in 1987, echoes this sentiment: 'So few other artistic groups have any mystery, NSK have a potency, energy and passion unequalled to any other work I've found anywhere else' (cited in Culshaw, 1987, p.60). This romantic quality corresponds to Laibach and the NSK's history of direct involvement with state ideology. This history is one of domestic and

international controversy, Laibach have been both banned by the Yugoslav state and immersed in the struggle for Slovenia's national identity and independence. Laibach's *N.A.T.O.* tour ended with two concerts in besieged war-torn Sarajevo in 1995 (the *NSK Država Sarajevo* event), and NATO insignia arrived in Sarajevo not with I.F.O.R. (NATO-led multi-national peace-keeping troops) but with Laibach as the Dayton agreement was signed and the Bosnian war ended (Monroe, 2008, p.304).¹⁷⁸ Inke Arns states that this event was 'the best attended cultural event in Sarajevo since the beginning of the war' (2004, p.53). In 1996, the Slovenian foreign minister Zoran Thaler ceremoniously handed Laibach's *NATO* album to N.A.T.O. Secretary-General Willy Claes. In comparison with many Western bands who demand political change in their native country, Laibach can be said to have both been in attendance at the making of history and to have helped bring it about.

The romantic appeal of this direct involvement may also suggest a Western yearning for a possible lost role of art. In re-mythologizing the historic avant-garde, Laibach and the NSK are drawing on utopian narratives and thus re-establishing the bond between art and power, between art and ideology, a connection severed in an over-compensatory manner by Western art following its incriminatory involvement with European totalitarianism. As a reaction to the utopian scope of the historic avant-garde, Socialist Realism and Nazi Kunst, post-war art shifted its focus from grand narratives to individual freedom and expression. Igor Golomstock in *Totalitarian Art* articulates this suggested lack of utopian drive in contemporary Western art: 'A nostalgia for art's lost social role, for its purposeful organisation, for its direct link with social and political life, casts

¹⁷⁸ In a conflation of art and life that reflects NSK discourse, some of the besieged used NSK State-in-Time passports to leave Sarajevo.

a pessimistic gloom over appraisals of the contemporary scene, forcing many artists and critics to flirt, albeit unconsciously, with totalitarian aesthetics' (1990, p.x). Golomstock here supports the argument that Laibach and the NSK's exploration of totalitarian aesthetics represents an antidote to this perceived loss. In referring to 'our investment in the myth of the avant-garde', Stephen Bann also analyses the West's yearning for art to have a more direct involvement, rather than the 'dubious social utility of the art which the West has produced over the past century' (1993, p.viii). IRWIN have similarly isolated their work in comparison with Western art, particularly Pop art: 'Pop art is linked through a distant artificial irony to a certain aspect of social nihilism. Laibach Kunst rises above such tendencies and wants to show the truth as it should be, restoring to things and people their unadulterated meaning' (NSK, 1991, p.48).¹⁷⁹ A comparable process is at work in popular music. In this instance Biba Kopf explores Laibach's impact on British popular music in the 1980s:

Alien though they may be, Laibach torchlight the way forward. They represent stability in an era that has surrendered itself to the rapid turnover of novelty. However grim and unsmiling, their severely short uniformity of appearance stands them head and shoulders above pop's panorama of dandies clamouring for attention, their common denominator smiles erasing their claims to individuality. If at first threatening, Laibach's aura of authority soon turns seductive when contrasted to the shabbiness of the alternatives (Kopf, 1987, p.24).

Kopf articulates Laibach's appeal in a cultural climate where Punk's nihilist explosion had failed to deliver the change it promised and was replaced by the politics-free vanities of the New Romantics in the youth culture of the early 1980s. Laibach's provocation and analysis of ideology on simultaneously cerebral and visceral platforms can be said to represent the lost potential of British Punk, a case

¹⁷⁹ 'Laibach Kunst' as used by IRWIN in this context refers to all NSK art. Laibach Kunst were the visual arts group that founded Laibach in 1980, and consequently brought together other artistic groups to form the NSK in 1984.

of what might have been if it had not been derailed by tabloid hysteria and assimilated by capitalism.

Non-alignment as an Interpellative Factor

I have argued that Laibach's interpellation is based on a subject-position that is both visceral and cerebral, and one in which the subject becomes a creative interpretive agent. This is at the core of Laibach's counter-cultural praxis, one that is non-aligned politically and runs counter to the cynicism that marks late-capitalism. This latter strategy is reflected in the emphasis questionnaire respondents put on Laibach's courage and commitment to their art. When Svetlana Boym writes about the current 'de-ideologised attitude', where to express an emphatic ideology is to risk being castigated as humourless and therefore not valid, Laibach represent an alternative (2001, p.57). Fanatical commitment is listed as point VII in the findings of the 2010 NSK citizen's congress: 'The role of the citizens of the NSK State-in-Time is to fulfil the State's goals with fanatical and artistic devotion' (cited in Monroe, 2011, p.165). This is at odds with the cynicism of late-capitalism, and part of being an NSK citizen of the NSK State-in-Time is the act of taking part in a utopian, if spectral, state.

Moreover, Laibach and the NSK represent a position of non-alignment with either left or right politics. Neither Laibach nor the NSK's discourse can be easily appended to either capitalism or its opposition. The difficulty of attaching it to oppositional politics is of particular significance. Although Laibach and the NSK can certainly be said to be counter-cultural, they do not involve themselves in the identity politics of gender or race, for example, and although they have spoken out against globalisation, which may be said to be the discourse of opposition, this is in

a vocabulary redolent of extremist nationalism. Similarly, individualism, which serves both liberal and late-capitalist purposes, is recognised in neither Laibach nor the NSK's spectacle. Thus it can be argued that in returning to outmoded and discredited ideologies, Laibach's appeal operates as a counter-position to current political discourse, right or left.

In taking this position of non-alignment with neither left nor right political discourses, and positing an opposition to the cynicism and excessive individualism of late-capitalism, Laibach and the NSK function as a strategy of resistance. This strategy throws into relief the illusion of resistance to late-capitalism, such as practiced by Western Performance Art, for example, and is a vital part in Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between the West and Eastern Europe. This strategy is discussed in the following chapter.

CONCLUSION: RESISTANCE

In this conclusion, Laibach's complexity and problematic subject positioning is examined as part of a larger non-alignment strategy that operates as a site of resistance to late-capitalism. Laibach do not stand outside late-capitalism, they are undeniably part of it, but this chapter posits their praxis as counter-practice to commodifiable narratives of opposition¹⁸⁰ In particular, comparison is drawn with the perceived oppositional stance of Western Performance Art praxis. Laibach and the NSK are Performance Art. They explore subjectivity through a ritualised staging of a spectacle, whether that be totalitarianism or capitalism. Laibach's theatre is the performance of the mechanism of ideology within the framework of the monumental Retro-avant-garde, which is a Gesamtkunstwerk of music, history, politics and art. I propose that this performance artwork is an alternative to that of the Western performance praxis of late-capitalism. I will interrogate how, in the latter, the focus on the discourse of the body and individualism is a collusive vocabulary between late-capitalism and Western Performance Art, and contrast this with the representation of the body and the individual in Laibach and the NSK. As an extension of this argument, I will discuss whether in the modern 'post-ideological' age, performance as a site of resistance to hegemonic structures is in danger of being reduced to utility, in that its

¹⁸⁰ Laibach are a popular music group who tour globally, sell records and DVDs, and have had a merchandising stall at their performances since 1992. The Laibach merchandising website *Laibach WTC*, which carries the slogan 'Trade is a Socialist Act', has been operative for some years (Laibach, n.d., online). Similarly, despite not recognising the status of originality as a value system, and functioning as an authorless collective, nevertheless for copyright reasons the track listing on the *Let it Be* (1988) album sleeve, for example, credits Lennon and McCartney. Obeying the dictates of copyright law and paying royalties is a functional necessity, making Laibach undeniably part of the capitalist popular music industry.

sole function is to be socially responsible, and its potential oppositional role illusory.

Opposition in the context of late-capitalism

Before a contrast of the performance strategies of Laibach and the NSK with that of Western Performance Art may be made, it is necessary to establish the context of late-capitalism. Understanding the structure of advanced capitalism provides a framework within which the potential for resistance may be measured. Following the first and second stages of capitalism, the market and the monopoly, ‘third-stage’, ‘advanced’, or ‘late-’ capitalism is its current manifestation. In the West, this is the capitalism of a ‘post-ideological’ age, arising from the collapse of the Grand Utopian Narratives and the resultant plasticity of postmodern identity. Late-capitalism fetishizes the individualism of the subject and identity is primarily defined as that of Consumer. The atomised nature of this network of postmodern fragmented individualism creates a ‘blindness’ at the centre in which ‘everybody is on the margin’ (Erjavec, 2008, p.147). In other words, capitalism’s shift from centralised identifiable industrial or commercial elites to its locus in individual identity means that capitalism is without centre. These elites are still very much extant, but capitalism has become diffused, ‘irreparably decentred, disintegrated, and disseminated’ (Erjavec, 2008, p.147).¹⁸¹ Fredric Jameson describes this shift away from ‘classical capitalism’ as the demise of the industrial working-class as the subject of history (1984, p.xiii). The rigid hierarchy of ‘classical capitalism’ in which the working masses were the binary to the management and ruling elite is no longer as coherent, and this new decentred capitalism makes effective opposition

¹⁸¹ This subject is also discussed in the chapter ‘Over-identification’, where the emphatic commitment of Laibach and the NSK’s over-identification tactic is analysed in contrast to the cynicism of late-capitalism.

problematic. The Dutch independent research project BAVO have tackled this issue, noting that in late-capitalism ‘subversion is impossible since no authentic place exists from where such a pure, radical act could be performed’ (BAVO, 2010, online). In BAVO’s formula, the capitalist structure is no longer *other* but has become totalising, whereby occupying a position outside the system risks losing the right to speak, and the alternative, which is to remain plugged into the ‘matrix’ in order to subvert it from within, entails endorsing this system (BAVO, 2010, online). Late-capitalism maintains a vocabulary of commodifiable subject-positions without which the subject is invalid, and to step outside these subjectivities is to run the risk of having an ‘existence without value’ (Gržinić, 2005, online). Thus conventional subversion of this structure becomes elusive. According to Kostis Stafylakis and Yannis Stavrakakis in their chapter in the *State of Emergence: A Documentary of the First NSK Citizens’ Congress* book, the reaction of cultural theory and artistic practice to this totalising effect has been to insist on a strategy of distancing, a strategy that attempts to recreate the lost distance between subjectivity and commercial-industrial power. The result is the notion of the artist as ‘nomad’: ‘a mythical subjectivity of mutable, moving and borderless nature, a semblance of autonomy able to escape power relations’ (Stafylakis and Stavrakakis, 2011, p.93). However, in the context of advanced capitalism, as Stafylakis and Stavrakakis go on to ask, is the prototype of this nomad not the global corporation (2011, p.94)? Jill Lane raises the same point in an article on the performance-activist Reverend Billy; how can artists or activists stage oppositional discourse when ‘the representation of power is itself now nomadic, liquid, and on the move’ (2004, p.300)?

Pragmatic Opposition

Yet the appropriation of the nomadic and mutable is but a part of the improbability of conventional opposition to advanced capitalism. In the modern 'post-ideological' age, utopian ideologies have become so tainted by their involvement with totalising narratives such as the historical avant-garde and totalitarianism that this results in an over-compensatory response on the part of contemporary artists and performers. The result is a conscious rejection of what BAVO refer to as 'high art statements, big political manifestos or sublime expressions of moral indignation' and that the alternative has become 'direct, concrete, artistic interventions that help disadvantaged populations and communities to deal with the problems they are facing' (2007, p.23). Ostensibly this appears laudable, but BAVO note that if artists do get carried away by their iconoclastic or revolutionary enthusiasm 'they are immediately accused of regressing into backward, totalitarian forms of society, preaching anarchy or even paving the way for terrorism' (2007, p.7). With the discrediting of the Grand Utopian Narrative went the utopian drive of the Left, and in the current 'post-ideological' age, oppositional practice contents itself with localised concrete actions. For Žižek, there is a basic paradox contained within liberalism, in which an 'anti-ideological and anti-utopian stance is inscribed into the very core of the liberal vision', wherein oppositional politics sees itself as the 'politics of the lesser evil' (2010, p.38). Monroe sees this as resulting in a user-friendly 'lower-case' culture, one of inert relativism and liberal neutrality in tacit agreement with the end-of-history thesis (2005, p.72). For BAVO, Žižek and Monroe, in the age of the cynic, pragmatic compromise has replaced vision.

Žižek identifies, in this disillusionment with the possibility of global social change, the rise of what he calls ‘project politics’; a proliferation of multiple forms of subjectivity (gay, feminist, ethnic, and so on) (2008b, p.xxvi). This, he states, constitutes an assertion of one’s particular subjectivity in a dispersed postmodern universe in which cultural recognition matters more than socio-economic struggle (2008b, p.xxvi). Cultural theorist Marina Gržinić echoes this point when she states that unless art engages with the structures of economic power rather than focusing solely on identity politics, it will ‘*remain* a never-ending play of *empty signs*’ (her italics) (2007, p.204). Johannes Birringer gives a more direct example of a perceived danger of the insularity of identity politics when he questions the subversive capacity of gay and lesbian performance if their prime market is the gay and lesbian community (1998, p.18). Birringer goes on to relate this argument to Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the conditions of reproducibility, in which no transformation or perception is possible or reversible without altering the relations of production (1998, p.18). Gržinić, Žižek and Birringer do not mean to completely discount project-politics, but suggest that accepting the given of project-politics as the most worthwhile endeavour is at the expense of effective identification of – and opposition to – the structures of advanced capitalism.

Not only is subversion elusive in late-capitalism, it can also be said to be a validating component of the spectacle, in which overtly oppositional discourses provide safe, commodifiable or assimilable outlets for negative attitudes (Monroe, 2005, p.222). Project-politics serve just such an oppositional narrative. In *The Spectre of the Avant Garde: Contemporary Reassertions of the Programme of Subversion in Cultural Production*, BAVO acknowledge the cultural sector’s boasts about the number of cultural projects realised, but positions them in a

complicity with late-capitalism's tendency to reproduce the same social injustices under a progressive veneer (2010, online). Jon McKenzie in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, defines the difference between transgressive and resistant efficacy to be found in the way power is conceived (2001, p.43). The former seeks to overthrow the totalitarianism of the establishment, whilst the latter, which is becoming increasingly popular, would subvert the hegemonies of 'ethnophallogocentrism' (McKenzie, 2001, p.43). In the latter instance, opposition is no longer attacking the totalising structure of the system but merely its localised manifestations, and it is a cosmetic exercise. In this system, late-capitalism can argue successfully for a balanced and just system of self-criticism without being challenged in any effective manner, and thus divest itself of the mantle of oppression, for how can it be oppressive when it is so open to criticism? So artists are granted a comfortable narrative of resistance whilst leaving mainstream society to get on with swimming with the tide. This is an extension of Adorno's notion of art's increasing autonomy, in which art becomes a defining function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom (1970, p.320). Slavoj Žižek cites as an example of this paradoxical supporting role of opposition, the demonstrations against the U.S. attacks in Iraq in 2005. The protesters were happy they were doing something and the government used the protest as an example of what they were fighting for: the option of protest against one's own government (Žižek, 2010, p.326). In this instance the structure remains intact whilst the spectacle of democratic process has taken place.

Western Performance Art has its own comfortable narrative of resistance that arguably sustains the spectacle-structure of late-capitalism. An example of this was found at the *Illness and the Enduring Body* symposium in London in 2012,

when the performance artist Franko B declared the state to be ‘enemy number one’. In this formula, the state becomes an easily identifiable enemy whose immediacy becomes expedient in terms of opposition. In other words, the repressive apparatus of the state is easier to oppose as it is more visible than the structures of late-capitalism, and this opposition maintains the reassuring illusion of being oppositional. Contemporary capitalism continues to operate unnoticed whilst clearly identifiable targets such as Section 28 and Operation Spanner provide unproblematic targets against which contemporary Performance Art has a ready-made oppositional discourse.¹⁸² This is indicative of the institutionalised narrative of Performance Art in the West, something Zdenka Badovinac who runs the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana (Slovenia), notes when she writes that one of the important reasons for ‘the emergence of performative practice practices – opposition to the commercialisation and musealisation [sic] of art – has been long forgotten’ (1999, p.13). This claim would seem to be substantiated at the aforementioned *Illness and the Enduring Body* symposium when the panel, comprised of Sheree Rose, Ron Athey and Franko B, were introduced by Lois Keidan, Director of the Live Art Development Agency, as ‘legends’. Here the artist becomes fetishized, which destabilises critical practice and makes their audience of academics and Live Art practitioners ‘fans’. An argument for a hidden discourse of a self-serving ideology may be supported by citing the audience’s response at this symposium to the artist Martin O’Brien having his genitals pinned to a butterfly board by Sheree Rose. The response could be described as light-hearted and knowing, with sympathetic laughter expressed at O’Brien’s obvious

¹⁸² Section 28, otherwise known as ‘Clause 28’, is a controversial component of the 1988 Local Government Act concerning the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality in schools. ‘Operation Spanner’ refers to a police operation undertaken in Manchester, England, in 1987, in which a group of homosexual men practicing consensual sado-masochistic sex were charged with assault upon each other.

discomfort. Although it appears unlikely O'Brien's intention was to stage a re-enactment for the sake of it, this instance is included here as an example of the way axiomatic and energised debates around witness and spectator in Live Art practice that, for example, defined Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* performance in 1974, have been replaced by a simulation of the original act of provocation.¹⁸³ In other words, the simulacrum in this instance lacks the challenge of the original, the assimilatory institutionalisation of Performance Art has defused its capacity for effective agency. The above examples are cited in order to substantiate the argument that Western Performance Art discourse has been successfully assimilated into a commodifiable narrative of resistance.

Laibach and Western Performance Art

Although Laibach and the NSK certainly constitute Performance Art, their praxis significantly differs from contemporary Western Performance Art discourse. It is in the context of the discourse of the body and individualism that this disparity is most apparent. Whereas the dominant focus in contemporary Western Performance Art can be said to be the discourse of the corporeal body, in Laibach and the NSK the corporeal body is absent. In Western Performance Art the individual and associated identity politics such as sexuality and gender is paramount, whereas in Laibach and the NSK the individual is not a valid unit in their *Weltanschauung*, and operates only as a cipher in the manner of Nazi Kunst or Socialist Realism. The two pictures below are examples of Laibach's re-coding of the totalitarian heroic figure cipher.

¹⁸³ *Rhythm 0* (1974): For six hours Abramović stood impassively whilst the public were allowed to do what they liked to her with various objects, some of which may cause pleasure, others pain. Among the objects were a loaded gun and a knife.



Figure 7.1, Sleeve of 12” single: ‘Die Liebe’, Laibach (1985c)

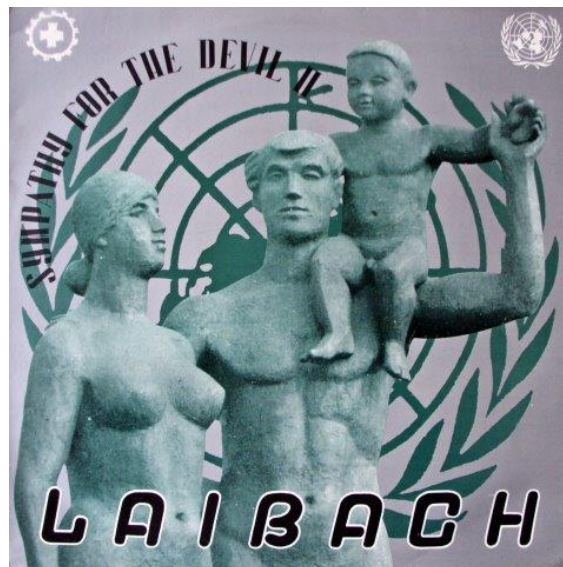


Figure 7.2, Album sleeve: *Sympathy for the Devil*, Laibach (1988b)

The invalidity of the agency of individualism in Laibach’s spectacle is acknowledged when they define an individual as ‘A multitude of one million divided by one million’ (NSK, 1991, p.54). In similar vein, the artist and associated individual creativity has no currency in Laibach and the NSK’s collectivity ethos. Whereas in Western Performance Art autobiographical practice is a defining discursive field, Laibach and the NSK in their challenge to the notion of the artist as originator of text can be seen as an opposite practice. In posing a

challenge to Western Performance Art's focus on the body and individualism in this manner, Laibach and the NSK simultaneously challenge the determinants of late-capitalism. In order to establish how Laibach and the NSK operate as a counter-practice to contemporary Western performance Art, further analysis of the discourse of the body as a site of resistance in late-capitalism is necessary.

The Discourse of the Body in Late-capitalism

The collapse of the Grand Utopian Narrative made redundant the body as heroic cipher, and freed it to become the unit by which individualism, free expression and identity is measured. Boris Groys traces the genesis of the age of the body to fascism, which has developed to become a 'world theatre in which everything ultimately depends entirely on the body' (2008, pp.131-132). In *Dramaturgy on Shifting Ground*, Hans-Thies Lehmann and Patrick Primavesi identify the body as a battleground in neo-liberal Western societies (2009, p.4). They state the body has become 'praised as a value in itself, however manipulated, trained, gendered and over-sexed, advertised as a product for consumption and abused as a battleground for ideologies, sacrificed for economic profit and for religious or political ideas of every kind' (2009, p.4). Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña refers to the body as the true site for creation; a *materia prima* (2004, p.78).¹⁸⁴ The performance artist Franko B describes his work as focusing on the visceral, 'where the body is a site for representation of the sacred, the beautiful, the untouchable, the unspeakable, and for the pain, the loss, the shame, the power and fears of the human condition' (2004, p.224). In terms of Performance Art, Joseph Backstein identifies the increase of the representation of the corporeal as a result of the mortal body being the last remaining guarantor of identity following the death

¹⁸⁴ The italics are Gómez-Peña's.

of God, the exhaustion of ideology, and finally the disappearance of the subject (1999, p.145). A similar process is at work in late-capitalism, where individualism replaces God and the Grand Utopian Narrative as potential guarantors. Marshal McLuhan's conceit of *figure* as opposed to *ground* is useful here in exploring the current dominance of the discourse of the body and individualism in relation to Backstein's theory. In McLuhan's formulation, the *figure* is the conscious subject and the *ground* is unconscious environment (McLuhan and Powers, 1989, p.5). However, when the *ground* moves too fast, as is the case with the vertiginous pace of contemporary technology-driven media, only *figure* is left (McLuhan and Powers, 1989, p.99). In this analogy therefore, McLuhan's *figure* serves as the subject, the body, and by association, late-capitalism's emphatic individualism.

Although the discourse of the body is salient in both contemporary Performance Art practice and late-capitalism, its agency as resistance in the former is increasingly undermined by its representation in the latter. For example, the sacred of the body-modification art of Fakir Musafar and the performance work of Ron Athey becomes banal when its ritual and authenticity is diluted by media repetition. Athey himself structures his self-mutilating performance artworks as if for a television programme or a musical (Migletti, 2003, p.45). Media spectacle has dissolved the content and meaning of these acts. In his succinctly entitled essay *Performing Against the Cultural Backdrop of the Mainstream Bizarre*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña asks whether the hitherto provocative interventions by artists such as Musafar and Athey have not become the norm:

In this new panorama, what do we mean by "extreme" "radical" or "transgressive"? These words are now empty shells. What is really left to "transgress"? ... The insatiable mass of the so-called "mainstream" has finally devoured all "margins", and the more dangerous, "other", thorny and exotic these margins, the better (Gómez-Peña, 2002, online).

Performance Art has become assimilated into Gómez-Peña's culture of the mainstream bizarre. The crossover between Performance Art practitioner and academic Dominic Johnson's performances in nightclubs with, for example, the performers of the Jim Rose Circus is so blurred as to be indistinguishable.



Figure 7.3,
Vision of Excess Night
Dominic Johnson (2011a)



Figure 7.4,
Vision of Excess Night
Dominic Johnson (2011b)

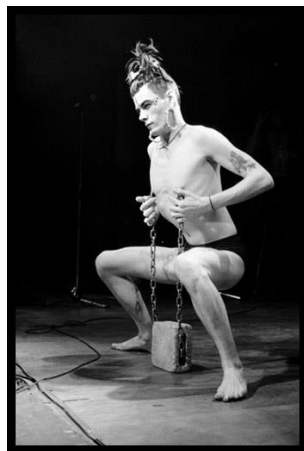


Figure 7.5
The Amazing Mr.Lifto
Jim Rose Circus



Figure 7.6
Enigma
Jim Rose Circus

When Orlan staged a ritualised cosmetic-surgery operation on herself in 1993 she described this work as blasphemous, but can this term have any real resonance in a modern secular culture where religious sensibilities have little or no credence and Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) depicts violent masturbation with a cross? In the

1990s, Orlan also staged live cosmetic surgery performances, in which each surgery had a theme which she developed by reading from philosophical, literary, or psychoanalytical texts as she was operated on by medical personnel dressed in costumes by famous fashion designers.



Figure 7.7, *Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, Orlan (1990)

In the above, Orlan is interrogating the representation of beauty. However, it could be argued that the aesthetic effectiveness of these performances has since been defused by the contemporary media spectacle of genuine cosmetic surgery excess.



Michael Jackson Jocelyn Wildenstein Amanda Lepore Michaela Romanini
Figure 7.8

The above examples are grotesques of cosmetic surgery, and these images are circulated frequently on the internet, becoming a trope in their own right. In this context, Orlan's performances of the 1990s lose their impact in the spectacle of

current cosmetic surgery excess, which has become a hyper-real simulation of itself.

Humanism and Performance

Rejecting utopian politics in favour of ‘lower-case’ pragmatic opposition has resulted in the increased value ascribed to utility performance, performance that is understood to directly serve society. The shift from utopian narratives to localised project-politics means that for contemporary Western performance practice to have currency within late-capitalism it must have social relevance. It must demonstrate a socially responsible pursuit of happiness and harmony, an aspiration late-capitalism fetishizes. As Baudrillard writes on the contemporary Western individual, ‘they are free to regard enjoyment as an obligation, wherein it is a duty to be happy’ (1998, p.80). It is an emphasis on a perceived capacity for a harmonious and healing quality in performance that Performance Art academic Rachel Zerihan reveals in her analysis of one-to-one performance.¹⁸⁵ Zerihan writes that this form offers the opportunity for ‘closeness and connectivity’ in this ‘globalised, disparate and insecure environment in which we live’ (Zerihan, 2008, online). In her analysis of the one-to-one performance of Adrian Howells’ *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2009), Zerihan’s vocabulary strays into the therapeutic:

My body felt like it was still absorbing the physical affect of what we had just shared and my mind – or was it my soul? – felt washed over, stimulated and soothed by Howells’ gentle provocation that urged a reconsideration of the gift of touch and the sense of healing we can easily give to another, yet seldom care to (Zerihan, 2008, online).

In the above example, one-to-one performance praxis celebrates intimacy and free-exchange, but arguably at the expense of critical distance, a tone maintained throughout the article. Zerihan’s vocabulary is in this instance predominantly one

¹⁸⁵ One-to-one performance may be defined as a performance of a solo performer and one audience member.

of recuperative therapy, and is cited here as an example of a celebration of the harmonious and healing in Performance Art.

The playwright Howard Barker refers to current utility performance specifically in British theatre as a ‘unanimity of functional intention’, in which moral givens remain unchallenged providing they remain within a common consensus of Left-wing opinion (1998, p.92). Barker refers to this latter element as luxuriating in a tepid bath of a ‘relentless harmony’ of accord (1998, p.92). In this way utility performance serves both advanced capitalism and re-affirms the oppositional Left, thus preserving the structure and stagnation of both. Lisa Jeschke in her study on the work of negation in performance describes how ‘fashionable contemporary performance projects within the art world like to accuse the theatre of old-fashioned authoritarianism or even totalitarianism in order to suggest replacing it with what might in varying contexts be called interactive, inter-relational, friendly, benign, liberal-democratic models of performance’ (Jeschke, 2013, conference paper). Jeschke speaks of those artists who ‘strategically hide the fact they’re sketching models of happy consumerism behind the seemingly emancipatory language of enablement and participation’ (2013, conference paper). Slavoj Žižek similarly warns against such notions as the validity of a utilitarian harmonious and healing quality in art: ‘There is a very thin line separating this “humanisation” from a resigned coming to terms with lying as a social principle: what matters in such a “humanised” universe is authentic intimate experience, not the truth’ (2010, p.59). In other words, notions of intimacy and free-exchange become more important than truth in art or performance, and, shaped by the narcissism of late-capitalism, arguably a more cherished aspect than aesthetic critique.

Barker calls for a negation of a perceived utility function in Western performance practice, claiming that contemporary society is disciplined by moral imperatives of gross simplicity and that complexity and ambiguity is a political posture of profound strength (1998, p.48). The gross simplicity Barker refers to is a blind acceptance of moral givens, which is a charge he directs at the oppositional Left: ‘The left’s insistent cry for celebration and optimism in art – sinister in its populist echo of the right – implies fixed continuity in the public, whereas morality needs to be tested and re-invented by successive generations’ (1998, p.49). Barker illustrates his point with recourse to a popular understanding of the artist Goya, whom he describes as having become associated with all things liberal and humane, ‘moving through horror with an inspired pen, satirical of monarchs, priests and power, a suitable recruit to the progressive school of culture which sees all presentation of the cruel as a plea for peace from damaged sensibility’ (1998, p.141). Barker suggests that the showing of all war becomes by extension pacifist, when in fact the psychology of witnessing is more contradictory.

Although not as specific, Adorno supports Barker’s argument, stating that art is social ‘primarily because it stands opposed to society. By congealing into an entity unto itself – rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be socially “useful” – art criticises society just by being there’ (1970, p.321). In this context Laibach’s militancy runs counter to utility aesthetics, and their radical ambiguity would appear to be in line with Barker’s call to challenge the ‘common consensus’ on morality. For example, Laibach’s music is primarily harsh and atonal, incorporating martial rhythms and triumphalist soundscapes. The abrasive quality of much of Laibach’s music challenges notions of tonal harmony, and tonal

music for Jacques Attali in his book, *Noise: A Political Economy of Sound*, amounts to an attempt to ‘make people believe in a consensual representation of the world’ (1996, p.46). He goes on: ‘Mozart and Bach reflect the bourgeoisie’s dream of harmony better than and prior to the whole of nineteenth century political theory’ (1996, p.5). Laibach have rephrased Attali on this issue: ‘Harmony is the true supreme form used by authority to demonstrate its power, satisfaction, and its political scenic arrangement’ (NSK, 1991, p.55). Yet Laibach and the NSK’s challenge to consensual moral givens is comprised of more than militant assaults on harmony and tonal music. Accused of immorality, Laibach responded: ‘In art, morality is nonsense; in practice it is immoral; in people it is a sickness’ (NSK, 1991, p.44).¹⁸⁶ To be effective, Laibach’s practice must operate outside moral givens and acceptable cultural mores in order to expose what Žižek refers to as ‘our innermost core of pleasure’ and turn it into the embodiment of excessive pleasure by ‘stripping the ideological edifices of their fundamental phantasmic constructs, their “myths” and allowing these phantasms to hover before us in all their imbecility’ (2009b, p.101). To do this, however, requires a radical ambiguity, as only by using the identical language of the ‘innermost core of pleasure’ can it be exorcised. Appropriately, Laibach’s embrace of militancy as a brutal necessity of their praxis and a demand for fanaticism echoes the emphatic exhortations of Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto, in which it is written: ‘Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice’ (Marinetti, 1909, p.49). This radical ambiguity must remain total if it is to be effective. In a 1988 interview for *Melody Maker*, Ian Gittins pressured Laibach to take a moral position on Nazism, but Laibach refused to be drawn: ‘For the millions of people included in the Nazi ideology, it wasn’t a

¹⁸⁶ This quote also occurs in the chapter ‘Nexus’, under the heading ‘Ideological Non-alignment’, and is repeated again here for relevance.

bad time. We cannot say it was good or evil' (cited in Gittins, 1988, p.9). A similar process took place that same year following apparently anti-Semitic statements made by Laibach during a press conference at the Transmusicales Festival before their performance in Rennes, France. Jack Barron of the *N.M.E.* describes how Laibach were accused of blaming the fact that their videos were not shown in America on the influence of the American Jewish lobby, followed by their referencing the concentration camp slogan 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Barron, 1988a, p.4). The following is an excerpt from the reported interview:

- Interviewer:* Is there any humour in the way you work?¹⁸⁷
- Laibach:* That is for you to find out.
- Interviewer:* Well is there any humour in the remarks you made about the Jewish control of the video media in America which you made at the press conference this afternoon?
- Laibach:* Obviously the Jewish lobby has a humour.
- Interviewer:* There were some members in the audience tonight who were saluting in time to 'Life is Life'... aren't you worried about attracting a fascist following?
- Laibach:* Well as I've said already today this is a problem of Western democracy... We would describe ourselves as a group that doesn't have anything to do with these kinds of political statements or any kind of political statements particularly.
- Interviewer:* What are your feelings firstly as a human being and secondly as a musician on Auschwitz?
- Laibach:* We were there as tourists. The organisers of our tour of Poland invited us to go there.
- Interviewer:* But what are your feelings as a human being about Auschwitz?
- Laibach:* Well today Auschwitz is one of the cultural monuments of Polish history. (Barron, 1988a, p.4)

The interviewer presses for Laibach to deal with Auschwitz on a personal level, as 'human beings', as accountable moral agents, and Laibach refuse to engage with this reductive discourse. Barron suggests that Laibach, 'Set out to be controversial by using a sordid strategy to invoke maximum indignation. And for what, to sell a few more records? Maybe'. He concludes his article with: 'The demystification of

¹⁸⁷ The interviewer is not specified.

Laibach is now one of the most pressing issues in modern music' (Barron, 1988a, p.4). This process of mystification is little more than answering questions obliquely, and in this manner Laibach characteristically let the questions of the apparently impartial interviewer reveal the interviewer's hidden agenda. Although refusing to answer questions directly is a deceptively simple tactic, to refuse to pass judgement on a moral absolute such as the Holocaust indicates a wilfully provocative strategy of ambiguity. Yet Laibach are not being obtuse for the sake of it. In *Balkan Babel*, Sabrina Ramet quotes an NSK member she met in 1987, who tells her: 'The very fact that Nazism is always tarred as the blackest evil is a way of not dealing with its social content and meaning' (1993, p.102). Here the tactic of radical ambiguity serves to challenge moral givens.

Writing in 1983, at the height of Laibach's cultural impact, Taras Kermauner recognises Laibach, in the radical ambiguity of their re-enactment of the totalitarian spectacle, as 'psycho-hygienists' (2009, p.58). For Kermauner, culture carries two forms of art: the 'humanistic, humanly and socially sustainable, protective, stabilising, symbolic' on one side, and the 'mystically bloody, sacrificially oppressing, and sacredly disturbed on the other' (2009, p.58). He posits that Laibach enact the latter to perform the function of the former. Yet this is too neatly balanced. Kermauner's formula excuses Laibach's ambivalence by couching their praxis in a comfortable binary narrative, and subsequently, as Kermauner's psycho-hygienists, Laibach would indeed therefore be utility performance. Nevertheless, in one sense Kermauner's definition is correct. As a narrative of transgression, Laibach can be associated with abject-transgressive groups such as Coil or Whitehouse, whose celebration of violence and the scatological is the return of the repressed. However, as I have argued,

transgression is incidental to Laibach and the NSK.¹⁸⁸ Instead, Laibach occupy the space of the inassimilable narrative, what Žižek calls the ‘sticky core of pleasure’ (2009b, p.101). In 1961, what became known as ‘The Milgram Experiment’ was conducted at Yale University in order to examine the power of authority (Milgram, 1974, pp.17-26). Subjects were urged by authority figures in lab-coats to continue inflicting electric shocks on unseen recipients whose suffering was audible. The experiment was a revealing study of the power of authority, yet its reach was limited, in that it did not interrogate the enjoyment inherent in subordination, or indeed the libidinal charge of power. In this sense, the Milgram experiment is reassuring, it implies that the violence of a system is located in its organisational structure. Laibach’s radicalised spectacle demands a different reading; one of the allure of the libidinal overwhelm of power and the jouissance of the subjugation of self. It is this enjoyment, this inassimilable ‘sticky core of pleasure’, that Laibach expose and the aesthetic vocabulary required must necessarily be transgressive.

Laibach the Xerox Machine

Through comparison with Western Performance Art’s fetish of individualism and the body, I have argued that Laibach and the NSK posit an alternative to the commodifiable and expedient oppositional narratives of contemporary Western Performance Art. This is a process of non-alignment with ideological determinants, yet for all their obfuscation this process is not a mysterious one. In interviews, Laibach and the NSK refuse to be drawn into an identifiable ideological position, which earns them political and moral censure. They refuse to be accountable, and by not explaining their audio or visual texts expose the ideological agendas behind those who would interpret them. Although

¹⁸⁸ For an analysis of Laibach and transgression see the chapter on Interpellation.

this engenders an air of ambiguous mystery, Laibach and the NSK's art is not mystical, but technical, it is a machine; an aesthetics machine. The 'mystical' Immanent Consistent Spirit that sits atop the NSK Organigram is nothing but a void, the *Objet petit a* around which the structure coalesces, generating the fascination of enigma. Alexei Monroe titles his book on Laibach and the NSK, *Interrogation Machine*, and in the recording 'Hell: Symmetry' (2003) Laibach themselves welcome their audience to the 'universe of Laibach Kunst machine' (Laibach, 2003, CD).¹⁸⁹ In practice, Laibach are machine-like in performance and textually. There is no comforting human-face behind the façade and the voice of their impossible authority paradigm is disembodied. Although the Laibach Kunst machine has function, it is not only bereft of humanity but a coherent ideology which would give it meaning or purpose. In this way, the Laibach machine is Thanatos; drive without desire, the Übermensch cyborg of James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984).

Sakshi Gupta's piece *Abandoned Xerox Machine* (2008) provides a useful analogy in examining Laibach and the NSK as machine, and a fruitful analytical tool.

¹⁸⁹ See: 'Hell: Symmetry', track nine, CD two.

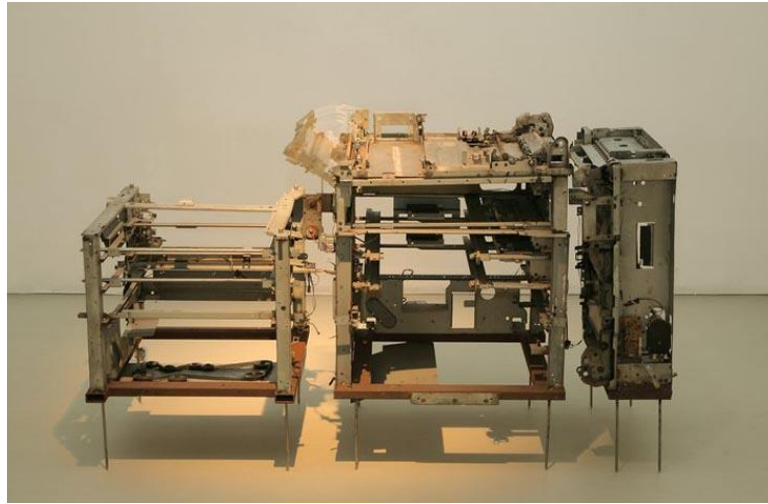


Figure 7.9, *Abandoned Xerox Machine*, Sakshi Gupta (2008)

There are direct correlations between Gupta's artwork and the artwork that is Laibach and the NSK. A Xerox machine replicates, and Laibach and the NSK generate 'new originals', treating ideological codes as Duchampian ready-mades. Moreover, in all three the mechanism is clearly visible and operational.¹⁹⁰ It is, however, in this very visibility of the mechanism that Laibach and the NSK operate, and thus throw into relief the invisibility of the mechanism of late-capitalism. Gupta's Xerox machine is archaic, obsolete, its levers and gears pre-dating modern solid-state touchpad technology. Similarly, Laibach and the NSK's levers and gears are the obsolete icons of history that have no currency in late-capitalism beyond kitsch. Yet in the act of exposing these levers and gears of ideology, Laibach interrogate shifting notions of transparency. In Modernism, transparency meant exposing the mechanism of the machine, whereas in postmodernism 'the interface screen is supposed to conceal the workings of the machine, and to simulate our everyday experience as faithfully as possible' (Žižek, 1997, p.167). An example of this can be seen in the touchpad technology of many

¹⁹⁰ Exhibited in the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2010, the mechanism of the Xerox machine was moving as per its function.

contemporary products, in which there is no button to press in order to affect the on-screen object, but by touching the image itself the subject may directly affect the object. There is no longer any interface to expose, as the interface itself has become invisible. In other words, contemporary transparency no longer means exposing the mechanism but to make that mechanism itself transparent, whereby the 'digital machinery "behind the screen" retreats into total impenetrability' (Žižek, 1997, p.167). There is therefore an anachronistic Retrogarde 'honesty' in Laibach and the NSK's work; that is, a deliberate archaism that is a step beyond Retrogardism in exposing the 'dishonesty' of modern transparency and its ideological mechanisms.

In order to illustrate the operation of the Laibach Kunst machine as a strategy of resistance further, a comparison with Socialism and capitalism is useful. Alberto Toscano compares the mystique of capitalist commodity fetishism to the transparency of the production process in Socialism, which he claims is an uninterrupted flow of communication. Here the worker has responsibility for the product and is thus continually connected to the product by this linear flow, whereas in capitalism the value system creates a gap between worker and product; capitalism is production abstracted by value (Toscano, 2011, conference paper). In Socialism therefore, production is focused on the machine, whilst in capitalism the focus is on the mystique of commodity fetishism. This division is paralleled in the respective approaches to the machine. In capitalism, humanity resists the machine, which is depicted as the Moloch from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927):

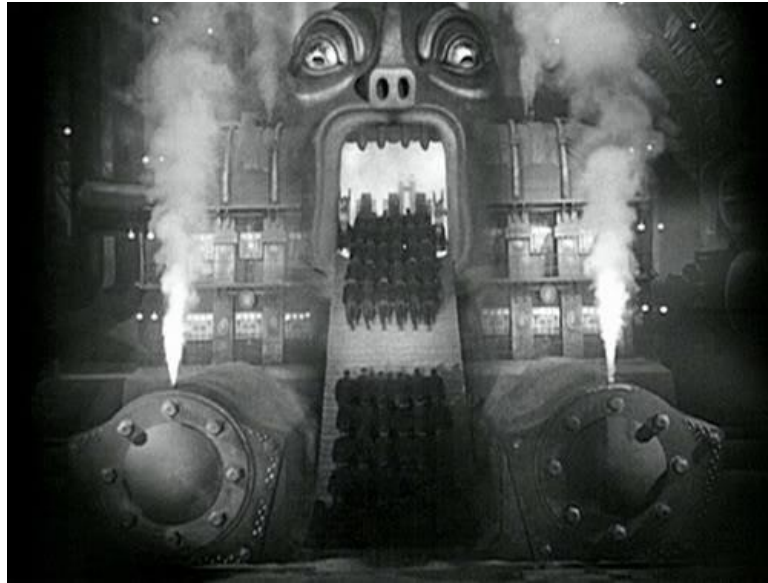


Figure 7.10, *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang (1927)

Here the machine consumes humanity, which is enslaved to industry. This has become the dominant popular conception of industry, and one at odds with early Russian avant-garde Constructivist notions, where the machine is more organically connected to the worker. Susan Buck-Morss has written on the difference between the Constructivist and the capitalist object, whereby the former was made to operate and work organically with, and for, the subject, unlike the capitalist object, which enslaved and was *other* to the subject (2000, p.119). Buck-Morss notes that the Constructivists set out to eradicate the distinction between artist and worker, and that the utopian surplus in the Constructivist machine fantasy ‘provided images suggestive of a reconciliation with nature’ (2000, p.119). Alexei Monroe has also written on this contrast between the capitalist and Russian historical avant-garde machine: ‘What was perceived in the west as the ultimate nightmare of liberal individualism, as the ideological counterpoint to the “Taylorisation”, to the Fordist ribbon-work, was in Russia hailed as the Utopian prospect of liberation’ (2008,

p.51). These opposing approaches to the machine are exemplified in Laibach's spectacle, as discussed in the following.

Laibach Kunst Machine

Utopian narratives revolve around the discourse of the machine, whether in the organic fusion of Constructivism or rebelling against capitalism's Moloch. In Laibach and the NSK, these diametrically opposed perspectives of the machine, the enslaving Moloch of capitalism and the utopian promise of the historical Russian avant-garde, become fruitful text. The founding tenet of Laibach and the NSK is Suprematism, which sought a utopia of geometric form, and Laibach and the NSK's praxis is located in the trauma of the historical avant-garde's assimilation into state power. In resurrecting and re-coding these 'obsolete' and discredited forms within their spectacle, Laibach's interpretation of the machine reveals the negativity associated with the machine in contemporary capitalism. This is done not only in articulating a visible ideological mechanism, but also in their visual and audio realisations of the machine. Laibach first emerged in the 1980s with recordings that directly referenced through samples and atonal noise the industrial machinery of Trbovlje. The design of this period was predominantly oppressive monochrome greys, blacks and whites, featuring collages of ideological iconography:

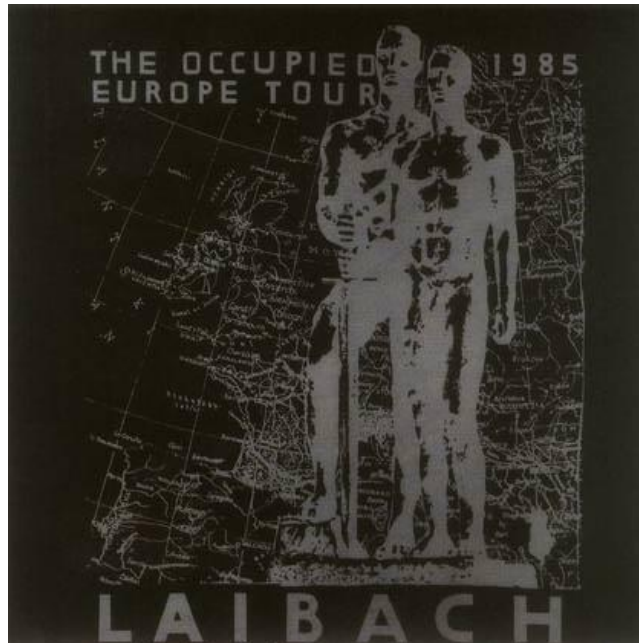


Figure 7.11, Album Sleeve: *Occupied Europe Tour, 1985*, Laibach
(UK release 1991)

In the 1990s, Laibach's depiction of the machine was transformed into the retro-futurism of *Kapital* (1992):

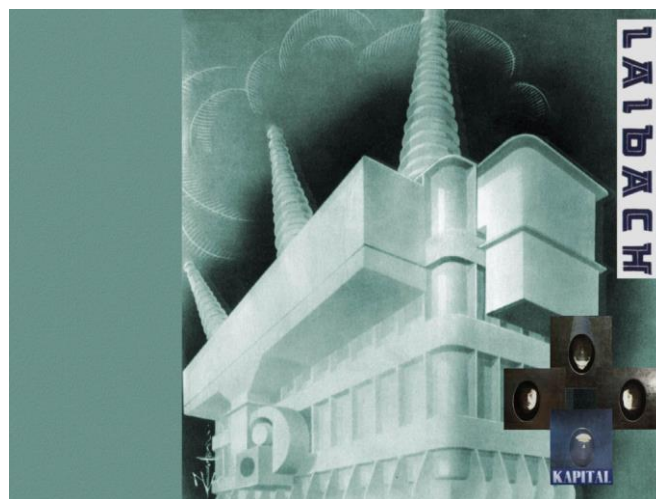


Figure 7.12, Album sleeve: *Kapital*, Laibach (1992a)

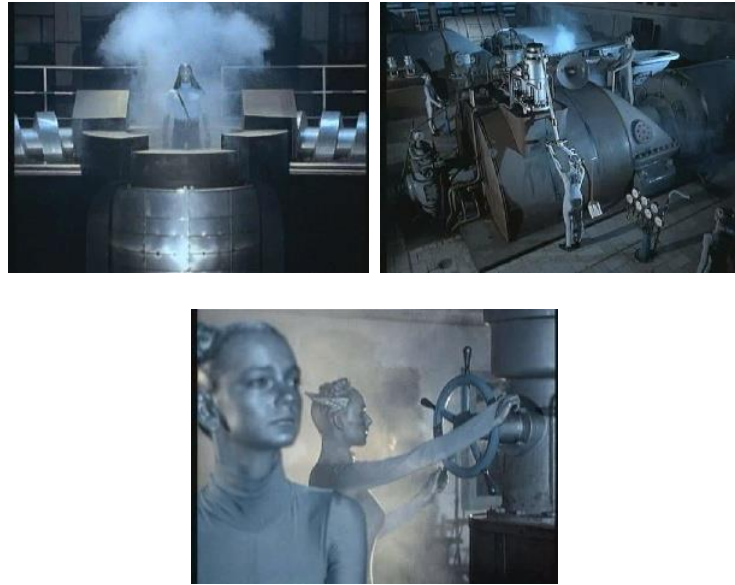


Figure 7.13, Video stills: 'Wirtschaft Ist Tot', Laibach (1992b)

In *Kapital* (1992), Laibach referenced the fictional technological promise of antiquated science-fiction and Socialist Realism. In 1994, the imagery of *NATO* (1994) took Laibach's machine into the realms of the virtual:

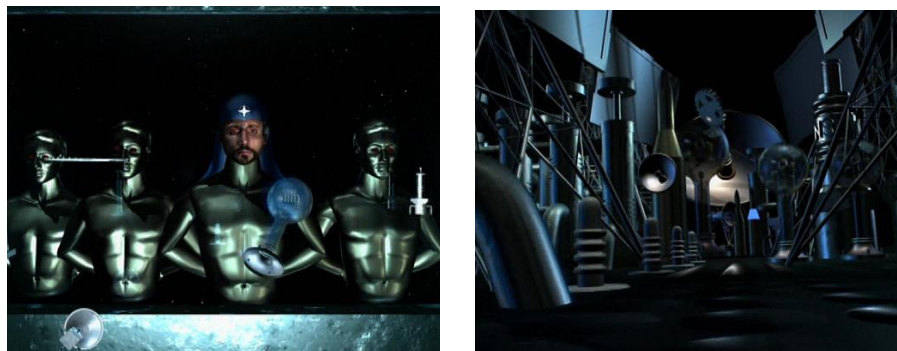


Figure 7.14, Video stills: 'The Final Countdown', Laibach (1994)

These manifestations are the Laibach Kunst machine realised in audio and visual text. The Laibach Kunst machine is the monumentalist spectacle of the Retro-avant-garde. It is an aesthetics machine whose workings are overtly visible, but the material produced by this machine is its own visibility, with no purpose but reflexivity.

The Laibach Kunst machine is Gupta's *Abandoned Xerox Machine* writ large, and in sound. Like her artwork, their cogs and gears are obsolete to the transparent interfaces of late-capitalism, and Laibach and the NSK's militant radical ambivalence runs counter to potential contemporary utility performance praxis. The new-Suprematism of Retrogardism has no currency in the narratives of advanced capitalism, and their process of establishing an impossible subject position creates a fascination with the ritualised spectacle of the Monumental Retro-avant-garde.

Laibach's continuing relevance

In this thesis, I have examined Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. By a strategy of non-alignment with temporal, aesthetic, geo-political and ideological determinants, Laibach and the NSK maintain this nexus as a point of dialogue, both as communication and as text for manipulation and interpretation. In the chapter 'The European Context', I discussed the difference between Western and Eastern European aesthetic discourse in order to demonstrate Marina Gržinić's notion of Easthetics, which is a means of articulating an Eastern European aesthetic discourse autonomous of Western hegemony (Gržinić, 2006a, p.484). In the subsequent chapter, Retrogardism was cited as paradigmatic of Easthetics, and, in being frequently misrecognised in Western aesthetic discourse, becomes text for Laibach and the NSK in an East-West dialectic. Retrogardism re-mythologises the ideological signifiers of the Grand Utopian Narrative within the 'new-Suprematism' of the Retro-avant-garde, and thus provides the means to effectively deal with the unfinished narrative of the European traumatic historical. It does this by re-

activating the ideological power and utopian energies behind these signifiers whilst simultaneously frustrating their ability to operate coherently by a process of repetition, juxtaposition and dissonance. In the chapter 'Over-identification', I posited Laibach's over-identification with an impossible authority paradigm as Retrogardism in practice. The resultant radical ambivalence demands a problematic subject position in order to engage effectively with Laibach and NSK texts. In the chapter 'Nexus', this complex subject position provides an analytical tool for understanding Laibach and the NSK's role as nexus between Eastern Europe and the West. In support of this argument, examples of Western reportage were cited as attempts to categorise Laibach within popular music and a commodifiable ideological framework. In 'Nexus', I demonstrated how the complexity of Laibach and NSK discourse prevents this easy categorisation, and, moreover, illustrates the creative potential explored by Laibach in the conceptual space between Eastern Europe and the West, what Eda Čufer calls 'The Difference' (1998, p.39). In the 'Interpellation' chapter, this complexity and 'Difference' proved the most significant factor in Laibach's interpellative qualities, as evinced in the results of the Laibach audience survey conducted for this research. It was demonstrated that respondents were drawn to Laibach on a visceral and cerebral level in equal measure, but the riptide between these two dynamics was what constituted Laibach's appeal. Laibach and the NSK's potential as a site of resistance to late-capitalism was analysed in this chapter 'Conclusion: Resistance'. Late-capitalism is adept at assimilating conventional forms of counter-cultural challenge such as Western Performance Art, and this was contrasted with the work of Laibach and the NSK.

Despite Laibach's heyday in the 1980s having passed, their counter-cultural challenge is still extant. In the introduction to this thesis, when explaining my research methodology, I described my focus as being on Laibach as concept. This not only binds all their disparate manifestations together as a Gesamtkunstwerk over thirty-three years, but becomes the agency whereby Laibach's praxis remains active. In other words, although it can be said Laibach and the NSK no longer have the same impact as they did in the 1980s, and the shift from Socialism to transitional post-Socialism in Eastern Europe has deprived them of much readymade textual material, their performative praxis still resonates. Laibach have been operational for over thirty-three years, they continue to tour internationally and 2014 sees the release of the studio album *Spectre*. Moreover, Laibach continue to frustrate categorisation, sitting uneasily in the Industrial music genre. This uniqueness, which is cited as a crucial interpellative factor by the majority of respondents to my audience survey, is certainly shaped by Laibach's eclectic output, but more significantly by their defining initial phase, which dates from their inception in 1980 to the release of *Macbeth* in 1990. This definition is not one based on musical quality, as, for example, *Kapital* (1992) is arguably their most musically and tonally complex release, but as regards their cultural impact. The 1980s were Laibach's most controversial period, what Monroe calls 'Classic Laibach', and the period in which they made their name, both in Slovenia and internationally (Monroe, 2005, p.182). It was a period when their radical ambivalence was at its most complete, and their over-identification strategy most effective and problematic. This 'classic Laibach' period is the foundation of the Laibach spectacle, and overshadows all subsequent output by the group, to the point when all Laibach audio and visual texts are to be understood as in dialogue

with this period. Despite Laibach no longer attaining the previous levels of controversy of the 1980s, this period is still quoted by respondents to my survey as what Laibach are about. That is to say, although the totalitarian iconography and martial cadences in Laibach's audio and visual texts are less obvious in releases after *Let It Be* (1988), Laibach will always be about the ideology of power in all its forms. Laibach's enactment of the totalitarian ritual remains an object-lesson in the staging of the mechanism of ideology. So complete is this staging that no other art group would be able to stage this so effectively without being in Laibach's shadow. Furthermore, Laibach's direct critique of globalisation and the suggested totalitarianism of the popular music industry continues to be apposite.

There is also much to be said for Laibach's practice of obfuscation and ambiguity in support of a claim for their ongoing agency. I have written at length on the radical ambivalence resulting from their ideological non-alignment, but this warrants further note in terms of an artistic strategy beyond that of ideological discourse.¹⁹¹ Laibach's articulation of an East-West nexus was often deliberately obtuse, at times appearing to re-affirm Western misconceptions and prejudices about Eastern Europe, and at other times making little or no attempt to be understood by the West. It could be argued that this was detrimental to East-West communication. Laibach's articulation of an Eastern European aesthetic discourse such as Marina Gržinić's *Easthetics* within the hegemony of Western aesthetic discourse not only celebrates difference, but celebrates the exclusion of the West. However, in Laibach's hands, the resulting inability by the West to comprehend Laibach and NSK praxis becomes a discursive field whereby the failure to converse

¹⁹¹ As regards an analysis of Laibach's ideological non-alignment, see the chapter 'Over-identification'.

becomes a constructive and fruitful text, generating an original aesthetic discourse. Thus, in Laibach and the NSK's celebration of Eda Čufer's 'Difference', the failings of both Eastern Europe and the West to communicate may be understood as positive, in that it generates a creative interplay of texts and aesthetic systems.

Laibach are a concept more than a popular music group, an international art-form more than Slovenian cultural product, and any research on Laibach and the NSK must necessarily articulate this. To research Laibach and the NSK otherwise would not only fail to engage effectively with their praxis, but to delimit their work as closed. In this finite format of closed product, Laibach's audience become 'fans', or consumers of product, rather than active subjects.¹⁹² Whereas a 'fan' is offered a product with which to identify, which may be considered a contract between the band and the audience, no such economy can exist as regards Laibach. Identification with the Laibach spectacle is problematised, and as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, Laibach operate as a question, not an answer (2002, p.287). The argument for an open-ended nature of Laibach's discourse may also be substantiated by pointing to Laibach's practice of temporal non-alignment. Although in one sense Laibach and the NSK are very much rooted to the context of Socialist and post-Socialist Eastern Europe of the 1980s, the nature of its prime aesthetic system, Retrogardism, disrupts temporal flow by operating under the paradox of looking simultaneously forward and backwards. It is this open-ended nature of Laibach's discourse that argues for their continuing relevance.

¹⁹² In the chapter 'Interpellation', I discuss the role of a conventional fan in popular music and contrast it with the Laibach subject.

In understanding Laibach's agency as located in the past, as closed, any future research into Laibach runs the risk of a retrospective approach. This has been a recent trend in analysis of Laibach and the NSK, a tendency to locate their narrative solely with Tito's Yugoslavia, Slovenia's independence, and post-Socialist Eastern Europe. Recent releases by Laibach such as *Gesamtkunstwerk '81* (2012) and *An Introduction to... Laibach* (2012), and the programme of Laibach and NSK related events at the Calvert 22, Chelsea Space and Tate Modern galleries in London in 2012, all support this propensity to approach Laibach from a retrospective point of view. What arose from these events in London from April to June 2012 was a tension between the operational agency and the historicisation of Laibach and NSK praxis. Each event found itself caught between a retrospective tone and the notion that the Laibach/NSK dynamic is extant and in a process of continual emergence. The danger of this historical retrospection and the archiving undertaken as part of institutional exhibition, is that it suggests the NSK project is a closed unit no longer engaged in the process of challenging ideologies, whether fiscal, aesthetic, or political (both right and left). For example, at London's Chelsea Space in April 2012, the exhibition featured Laibach and NSK items in vitrines, and the focus of the talks given at the Tate Modern's symposium was the NSK's past, and historical effectiveness.¹⁹³ The title of the Tate's symposium was itself indicative: *Neue Slowenische Kunst (1984-1992): A Historical Perspective*.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, many of the papers presented discussed Laibach and NSK praxis as a means to explore the speaker's own theoretical work. This may herald a new and

¹⁹³ A notable exception to this was Alexei Monroe's paper, which closed the symposium. Monroe's paper was the only one to address Laibach and the NSK as an ongoing and vital artistic practice. For example, his was the only paper to relate Laibach and NSK praxis to contemporary issues of excessive surveillance and increased governmental control.

¹⁹⁴ Laibach's performance at the Tate Modern that closed the symposium was divided into two halves, with the first half being a re-enactment of their Novi Rock performance in Ljubljana in 1982. However, although this was certainly a historical retrospective of that iconic performance and early Laibach material, each track had been significantly reworked and updated.

inert phase of Laibach and the NSK study, in which academia no longer discusses the subversive value of over-identification or the paradoxes of Retrogardism as a vital aesthetic system, but instead analyses its historical impact.

This move towards a retrospective analysis of Laibach and the NSK is to be cautioned against, as it risks neglecting their continuing impact and relevance. Retrogardism, despite drawing its energies from history, is not a historical art form, and neither is it a study in European history. The open wounds of the European traumatic historical are not healed by retrospectives. Laibach have not only demonstrated the importance of Difference as the potential for a creative interplay of texts and aesthetic systems, but the value of ambiguity and enigma in its relationship to subjectivity. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, the Laibach Kunst Machine is still very much relevant, perhaps even more so now, under the burgeoning and all-assimilating power of Late-capitalism.

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O'Brien. M. *Regimes of Hardship*, 9th June 2012. Performance Space, London

RADIO

The Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia: The Story Of Tito. BBC, Radio 4, 26th April 2010 4.15pm

APPENDIX

Results of Part One Questionnaire

	Page
1. Personal details	
1. What is your age?.....	385
2. What is your sex?.....	385
3. What is your profession?.....	385
4. What is your nationality?.....	386
5. To what level are you educated?.....	387
2. History	
1. How long have you known of Laibach?.....	388
2. (a) How did you first come across Laibach	388
(b) What sparked your interest?.....	388
3. How many of Laibach's albums do you possess?.....	390
4. What (if any) was your first Laibach recording purchased?.....	390
3. The NSK	
1. Are you aware of the NSK (<i>Neue Slowenische Kunst</i>)?.....	391
2. Are you a NSK passport holder?.....	391
3. Have you been to any NSK events?.....	391
4. Did you attend the symposium in Trbovlje this year?.....	392
4. Live Performance	
1. Have you seen Laibach live?.....	393
2. Do you go with friends to the performance/s?.....	393
3. Do you meet people you know at their performance/s?.....	393
4. What do you think the projections used convey?.....	393
5. General	
1. What Laibach insignia/merchandise have you worn?.....	394
2. Do you wear Laibach regalia only at Laibach/NSK events?.....	394
3. Have you a working connection with Laibach or NSK?.....	394
4. To what extent are you familiar with the background to the iconography used by Laibach?.....	396
5. Have you read <i>Interrogation Machine</i> or the NSK book?.....	396
6. Other	
1. Do you regularly attend gigs by other bands?.....	397
2. Do you seek out 'Live Art' performances?.....	397
3. Do you go to the theatre regularly?.....	397
4. Do you go to art galleries?.....	397
5. Have you ever lived in Central/Eastern Europe?.....	397
6. Do you have any close relatives from Central/Eastern Europe?.....	398

7. Opinion/Impression	
1. Please recall your first impression on hearing Laibach.....	399
2. Please recall your first impression on seeing Laibach.....	401
3. If you had to, how would you categorise Laibach?.....	403
4. What is Laibach's 'political agenda' (if they have one)?.....	404
5. Are Laibach currently relevant?.....	407
6. How would you describe Laibach to someone who's never heard of them?.....	409
7. What is your favourite Laibach album?.....	410
8. What is your least favourite Laibach album?.....	412
9. If you have one, what is your favourite Laibach track?.....	412
10. Are there any issues concerning Laibach that you are uncomfortable with?.....	414
11. What do you dislike about Laibach, if anything?.....	415
12. What is it about Laibach you like, what is their appeal to you?.....	417
13. Finally, please add any further information about your experience of Laibach, anything at all, or indeed, any observations about this study, or anything you feel I may have missed that needs to be asked, or you would like to say.	421

Results of Part Two Questionnaire

	Page
1. Appeal	
1. Do you find any humour in Laibach? Please specify	428
2. What is the appeal of Laibach's use of the Slovenian and/or the German language?.....	428
3. Laibach often differ in 'style' from album to album, what is the appeal of this to you?.....	429
4. If your email address references Laibach, why is this?.....	429
5. (a) Many respondents were drawn to the controversy surrounding the group, if so, what is this appeal to you?.....	430
(b) Many respondents were drawn to the 'fascist' or 'totalitarian' elements in Laibach. If so, what is this appeal to you?	430
6. Have you danced to Laibach (in clubs, etc.)?.....	431
7. In 1987 I heard 'Krst' late night on the John Peel radio show and knew immediately this was 'my band'. This has been a personal experience for many respondents, a sense that something had been missing in culture and Laibach completed the picture. Was this the case for you?.....	431
2. Feasibility	
1. Most respondents were delighted to take part in research on Laibach, please say why you responded to my request.	434
2. Should an academic study be made of Laibach? If so, why?.....	435

3. Community	
1. <i>If you are a member of the Laibach Facebook group, why did you join?</i>	437
2. <i>Do you feel you participate in the Laibach ‘thing’ (whatever that may be)?</i>	437
3. <i>How do you keep abreast of Laibach’s activities?</i>	438
4. Additional	
1. <i>How often do you listen to Laibach?</i>	439
2. <i>Were you aware there are three different versions of the album Kapital?</i>	439
3. <i>If you wear Laibach insignia, why do you do so, and what is the reaction from the public?</i>	439
4. <i>Are you interested in or practice Paganism? Or any similarly ‘alternative’ lifestyle?</i>	440
5. <i>If you are Slovenian, how do you feel about Laibach’s representation of your country? If you are not Slovenian, how do you feel Laibach relate to your country, if at all?</i>	441

Selected Email correspondence

Christian Matzke	443
Donald Campbell	444
Heather Duke	444
Lili Anamarija No	445
Sakshi Gupta	449
Timo Vuorensola	450

Audience Survey

Below are the details of the survey of Laibach's audience conducted between December 2010 and March 2012. The survey was in two parts; the stage two questionnaire was formulated according to the responses of stage one. Some respondents were approached in person at a Laibach performance at the Relentless Garage on 15th December 2010, but most were found through the social media site *Facebook* through speculative postings in the Laibach group. A personal appeal for respondents was also made on the *NSK State News* webcast in 2011 (Matzke, 2011, online). Others were found by word-of-mouth, having been recommended by respondents. Of the 656 contacted, 225 responded to the first questionnaire, and 140 to the second. Almost all the respondents expressed a willingness to take part in such a study, with only four objecting to the research, two of whom withdrew their participation on the grounds that they were concerned I was a member of an anti-fascist organisation. Many of the respondents have asked to be sent the result of the survey once completed, and I occasionally receive email correspondence asking after the progress of the survey and my research in general.

Respondents ranged from those with a thorough understanding of Laibach and the NSK, to those with a passing interest. This diversity could be extreme, for example the former group often included those who had worked with Laibach or knew them personally, whilst at the other end of the scale some only possessed one album, if that. However, the majority of respondents proved well-informed, demonstrating a high level of understanding of Laibach's praxis, and expressed a concern that Laibach were consistently being misread, which was often cited as a motivation for taking part in the research.

The findings of the survey were used primarily in the chapter 'Interpellation' and constitute support material only, as the survey was not statistically regulated. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Disclaimer (This accompanied both questionnaires).

The purpose of this practical research is to study a cross-section of Laibach's audience. You are invited to participate in this research. The research is being co-ordinated by Simon Bell, a PhD. candidate with Anglia Ruskin University, and results of the study will be included in a written study of the work of Laibach and the NSK. This research is personally funded and not affiliated to a commercial company. If you agree to participate, you will be asked a brief series of questions as regards your understanding of Laibach. Data gathered will be stored digitally and completely confidentially, and will eventually be included in the written research thesis. Your participation will contribute to research on Laibach and the NSK, and on Eastern European performance practice in relation to the West.

Results of Part One Questionnaire

(Total number of respondents: 225)

The number column indicates the number of respondents. The percentages were worked out according to the number of responses to the question, thus excluding those who did not answer, not total respondents overall. For clarity, only the significant highest percentages are indicated.

1. Personal Details

1. *What is your age?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Age-group: 31-40	90	40%
Age-group: 41-50	69	30%
Age-group: 20-30	50	22%
Age-group: 50+	11	
Age-group: under 20	3	
No answer	2	

2. *What is your sex?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Male:	185	82%
Female:	40	18%
No answer	0	

3. *What is your profession?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Creative/entertainment	47	20%
Sales and manual	34	15%
Other	32	13%
Student	26	11%
Software/computing	25	10%
Education	19	
Management	17	
Technical	11	
Academic/research	8	
Community care	7	
No answer	0	

4. *What is your nationality?*

Category	Number	Percentage
British	54	24%
American	45	20%
Slovenian	12	5%
Canadian	8	
Italian	7	
Swedish	7	
Norwegian	7	
French	7	
German	6	
Serbian	5	
Irish	5	
Macedonian (F.Y.R.O.M.) ¹⁹⁵	4	
Polish	4	
South African	4	
Austrian	4	
Hungarian	3	
New Zealander	3	
Spanish	3	
Czech	3	
Danish	3	
Mexican	2	
Croatian	2	
Romanian	2	
Citizen of the NSK State-in-Time	2	
Bosnia-Herzegovinian	2	
Israeli	2	
Georgian	1	
Japanese	1	
Swiss	1	
Belgian	1	
Bulgarian	1	
Portuguese	1	
Australian	1	
Slovakian	1	
Korean	1	
Icelandic	1	
Lithuanian	1	
Finnish	1	
Latvian	1	
No answer	5	

NOTE:

Some respondents indicated dual nationality. Both nationalities are therefore included in the above.

¹⁹⁵ F.Y.R.O.M.: the 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'.

5. *To what level are you educated?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Degree (or equivalent)	71	31%
Masters (or equivalent)	57	25%
Secondary school (or equivalent)	50	22%
Current undergraduate	15	
Vocational qualification	14	
Doctorate	6	
No answer	12	

2. History

1. *How long have you known of Laibach?*

Category	Number	Percentage
21-30 years	81	36%
11-20 years	77	34%
0-10 years	64	30%
No answer	3	

2. (a) *How did you first come across Laibach?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Introduced by friend or colleague	68	30%
By accident ¹⁹⁶	58	25%
On television	18	7%
Not specified	17	
Through an interest in the 'Industrial music' genre	14	
In print/music press:	13	
Played at a club	13	
Introduced by family member	11	
By mention as an influence on other groups	10	
Heard on the radio	7	
Through working in the music industry	7	
No answer	17	

(b) *What sparked your interest?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Not specified	45	20%
Laibach's originality	22	9%
Similar field of interest	9	
Interest in art	9	
Totalitarian aesthetics	7	
The controversy surrounding Laibach	6	
Other	6	
Political significance	5	
Humour	5	
Progenitors of Rammstein	4	
No answer	107	

Selected quotes as to what sparked their interest in Laibach:

- 'I was a fan of industrial music, and Laibach seemed somewhat ridiculous but very original, and I wanted to hear what they sounded like.'
- 'They sounded different to almost anything I'd heard before.'

¹⁹⁶ Although the category 'by accident' would certainly include many of the following categories, it is also included here as a category in itself.

- ‘Unusual combination of electro and marching music immediately set Laibach apart from all other “industrial” musicians. Also, the perplexing insertion of a Tito sound-bite, dubbed in English with solemn seriousness despite its apparent lack of context or shock value (from the point of view of a non-Yugoslav) lingered on my mind like a riddle.’
- ‘*Opus Dei* sleeve: axes tied into a swastika. The image was disturbing, but compelling and when I listened to the music, it was much the same. I hadn’t heard anything like it before.’
- ‘The sound – it was like an industrial Wagner overture, a romanticized nationalism, like a grand anthem, but with martial bass beats. I had never heard anything like it.’
- ‘Laibach was something completely new; the foundation to a new approach to listening to music.’
- Describing their first encounter: ‘An essay by Žižek in *The Universal Exception* in a Section titled *Real Existing Socialism*. As I knew nothing much about Slovenia, I thought he was talking about a political party! ... I instantly googled them, to find out it was all an “act”.’
- ‘I discovered there is so much more behind the name Laibach than music itself.’
- ‘There is much more to Industrial music than Neubauten and Throbbing Gristle and banging on bits of metal.’
- Geburt Einer Nation ‘just made you want to go and invade Poland.’
- ‘It sounded like fascist ravings but at the same time over the top. I really didn’t know what to make of it.’
- ‘*Let it Be* struck me as absurdly funny, but I also liked the juxtaposition of such an “odd” concept with martial beats and somewhat oppressive-sounding music.’
- ‘My emergence into the Industrial music subculture at the age of approximately 13, spurred by my rejection of common social norms on account of my high-functioning autism.’
- ‘I was interested in them because they were “old school” industrial, one of the originals and their name had a kind of prestige about it.’
- ‘I bought the CD of *Opus Dei* based solely on its cover, and the fact that it was released on the Mute record label.’

3. *How many of Laibach's albums do you possess?*

Category	Number	Percentage
1-5	64	28%
6-10	38	16%
11-15	25	
None	22	
16-20	8	
20 or more	55	24%
No answer	13	

4. *What (if any) was your first Laibach recording purchased?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Opus Dei (album)	50	22%
Not specified	47	20%
Volk (album)	17	7%
WAT (album)	14	
Let It Be (album)	13	
NATO (album)	13	
Nova Akropola (album)	12	
Sympathy for the Devil (album)	10	
Anthems (album)	9	
Jesus Christ Superstars	8	
Kapital (album)	7	
Macbeth (album)	5	
Krst Pod Triglavom (album)	4	
Die Liebe (single)	4	
Laibach (1985) (album)	3	
Life Is Life (single)	3	
Tanz Mit Laibach (single)	2	
The Occupied Europe Tour 1985 (album)	2	
Ljubljana Zagreb Beograd (album)	2	
Rekapitulacija 1980-1984 (album)	2	
Sympathy for the Devil (single)	1	
Panorama (single)	1	
Brat Moj (single)	1	
Slovenska Akropola (album)	1	
Through the Occupied Netherlands (bootleg tape)	1	

3. The NSK

1. Are you aware of the NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*)?

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	206	91%
No	17	9%
No answer	2	

2. Are you a NSK passport holder?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	200	88%
Yes	25	12%
No answer	0	

NOTE:

Twenty-nine of the 200 respondents who said they did not hold an NSK passport, indicated that they intended to when they had an opportunity.

3. Have you been to any NSK events?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	182	80%
Yes	41	20%
No answer	2	

NOTE:

sixteen of the 182 respondents who said they had not attended an NSK event indicated that they intended to when they had an opportunity.

Events cited as attended:

IRWIN exhibition, Hagen, Germany (2006)
NSK event, Dublin (2004)
Publication launch party for the NSK monograph (1991)
NSK exhibition, Tramway Theatre, Glasgow
IRWIN exhibition, Düsseldorf, Germany (1989)
Noordung Prayer Machine, Hamburg (1994)
NSK Citizens' Congress, Berlin (2010)
'Art exhibition in Seattle'
Laibach exhibition, Moderna Galerija, Slovenia
NSK citizens' event during the *Laibach Revisited* concert, Trieste, Italy (2004)
Exhibition in Tivoli Park, Ljubljana, Slovenia
'The founding in Iceland'¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ This is a reference to Halldor Carlsson and Olafur Thorsson's *NSK Garda Reykjavik* event in 2007.

4. *Did you attend the symposium in Trbovlje this year?*¹⁹⁸

Category	Number	Percentage
No	212	94%
Yes	9	6%
No answer	4	

¹⁹⁸ This was an event held in Trbovlje, Slovenia, in September 2010, celebrating thirty years of Laibach.

4. Live Performance

1. *Have you seen Laibach live?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	154	69%
No	71	31%
No answer	0	

2. *Do you go with friends to the performance/s?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	123	84%
No	23	16%
No answer	79	

3. *Do you meet people you know at their performance/s?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	99	66%
No	49	34%
No answer	77	

4. *What do you think the projections used convey?*¹⁹⁹

Category	Number	Percentage
They are part of Laibach's aesthetics	22	32%
Non-specific response	13	20%
Satirical or oppositional	12	18%
Thought-provoking	7	10%
Ambiguity	4	
Art	4	
Humour	3	
No answer	160	

¹⁹⁹ Laibach performances are accompanied by projections on screens behind the group.

5. General

1. What Laibach insignia/merchandise have you worn?

Category	Number	Percentage
Do not wear	116	51%
T-shirt/shirt	67	61%
Badge	42	38%
Belt	15	13%
Armband	12	
NSK car sticker	7	
Tattoo	4	
Malevich cross	3	
Tie	3	
Necklace	2	
Patch	2	
Scarf	1	
Tie-pin	1	

NOTE:

There are two calculated percentages in the above: the percentage of those who do not wear Laibach insignia/merchandise is worked out separately from the percentages of those who do wear the insignia/merchandise.

2. Do you wear Laibach regalia only at Laibach/NSK events?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	85	95%
Yes	5	5%
No answer	129	

NOTE:

Six indicated they would not wear Laibach insignia or merchandise at Laibach performances.

3. Have you a working connection with Laibach or NSK (i.e. worked with them, written on them for a journal or academically)?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	194	88%
Yes	23	12%
No answer	Na.	

NOTE:

Details of working connection:

Press: interview/review	8
Other	5
Recorded/performed with	4
Published academic article	2
Arranged Laibach/NSK event	2
Film	2

Selected quotes as to their working connection with Laibach or the NSK:

- 'I've taken part as delegate to the First NSK Citizens Congress in Berlin. Written two texts published on <http://times.nskstate.com>. Organized the First *NSK Rendez-Vous* Lyon and I'm planning the First *NSK Rendez-Vous* Paris for this fall/winter. Helping Alexei Monroe with the translation into French of his *Plural Machine* book and some texts from mine will be published in the book related to the NSK Congress.'²⁰⁰
- 'Yes I have been working with them with our local orchestra. We recorded a NSK anthem for their CD. I played first trombone on the record.'²⁰¹
- 'I commissioned about four promo videos, a concert video and music commercials when I worked at Mute Records. I also worked with other NSK people (film directors etc.) who I met through Laibach.'
- 'I co-wrote the first article about them in the UK press and played drums on the occupied Europe tour and a few other concerts in the early eighties, and also in their collaboration with dancer Michael Clark.'
- 'I have written and lectured about NSK'
- 'Articles in newspaper, magazine for university. I ran polish site (blog) about Laibach and NSK. I currently trying to organize *NSK Rendez-Vous*.
- 'I was asked to do a guerrilla street performance by Laibach before the show serving soup to starving Americans at the show in Seattle two years ago'.²⁰²
- 'Made a film for them when they played with Michael Clark at Sadler's Wells for one of their songs with Dan Landin my working partner at the time...²⁰³ I also helped shoot the video for Life is Life.... and I made their statement of intent film for them way back in 1983 when I was at St,Martin's film school.'
- 'Mixed some of *Nova Akropola* and produced *Opus Dei*.'

²⁰⁰ The respondent here refers to Monroe's *Interrogation Machine* (2005) as the *Plural Machine*. The book mentioned as relating to the NSK Congress is *State Of Emergence: A Documentary Of The First NSK Citizens' Congress* (2011).

²⁰¹ The recording referred to is the track 'NSK' from the album *Volk* (2006).

²⁰² This event is examined in the chapter 'Nexus'.

²⁰³ Laibach collaborated with the choreographer Michael Clark on his 1987 *No Fire Escape in Hell* production.

- ‘I quoted the NSK in one of my novels, loosely based on virtual communities’.²⁰⁴
- ‘I might mention them in my next book’

4. *To what extent are you familiar with the background to the iconography used by Laibach? I.e. The Sower, Malevich, Heartfield, etc.*

Category	Number	Percentage
Some awareness	107	49%
Unaware	80	38%
Very familiar	28	13%
No answer	10	

5. *Have you read Interrogation Machine or the NSK book?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Neither	158	69%
<i>Interrogation Machine</i>	46	20%
NSK monograph (1991)	22	11%
No answer	Na. ²⁰⁵	

²⁰⁴ This publication was not specified.

²⁰⁵ Some had read both Monroe’s and the NSK’s book.

6. Other

1. Do you regularly attend gigs by other bands?

Category	Number	Percentage
More than once a month	66	32%
Rarely	36	17%
Once a month	33	16%
None	28	13%
Weekly	23	11%
Sometimes	20	11%
No answer	19	

2. Do you seek out 'Live Art' performances?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	121	56%
Yes	95	44%
No answer	9	

3. Do you go to the theatre regularly?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	133	60%
Yes	86	40%
No answer	6	

4. Do you go to art galleries?

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	172	78%
No	48	22%
No answer	5	

5. Have you ever lived in Central/Eastern Europe?

Category	Number	Percentage
No	171	79%
Other	12	5%
Slovenia	10	4%
Poland	4	
Serbia	4	
Czech Republic	3	
Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.)	3	
Romania	3	
Croatia	3	
Hungary	2	
No answer	10	

6. *Do you have any close relatives from Central/Eastern Europe?*

Category	Number	Percentage
No	157	75%
Yes	50	25%
No answer	18	

7. Opinion/Impression

1. Please recall your first impression on hearing Laibach

Category	Number	Percentage
Awe/astonishment/shock	42	22%
Power/force/energy	35	17%
Unique/originality	30	15%
Enigma/fascination	26	13%
Comic/humour	26	13%
Disturbing/intimidating/guilt	10	5%
Intellectual/artistic concept	7	
The vocals made an impression	7	
Confrontational/provocative	3	
'It was my music'	2	
No answer	37	

Selected quotes as to their first impression on hearing Laibach:

- 'They reminded me of Rammstein at first, but after listening to them, I realized they were a million times better and were truly performance artists, not just musicians.'
- 'Oh my God, I have to dance to this.'
- 'WTF? Is this for real or not?'²⁰⁶
- 'I was awe struck at the imperialistic sound that seemed to make a sentiment of unity. It made me feel like I could be a part of something where I felt to so often be an outlier [sic] of many other things.'
- 'I loved the grandeur and the spectacle.'
- 'It sounds to me like a different way to make music.'
- 'Seemed like an archive recording from WW2.'
- 'In the living room when I was about four. It was a very powerful experience.'
- 'I bet no Women listen to this...'
- 'The booming vocals and orchestration of Life is Life underscored by the equally hypnotic visuals immediately prompted questions about the superficial sensations spawned by Laibach's music and imagery and their agenda's true intentions toward sincerity or mockery. Distinguishing between their pose and that of a true neo-fascist stance became an important task.'

²⁰⁶ 'WTF' is an abbreviation for 'what the fuck'.

- ‘I was in awe. The music just clicked with me; the drama and force of it was just incredible.’
- ‘It was a real WTF? moment and I can recall it like it was last week. It was sometime in 1987 ... When Opus Dei came on, we were like “Holy shit! This stuff is freaking insane!” We were completely impressed, amused, and laughing ourselves silly with how they had brilliantly reworked a fairly known top 40 hit into some sort of pseudo-fascist military dirge.’
- ‘I was filled with energy.’
- ‘This is too good to be truly fascist.’
- ‘HOLY SHIT! (I’ll never forget my shock! Positively).’
- ‘Honestly I thought it was something that I had felt I always heard maybe in my dreams or wanted to hear and finally somebody made it real.’
- ‘It was *Macbeth*. I was terrified when I heard that strong powerful music. And at the same time it was so refreshing and it gave me special energy.’
- ‘Nazi, skinhead violent stuff...’
- ‘I was fascinated beyond belief.’
- ‘It hit me directly. It was like a fresh rain on a hot evening. When I heard the sounds, the voices, I couldn’t believe my ears.’
- ‘I was immediately fascinated by Laibach's rigid martial percussions, their numbingly monotonous delivery (both vocal- and music-wise), the onslaught of brass, timpani and metallic impacts evocative of strength, discipline and determination. It seemed to me that this music was intended for an audience not of mere humans, but of colossal statues.
- ‘Disturbing, but compelling. I hadn’t heard anything like it before. Coming from a punk anarchist perspective the authoritarian overtones said I should be repulsed by it, but I couldn’t resist finding out more.’
- ‘I was amazed that a musical group like that could be formed and allowed to exist in former Yugoslavia, where I lived before it broke up.’
- ‘Being a fan of composers like Holst and Mahler, dance music and metal, they ticked a lot of boxes simultaneously.’

- ‘I started laughing I realised straight away that they had a sense of humour and irony and I really liked that aspect of them. But I also felt that I was flirting with something potentially very dark. The Germanic music was funny because I couldn’t believe anyone could get away with that sort of music, especially as they come from the communist Eastern bloc with the unfortunate historical Nazi references and connotations.’
- ‘These guys take themselves so seriously, they can't possibly be for real.’
- ‘Nostalgia of a glorious past of Europe.’
- ‘Wow! This sounds so powerful and intellectual at the same time!’
- ‘Socialism meets arthouse via MDMA.’²⁰⁷
- ‘Absolutely stunned. Felt like there should be music like this but had never heard it before.’
- ‘I'd found “my” type of music.’
- ‘I fell in love with their music instantly. It was heroic, grand, powerful, and apparently serious, it harked back to a different age and in doing so plundered much that was good from the past.’
- ‘It was painful but attractive. A test of extreme listening.’
- ‘I thought they were taking the piss...then I listened properly...’

2. *Please recall your first impression on seeing Laibach*

Category	Number	Percentage
Power/force/energy	26	19%
Awe/astonishment/shock	26	19%
Comic/humour	19	14%
Disturbing/intimidating/guilt	18	13%
Enigma/fascination	16	12%
Unique/originality	14	10%
The ‘look’ made an impression	6	
‘Ceremonial’	2	
‘This is my band’	2	
It represented European culture	2	
No answer	94	

²⁰⁷ MDMA is better known as the drug Ecstasy.

Selected quotes as to their first impression on seeing Laibach:

- ‘Being American it made me question that if I think this looks cool and also feel a connection then what is wrong with Soviet/Russian relations, what makes the American viewpoint be so negative of it.’
- ‘I like industrial style things and people appearing almost bio-mechanoid’
- ‘It felt like an absurdist political rally.’
- ‘The first time I saw them live, I felt like I was finally home.’
- ‘At an international exchange Slovenians were screening the video for Life is Life. I felt that how cool was that.’
- ‘Isn't a video that makes a mockery of fascism sending the wrong message? Isn't it a little bit irresponsible to use such Völkish imagery ironically, when the irony may be lost on most of the audience? What were Laibach trying to achieve?’
- ‘I watched “Opus Dei” and suddenly “got it” ... I began showing the video to friends.’
- ‘This is the band I will follow for the rest of my life.’
- ‘Hilarious. Trolling for a living and for a statement is awesome.’²⁰⁸
- ‘Performance Art, with multiple layers of meaning.’
- ‘They appeared in UK at the right time to be noticed, the post-punk scene was open to many un-rock’n’roll directions. I thought I detected a very dry sense of humour. Very impressed with their clean dynamic discipline and unique identity.’
- ‘Is it OK to like this?’
- ‘It seems to me that the primary purpose of Laibach – to critique social and cultural trends – can only be fully realized when they perform live, since the reactions of the other audience members around you are as much a critical part of what they’re trying to do as the performance itself. One is never passive during a Laibach concert.’
- ‘My most abiding memory of the Union Chapel gig is the surrealism of being in a converted church listening to a band that had Nuremberg style banners on stage and watching the audience

²⁰⁸ ‘Trolling’ is internet slang for the practice of deliberately causing argument or hostility.

dressed as anarchists and neo-Nazis standing shoulder to shoulder.’²⁰⁹

- ‘The NATO-tour video. This was pretty close to the events in the Balkans. This added a feeling that Laibach was more than just a band playing music to entertain. Laibach brought NATO to Sarajevo, but they also brought the Balkans to west Europe.’
- ‘WOW! I loved the performance, the sense of occasion, the whole theatrical aspect of it. This wasn’t a gig – this was a work of art.’
- ‘I thought the “Life Is Life” video was HILARIOUS! I liked that they had a sense of humour about themselves.’

3. *If you had to, how would you categorise Laibach?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Industrial-martial	99	47%
Impossible to categorise	39	18%
Art/performance art	20	9%
Avant garde	8	
Unique/original	8	
Satirical/parody/humour	7	
Intelligent	9	
Gesamtkunstwerk	3	
Electronic Body Music ²¹⁰	3	
Slovenian	3	
Rock	2	
Anti-capitalist	2	
Eastern European	2	
Postmodern	2	
No answer	18	

NOTE:

The dominant category, ‘Industrial-martial’, was often given grudgingly, or with a caveat.

Selected quotes on how they might categorise Laibach:

- ‘My favourite thing about them is that they are uncategorizable.’
- “Artists” is the only term which does justice to the range of their achievements.’
- ‘I can’t. Honestly, I’ve tried answering this before with a friend, and I’m stumped.’

²⁰⁹ The Union Chapel performance was in London in 2004.

²¹⁰ Electronic Body Music, or ‘EBM’, is a musical genre which can loosely be described as a cross-over of Industrial music and dance.

- ‘I would think Laibach needs its own category.’
- ‘Laibach is the quintessential post-modern musical project, as it claims any pre-existing style, current, process or content as its own raw material.’
- ‘Definitely NOT post-modern. I can't stand irony. They are not ironic.’
- ‘Categorize in what sense or context? They draw outside the lines in several.’
- ‘The Only True Art, if we consider art as an object inherently critical towards the reality – all other culture forms were consumed already by the System and are legitimizing its totalitarian functioning.’
- ‘I am deeply opposed to categorisation, as I hope the other followers of Laibach are.’
- ‘It would mean to offend their complexity.’
- ‘They wouldn’t like that and I tend not to.’

4. *What is Laibach’s ‘political agenda’ (if they have one)?*

Category	Number	Percentage
They don’t have one	34	17%
To make you think	31	15%
Unsure/don’t know	26	13%
Opposition to the status quo	25	12%
Left-wing	16	8%
Provocation	15	7%
Anti-totalitarian	10	5%
Where left and right meet	7	
Freedom	6	
Irony/satire	6	
Totalitarianism of pop culture	5	
As political commentators	5	
Slovenian	4	
Artistic totalitarianism	3	
Art/politics and the post-human	2	
Situationist	2	
Politics as an art form	2	
No answer	24	

Selected quotes on Laibach possible 'political agenda':

- 'They have to be understood in that Mitteleuropean context, which is not the same as our (UK) liberal democratic tradition – and where art is historically much more entangled with politics.'
- 'I imagine they represent a form of futuristic government for large scale society that does not exist or been practiced yet but has fundamentals or social traits from what we display/share in smaller group dynamics like a clan or tribe.'
- 'I feel like they are patriotic, and their stereotypes based on prejudices but I don't mind it.'
- 'Critique through adopting the form of its victim, nothing more. And this is truly a European phenomenon (Eastern European especially but not exclusively of course). Such methods can also be seen in the subversive cinema of this region. So I understand that some Americans, and any other people that are not use to this mode of critique, may misunderstand as offensive or just not understand its relevance.'
- 'Anti-passive, forcing people to confront their accepted assumptions by using archetypes and inverting/subverting them.'
- 'I am ashamed to say that I have never figured this out exactly. I have been aware that their music is largely political, but haven't pieced together what their point is exactly. I assume that they have a liberal leftist point of view, but this assumption is derived more from statistics than anything else (the statistics being that most popular music bands and artists in general favour liberal and/or leftist politics).'
- 'To popularize the artistic achievements of Europe's fascist / totalitarian past.'
- 'A tool is just a tool, it is used to build the house but is not the house itself.'
- 'They are attempting to map out a new world order, one rid of archaic, ineffectual institutions and ideas that allow for oppression.'
- 'It is not for me to say, but they stimulate a discussion with one's own value system.'
- 'Can't be done without writing a thesis.'
- 'I thought their original agenda, to show the fascist undertones of their supposedly anti-fascist Communist state, was brilliant. After the fall of the Soviet empire, their message on the rise of destructive

(and still fascist) Balkan nationalism was equally on-target. Since the end of the Balkan war their critique of capitalism through dance music is, I feel, a bit more scattered and tentative, though that may be because I'm inside the capitalist system while I looked at the earlier critiques from the outside.'

- 'I don't think they have a specific ideology. If they do, they haven't been very successful at conveying it since no one can pinpoint with any certainty what it is. Such an effect is the exact opposite of the disambiguation that political propaganda is supposed to achieve. I see them more as critics who analyse political and cultural trends in their music. I do believe that their interest in Slovenian nationalism and their hostility toward American cultural and military imperialism are genuine. They also do seem to have a healthy distrust of liberal democracy and capitalism, but I certainly don't believe they are actually Fascists or Communists. If I had to label them I'd probably call them anarchists or Situationists (in the manner of Guy Debord).'
- 'I think they don't really have one and they are simply plundering the rich seams of political philosophy that has run through Europe for the past couple of hundred years. On many levels they fail miserably to deal with politics in the current age and they tend to steer away from the issues of today, such as mass emigration, populations shifts, the environment and food production. They tend to relate politics to a metaphysical approach masquerading as some kind of new third way philosophy. They are after all an art collective not a political organisation.'
- 'Once Laibachized, any historical, political, philosophical or religious discourse becomes ambiguous and suspicious.'
- 'Rock was totalitarian even before they made it clear; they do not so much preach any political view as present totalitarian art as an idea.'
- 'They stand up for the rights of the oppressed (Eastern European countries especially, but applicable to all the world).'
- 'They seem to represent a kind of esoteric politics, almost esotericism as politics, or using political symbols as if they were religious or magical symbols. It seems like an occult politics, or the politics of occultism.'
- 'I think music shouldn't be about political agendas, it should be about fun and entertainment. However, Laibach has always been a political band in their own special sense and their message is pretty clear.'
- 'The emperor is naked!'

- ‘They are the enemy, wherever they are, they are never really on our side, but at the same time they are telling us to “join them”.
- ‘My understanding of Laibach is derived from their basic concept of relation between art and politics (totalitarianism), which I see as binary opposition that in the context of Laibach forms a fundamental paradox that builds Laibach's poetics and visual expression. Through this expression and usage of ambiguous symbolism Laibach comments on wide cultural and socio-political phenomena and postmodern human condition.’

5. *Are Laibach currently relevant?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Yes	121	66%
Not as much as they were	26	14%
Not at all or little	18	9%
It is relative	11	
Not sure/don't know	7	
No answer	42	

NOTE:

Many respondents did not answer, stating they were unclear as to what the question referred to. As in: relevant to whom, or what?

Selected quotes on Laibach's possible relevance:

- ‘I think the world would be a worst place without them as there would be a void.’
- ‘If an artist is political, we define them as “political” and don't let them escape the label. Laibach transcend that kind of classification.’
- ‘In the US, I find them relevant. We have a political and cultural system that is very “binary” (i.e., it is assumed that you are either “this” or “that” - only one of two choices, such as our political system, where it is assumed you are either a Republican or a Democrat, with no third or fourth or fifth viable option). Artists like Laibach mix images and ideas that result in a certain level of confusion; I consider that healthy, as it causes one to really make an assessment of what they think, believe.’
- ‘I'm not sure they are. What happens when actual politics are all aesthetic and no substance, and there are no mass politics anymore? Can you satire something that no longer exists?’
- ‘Yes... we live in a society that is increasingly becoming tired of the mediocrity of its democracy – its politicians and their “middle of the road” politics. There are increasing numbers who yearn for a more decisive spirit.’

- ‘Rammstein has taken the cartoon element and rendered Laibach looking for a vision.’
- ‘Extremely relevant for the Balkans, and the Balkans are extremely relevant to Europe, and Europe is extremely relevant to the World, and the World is extremely relevant to the human race, and the human race is extremely relevant to the World, and the World is extremely relevant to Europe, and Europe is extremely relevant to the Balkans, and The Balkans are extremely relevant to Laibach, so...’
- ‘I think here in America they are so relevant that everyone is scared to listen to them.’
- ‘Currently, the most “political” acts are all “anti” bands, anti-capitalism, anti-government, anti-racism, blah-blah-blah. No alternative other than bland clichés, no manifesto for change. You could never describe Laibach as bland or clichéd.’
- ‘I think that they were more relevant and effective in the past when there was more mystery about them.’
- ‘They will always be relevant. Sadly.’
- ‘I don't think they have the notoriety in the States to effect much ideological change in the western world outside of a subculture who mostly present themselves as so overtly rebellious of social norms, even the inner fringes of the mainstream ignore them (and by proxy their views, expressions and influences).’
- ‘Laibach has, I think, become less relevant as they have lost some of the sense of the unknown that made them.’
- ‘At this time of a big influx of people into Europe from the East it seems even more relevant.’
- ‘It is important Europe to stand united and work together. Not least now with financial difficulties and the threat of terror.’
- ‘Enormously so. That is their raison d’etre, and ultimately, their albatross.’
- ‘From an American standpoint they seem to represent two political ideologies that are completely foreign and forbidden (Fascism and Communism). They represent a kind of European extremism that is foreign to Americans, but that still influences American thought and politics, in more subconscious or underground ways. They are relevant because I think encountering them increases anyone’s

political intelligence and ability to understand political symbols on a more emotional (and spiritual) level.’

- ‘The tension in the Balkans is not over!!!’
- ‘Not really – sorry about this – even my friends in Slovenia know them but don’t hear their music.’
- ‘They are “grand masters” of irony but things have probably moved on – there is a danger of ironizing their own irony. The images on which their vision is based already seem to be irrelevant to the younger generation who now simply add them to their armoury of tastes and vehicles. In a sense, the Laibach revolution is over because it succeeded.’
- ‘The Laibach machine stopped running after *WAT* and now they only play music for amusement.’²¹¹

6. *How would you describe Laibach to someone who’s never heard of them?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Industrial-martial	47	23%
Listen to them first	23	11%
I would compare them to Rammstein	18	9%
As Slovenian/Yugoslav	16	
Difficult to do so	16	
Art/artists/performance art	14	
Unique/original	12	
Only if the person had the capacity to understand	9	
As an intelligent band	8	
Provocative/avant-garde	7	
Learn about them first before listening to them	5	
Wagnerian	4	
A Totalitarian aesthetic	3	
Be open-minded whilst listening	3	
A funny industrial Slovenian band	3	
By referring to Slovenian history	3	
As Subversive	3	
Powerful	2	
Nazi pop	2	
No answer	27	

Selected quotes on how they would describe Laibach to someone who has never heard of them:

- ‘Like George Orwell said of the future in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “a boot stamping on a human face forever”.’

²¹¹ WAT refers to the album *WAT* (2003).

- 'I wouldn't really talk about Laibach to someone who'd never heard of them – as any attempt at a definition would miss out too much to be satisfactory to me. I'd probably just say “they're from Slovenia”.'
- 'The funniest industrial band in all of Slovenia.'
- 'One of the most interesting “products” of the soviet totalitarian era that had and still has an important impact on a wide range of socio-cultural movements and postmodern ideologies.'
- 'If this “someone” isn't really a history enthusiast it would be difficult to describe Laibach work.'
- 'The sound of the Cold War!'
- 'An acquired taste and possibly more interesting conceptually than musically.'
- 'They're the only band that's been even remotely linked to the end of a totalitarian regime, which usually piques interest.'
- 'I would say “Just go listen to Žižek explain them”.'
- 'Try to imagine the sound of a band consisted of: Josip Broz Tito, Charlie Chaplin, Adolf Hitler and Edvard Kardelj.'²¹²
- 'I have to do this a lot. I never know how to even begin. I once read something which called Laibach “one of few bands capable of claiming real influence on the history of their homeland”, and I think there's a grain of truth in that. It's a good way to emphasise how much more than a band they are.'
- 'Pop music as totalitarian performance art.'

7. *What is your favourite Laibach album?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Opus Dei	40	21%
Volk	37	20%
WAT	31	16%
Let it Be	13	7%
Jesus Christ Superstars	11	
Kapital	10	
Nova Akropola	8	
NATO	8	
Krst pod Triglavom	8	
Macbeth	7	
Anthems	5	

²¹² Edvard Kardelj (1910-1979) was Tito's ideologist and creator of the Yugoslavian system of Self-management Socialism.

Sympathy for the Devil	4
Laibach (1985)	3
Laibachkunstderfuge	3
Rekapitulacija 1980-1984	3
Neu Konservativ	1
Ljubljana-Zagreb-Beograd	1
MB December 21 1984	1
Volk (live album)	1
No answer	19

Selected quotes on why that particular album is their favourite:

- ‘WAT, for being the most all-encompassing album for what defines Laibach, both in terms of sound and message.’
- *Laibach* (1985): ‘I prefer this dirty, corrupt, authoritarian, industrial noise sound. Like the protagonist says in Michael Radford's film adaptation of George Orwell's novel “1984”, in the most magnificent scene from the movie: “Look, I hate purity. I hate goodness. I don't want virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone corrupt”. This scene is very important to understand, that's why I use it during my noise performance.’
- ‘I cannot answer this question. They are brush strokes of the same painting.’
- On *Macbeth*: ‘A kind of vague theatrical incidental score that leaves the listener responsible for putting images to the music.’
- On *Opus Dei*: The power, impact and shocking absurdity is still hard to beat ... I suppose it still defines Laibach and would be the one you would play to a first-time listener for the shock value alone.’
- ‘Volk is a poignant commentary on the artificiality of nationhood and the trap of patriotism. It's an excellent concept album; they really nailed that sad sense of irrelevance and desperation that creeps up on every fallen and falling empire, lurking just under the surface of their apparent power and success.’
- On *WAT*: ‘As an American, I get more of the references.’
- On *Volk*: ‘It stopped them from becoming yet another Industrial/EBM act. I know a few people that were disappointed by it as they essentially wanted another *WAT*, but to me it caught the essence of Laibach, i.e. to produce the unexpected and to challenge the listener's perceptions of them.’

8. *What is your least favourite Laibach album?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Jesus Christ Superstars	25	18%
Volk	14	10%
Laibachkunstderfuge	13	9%
Let it Be	12	
Kapital	11	
Macbeth	7	
WAT	7	
NATO	6	
Ljubljana – Zagreb – Beograd	4	
Laibach (1985)	4	
Opus Dei	3	
Nova Akropola	2	
Krst Pod Triglavom	1	
Rekapitulacija 1980-1984	1	
Sympathy for the Devil	1	
The Occupied Europe Tour 1985	1	
No answer	113	

Selected quotes on why that particular album is their least favourite:

- On *Kapital*: ‘It just doesn't seem very distinct in any way. When it comes up on shuffle, I often don't even realize that it's Laibach.’
- On *Volk*: ‘I found some of the (anti)nationalist lecturing somewhat trite: Laibach are always best when they refuse to explain what they're about.’
- On *Jesus Christ Superstars*: ‘Religion, especially Christianity has been an easy target for the last 50 years. This album is just another nail in the coffin, nothing more than that.’
- On: *Laibachkunstderfuge*: ‘I am not particularly a fan of classical music, so I was not particularly interested in hearing Laibach's spin on Bach. Also, the absence of lyrics means the absence of furious ideas.’

9. *If you have one, what is your favourite Laibach track?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Tanz Mit Laibach	30	15%
Opus Dei	15	7%
Geburt Einer Nation	12	6%
Država	10	5%
Sympathy for the Devil	10	5%
B Maschina	8	
Alle Gegen Alle	7	
Leben Heißt Leben	7	
Slovenia	6	

Das Spiel ist Aus	6
America	5
2525	5
God is God	4
Jesus Christ Superstars	4
Across the Universe	4
Rossiya	4
Entartete Welt (The Discovery of the North Pole)	3
War	3
Du Bist Unser	3
Abuse and Confession	3
Wirtschaft ist tot	3
The Great Seal	3
Anglia	2
Ti, Ki Izzivaš	2
Y'srael	2
Die Liebe	2
In the Army Now	2
Final countdown	2
Achtung	2
Francia	1
Smrt za Smrt (remix)	1
I've got a feeling	1
Panorama	1
Macbeth	1
Everlasting in Union	1
Get Back	1
For you Blue	1
Slovenska Zena	1
National Reservation	1
Jezero/Der See	1
Maggie Mae	1
Mama Leone	1
Krst	1
Germania	1
Now You Will Pay	1
Two of Us	1
Message from the Black Star	1
WAT (We Are Time)	1
Brat Moj	1
Decree	1
Zhonghua	1
Sila	1
Krvava Gruda, Plodna Zemlja	1
Life is Life (Peel sessions)	1
Steel Trust	1
F.I.A.T.	1
No answer	28

Selected quotes on why that particular track is their favourite:

- On 'America': "The end of History, The end of Time, The end of Family, The end of Crime". It is what I feel is happening to the USA right now under the Obama administration...we are losing our identity.'
- 'For me "Life is Life" has definitely become a song by Laibach, not by Opus, and they gave it such a different meaning, that's a pure hymn, to put it simple.'
- On 'Abuse and Confession': 'The choir, the music, the passion, as an individual song mind you it's so big sounding I can't believe it fits through my ears.'
- 'I always start to laugh hysterically on the last track on *Let it Be*, "Maggie Mae"... the idea is brilliant!'
- On 'The Great Seal': 'It is everything that Laibach are. It is not a song – it's a national anthem. It is full of hope, pride, honour and optimism.'
- On 'America': 'I have it listen by an US Navy Admiral (was in charge on the fifth fleet) and his son (ex-Navy Seal). They were moved by it because that song brings smart criticism with strong respect. It's a song every US Army Soldiers should listen to as an anthem for humility.'

10. Are there any issues concerning Laibach that you are uncomfortable with?

Category	Number	Percentage
Those who assume Laibach are Nazi/fascist	19	38%
The totalitarian imagery	12	24%
Neo-Nazi following	12	24%
Use of totalitarian imagery: is it literal, or parody	5	10%
'How easily I am seduced by the political rally spectacle'	2	4%
No answer	175	

Selected quotes on any issues they may be uncomfortable with:

- 'The Nazi era is remembered as a time of hate and evil so yes being drawn to an aesthetic associated with it inevitably results in some self-questioning.'
- 'IF they are fascists (and I don't know that they are – I suspect they're more likely to be anarchist or communist), then I'm extremely uncomfortable with that.'

- ‘That's the beauty of what they do, they provoke, they make you cringe at times and their continued use of deformed Nazi imagery is annoying but it remains challenging.’
- ‘I have a Jewish friend who was very offended by the album artwork for *Opus Dei*. We had a long talk about how artists “flirt” with Nazi imagery, why and how artists (like Heartfield) use such images in a satirical way. Ultimately, this was a positive experience, but it did concern me that a close friend who was Jewish felt threatened at first.’
- ‘Once a friend told me: “Gosh, you really have something against Jews”, only for playing (and dancing to) Laibach one afternoon.’
- ‘Why should there be? I’m not an idiot.’
- ‘I never liked the Nazi jokes.’
- ‘I like their music – I am not really interested in their opinions.’
- ‘They sided with NATO in the Balkan war, a mistake and dangerous decision.’
- ‘As an Italian, I often wonder what their actual sights about my country are. Slovenia and Italy had a very hard relationship in WWII, as their country was occupied by the fascist army.’
- ‘HA! HA! That’s a trick question.’
- ‘As an Italian, I just cannot sing “Eia Eia Alalà” without feeling weird ... My feeling uncomfortable is part of the Laibach experience package, true, but this is still quite a hot issue for Italians.’²¹³
- ‘I am only uncomfortable when they criticize my Christian faith.’

11. What do you dislike about Laibach, if anything?

Category	Number	Percentage
Perceived loss of ‘edge’	16	50%
Nazi/fascist imagery	5	10%
Neo-Nazi following	4	8%
Not enough vocal variation	3	
Fluctuating musical quality	2	
Wilfully musically obscure	2	
No answer	193	

²¹³ The cry ‘Eia Eia Alalà!’ is historically associated with Italian fascists and occurs in Laibach’s ‘Nova Akropola’ (1986).

NOTE:

Although 193 respondents are cited above as having no answer, many of these were emphatic in stating there was nothing to dislike about Laibach.

Selected quotes of what they dislike about Laibach:

- ‘I’m not really sure how much of the merging of syntho-pop/electronica /industrial music and totalitarian aesthetics is really a joke or satire ... I take it as a very funny joke. But I don't think Laibach and NSK do. They’ve been at this 30 years now. That's a long time string a joke along.’
- ‘Sometimes they can be boring and quite obnoxious in interviews.’
- ‘Clunky nature of the lyrics, uninspiring, dated nature of much of the music.’
- ‘Some members of their audience – sometimes a little po-faced (they will watch a man play a saw and not realise the piss is being taken out of them).’
- ‘I don’t like that they ended their “totalitarian” way of answering journalists questions and ended element of mystery. Personally (for my taste) I prefer their more monumental scenic presence (without smiling, shaking hands with audience).’
- ‘They seemed to have become commercial just to sell records.’
- ‘The idea that maybe it’s all a bit of a joke.’
- ‘I wish they went back to their raw industrial origins rather than indulging in national anthems.’²¹⁴

²¹⁴ The respondent is referring to *Volk* (2006), which is a treatment of fourteen national anthems.

12. What is it about Laibach you like, what is their appeal to you?

Category	Number	Percentage
Unique/originality	37	13%
Complexity/depth	34	12%
Commitment/courage	29	10%
Visuals/design/imagery	22	
Constant re-invention	19	
Humour	16	
Controversy/provocative	21	
Eastern European specificity	14	
Irony	13	
The vocals	8	
Power/force	8	
Intelligence	8	
Ambiguity	7	
Exploration of political ideas	7	
Blending ideology with music	6	
The focus on history	5	
Lyrics	5	
The collectivity ethos	4	
Ideological independence	4	
Interpretations of other songs	3	
They sing in German	3	
Iconoclasm	3	
Longevity	2	
'They're nice people'	2	
No answer	Na.	

Selected quotes on Laibach's appeal:

- 'Laibach is perfect in many ways. The music is just one of them. The live performances, their artwork, intelligence, smart humour, use of symbols, totalitarian sound and uniforms...'
- 'I was deeply interested in communist era Yugoslavia.'
- 'I really look at them as some kind of role model.'
- 'Musically, they have always moved with the times, transformed their musical mode of expression and done what they do to a high artistic degree. However they are not alone in this. What Laibach do that sets them aside is master a dominating phantasmagoria of militarism and fear which curiously often opens moments of space and beauty.'
- 'The confusion it spurs among politically correct fanatics.'
- 'They have a humour not seen in a lot of industrial bands.'

- ‘I like the “size” of their music – it’s huge! Like fog, surrounding me, chasing away all other sounds.’
- ‘They are proud of their nationality and it’s nothing to be shamed. In some way it’s healthy and important if its normal proud of your country. Nobody is racist if he is just proud of his country and like place where he live. Radical attitude lead to problems.’
- ‘I study History ... one of the most fascinating for me is (still) the period of WW2 and years after (Cold War).’
- ‘The music is good for moments of anger.’
- ‘The awesome honesty of their ideas’
- ‘Each album is unique from each other and provides a different listening experience.’
- ‘They are critical and unapologetic for the histories I think we all share with varying degrees of intensity...’
- ‘It often makes me consider my own emotional response to the world.’
- ‘As a Politics graduate (1981) with an interest in ideology and a love of heavy music their appeal was somewhat instantaneous. I loved the imagery and intellectual background and the fact that they challenged leftist orthodoxy in the western post-punk “alternative” music culture.’
- ‘I mean, sometimes how can you not laugh?’
- ‘I like that they seem to come from a dark place but are not evil.’
- ‘A sort of performance art that I think is necessary – especially in the US, where limited, pre-defined options dictate what choices we make.’
- ‘Sadly I’ve never been able to spread my love of Laibach – other people I know just don’t seem to get it.’
- ‘It put other Slavic nations on the map for me and made me study their history. I was able to understand better what’s going on in Europe and how the socialism was lived and contested. Also their lyrics, the use of symbols and visuals and the fact you can get some awareness and insight on many different topics, such as the social anchoring of political programmes, politicization, national mentalities, national and global agitation and identities, systems of values, transformations of the social structure, political demands, self-determination...’

- ‘They don't believe in originality.’
- ‘There will never be anyone or anything like them – even 25 years later, their early music inspires me and fills me with hope and energy.’
- ‘I love the fact that the more I hear, the more I know, the more I want to keep learning about them. Not many bands are so complex and have the power to raise this feeling in their fans.’
- ‘Laibach are in many ways the swan song to Modernism. They're honest, they make great music, they don't pull punches, their work is catchy and yet complex and intelligent. They have depth, and in music and popular culture that's a rare thing indeed.’
- ‘Laibach has created more perfect totalitarian art than the totalitarians themselves were able to create. Also, I like the fact that beneath the militant exterior lies a rich current of critical thought and respect for the audience's intelligence – a rare thing in music these days. As an aesthetic and intellectual experience, I find Laibach more interesting and satisfying than any other band I can think of, probably because they've always been much more than just a band ... certainly no other band I can think of can match them for sophistication and depth.’
- ‘I loved the fact that when in a bar in Ljubljana and one of their tracks came on the entire place erupted in song.’
- ‘It seems all kinds of people like Laibach, and it seems everyone has a different opinion on them, at the Oslo concert there were celebrities, neo-Nazis, hippies, old ex-synth people, rockers...’
- ‘They create and re-create, design and re-design to produce art. Real art, the kind that hits you like a hammer. Even if you don't like a particular song, it makes you have a feeling. It's not a mirror. It's going to come up and punch you in the face.’
- ‘My fear of being manipulated may have driven my lust for Laibach and other images of police states.’
- ‘Laibach allowed me to confront my own fantasies of violent revolution and uncompromising totalitarian utopia, to experience the euphoria associated with the identification to absolute ideals, and at the same time to become aware of the impossibility of such fulfilment, of the absurd discrepancy between the utopian vision and the violence required to achieve it. Also, most Laibach tracks seem to reference something else: there is an undeniable pleasure in decoding the mystery and identifying the sources. Sometimes the

key to deciphering a Laibach song only came years after I first heard the track.'

- 'I'd rather not analyse it. Takes all the fun out.'
- 'They're the PP Rubens, the Poussin, the J-L David, the Goya of our day in terms of loading a ton of well-thought, highly important, synthesized information with philosophical opinion. I don't think their art will be fully understood until after this current historical paradigm. They are the avant-garde.'²¹⁵
- 'Some of their uniforms/costumes are quite sexy.'
- 'Laibach removed the death skin, represented by the symbolic, of 20th century Europe. They offered a new possibility of analysing the politics, as a material factor and not as an iconographic factor. And this is highly important in our years of propaganda, mass control and instrumented moral.'
- 'I appreciate their cunning, and the fact that essentially they are performance art, played out in the music world.'
- 'There have been times when all I wanted to listen to was Laibach; even their more difficult recordings like *Neu Konservativ* were so enjoyable. I love the challenge of their music.'
- 'Laibach is a gateway to a part of Europe I am not familiar with, Slovenia and the Balkans.'
- 'I have noted with some guilt or shame that the fascist aesthetic is appealing to me personally, even though my personal politics tend toward Anarchist/Socialist.'
- 'The more I discover about them, the more fascinating they are to me. Even when I think I've seen everything I could see, they manage to surprise me with some new action.'
- 'I listen to another 100 bands and my musical tastes are so wide. But Laibach remains Laibach no matter what comes and goes. It's something very special and dear to me. It has always been and will always be. They're just brilliant in what they do and their image, music and everything behind that, are something making them one of a kind! Plus, their influence on so many other acts is more than obvious.'
- 'As I am an academic working in the area of Yugoslavian art, I am also very interested in their use of Slovene/Yugoslav symbols and

²¹⁵ 'PP Rubens': Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Flemish baroque painter. 'Poussin': Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), French baroque painter. 'J-L David': Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) French neo-classicist painter. 'Goya': Francisco Goya (1746-1828) Spanish Romantic painter.

their extensive mining of twentieth century history in these countries, for use in a post-Yugoslav present. The way in which Laibach, as part of a broader NSK movement, was able to move almost seamlessly from a decaying Tito-ist context, to a capitalist/pro-EU cultural context, almost seamlessly, is near-unique amongst artists anywhere in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 90s.'

- 'I like anyone who seeks to destroy the identity of modern men, the images, the icons, the ego based on identification with a group... but I would take it a step further than Laibach (probably) and criticize humanity for being weak slaves of technology, sex, and self-obsession... not just in terms of strictly political criticism, but with a deeper disgust for how humans operate... probably not so Laibachian... more like death/doom metal and some ambient stuff.'
- 'I like the fact they are "in character" as it makes me wonder "What as?".'
- 'The balance between statement and understatement is well achieved.'
- Their 'ability to understand world complexity and simplicity in the same time.'
- 'I love the idea of a band (or artistic collective) that challenges my ideas and my stability, while feeding my ears with beautifully crafted music and vocals.'
- 'Laibach speak from a far more European perspective and if anything they appear far less absorbed in themselves than what surrounds them. I also consider them to be uncompromising and in my opinion this gives them a certain amount of artistic integrity, they don't appear to care as to what the reaction will be to their art they simply create for the sake of its creation and the ultimate goal of confrontation of sorts.'

13. *Finally, please add any further information about your experience of Laibach, anything at all, or indeed, any observations about this study, or anything you feel I may have missed that needs to be asked, or you would like to say.*

- 'You have to understand Laibach in terms of protest art under a repressive right-wing state. This cannot be done via open confrontation; but can be achieved via mocking, parody, mock-serious overstatement and deconstruction. It is unfortunate that we didn't see anything like this in South Africa in the late 1980s, but I

understood it clearly.²¹⁶ Some disagreed at the time, but I am firmly convinced of this.'

- 'I'd love to watch a Laibach gig in a military zone, in a missile base, in a museum, clubs are not the best locations for them.'
- 'There was no reference to religion in this questionnaire, which plays a great role in Laibach's art.'
- '1986 in Glasgow I heard copied cassettes of *Nova Akropola* and "The Occupied Europe" albums. At first I thought they were smuggled documents!'
- On a Laibach performance: 'I'm not used to the crowd type that was there but I found them to be very nice and pleasant compared to a lot of metal crowds.'
- 'I was astonished how young Slovenian students were proud of their greatest band not concerning of how they are out of mainstream and weird. It was like a Finnish would say to me that they worship Lordi.'²¹⁷
- 'When hearing them I enter a world that I don't know, and probably never will understand fully, because I haven't lived in that period. Also, if someone doesn't like them from the first song they hear, I don't think that they ever will.'
- 'Laibach does not function like a regular band; its direction is not influenced by the ego of its members. Or as they put it "Happiness lies in total negation of one's identity". They are guided by a greater abstract entity.'
- 'If you have Laibach, there's no need for other bullshit "martial" bands like Von Thronstahl or Triarii.'
- 'It is an extraordinary survey. I really surprised that it is even existed. As I am a citizen of Central Europe probably Laibach is "less" interesting for me than people from the "West". I am living in a country where communism was placed for 40 years and before that Nazism was accepted as well. Laibach shows this kind of historical duality about this area that people lost the leadership in the great free democracy. They do not know how to use it.'
- 'Not many bands have had an agenda; not many bands are "about" something in the way an art work may be about something. Laibach are a band with a unique idea.'

²¹⁶ The respondent is South African.

²¹⁷ Lordi were a Finnish Heavy Metal group who wear outlandish costumes with a horror theme, winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 2006.

- ‘After almost 20 years they produce an album that is right up there with their greatest work, and might indeed be their best album ever (WAT). I can only think of a few other bands that have managed it.’
- ‘It would be interesting to see how fans relate to other fans. Laibach's music offers various interpretations, so their fans should have rather different opinion of the music (and the band). For example, I have had to tolerate the Islamophobia expressed by a significant large proportional of the members of the mailing list, as with my own interpretation of the music I see rather the opposite in Laibach's music – a tolerance for other cultures and religions.’
- ‘Maybe you should reserve a part of your study about what people perceive is going to be the future of Laibach. The original group members are now in their 50s, and actually just two of them are still doing music and performing live, with the assistance of new and younger people from other Slovenian bands. Is Laibach going to survive? The day Laibach will become an acquired taste or a predictable stereotype, it will be time to call it a day.’
- ‘In the shows I've seen in Croatia and Slovenia, they had minimum interaction with people watching them, and seeing them in the club outside the stage was mission impossible. I think that maybe it's better like that, because that way they create some kind of mystic image of themselves, by not letting their fans into their private sphere.’
- ‘I often see pro-fascist fans supporting and anti-fa protesting against them. There are still plenty of people who aren't in on the joke.’²¹⁸
- ‘I had the pleasure of meeting and spending time with the band and some associates through my connection at Amok several years ago, including a party in their honour at the home of Mark Mothersbaugh from Devo, where Timothy Leary and Trent Reznor were also in attendance.’²¹⁹ Despite the odd group of people it was generally like any other party in the Hollywood hills. Sorry I don't remember more details, but it was 20 years ago.’
- ‘The first live show I saw was the *Kapital* tour, in the Moore Theatre in Seattle, USA in 1992. My strongest memory of the show was how cold it was in the theatre - you could see the band's breath clearly in the lights. Somehow it seemed quite fitting.’
- ‘First time I saw them, in 1988, they had huge fire-pots on each side of the stage and the two army style men drumming. The singer came on stage in a gestapo-esque outfit. No one I worked with in the bar had ever seen anything like this. Our mouths gaped, and we smiled. Powerful and strange, yet familiar. Been a fan ever since.’

²¹⁸ ‘Anti-fa’ is the term for an anti-fascist group or movement.

²¹⁹ The NSK monograph was published by Amok books in 1991.

- 'I get a bit sick of idiots who say that they are "fascist" and are somehow to blame for the violent break-up of Yugoslavia.'
- 'I've not since come across a band with the ability to shock and offend through their choice and interpretation of cover songs.'
- 'Laibach were a starting point of a love affair with Slovenia, truly an awesome nation, so small yet so diverse.'
- 'I remember we were then on our way to an air cadet band practice, so my friend rewound back to "Opus Dei" and as we pulled into the car park with the stereo blaring the song, I start driving slow circles around the rest of our band mates as my friend stuck himself out the window doing the fascist salute. The looks we got back were priceless!'
- 'For the longest while the impression we got here in North America was they were closet fascists. However when I saw some interview footage of Slavoj Žižek in Film From Slovenia explaining the subversive aspect of Laibach in the Slovenian independence movement, then it all suddenly made brilliant sense.'
- 'Previous to Laibach and Neubauten I had a great deal of difficulty finding music/art that I could relate to. Laibach combined my interest in history, politics and Eastern Europe in a unique, somewhat controversial and yet talented package (plus nobody I talked to had ever heard of them, giving me some avant-garde credentials amongst the young people I knew at that time, as much then as now).'
- 'When I worked with the band, Slovenia was "free", but their phones were still bugged and the authorities were keeping an eye on them. I think that they are generally misunderstood as people do not read up about the band and the ethos behind them properly, and generic first reactions to them used to be "that Nazi band". The images and graphics they base their work on stem back to great experimental artists. They had a great attitude to experimentation creatively, were really educated in art and music, so were a pleasure to work with. We found new and interesting directors and took chances with them, something other artists do not like doing generally.'
- 'It was easy to see how this musical collective could have emerged from this small, politically-aware country in the lead up to immense political change and conversely, understand how they could never have emerged from Britain.'

- ‘When the war in Bosnia kicked off I recall thinking that this was what Laibach had been making records about all along, warning us that this horrific descent into brutality was on the cards.’
- ‘What if I liked the sound and later found out that the ideology was something I could never publicly adhere to?’
- ‘I wish I had heard them before I became a Rammstein fan – I feel that in some way this band have overshadowed them to a degree.’
- ‘I’m extremely interested in your research. Laibach, quite simply, shares joint highest regard in my affections alongside Julian Cope: smart, funny and capable of creating their own vision. Most of my work is on William Blake, so I’ll end with a quote from him that I think applies to them – “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s”.’
- ‘Laibach are a very misunderstood and under-appreciated group, which is rather ironic considering that what they’re saying is so relevant.’
- ‘I heard someone in the band was assassinated for their political beliefs.’
- ‘“Progress” is not as happy a story as we would like to believe. Slovenes have historically experienced a greater chunk of the political spectrum within the span of a single lifetime than just about any other nation. Laibach reminds us that the differences are not as stark as we like to think.’
- ‘American Laibach fandom was badly represented in the documentary *The Divided States of America*. The leather and chains crowd that makes up the audience at live shows belies a large group of people who are fundamentally interested because they like intellectually challenging stuff. On the other hand, if Laibach’s audience is largely self-identified intellectuals, what does that say about their project? Nothing good.’
- ‘Was it REALLY necessary to ponce around in obviously-designed-to-look-like SS uniforms for the WAT photo-shoot?’²²⁰
- ‘I love the whole Lacanian aura which surrounds Laibach/NSK (your study title is a good example). It’s all nonsense of course, but better than a load of fucking love songs!’²²¹

²²⁰ The WAT (2003) publicity photographs featured Laibach in both Nazi and American uniforms, wearing the Laibach armband.

²²¹ At the time the questionnaire was sent, the working title for the thesis was, ‘Laibach and the NSK: Ludic Paradigm of the Post-totalitarian Age’.

- ‘I owe Laibach a debt of gratitude. My musical education was mainly limited to British and American rock/pop with only Jean Michel Jarre, Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream pointing to European music. Laibach opened my ears to the alternative industrial and noise music scene and started me on the path that means that most of my listening is now European. I have since discovered Krautrock and European music in all its glory from Stockhausen to Cluster to Amon Duul II.’
- ‘I’ll never forget the time they got beat up on the tube for wearing lederhosen, back in 1985! They were fearless about extending their theatre to real life and would strut around in what they called “alpine hunting gear” (which to most of us resembled gestapo uniforms) in places like Brixton and the East End...’
- ‘I find it interesting that when they first started, they used Italian just as much as German, because Slovenians also “hate” Italians as Fascist invaders, and most of their songs were in Slovenian, so people could still “understand” these strange outsiders. So, even when they in Slovenia, they were “foreign”, an outside element interfering with the harmony of the hegemonic culture. When they go west, they largely drop Italian and stick to German, which everybody everywhere associates with Nazism, and they start to sing in English so people can “understand”. But only so people can understand, it’s not a compliment. When they were in Austria, their philosopher gives a semi-Nazi speech calling, which calls for an Anschluss with Slovenia instead of Germany, when they are in America he is an anti-American barbarian from the East, in England he gives a speech mimicking our home grown Islamic extremists.²²² It’s about throwing our fears and prejudices in our face. However, all the time they mix it up with inclusive elements; they are a band imitating foreigners that invaded Slovenia talking as if they are Slovenian nationalists.’
- ‘I fear that once something becomes an academic study it loses relevance to the real world. Can it be argued that by studying Laibach, you’re making them less relevant to reality? To quote Collins English Dictionary: “Academic. adj. excessively concerned with intellectual matters and lacking experience of practical affairs”.’
- ‘They are able to give you a massive rush... pumping blood... they are animalistic and somehow tap into very primal feelings.’
- ‘Opus Dei” on *The Chart Show* was refreshingly drab to the glitz of 1980s pop culture.’²²³

²²² The philosopher mentioned is Peter Mlakar of the NSK’s Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy. Mlakar has accompanied Laibach on tour and opened performances with speeches to the audience.

²²³ *The Chart Show* was a British television programme on popular music in the 1980s.

- ‘I only have the last concert fresh in my memory (the 2011 tour), and the projections during that concert were worth zero – mostly due to the fact that I think Laibach (on an intellectual and emotional level) has lost most of its meaning. The projections during the last concert could have been replaced by blinking lights.’
- ‘Laibach are essentially a caricature/business these days.’

Results of Part Two Questionnaire

(Total number of respondents: 140)

The number column indicates the number of respondents. The percentages were worked out according to the number of responses to the question, thus excluding those who did not answer, not total respondents overall.

1. Appeal

1. *Do you find any humour in Laibach? Please specify.*

Category	Number	Percentage
Generally humorous	56	35%
Parody/satire/irony	39	24%
No humour	19	12%
‘Subtle’ humour	10	
‘Black’ humour	9	
‘Dry’ humour	5	
‘Camp’ humour	4	
Unintentionally humorous	3	
Unsure/don’t know	3	
‘Surreal’	1	
No answer	Na.	

NOTE:

Those who found humour in Laibach were often emphatic about this. The three most cited sources of this humour were the recordings ‘Opus Dei’ and ‘Geburt Einer Nation’, and the album *Let it Be*.

2. *What is the appeal of Laibach’s use of the Slovenian and/or the German language?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Suitable for ‘Industrial’ music	67	41%
Increased esoteric appeal	22	13%
Laibach’s European identity	18	11%
No particular additional appeal	15	
It does not pander to the West	13	
The vocals become more important than the lyrics	11	
‘I can speak Slovenian/German’	10	
‘Demonic/Teutonic/Nazi’ appeal	4	
Humorous	1	
No answer	Na.	

3. *Laibach often differ in 'style' from album to album, what is the appeal of this to you?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Diversity/surprise	55	36%
Variable quality between albums	24	15%
Demonstrates experimentation	24	15%
Laibach is more than a popular music group	19	
Demonstrates development	15	
No discernible additional appeal	8	
Independent of 'fan' expectations	5	
'I don't like the way they vary stylistically'	1	
No answer	Na.	

Selected quotes on the perceived diversity of styles:

- 'Laibach treat different styles as if they were countries they are invading.'
- 'Whenever you approach a Laibach album that you have not heard, you approach without expectations.'
- 'Laibach's constant stylistic shifts are both a challenge and a riddle. Will I be able to "get" their next move?'
- 'The differing styles mean that each album is a complete conversation between the band and the listener.'
- 'I like the fact that I have had to work on some Laibach pieces to appreciate them.'
- 'I don't have problems with style as long as the message remains the same.'
- 'Laibach as conceptual art as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon idea of popular music interpreting feelings.'
- 'Laibach are too complex an artistic phenomenon to be bound by styles or genres.'

4. *If your email address references Laibach, why is this?*

*Selected quotes:*²²⁴

- 'I have a Laibach email address. I have no idea why I chose it, I guess I like to be associated with them. It's a pseudonym I like to have that no one but those who are in the know will understand.'

²²⁴ The respondents were guaranteed anonymity, which is why the email addresses referred to are not included here.

- ‘My email address is mainly a reference to Joseph Beuys, but in the way that there was a contact between Beuys and Laibach, also between Beuys and IRWIN, so also a reference to the NSK.²²⁵ The meaning of East and West, too.’
- ‘No, it doesn't in email name, but I have Malevich cross hidden inside mail signature, as part of religious symbolism I could say.’
- ‘I like to show people that I enjoy Laibach.’

5. (a) *Many respondents were drawn to the controversy surrounding the group, if so, what is this appeal to you?*

Category	Number	Percentage
No noticeable additional appeal	55	38%
Drawn to controversy in general	20	13%
Controversy as a useful tactic	17	11%
The controversy is there only if you wish to see it	15	10%
Controversy as an act of courage	7	
Unaware of any controversy	4	
As opposition to capitalism	3	
An alternative to ‘soft’ counter-culture	2	
The controversy surrounding Laibach is annoying	2	
No answer	Na.	

(b) *Many respondents were drawn to the ‘fascist’ or ‘totalitarian’ elements in Laibach. If so, what is this appeal to you?*

Category	Number	Percentage
It's merely a device	33	28%
Frisson between repulsion and attraction	24	20%
No appeal/it's an irrelevance	20	17%
A device to mock/belittle fascism or totalitarianism	18	15%
The forbidden/taboo/controversy	8	
‘I dislike it’	5	
As a pressure valve exorcising the appeal of fascism	5	
As ‘black’ humour	3	
‘Laibach are Socialists’	1	
No answer	23	

Selected quotes on the respondent's relation to the fascist or totalitarian in Laibach:

- ‘Nobody fantasizes about being tied up by a liberal.’
- ‘As a Norwegian-American Heathen (Asatru), fascists were the greatest enemy to my traditions and gods since Carl the Butcher (“Charlemagne”) and totalitarianism is objectionable to any thinking

²²⁵ IRWIN planned to work with Joseph Beuys in 1985, performing a joint action whereby Beuys would sow Slovenian fields. Beuys died before this could take place.

individual. Anything that mocks, belittles, or otherwise insults these toxic ideas and movements appeals to me.’

- ‘I see Laibach as a way to deal with my own attraction to the fascist aesthetic. I use Laibach as a pressure valve and as a way to interrogate the things I see around me that appeal to these urges.’
- ‘Men in uniform are hot.’

6. *Have you danced to Laibach (in clubs, etc.)?*

Selected quotes:

- ‘I’m a DJ and I play a lot of times “Tanz Mit Laibach” or “Achtung” (sometimes “Alle Gegen Alle”). People dance a lot with these songs.’
- ‘As a DJ, Laibach are definitely always present on my set-lists. Some of the favourite tracks for the dance floor are “Alle Gegen Alle”, “Achtung”, “Geburt Einer nation” and “Tanz Mit Laibach”.’
- ‘Laibach songs like “Tanz Mit Laibach” are basic pieces in repertoires on gothic/industrial/dark electro parties in Slovenia.’
- ‘The audience were laughing about the real funny version of “Maggie Mae/Auf der Lüneburger Heide”, after the DJ told me that he will play a new Laibach track I danced without knowing it, after the now dead Neo-Nazi Michael Kühnen liked to be on the Lüneburger Heide, I thought it isn’t only a funny track by Laibach so I raised my right arm to a “Hail ...” -greet like provocation. I was dressed in a very long Valentino sweatshirt, light and dark blue striped, looked like a “designer concentration camp clothing”. The audience stopped laughing in the moment I’d raised my arm. Fifty percent of the audience knew me the others had some people which wanted to throw bottles and glasses on me, but they didn’t. They started thinking’²²⁶

7. *In 1987 I heard ‘Krst’ late night on the John Peel radio show and knew immediately this was ‘my band’. This has been a personal experience for many respondents, a sense that something had been missing in culture and Laibach completed the picture. Was this the case for you? If so, please elaborate.*

Category	Number	Percentage
Reported similar experience	40	61%
Did not share the same experience	25	38%
No answer	75	

²²⁶ This respondent is one of the most prolific of the NSK Folk artists.

NOTE:

Apart from those who did not share the experience detailed in the question, the results listed below are those who felt the same way in some form. Many wrote that they weren't initially much taken, but then it grew on them. Many respondents for whom English was not their first language appeared not to understand this question.

The following are Laibach releases cited as triggering a similar initial response:

Opus Dei (album)	6
Let it Be (album)	3
Geburt Einer Nation (video)	2
NATO (album)	2
Life is Life (video)	2
Krst (single/track)	2
Life is life (single/track)	2
Sympathy for the Devil (single/track)	1
Nova Akropola (album)	1
Kapital (album)	1
Tanz Mit Laibach (single/track)	1
Rossiya (single/track)	1
Get Back (single/track)	1
NATO (box set)	1
Vier Personen (single/track)	1
Final Countdown (single/track)	1
Die Liebe (single/track)	1

Selected quotes on a similar experience:

- 'Krst and other early Laibach works like it have a primal draw that is unparalleled for me. I feel that they are nearer to the religious music I was raised hearing in churches than to the music I heard on the radio.'
- 'I can agree that Laibach complete a picture of sorts for me — there is no replacement for them. In their absence would be only silence.'
- 'First I was amused, then a little scared. Finally I was in love.'
- 'My first album was *Nova Akropola* and the music that came out of the speakers was a revelation to me. I had no idea such music existed.'
- 'They are one of the bands that moulded me into the person I am today. I have a certain number of bands that I will always love, and Laibach is one of them. I have two tattoos on my lower back of two of their symbols. Only very important bands in my life get a tattoo!'
- 'For me, it was somewhat the opposite – I grew up with Laibach and among people who knew of Laibach. Moving away from my family

has given me the sense that there is something missing from this culture.'

- 'I started to listen attentively to Laibach at a moment in my life when I was struggling to find anything serious and worth experiencing in life; everything seemed falsely jokey and funny, and everyone was blaming me for not being able to appreciate the simple pleasures of a superficial life. Fuck off. "Država" said all I wanted to say to them.²²⁷ Laibach did not become "my band" and I am still listening to a broad variety of music, yet it was a breath of fresh air to know that someone in the world was being strict, serious and steel-hard, and not feeling guilty about it.'
- 'When my former violin teacher performed with them as a member of the Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra (the concert stirred great controversies, I remember my ex-professor telling my mother that the members of the Orchestra were divided in different factions as to perform or not, and he defined the experience as very unusual and particular).'²²⁸

²²⁷ 'Država' is a track by Laibach, first appearing on the album *Laibach* (1985).

²²⁸ In 1997 Laibach performed at the opening event of the European Month of Culture in Ljubljana, accompanied by the Slovenian Philharmonic Orchestra.

2. Feasibility

1. *Most respondents were delighted to take part in research on Laibach, please say why you responded to my request.*

Category	Number	Percentage
To increase awareness of Laibach and the NSK	45	30%
Wanted to help	43	29%
Opportunity to share love of Laibach and/or music	35	23%
‘Because you asked’	10	
‘It was an opportunity to question myself’	8	
‘I rarely get to talk about it’	7	
No answer	Na.	

NOTE:

Many wanted to read the results of my research when complete. Some thought Laibach should be taken more seriously and thus merited research. Many respondents expressed surprised delight an academic study was being made.

Selected quotes on why they responded to my questionnaire:

- ‘Because of the issue of fascism and Neo-Nazism that clouds public perception of Asatru, as someone who has served the Asatru community as a godhi (priest), I feel it is important to be engaged with academia (whether as researcher or as subject) anywhere our interests and activities intersect.’
- ‘You are doing something I would have liked to have done had I possessed the time... and the intelligence! I want to read the results of your work, to find out how many others are out there who share the “vision”.’
- ‘I responded because they have provided me with something visceral that I cannot explain.’
- ‘It’s an opportunity to talk about something which I like, with someone who shares that interest. I imagine most “hardcore” Laibach fans simply do not know personally another person into Laibach.’
- ‘That Laibach are now a research subject I think demonstrates that the impact that they have had politically and culturally has now been recognised and I believe that such research will feed positively back into all that is Laibach.’
- ‘Introversion, reflecting, the desire to provide a broader picture of a Laibach fan than you may have... I don't know honestly.’

- ‘It is rare these days that a band is an “art project”; that a band can “be about” something or other. This is very much how I feel Laibach works, and I’m glad to remember them for it, as well as re-think my relationship with a band that has been very important for me at times.’

2. *Should an academic study be made of Laibach? If so, why?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Laibach are more than just a band	45	36%
It increases knowledge in general	15	12%
Yes (no reason specified)	14	11%
‘Might as well’	13	
Because Laibach are misunderstood	9	
Not sure if a study is necessary	7	
Because it generates more attention for Laibach	5	
It encourages praxis similar to Laibach’s	4	
‘I do not know enough to answer this question’	3	
It increases the individual’s appreciation of Laibach	3	
Not needed, Laibach speaks for itself	3	
Specialising in Laibach is problematic	2	
‘Please don’t’	1	
Not needed at all	1	
No answer	15	

NOTE:

Many wrote of about how complex Laibach are, and therefore deserve study. Most were very emphatic that study should be done, particularly as regards Laibach as a strategy of resistance.

Selected quotes on the feasibility of an academic study of Laibach:

- ‘Even Freud said sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Mark Twain authorised the shooting of anybody who tried to read anything into Huck Finn. I fear academics frequently wish to read more into something than there already is (I particularly dislike psychoanalytical approaches to history). However, all culture is valid and all culture should be studied; it tells us so much more about a place and time than the high politics.’
- ‘Why not – though I tend to prefer to see intellectuals sweeping the streets and cleaning up hospital wards.’
- ‘Personally I don’t believe that there shall ever be an all-inclusive Laibach/NSK study. Instead of that there should be numerous independent studies that supplement each other.’

- ‘Absolutely yes, especially because Alexei's book cannot be regarded as the Laibach Bible forever. Laibach and NSK have progressed a lot since *Interrogation Machine* was released and it just makes sense that these changes are tracked down and interrogated in return.’

3. Community

1. *If you are a member of the Laibach Facebook group, why did you join?*

Category	Number	Percentage
To keep up with Laibach news	58	42%
I support/like Laibach	35	25%
Not a member of Laibach Facebook group ²²⁹	24	17%
Not sure why	7	
‘Might as well’	5	
To find out when they are performing	4	
I join similar <i>Facebook</i> groups	4	
No answer	Na.	

2. *Do you feel you participate in the Laibach ‘thing’ (whatever that may be)?*

Category	Number	Percentage
No	61	48%
Yes	31	24%
‘I’ve spread the word’	12	9%
‘I’ve made work inspired by Laibach’	9	
Not so much anymore	8	
‘Yes they have inspired me’	2	
‘They have a place in my heart’	2	
No answer	Na.	

Selected quotes on their perceived participation:

- ‘I’m in on the joke if that counts.’
- ‘No, the recent NSK congress looked quite silly and judging by the photos of the event most of the participants were Goths, drop outs and the occasional skinhead, it seemed to represent a “scene”, a nightclub gathering, rather than anything half way serious in relation to politics and culture.’²³⁰
- ‘Having been a member of Test Department 1989-1990, I felt an affinity’²³¹
- ‘I’ve participated in a panel about the future of the NSK state during the events surrounding the 30th anniversary of Laibach Kunst in Trbovlje in 2010, been a facilitator at the first NSK citizen’s congress, co-curated an NSK-exhibition in Leipzig in 2011 and have experimented with NSK strategies in stage shows for years (independent from NSK), eventually becoming NSK diplomat in 2011.’

²²⁹ There were other sources for respondents outside *Facebook*.

²³⁰ This is a reference to the NSK’s first Citizens’ Congress in Berlin, in 2010.

²³¹ The Industrial music group Test Department is directly compared to Laibach in the chapter ‘Interpellation’.

- ‘Laibach has a strong influence on people. Anyone can be Laibach. Going to a concert you participate in the Laibach thing, but also by introducing their music to people is sort of a missionary work, yes, I do that.’
- ‘LAIBACH use me and I use LAIBACH. Das LAIBACH Ding?’
- ‘This is the most amusing question in this research (in a good way). When I think about this question, it makes me silently laugh at myself. I have introduced many of my friends to Laibach’s music. I talk about the group so much that some of my friends think Laibach is my favourite band. I listen to Laibach every day. I have spent about 120 euros on Laibach merchandise and that doesn’t include the albums. I have seen two Laibach concerts (and briefly met Slavoj Žižek). I have written a newspaper article about NSK. However, I understand that I am a complete outsider. I’d like to believe that I participate in the Laibach “thing”, but I’m an outsider.’

3. *How do you keep abreast of Laibach’s activities?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Facebook page	47	24%
Laibach website	38	19%
‘Internet’ (unspecified)	35	18%
Word of mouth	26	
I don’t	15	
NSK Times webpage	10	
Press	5	
‘Direct channels’ (unspecified)	4	
Laibach Yahoo group	3	
Donald Campbell’s website	3	
Last.fm	2	
iTunes	1	
Wikipedia	1	
‘I’m part of the state’ ²³²	1	

²³² In this instance, ‘state’ indicates the NSK State-in-time’.

4. Additional

1. *How often do you listen to Laibach?*

Category	Number	Percentage
1-3 times a week	53	42%
Sometimes	36	28%
Once a month	21	16%
Every few months	8	
Seldom	7	
Not at all	1	
No answer	14	

2. *Were you aware there are three different versions of the album Kapital?*²³³

Category	Number	Percentage
No	83	63%
Yes	35	26%
'I knew there were two versions, not three'	12	9%
No answer	10	

3. *If you wear Laibach insignia, why do you do so, and what is the reaction from the public?*

Category	Number	Percentage
Doesn't wear it	63	
Opposed to wearing this insignia	1	

NOTE:

Reactions experienced by those who wear insignia:

No reaction/comments	15
The symbols are not recognised	9
Positive reactions	7
Curiosity	7
Neo-Nazi assumptions	4
Suspicion/'weird looks'	3
Assumption it is to do with medical personnel ²³⁴	3
Assumption it is to do with Christianity ²³⁵	2
Non-confrontational reaction	1

Selected quotes on wearing Laibach insignia/regalia:

- 'It has personal significance for me as I feel like an involved member of the Laibach/NSK/NSK State movement. I have mostly gotten neutral or positive reactions, but I sometimes wonder if people see a cross and assume it is a Christian image.'

²³³ The cassette, vinyl and CD versions of *Kapital* (1991) vary from each other.

²³⁴ The symbol is the Malevich Cross.

²³⁵ The symbol is the Malevich Cross.

- ‘A dear friend of mine who is Jewish did react strongly against a Heartfield graphic from the *Opus Dei* album.²³⁶ I felt badly about this, but it did spark a good discussion between us.’
- ‘I would not under any circumstances wear Laibach insignia. The insignia is provocative and may of course be misunderstood by the general public. I also think it would be slightly immature of me to do so.’
- On wearing the Laibach armband: ‘I do it with hesitation since I realize that it can be very easily misunderstood. However it is so cool that it is a Malevichian cross and it creates a sense of belonging, something exclusive and exciting.’

4. *Are you interested in or practice Paganism? Or any similarly ‘alternative’ lifestyle?*

Category	Number	Percentage
No	80	62%
Atheist	15	11%
Yes	7	5%
Christian	6	
Agnostic	5	
Used to be a ‘pagan’	5	
‘Pagan’, or strong inclinations toward Paganism	4	
Buddhist	3	
Occultist	2	
Goth/fetish scene	1	
Gaudiya Vaishnavist (Hindu)	1	
No answer	11	

NOTE:

Many expressed an interest in Paganism but not as practitioners.

Selected quotes on their interest in an ‘alternative’ lifestyle:

- ‘My spiritual practice embraces elements of Paganism, Satanism, and other magical traditions. I recognized in Laibach an occult approach to political symbols.’
- ‘I’m actually a very orthodox Lutheran studying to be a pastor. Laibach is something of a guilty pleasure, not something I can admit publicly to many people because most would not understand.’

²³⁶ The *Opus Dei* (1987) sleeve sports crossed axes forming a swastika, which is taken from John Heartfield’s image *Blut und Eisen* (1934) (see figure 1.4).

5. *If you are Slovenian, how do you feel about Laibach's representation of your country? If you are not Slovenian, how do you feel Laibach relate to your country, if at all?*

NOTE:

Most seemed to think the question asked how Laibach related to their country directly, and thus indicated they did not relate. Also, many failed to read the question entirely and just answered they were not Slovenian.

Selected quotes:

- 'I am an American. Laibach represent a kind of cultural alternative to American pop culture and even American counter-culture, that is inspiring and even instructive.'
- 'I don't think there's anyone in the UK who "still believes they are ruling the world" or that "all other nations are inferior".'²³⁷
- Laibach's 'content is specifically Eurocentric and intended for that audience. When the generally uninitiated North American is exposed to Laibach, they are generally confused by it – as North Americans are not used to a "political" or "art" message in their music. But because my parents were immigrants from Europe (Great Britain) and I was brought up immersed in European culture (English and Norwegian) as a child, culturally I still have one foot in Europe – so I can relate and appreciate them.'
- 'Britain has always had an odd relationship with uniformed authorities, preferring to ridicule them with satire rather than relate to them.'
- 'Laibach has much to teach us Americans about ourselves.'
- 'The UK and Laibach are entirely unrelated in my view, which is why I trust them to commentate on us with an outsider's insight.'
- 'Laibach are on a British record label but otherwise they are most definitely "foreign" and probably have no more connection to Britain than they do any other country with the exception of Germany and Eastern Europe.'
- Laibach have spoken in interview 'of their continued interest in Bosnia and how it was the biggest social experiment in today's Europe, and how the ramifications of its outcome far surpass its borders.'
- 'We don't talk about Laibach in public... even here in Trbovlje!'²³⁸

²³⁷ The respondent is here referring to the lyrics of Laibach's 'Anglia' (2006) which is Laibach's treatment of the British national anthem.

²³⁸ Trbovlje is Laibach's hometown.

- ‘Actively they don’t represent Slovenia ... The country is ignoring them and they don’t mind, they ignore back, but not deny Slovenia. They sing in Slovenian. That is big thing for Slovenia. They do not depend on Slovenia public.’
- ‘Without Germany and its history Laibach couldn’t work.’
- ‘It's a tie made of blood between our countries.’
- ‘I'm glad Laibach are Slovenians, I like to have them close to home and I'm privileged that I can easily understand several of their cultural references, from Plečnik and his Slovenska Akropola, to Grohar's Sejalec, my fellow citizen Avgust Černigoj's expressionist works (I own one small piece), or Prešeren’s Krst pri Savici. I think Laibach and the other NSK groups are among the most important Slovenian contributions to contemporary art and culture. In all their ambiguity and apparent Germanophilia, they act as ambassadors of the Slovenian cultural heritage of the past and present. I don't have any problem with their representation of Slovenia.’

Selected Email Correspondence

Permission for publication of email addresses and accompanying text was given by all the respondents in this section.

Christian Matzke

(retrogarde@yahoo.com)

Christian Matzke runs the Retrogarde Reading Room in Portland, Oregon, and the unofficial *NSK State News* webcast. In the course of my research I made an appearance on this webcast (Matzke, 2011, online). I filmed the NSK events in London in 2012 specifically for inclusion on these webcasts.²³⁹ Matzke is a non-academic authority on Laibach and an NSK Folk artist, and his Retrogarde Reading Room contains books, articles and artefacts associated with Laibach and the NSK. He was sent the Laibach audience survey questionnaire, and emailed separately on the 9th November 2011. His response was employed primarily in the chapter 'Interpellation'.

I'm particularly interested in why you have devoted so much time, energy and resources into your work with the NSK, including the Retrogarde reading room.

'I have to say that it has never felt like a lot of work. For reasons I can't entirely explain, I have always enjoyed sorting and cataloguing things, so the Reading Room is simply the most accomplished version of my lifelong habit. The *NSK State News* is a bit more labour intensive, but I am an amateur filmmaker so it was a natural fit in a way. I saw a need and realized I had the skills necessary to fill it. I'm still hoping it will grow beyond just being me as the news anchor, but I figure at the rate that events are happening I will have enough material to keep this going for a good while.

When I started the Reading Room in 2003 I didn't know what the NSK would make of it. That's actually why it is called the Retrogarde Reading Room and not the NSK Reading Room. It turns out I had nothing to worry about as the founders are very supportive of what I'm doing, but I'm really glad I chose the name I did as it gives it a bit of distance from the original NSK membership. I don't ever want to be seen as masquerading as a member of the historic NSK collective, I am simply a citizen doing his civic duty.'

Please tell me about the NSK uniform you are depicted wearing on your website.

'First off (and this is really important to me conceptually), the NSK Commissar uniform is constructed from 100% genuine Communist surplus. The only items that give it a Nazi veneer are the embroidered bits (collar tabs, eagle, and the name on the sleeve) and I had those made myself. The point of that piece for me was to confront folks with the knee-jerk reaction of an extreme right wing image and then explain how it is actually (nearly) identical with an extreme left wing image. That totalitarian grey zone is of great interest to me.

²³⁹ This footage was also posted separately on You Tube.

I had one of the original wool and leather armbands too. When I traded my NSK Commissar uniform to IRWIN it went with it.²⁴⁰ I'm a little sad about that honestly, as I agree the new ones are pretty poor. At the NSK Citizens' Congress (2010) I was the only one with the original kind and all around me folks were seeing theirs begin to fall apart.

The uniform 'evolved from 2004 to 2006 I'd say. There may have been some slight modifications in the medals after that, but 95% was complete by '06.'

*I enjoyed your Lego Laibach gig – are you familiar with the work of Zbigniew Libera and his controversial Lego concentration camp?*²⁴¹

'Yes indeed! I really wish the original image of the Lego Laibach concert had had three things on it: my email address, the word "LAIBLOCK" instead of "LEGO", and the note "inspired by Zbigniew Libera". That image has gone viral and I have had a few folks accuse me of ripping off Libera. Actually, that right there is a pretty interesting commentary since by far he was tackling the more potent and important subject. All my LAIBLOCK sets have now gone to IRWIN as part of their NSK Folk Art collection, but my original Lego Laibach front man belongs to Milan Fras.²⁴² Hopefully he is set on a shelf in his home and makes him smile.'

Donald Campbell

(dhc3945@hotmail.com)

Donald Campbell is the author of an unofficial Laibach website (Campbell, n.d., online). The website is a comprehensively researched source of Laibach data and articles. Campbell was sent the two-stage questionnaire for this research, and was emailed separately on the 9th November 2011 as to his reasons for creating the site.

I'm interested in why you have devoted so much time, energy and resources into maintaining your website.

'I had produced two fanzines based on Laibach and the NSK back in 1990 and 1992, so when I was given some web space at work it didn't take long to decide on a website on Laibach. I first came across the group on television back in 1988 and soon later by sheer coincidence I met an Australian-based Croat who had some connections with the music industry in Yugoslavia.'

Heather Duke

(profoundia@gmail.com)

Heather Duke was asked by Laibach to present a street performance to the audience queuing outside the venue before a Laibach performance in Seattle in

²⁴⁰ Matzke's uniform is exhibited as NSK Folk Art, and appeared in a glass vitrine at the *Time for a New State* Folk Art exhibition at the Calvert 22 gallery in London in 2012.

²⁴¹ *Lego. Concentration Camp* (1996) by Zbigniew Libera is a manufactured box set of Lego with which it is possible to make a model of a Nazi concentration camp (see figure 6.10). Matzke's work is a rendering of a Laibach performance in Lego. Both pieces are discussed in the chapter 'Interpellation'.

²⁴² Milan Fras is the vocalist of Laibach.

2008. The details of this event are analysed in the chapter 'Nexus'. Duke responded to my email on the 9th November 2011 with a copy of a text entitled *Tanz Mit Laibach* written shortly after the event.

Tanz Mit Laibach

'Through a series of synchronistic events, My friend Kent and I got to do a street performance in front of the Laibach show at the Showbox in Seattle last night ... The concept is exciting and confrontational. The Slovenians want us to serve soup on their behalf to suffering, starving Americans in front of the venue. Kind of like one of the bread lines of the Great Depression. They ask for things like black and white bread to be symbolic of the presidential choices. They request that the soup be "not a very good soup" ... I have a brown dress with buttons that I has in fact been worn to another Laibach show a few years back. I added a fox stole and my black felt hat... then glue-gunned a weasel skull to the front of it. And black boots and stockings of course. My stab at Fabulous Slovenian Art Chic. Then I fashioned a sign with some Laibach-related symbology and the American Flag on the back and the words "\$uffering Brothers, We can spare some soup." ... We make soup... paint my face and upper body white, smear his [Kent's] face with black makeup, and head down to the Showbox. We scope out a place to set up, heading first to a spot beside the door away from the bouncers. They immediately intervene, telling us to move to the curb. I put my soup pot down wearily, already in character. I'm breathing in butoh, with my eyes half closed and start focusing and ignoring what is going on around me. Kent stands at the ready to dole out the bread. We had arranged that we wouldn't be talking ... I cautiously offer some folks some soup and bread. Most people don't want it. They seem wary of us. Two kids with backpacks who seem to be homeless stop. I hear one of them say something like "wow, this is amazing... if I had some extra spare change I'd kick some down to you – but it's been rough for me". My heart melts. We have some real suffering Americans in our midst. The two kids talk to Kent about how they feel like they have been discarded. He shares soup with them. A few more homeless seeming people walk by curiously. They are glad to have our soup. Most of the Laibach fans stay back, not quite knowing what to think of us. Before our pair of friends with backpacks leave, I sing the second verse of the song "To those Born Later", by Hanns Eisler. People perk up a little, and realize that this is a performance. I continue to accost people with the bread and soup. People start to come up to Kent and talk to him and I do a little ranting and weird behaviour. I decide on a whim to sing "Am Grunde der Moldau", also by Eisler. At that moment I notice faces against the window and recognize Seattle artist Charles Krafft with some folks from Laibach and crew. They come out of the club beaming and are very appreciative. I greet them formally in German and they seem charmed. Kent and I decide to slowly pack up so we can go into the show.'

Lili Anamarija No

(lili_anamarija_no@yahoo.co)

Lil Anamarija No is a prolific NSK Folk artist, and in 2008-2009 created *The Tabernacle of Love*. This artwork is comprised of menstrual blood on some tissue paper in a rhomboid cavity in a brushed steel Malevich cross. It was on display at the NSK Folk Art exhibition *It's a Beautiful Country*, in Leipzig in 2010, and at the Marcus Campbell bookshop during the programme of NSK events in

London, 2012.²⁴³ The piece is discussed in the chapter 'Interpellation'. Anamarija No was emailed a questionnaire on her work on the 4th November 2011.

As well as exhibiting art, are you a live-art performer?

'I believe that being engaged in art should actually mean living art not just doing/ making / manufacturing / producing it. I have not been actively present in the world of art for long, and until now, I have not done any live performances as such, but this is certainly a direction I feel drawn to, so sooner or later I will not be able to resist it any longer. '

I am making an assumption that you enjoy the work of Laibach, please give a small sample of other musical artistes you like.

'I certainly enjoy the work of Laibach, and now I am happy that I had the chance to witness their early concerts, too. I try to get to see at least their concerts in/near Ljubljana, where I have been based for the last six years, but perhaps now, when I am more directly involved in visual art, I feel more drawn to their aesthetics than the music.

Are you interested in, or practice Paganism? Or any similarly 'alternative' lifestyle?

'It's funny you should ask that, for I think it's my ex-(British) husband who is into Paganism, which – I think – is much more popular in Britain than in Slovenia, for example. I am also not a follower of any major or minor religion, because I believe they all narrow people's minds and, I have always walked out of anything that would limit me.'

I understand you were a delegate at the NSK Berlin Congress, but besides that, have you a working connection with Laibach or the NSK (i.e. worked with them, written on them for a journal or academically)?

'I have never had any working connection with Laibach. Now, this NSK term is so wide that it could be understood at different scales. I can say quite comfortably that I have been an active and proud member of NSK State.'

Do you wear Laibach/NSK regalia, and if so, is this in everyday life or just at NSK events?

'Yes, I do wear NSK regalia: In my mind the term NSK would also include Laibach, because I have always considered Laibach as (the most recognised, even most notorious for some time) part of NSK – from the 80's on. On the one hand I have always been drawn to the NSK aesthetics – years ago, in mid-90's when I was still living abroad, and was not engaged in art at all, I remember that seeing some graphics works of Irwin it crossed my mind that "if I were ever doing art, I would do it this way". On the other hand I am of "agitprop" mind, and while living out of Slovenia I had an NSK cross (brooch) with the letters made and wore it on my black beret. Of course I had many people in public places asking me what it was or what it meant, so having lived out of Slovenia/Yugoslavia for altogether nearly 20 years I had the chance to advertise NSK among people, talking mainly about Laibach and Irwin, as the most-widely publicly recognised parts. I found it curious that even when I came to Slovenia during that period – visiting for a few days –

²⁴³ The Marcus Campbell Bookshop was also the site of *Baptism Under Gustav*; the first NSK christening, in April 2012.

there would be people of all ages in the street asking me about the cross on my beret, and then, a bit surprised they didn't know the artists who originate from Slovenia – I started explaining ... And yes, of course I wear them in everyday life. I try to live my beliefs.'

For the Berlin Congress I had my other NSK / Laibach / Malevich-shaped crosses: a pendant on a necklace chain (which to me – worn at a place where some Christians would declare their belief/religion by wearing either a cross [faith], an anchor [hope] and/or a heart [love] – if I remember this correctly from my childhood – represents what I believe in; it is also the only piece of jewellery that I always wear.

Apart from that I use my NSK passport actively at borders, trying to get official state stamps in it. This is how I have become an active NSK citizen and I've enjoyed all the stories attached to these experiences...'

Please recall your very first impression on hearing/seeing Laibach/NSK.

'I first heard Laibach in the famous Ljubljana FV 112/15 club, it must have been a Tuesday – New Wave night - and I found them shriekingly loud, unusual, quite different to other (punk /new wave) bands, performing at the same venue. I think I must have seen first NSK posters, advertising Laibach concerts around Ljubljana at the same time. I liked them, for sure, as I've still got one that I'd snatched off a wall somewhere.'

Are there any issues concerning Laibach/NSK that you are uncomfortable with?

'I don't think so, I cannot think of one at the moment.'

What is it about Laibach/NSK you like, what is their appeal to you?

'I like their aesthetics – it is always aesthetics that draws me to something first. But mere aesthetics is not enough – for it cannot keep one's attention for long. I am not sure how to word it – it is some kind of wits and provocation, combined by their professional, yet sincere approach. Had they not been doing / living things sincerely they would have not been on the scene for many years.'

In 1987 I heard 'Krst' on the John Peel radio show and knew immediately this was 'my band'. This has been a personal experience for some respondents of a questionnaire I sent out to the Laibach fanbase earlier this year – a sense that something had been missing in culture and Laibach completed the picture. Was this the case for you?

'I would listen to Laibach earlier, and I remember a friend from Britain smuggling *Nova Akropola* album (camouflaged into something different) into Slovenia (back then still Yugoslavia) from England for me. Laibach was banned in Yugoslavia at the time, after that famous TV interview.

'I think it was different for us over here. At the beginning when it all started, everything was here, on the threshold. You would walk about Ljubljana and see/meet these lads at various places... We were all going to the same places, dancing at the same places, gathering at the same café (that was closed down for renovation – for no apparent reason – after a while because the authorities were getting somewhat uneasy about so many young people gathering at the same place

every day). Even when you didn't know the people personally you would see the same faces at the same kind of events which created a certain feeling of belonging. A bit later it was all suddenly removed from us (when Laibach got banned) for a while, all their activities were moved out of Slovenia... and in 1987 I was already out of Slovenia and only returned to root in, in 2005.'

How do you feel about Laibach/NSK's representation of your country?

'I am very happy about it and, coming to think of it, I think I was born at exactly the right time to witness and enjoy it. One thing that rejoices me is that – certainly by observing how the Berlin Congress was handled, and since - I am pleased to see that they (NSK) do things inclusively rather than exclusively concerning other nations. And I believe that, also, when someone says Laibach – people around the world do not think of Slovenia first, but of them – perhaps their image / music / ...

At the time when the term globalism has mostly negative connotations in relation to neo-liberal capitalism and similar, it is the kind of "globalism" that Laibach and NSK have been practising that we should look forward to.'

How would you describe The Tabernacle of Love?

'For the NSK Folk Art exhibition in Leipzig I described it as a tribute to "Nature'S unlimited Kreativität".²⁴⁴ Technically speaking it's a piece of the following details:

Tabernacle of Love, 2008-2009

Menstrual blood, tissue paper, steel, fibreglass

Size: 28 x 27 x 8.'

Have you exhibited this work anywhere else? If so, what was the reaction?

'I have not exhibited it anywhere else yet.'

Why did you make the piece?

'Now this is one of un-answerable questions. When a piece is a direct response to some situation /activity / some other work this question can be answered quite simply and directly, but this is not the case here.'

What were you trying to say?

'I am really sorry, but this is again one of those questions that cannot be answered adequately.'

Is the use of menstrual blood common in your work?

'By its very nature it cannot be used commonly. Let me explain: I can easily admit that I feel drawn to the body, bodily liquids/qualities, and that I am in a very nice and close relationship with my own body. Blood is so primary and essential that I naturally find it very attractive, but at the same time I don't like it when its usage is or has to be connected with violent/invasive acts. For this reason, I, as a woman, can feel privileged for having a direct, yet non-invasive access to a totally natural blood source. However, menstrual blood is something that is not so widely available (it's not something that is available every day, and there's a question how to catch/retain/store it for desired further use, plus an additional question of its

²⁴⁴ The capitals are here deployed by Anamarija No to spell out NSK.

conservation), so this makes it something that can only be used by chance (as in luck). It is something that cannot really be controlled and directed by a human being, so that makes it something very special when it appears in a clearly “usable” form.’

How do you feel about gender/the female in the NSK/Laibach construct?

‘Now this is a very interesting question, perhaps the most intriguing of the lot, and I must admit that I have been thinking of giving it a research ever since it got mentioned when I met Lina Džuverović from Calvert 22 when she was in Ljubljana. I have no idea where it will lead/bring me, but perhaps I should disclose my present general stand about gender/the female in society (and in art?). Talking from personal experience it really depends on what country /social class you come from. In my case, if we look back in the history, I come from (back then Yugoslavia) a socialist country, (I would not call it a communist country, because especially in the part I come from, in Slovenia – bordering Austria and Italy – we had all the freedom we needed, and at the same time a rather high general standard of living, as Yugoslavia was much more a social country than countries are nowadays). There was no unemployment, there were no homeless people, all young people could study at university... as a result of the partisan movement (consisting of men and women) fighting for freedom in the Second World War, men and women were declared equal in front of the law after the war. So then, there was no need for any feminist movement or anything like that, and I don’t think there were any gender issues present. In Britain and other “western countries” as we called them, women were not equal to men, which gave them a rather different “starting point” when it came to gender issues. I think that the general situation in society is currently worsening, but perhaps it’s become so bad now, that people will start to fight for their rights more fierce fully, and things will turn for the better. As a result of my “equal” upbringing I have never felt any discrimination, or perhaps it is my way of thinking/acting that has never provoked one. Now I remember that Lina and I were discussing why there are so few women interested / involved in the NSK State project, so let this be the question I shall tackle. As far the original NSK group is concerned I think it would be best to ask them this question directly; they would know best. Or perhaps it has just happened so, quite naturally.’

Do you know what the NSK think of the piece?

‘I haven’t got a clue. If/when I get an appropriate chance I may ask them.’

Sakshi Gupta (witnessakshi@gmail.com)

Sakshi Gupta is an Indian artist whose sculpture *Untitled (Xerox machine)* (2008) is compared to Laibach and NSK praxis in the chapter ‘Conclusion: Resistance’ (see figure 7.9). Gupta was emailed on the 25th January 2011. Gupta describes the artwork as follows.

‘Untitled. Abandoned Xerox machine, motors; 64” x 23”.6 x 34”.6; 2008. Reclaiming the wreckage of an old dilapidated Xerox machine that appears to have been used to the point of its extinction, the work tries to redefine uselessness as useful. After having stripped the machine of its conventional productive function, the work alludes to the impact or consequences of what, in life, is otherwise hidden

from sight. Elevating the machinery off the ground and positioning its integral parts side by side, it demonstrates an attempt on my part to scrutinize reality for opportunities for creativity, even where death and decay appear much more prevalent.'

Would you say Untitled (Xerox Machine) represents a "nostalgia" for a lost industrial past?

'I think it's rather difficult to generalise a particular sentiment for a country as vast as India is; also one must keep in mind that India is as yet a developing country with more than half of its population still in villages. Having said this I wouldn't hesitate in saying that technology has percolated through and various aspects of "industry" has touched even remote villages, be it through upgradation of agricultural equipment, televisions, mobiles etc. I have myself visited many villages in some parts of western India where although one can see industry now playing a role in the lives of people there but also at the same time a sense of fascination for it. On the other hand, in the urban pockets of India, you may know as well that ever since the digital revolution has taken place, India has not only absorbed it but has also made significant contributions to the growth of the digital world. (With so much brain-drain from India to the West). So here one does witness a sense of nostalgia too for the "lost industrial", though in the same breath I'd like to add that everything is growing and changing at such a rapid speed right now that it'll be some time before we can really sit back and know and identify what we have truly lost and gained!

Timo Vuorensola (timo.vuorensola@starwreck.com)

Timo Vuorensola directed *Iron Sky* (2012), the soundtrack of which was written by Laibach. The premise of *Iron Sky* is the return of the Nazis after their defeat in World War Two, having fled to the moon. As part of this research, Vuorensola was sent some questions on his reasons for selecting Laibach for the soundtrack. The questions were written before the film's release, and I was unaware of the level of Laibach's commitment to the project. His response is included in the chapter 'Interpellation'. The questions were emailed on 28th February 2011.

Why did you choose Laibach and their music?

'It was the first thought after hearing the concept for the film - something in the wicked, dark comedy of Nazis on the moon stroke me directly in the same nerve as Laibach does. But it wasn't before I heard their album *Volk* in 2006, buying it off randomly from a store not even knowing it was just out. The album made the biggest inspirational impact on *Iron Sky* when we started to draft out the story and the feel and look of the film.'

How did you hear of Laibach?

'Originally? I think it's been a band that I've known forever, but probably a friend of mine played it to me somewhere in mid '90s or something.'

Are you a fan of Laibach? Do you listen to them in your spare time?

'Yes I am, and have been for as long as I can remember. I do listen to them on my spare time.'

Have you read Alexei Monroe's book on Laibach (and the NSK) Interrogation Machine?

‘To be honest, I got the book from Ivan, but I haven't got around reading it yet. It's a beautiful book, but it's at the moment sitting on my shelf, waiting to be read.’²⁴⁵

What tracks are you using, and what tracks did you consider and then NOT use?

‘We're planning possibly not to use too much of the already existing material, but I'd loved to accompany the track “Germania” somehow in the film.’²⁴⁶

Why did you choose to use those particular Laibach tracks?

‘“Germania” had a strong impact on me when working on the film, and it has nice melancholy accompanied with a message I felt was important.’

Did Laibach make any suggestions as to the use of their music?

‘Not specifically, but since we haven't really started the composing yet, it remains to be seen how we'll proceed and how much of their already existing music we'll end up using.’

Did Laibach write any new music for the film?

‘Yes, they'll write the full score for the film.’

What is your general impression of Laibach – what do you think of them?

‘I think they are one of the most important bands around, and I've always respected their absolute taste. I love them.’

²⁴⁵ The Ivan referred to is Ivan Novak, a member of Laibach.

²⁴⁶ In the finished film there are Laibach audio references throughout, most notably the opening to ‘America’ (2006) as the Nazi protagonists dramatically enter the presidential office of the Whitehouse, and diegetically; *Tanz Mit Laibach* is heard playing off-screen in a Neo-Nazi club.