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Envisioning the Future: Laibach as a Challenger of the Yugoslav State

1. Introduction: A disruptive force in an imperfect system

Today a relatively successful musical band, Laibach has been a major reference in the exploration of art, power, and ideology (Gržinić 1993; Monroe 2005a; Shukaitis 2011; Mendelyte 2013; Bell 2014; Šentevska 2022). Having been active for more than 40 years now, and having regularly published albums on the London-based label Mute Records, it is considered an influential band on the alternative musical scene. Boasting a rich history of experimental musical production and intriguing live performances, Laibach has been active since 1980 and is still regularly touring Europe, the United States and other parts of the world. In November 1995, Laibach held two unforgettable concerts at the Sarajevo National Theatre, one before the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the other on the very same day the agreement was signed. Furthermore, in August 2015, Laibach was the first Western band that got to play a live concert in North Korea (The Guardian 2015; Monroe 2018; Bell 2020; Šentevska 2020). The Slovenian ensemble was close to performing in Kyiv in 2023 despite the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine (Šentevska 2023).

In May 2024, Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar awarded Laibach the prestigious Medal of Merit of the Republic of Slovenia for 'longstanding activities, creativity and encouragement of different approaches to music at home and internationally' (President of the Republic of Slovenia official website 2024), thereby cementing the band's relevance for the contemporary Slovenian and European culture. At the very beginning, however, Laibach was looked at with significant suspicion by the authorities in former Yugoslavia, at a time when the internet and mobile technology did not exist, and when the most effective way to organise a concert was either by fax or by phone. In its strategic declaration titled "10 Items of the Covenant", written in 1982 and published in 1983 in the journal "*Nova Revija*", the band proclaimed that "the individual does not speak; the organization does," and that "Laibach adopts the organi-

Scenari, n. 21, 2024 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine • www.mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/scenari • ISSN (online): 2785-3020 • ISBN: 9791222317717 • DOI: 10.7413/24208914188

zational system of industrial production and the identification with ideology as its work method. In accordance with this, each member personally rejects his/her individuality, thereby expressing the relationship between the particular form of production system and ideology and the individual. The form of social production appears in the manner of production of Laibach music itself and the relations within the group" (see Laibach 1982; and Zinaić et al. 1991). Even though the band's Covenant can be understood as a distinguishing feature of the group's performativity, such statements are telling of the way in which Laibach conceived music – namely, a way to criticise politics and demand social change rather than achieving popularity and commercial success.

When Laibach first appeared on the scene, Yugoslavia was already experiencing an ideological and economic crisis (Krulic 1993; Baker 2015; Jović 2009; Štiblar 2019) because of a number of factors including economic decay, failure to develop a common historical narrative, and differing levels of pluralistic political culture across the country's constituent federal units (Ramet 2007). At the time, dissatisfaction had been mounting among the Slovenian population with the 'dysfunctionality' of the economic system of self-management (Centrih 2020). Due to its provocative statements, disruptive and often subversive early performances, and highly challenging attitude, Laibach was surrounded by substantial controversy, provoking strong reactions from the abovementioned authorities. As a result, from 1983 to 1987 the name "Laibach" was banned from public use and the band's live shows were prohibited in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia (Šentevska 2022; Stefancic 2023). This article focuses on the Slovenian band Laibach and its role in fostering a platform for social, cultural, and political activity within the Slovenian art scene. This took place in the libertarian climate of the 1980s and early 1990s, which arguably supported Slovenia's path towards independence in 1991.

Specifically, the aim of this paper is to assess Laibach's disruptive social and cultural contribution by analysing the cultural pattern of the early 1980s and by discussing the strategies applied by Laibach in order to overcome official bans such as the prohibition to publicly use the name "Laibach". To this end, I reviewed the body of literature focusing on the band and interviewed a number of contemporary intellectuals who are established experts on Laibach to gain further insights. The interview questions focused on Laibach's relation to the Slovenian independent culture, the political pressure experienced by the band during its early years, and Laibach's positioning in a setting which became functional for promoting Slovenia's call for independence. The subsequent discussion singles out some of the implications of Laibach's strategies within the wider contemporary cultural space.

2. *Zeitgeist*[1]

What context did Laibach originate from? The following quote from Monroe (2005b) helps to answer this question: "As a country that actually experienced a brutal Nazi occupation, it was more understandable for Yugoslavia to keep alive old memories, but even so for those born in the sixties the saturation of the culture by images of the war became oppressive and alienating. This cultural overkill manifested itself in Laibach's ambivalent use of Tito and near simultaneous posing as both Partisans and Fascists (Yugoslav children's equivalent of Cowboys and Indians). Laibach then, emerged from a context shaped by Yugoslavia's complex and increasingly dysfunctional official ideology, the noise and pollution of local heavy industry, vivid memories of Nazi violence, Germanisation and a small radical cultural scene open to Punk and radical art. This mixture was as unstable as, and a reflection of, the volatility of the Yugoslav state itself."

Following Krause (2019), it can be suggested that discussing a complex cultural phenomenon like Laibach requires a proper historical contextualisation that links different realms of social life. At the beginning (1980-1984), a leitmotif of Laibach's appearances and live shows was its critique of the Yugoslav system. By developing its outspoken criticism of Yugoslav politics and institutional arrangements throughout the 1980s, manipulating speeches delivered by Tito and other socialist leaders and ideologists in unconventional fashion, and attaching new meanings to socialist symbols, Laibach opposed the official political propaganda of the time. As pointed out by Tratnik (2022), this, however, does not mean that its actions were necessarily supportive of specific political alternatives.

As an avant-garde, cross-media group, in the Slovenian cultural scene Laibach was preceded by the OHO group – an art collective from the late 1960s and early 1970s that experienced significant political pressure several years before Laibach came together (see Šuvaković 2010). However, as Motoh noted (2012), in the early 1980s Laibach represented "a sharp break with the avant-garde movements of the Six-

[1] Literally "the spirit of times" in German language, this concept is relevant to the German-Slovenian context, particularly in relation to Laibach's artistic orientation. It helps pointing to the empirical level in which culture manifests itself. By placing cultural phenomena and political manifestations in specific contexts or settings, the concept challenges platonic assumptions that ideas can be timeless. Laibach's critical orientation towards politics, ideology, and culture is often specific to the wider historical pattern or framework. Interestingly, the concept of Zeitgeist is referred to also in some later Laibach works, such as the WAT 2003 album, in which words such as "Zeitekonomie" originate directly from the word "Zeitgeist" so as to stress the distinctive elements of contemporary economies.

ties and Seventies" as well as a "unique reflection of the contemporary Yugoslav political, economic and social crisis" (2012, p. 288). Before Laibach, other artists and film directors challenged Yugoslav symbolism and popular myths: a good example is the film *Plastični Jezus* (Plastic Jesus 1971) by Lazar Stojanović, in which the director draws a parallel between communism and the nazi-regime. However, such attempts were rather infrequent in former Yugoslavia and those who expressed criticism were often marginalized. By contrast, since its very first performances and shows, Laibach was not standing alone, but enjoyed the favour of the cultural milieu of the period, which was quite unprecedented in Slovenia.

As noted by Levi (2009, p. 103), soon after the death of post-war Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, in many cities of former Yugoslavia an anti-Tito sentiment became widespread despite the fact that Tito's figure still inspired many and was part of the Yugoslavs' collective memory. From 1980 onwards, the most urgent question (though expunged from the public debate) was the following: *should the country continue to follow Tito's politics after his death?* (Levi 2009, p. 53). Laibach came on the scene at a time when Tito's void had to be filled and no political figure appeared to live up to his legacy. To quote Lorenčič, "in this context, Laibach […] 'pro/anti-emotionally' reflexively replaced the character of the dead-alive beloved leader, Marshal Tito, by erecting a new cult: Laibach Kunst, which was constituted only a few months after his death" (Lorenčič 2021, p. 37).

Moreover, some years before Laibach started out, as in other parts of Yugoslavia punk music had gained popularity in Slovenia's capital Ljubljana and in other cities such as Maribor, Koper and Nova Gorica (Ramet 2019; Phillips 2023). As suggested by the social theorist Marina Gržinić, in the late 1970s and early 1980s punk in Slovenia as well as youth subcultures in Ljubljana were a direct expression of the call for social change: "at the time when punk emerged in Slovenia in 1977, it was also the only possible alternative to the impotent socialist amateur culture on the one hand and high modernist formal logic in the field of art on the other. It thus opened up the entire field of research of contemporary urban art culture and its radically postmodernist paradigm" (Gržinić 2023, p. 20). More generally, what the movements and individuals wanted, at least initially, was "a level playing field in social and public life, free from administrative and other interference from the ruling political party, the League of Communists. What they wanted most was their own autonomy and freedom" (Centrih 2020, p. 63).

Arguably, with the rise of radical and alternative cultures in Ljubljana as well as in other Slovenian cities, the new social movements constituted a prolific setting for Laibach's music and their live concerts. As

Alexander Nym observed, "the emergence and impact of Laibach are inextricably linked to Ljubljana's subculture and new social movements of the 1980s. This is also supported by the fact that no other group from the international (post-)punk/industrial scene managed to create such a unique approach and effective PR strategies by deploying art in explosive settings. The Laibach concept and the supportive Ljubljana's scene provided a mutually advantageous match unseen elsewhere, combining local sensibilities and societal discourse with artistic interventions" (*my interview*).

To put it otherwise, with the rise of alternative social movements and the punk culture, the ground was set for a social critique coming from the younger, largely "pro-socialist" generation that, nevertheless, was keen on expressing an unprecedented dissatisfaction towards the centralised Yugoslav regime and the country's main institutions. In paving the way for political criticism, Laibach issued its Covenant in 1982 (published in 1983 in *Nova Revija* – an influential Slovene language literary magazine – and later reprinted in the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* book in 1991). Moreover, it developed an innovative organisational structure and proved particularly skilled not only in creatively manipulating art and ideologies, but also in disseminating provocations through the most popular medium of the time, television.

3. A comparison with contemporary dissidents

Laibach's disruptive force in the first half of the 1980s can be better understood by reference to other influential thinkers who were based in Slovenia and shared a profoundly critical view of the Yugoslav regime in the 1970s and 1980s. Standing out among them is France Bučar – a lawyer, sociologist and politician who redefined national identity as the core of his personal understanding of ethics (Kovač 2019) and was tracked by Yugoslav intelligence in the late 1970s and during the 1980s (Žerdin 2015; Omerza 2023). Arguably, Laibach shared with Bučar a peculiar critique towards corrupted forms of socialism and towards the so-called "Titoism". In the 1980s Bučar was still very critical of the authoritarian regime that came into power after Tito's death, which was based on an increasingly centralised political power with less and less space for democratic systems to blossom. Bučar would later write the following words about Tito's Yugoslavia: "the country appeared as a closed system, characterised by an unsatisfactory flow of knowledge and too little innovation […]. The country was destined to fail" (Bučar 2007, p. 264).

According to Bučar, censorship and intolerance in former Yugoslavia were particularly harsh towards those creative forces that made the

greatest effort to contribute to the social and cultural development of the country. Laibach, however, never expressed this idea clearly, since band members have always preferred to manipulate messages and speak about alienation, and chose ambiguity and paradoxes over open statements. As observed by Štrajn (2015, p. 177), "it was always difficult to precisely differentiate between aesthetics and politics in Laibach's performances and in various artefacts, but it appears that politics got adapted by art for goals that remained ambivalent."

Nevertheless, these beliefs undergirded the band's activity in particular in the early 1980s. Thus, Laibach showed that alternatives to ruling political parties were not only a viable solution, but indeed much needed. As already suggested, Laibach was not alone in its provocative attitude. Instead, it was accompanied by the punk movement and supported by the alternative cultural scene as well as by the then particularly active Ljubljana subcultural movement.

Unlike most provocative artists and dissident intellectuals of the time, Laibach showed a remarkable ability to use very diverse media and to tailor its messages to each outlet. One example that further substantiates this observation is the well-known 1983 interview on Slovenian TV. In June 1983, the ensemble had its first televised interview during the TV Tednik (TV Weekly) show. Wearing military uniforms and white armbands featuring a black cross, Laibach appeared in front of graphic images of large political rallies reminiscent of those in Nuremberg whilst reciting their "Documents of Oppression". It can be argued that showing such controversial imagery on TV and reading out this particular speech had the effect of revealing the similarities between the Fascist and the Socialist Realist iconography; this was, in turn, functional for questioning media freedom. At the end of this thought-provoking TV interview, show host Jure Pengov decided to publicly address the members of Laibach as "the enemies of the people."

It can thus be concluded that in the early 1980s Laibach constituted one of the most radical elements of Slovenia's alternative culture. While most dissident intellectuals developed more or less direct critiques of the relations of power inside Yugoslavia, of the lack of transparency of the ruling party and, therefore, called for more freedom, Laibach took the totalitarian regime quite literally. To quote Goddard (2018, p. 66), Laibach was taking on an exaggerated form of the totalitarian state as a strategy of excess: "by being more totalitarian than the state itself, by embodying its disavowed obscenity, Laibach were, in contrast to dissident, ironic or cynical responses, which are in fact cultivated by regimes of power, producing a form of communication that could not be tolerated precisely by being too close to the ideology of the state itself and revealing too much about its obscene operations."

Furthermore, the material used and manipulated by Laibach derived from Yugoslav and Slovene history, particularly from self-management and the socialist heritage of Trbovlje. Monroe (2005b) provides an effective description of what Laibach's early concerts looked like: "on stage, Laibach experimented with oscillators, feedback and carried out primitive sampling using old turntables. Even for radical and Punk audiences the result seemed extreme, and often provoked violent responses. Laibach also 'sampled' the actual language and texts of self-management, which was experienced by many as corrupt, complacent and decadent – an unstable mix of officially-encouraged consumerism plus residual Stalinism and nationalism. Laibach quoted from Edvard Kardelj, the Slovene ideologist of self-management and also from Tito. Samples of Tito speeches were played at concerts and appeared on Laibach's tracks *Decree* and *Država* (The State). When Laibach's first album was issued in Slovenia, Tito's voice was excised by censors (rather than cover this up, Laibach left an audible gap to highlight this enforced absence)."

4. Collectivity, anonimity, and (hidden) identity

Laibach often perpetuates elements from the avant-garde tradition through specific aesthetic devices (Simonek 2017). This certainly holds true with regards to a metatextual strategy employed by the band at its very early days, namely its 1982 Covenant. As Božić (2022) noted in her analysis of the band's strategy, when Laibach in its public statements proclaims that "the individual does not speak; the organization does," or that "all individual differences of the authors are annulled, every trace of individuality erased," or that "Laibach Kunst is the principle of conscious rejection of personal tastes, judgements, convictions," one is reminded of the long-standing avant-garde tradition of collective speech acts, declarations, manifestoes, and the way they mix artistic and political programmes. While Laibach's points from the Covenant allow for very diverse interpretations and may not be meant to be taken literally, it is nevertheless reasonable to discuss them by adhering to the ideas elsewhere expressed by Laibach.

The Slovenian band serves as a case study for discussing both the role that individual actors or groups may play in pre-established contexts, and the way they may depart from highly ordered organisations and subgroup cultures (see Golden 1992). In adopting its own organisational model as an independent and radical musical group, Laibach insisted on both collectivity and anonymity. These two elements apparently contradict individual identity. Borrowing from Dawson (2018), one could suggest that, by mimicking the organisational complexities of former Yu-

goslavia in its most totalitarian expression, it is as if the band from Trbovlje wanted to ultimately challenge the idea of authoritarianism based on the cult of the individual. Indeed, in its Covenant, the band proclaimed: "Laibach works as a team (the collective spirit), according to the model of industrial production and totalitarianism, which means that the individual does not speak; the organization does." To put it otherwise, Laibach was taking on the form of an independent organisation with its own rules and goals.

As stated in the Covenant (1982), band members used fictitious names: Eber-Saliger-Keller-Dachauer. Its militarist-totalitarian image inspired the deconstruction of identity and masculinity (Gravenor 2017: 180). Therefore, by hiding their real identity anyone could theoretically become part of Laibach. The fact that the identity of each member was kept secret also meant that the band could be more easily associated with the symbols that it adopted – for instance the cog and the cross, somewhat resembling Malevich's *Black Cross* (1915).[2] It should be recalled that Laibach's provocative statements and the public controversy it generated in Slovenia and elsewhere happened at a time when, for instance, Duran Duran in the UK used a very different approach to reach unprecedented international popularity and commercial success – comparable only to the Beatles (see O'Regan 2022) – with the *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* album (1983).

In the first decade of its activity, Laibach was not aiming at any commercial success whatsoever. As in other socialist countries (Gololobov et al. 2016), for popular or influential bands in Yugoslavia it was not possible to make profit and economic gains. The goal was to have a disruptive effect on the social and political reality. The attitude adopted by the ensemble in relation to the state was a challenging one: namely, a confrontational attitude not sympathetic to the ruling socialist party in Yugoslavia nor to the state of things of the time. Arguably, Laibach's focus on both collectivity and anonymity helped strengthen the potentially subversive message conveyed by the band's performances and lyrics. It can be suggested that, paradoxically, Laibach's organisational model called for censorship and, at the same time, helped the band overcome it successfully. Enacting their own aesthetics and iconography and staging their "new"

[2] In Laibach's opus, the cross is a symbol charged with performative and visual power. Whether the similarity to Malevich's *Black Cross* was an intentional reference or an accidental one, remains an open question. Recently, former Laibach collaborator Teodor Lorenčič (2021) suggested that the reference was initially accidental – a mix of consciously and unconsciously existing information. More generally, it can be argued that Laibach's use of the cross should be interpreted as a symbol either referencing or complementing a number of totalitarian, artistic, formal (logical) and religious meanings – depending on the aim of the reference and the context.

ideology, Laibach reflected the manipulation practices common as much in industrial production as in modern politics: to quote Lorenčič (2021, p. 37), "in the historical context, Laibach Kunst is a striking reflection of the existing manipulative political mind: the brutal definition and theatricalization of someone, a historical command accepted by the masses or ideological manipulation in order to (re)educate to obedience. A moment of triumph of political will."

5. Bypassing the ban

According to Monroe (2005b), during the band's first concerts "military smoke bombs were used and Laibach's uniforms were based on Yugoslav army fatigues. After military service, members of the group rejoined the emerging punk/alternative scene in Ljubljana and soon became its most extreme element." Laibach's noisy music, provocative early live appearances and visual projections had a central place in the band's critical attitude towards the political establishment and the institutional order in former Yugoslavia. Even though the Yugoslav regime is often referred to as an authoritarian system that often intimidated its citizens (Pučnik 1987), it nevertheless showed some degree of freedom and tolerance as it allowed Laibach and other Slovenian bands to express discontent and critical opinions in the early 1980s. Arguably, it is this thin line between a relatively tolerant socialist system and an authoritarian regime that Laibach thread as it strove to position itself as a music group.

In 1983, however, Laibach found itself at the centre of a scandal in the Yugoslav media that had severe consequences for the band. During a particularly noisy performance at the Zagreb Biennale of New Music with the British groups 23 Skidoo and Last Few Days, Laibach projected images of the Partisan struggle and Tito alongside graphically erotic clips. The concert was halted by police and military officials, and the members of the ensemble were escorted onto a train to Slovenia. Shortly after, also as a result of the above-mentioned appearance on the TV Weekly show, the band's public performances were *de facto* prohibited: "a large inter-republic scandal and media campaign ensued, including an anti-Laibach statement from the Croatian League of Socialist Youth. Laibach responded with a letter published in *Mladina* in which they explained their intervention, citing influences from artists such as John Cage, Nam June Paik, Josef Beuys, and Robert Rauschenberg […]. In the coming months Laibach were supposed to release their first album *Nebo žari* (The Sky Glows) for Radio Television Ljubljana's record label ZKP RTLJ. The annulment of their contract without much explanation was largely ascribed to the Zagreb Biennale incident" (Šentevska 2022, pp. 187-188).

Former Yugoslavia was a system that did not allow for certain "safety" lines to be crossed. This becomes clear when one considers the 1983 ban on Laibach issued by the City Council of Ljubljana. As it is now well documented (e.g. Šentevska 2022; Stefancic 2023), the use of the name "Laibach" was officially banned for several years. As a result, the band could not perform live in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia.

Showing both resourcefulness and creativity, the members of Laibach managed to continue composing music and staging live appearances. In order to do so, they avoided using their name, so as to not contravene the official ban posed on their performances in Yugoslavia. Moreover, in 1984 Laibach contributed to the establishment of the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) collective, together with the group of painters named Irwin and the Scipio Nasice theatre group. As noted by Anđelković (2016, p. 21) and further documented by Nym (2023), the NSK collective had its own organigram comprising an economics as well as a philosophy department. This shows that the band not only continued to exist despite all the limitations resulting from the ban, but it even enlarged its spectrum of influence through the newly established art collective, which was since then active until Slovenia's independence in 1991 and in the following years.

Furthermore, in the period when the ban was in force, Laibach could not officially advertise concerts in Slovenia nor in the other Yugoslav countries, yet it managed to tour abroad. This is how the band launched its "Occupied Europe tour" in collaboration with the Last Few Days. The tour started on November 3rd, 1983, at the Arena in Vienna, Austria, and ended on December 23rd, 1983, at the Diorama club in London, UK. This tour represented a historical turning point for the band and, more generally, for cultural standards in former Yugoslavia. Laibach played in various venues located in cities such as Budapest (Hungary), Krakow, Wroclaw, Torun, and Warsaw (Poland), Copenhagen (Denmark), Hamburg, and West Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam, Eindhoven, The Hague, and Maastricht (the Netherlands).[3]

Band members were allowed to tour abroad even when they provocatively proclaimed having "occupied Europe." Planning that tour involved "many months of work, so before the departure every concert was meticulously planned in detail. At that time, telephone communication was the fastest, and fax machines began to function as the main communication channel […]. Igor Vidmar organised the Yugoslav part of the tour,

[3] There were no major issues with the public use of the name "Laibach" during the "Occupied Europe Tour". All the concerts were successfully performed with the exception of those planned in Czechoslovakia. There, the concerts had to be cancelled since Czechoslovak authorities denied the band's members access at the Hungarian border crossing.

Ivan Novak the Eastern European part, and Daniel Landin from London the Western part of Europe" (Lorenčič 2021, p. 57). The tour helped Laibach achieve visibility as well as recognition outside Yugoslavia: to put it otherwise, once the band had achieved popularity and recognition abroad, the ban had no reason to exist anymore.

Furthermore, although Laibach's concerts were prohibited in several regions of Yugoslavia in the 1983-1987 period, the ensemble was still able to use its characteristic imagery and symbols on posters without making use of its banned name or directly referencing to it.

6. An evaluation by experts and Laibach collaborators

To better substantiate the previous sections, in this section I provide a review of the answers collected during a set of interviews held via electronic communication with selected experts who are familiar with Laibach, its activity ad its achievements on both an artistic and a socio-political level. Some of their email addresses were obtained with the help of Laibach Informbureau, an information office related to Laibach's official website. Emails proved an effective tool to collect qualitative data. As such, it is a viable alternative to face-to-face or telephone interviewing (Meho 2006; Remenyi 2011; Fritz and Vandermause 2018; Dahlin 2021). In this case, I was able to obtain valuable insights, points of view, and ideas on Laibach.

The questions, formulated in English, were sent out in February, March, and April 2024. Six respondents provided answers in English, whereas two respondents preferred to answer in Slovenian. Responses by eight interviewees were carefully analysed. What follows are the main results.

The opening question focused on the political pressure exercised by Yugoslav authorities on Laibach during the early years of the band's activity, namely in the 1980-1985 period.

The interviewees tend to agree on the fact that Laibach members experienced a considerable degree of pressure from Yugoslav authorities, yet this never took the form of full censorship. Contemporary philosopher Peter Mlakar, who in the past collaborated with the ensemble on several occasions, suggested the following: "the political authorities and a good part of the population simply did not like what Laibach was doing: the band was perceived as an ensemble that identified with Nazism, willing to promote unacceptable values and ideas, thereby dangerously undermining Socialism. Stated otherwise, Laibach was commonly viewed by many as a group that was spreading the social evil."

As noted by another respondent, it was clear that the political power aimed at silencing the members of the band; the question was, however,

"how to do it." According to another respondent, "although the political pressures were strong, they did not manifest themselves in the form of direct political repression and political trials." According to another expert, initially "there was more of a moral outrage by local socio-political organizations rather than proper political pressure." He added that things eventually got worse after Laibach's controversial performance at the Zagreb musical Biennale in 1983. Nevertheless, the band managed to continue with its activities and concerts, particularly outside Yugoslavia. If anything, according to a UK-based researcher, the pressure seemed to produce in Laibach a kind of "transgressive revolutionary energy" that was indeed appealing to its audience.

In relation to that, and given what has been suggested in the previous section regarding the prohibition to publicly use the name "Laibach", the selected experts were asked to discuss how Laibach managed to overcome the 1983 ban which prohibited the use of its German name as well as live performances. As observed by the German scholar Alexander Nym, Laibach band members "merely continued their chosen path of overidentifying with the dominant system by adhering to the Ljubljana's council decision disallowing them to use the name in public. They were, however, postmodernist enough to simply replace the name with the cross symbol associated with the previous infamous appearances."

Here are the key points emerging from the interviews:

(1) the censorship was a *de facto* rather than a *de iure* censorship, which meant that band members did not have to face serious legal consequences;

(2) the ban applied to Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia: Laibach could still play in Serbia and, in particular, in its capital Belgrade;

(3) Laibach members were postmodernist enough to replace their name with the symbol of the cross, associated with the band's previous live appearences;

(4) Laibach enjoyed public support by several intellectuals who recognised the emancipative power of the band's implicit critique of signifying practices – this turned out to be helpful in overcoming the ban. At that time Laibach was supported by civically engaged intellectuals such as Taras Kermauner, Slavoj Žižek, Darko Štrajn, Tine Hribar, Lev Kreft, Tomaž Mastnak, and Pavle Gantar.

The next question asked the experts to state whether the initial period of Laibach's activity (namely, their first five years of existence) can be better understood within the context of alternative culture and the punk scene in Slovenia.

Some of the respondents noted a close relationship between the band and the emerging civil society at the beginning of the 1980s: to quote one respondent, "the emergence and impact of Laibach are very much

related to Ljubljana's subculture and the new social movements of the 1980s." A Slovenian intellectual who closely collaborated with Laibach during its early years and who organised some of its early shows, suggests that "Laibach's first period can only be understood in relation to, or as part of, Ljubljana's alternative culture and its institutions: Laibach was, in my view, a continuation of punk by other means." Conversely, other experts emphasised the original traits of the group which set them apart from punk. To quote one interviewee, during the 1980s "Laibach was part of the punk scene, yet it was also very distant from it."

It is worth mentioning that one respondent notices remarkable ideological differences between Laibach and Slovenian punk on the one hand, and British punk on the other: "it is worth considering the whole period with a wider lens, seeing it as an offspring of Punk, that explosion of transgressive revolutionary energy manifested in popular culture. There is, indeed, an interesting parallel with the rise of the Sex Pistols and Laibach. Both were launched into headline-grabbing mainstream consciousness virtually overnight; the Sex Pistols with their incendiary appearance on the Bill Grundy show in 1976, and Laibach on the Yugoslavian news programme TV Tednik in 1983. Both caused alarm and public outrage, but whereas the Sex Pistols' offence was infantile swearing, Laibach's was a display of problematic militant aesthetics. Punk's use of the Swastika, for example, was purely for transgressive shock, Laibach's employ of totalitarian iconography was far more ambiguous and unsettling. The difference is telling. The Slovenian Punk dynamic, from which Laibach sprung, maintained its intellectual and political context, whereas in Britain, Punk quickly became a parody of itself. The 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 next question aimed at discussing what was unique about Laibach's organisational structure as defined, for instance, in its 1982 Covenant. The respondents observed that the band's structure fitted well with its avantgarde activity. An expert who is also a well-established academic researcher suggested that Laibach not only successfully implemented the scheme of its organisation, but it also exceded it while remaining faithful to the basic principles of the Covenant. By contrast, some other respondents suggested that the Covenant itself was not unique, as other avantgarde movements had used similar statements and organisational schemes before: instead, what seems to be unique is "its employment in the performativity of Laibach Kunst."

Furthermore, the experts observed the following:

(1) Laibach managed to create significant appeal through the enstragement of the audience;

(2) arguably, there is "no sustaining ideology" in Laibach, and that's exactly where "Laibach's terrible beauty" comes from.

Moving from Monroe's (2005a) and Štefančič's (2012) arguments on Laibach's pivotal role in Slovenia's underground culture, the last question aimed at shedding light on its relevance in the country's path for independence.

To provide an answer, some respondents made a reference to the larger context of Yugoslavia, viewed as an "increasingly fragile system." According to one respondent, within such context, Laibach's activity "had an important social and cultural dimension" which played an important role in demanding social change and sketching a future for Slovenia outside the context of Yugoslavia. Here, it is also important to note that, similarly to other Slovenian bands and artists in former Yugoslavia, Laibach never really demanded a total break-down and demise of the state. To quote again one expert, "the alternative music subculture in Slovenia aimed not at destroying the State, as was the rallying of British punk, but to replace it with better alternatives."

In addition, a few respondents also stressed the fact that Laibach played a role for Slovenian culture not only at home, but also abroad: while the extent of Laibach's contribution to Slovenia's independence is hard to assess, the band "put Slovenia on the map to many Europeans." Another expert added: "Laibach transcended the domestic impact as it has always aimed at achieving international impact, which started in 1983 with the *Occupied Europe Tour*." And, as it is nowadays well known, the impact grew bigger after that tour. As suggested by the other experts interviewed, since its early days Laibach has helped Slovenia achieve improved recognition at least among their fans across Europe and among the intellectuals and artists who got acquainted with its work.

7. Conclusion

Laibach came on the scene at the beginning of the 1980s as an independent, radical force, able to influence not only its audience, but to some extent the alternative culture in Slovenia and elsewhere. By transforming discourses and criticism into music, the band was able to reach a large and diverse audience of young people. Throughout its first decade, Laibach constantly maintained characteristic elements of mystery, performativity, and ambiguity that defined it as a band. More broadly, it was able to attract the interest not only of young people in Ljubljana and in other Yugoslav cities, but of youth living in the Eastern block more generally and, to some extent, of alternative cultures in Western

European countries. It is, therefore, not difficult to understand why Laibach helped promoting alternative approaches to social issues in Slovenia and abroad.

In the 1980s, Laibach was a key actor among the socio-artistic movements that called for autonomy, independence, and freedom in Slovenia. Paraphrasing Susan McClary (2021, p. 158), it can be suggested that Laibach is the quintessential example of how social change can be encouraged by sketching alternatives through music; the band's path stresses the relevant role that music can play in societal transformation. Laibach came to represent a distinctive radical phenomenon able to influence the audiences in former Yugoslavia as well as to shape alternative cultures across Europe. It is not surprising, then, that Laibach was commonly viewed by many as a band spreading "social evil."

Laibach's case exemplifies potential strategies to bring forward disruptive ideas and new policies, even against the odds, at times of moral decadence and in authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian socio-political settings. The band's critique was directed towards what was considered to be the repressive Yugoslav state and its inability to find adequate solutions to economic and social problems. It would be nonetheless a mistake to equal the Yugoslav state after Tito's death with socialism. Laibach did not criticize socialism as such, and the band never advocated a complete break-down or total demise of the state. Instead, as one respondent suggested, while enjoying the support of intellectuals such as Taras Kermauner, Slavoj Žižek, Tine Hribar and Lev Kreft, Laibach has always remained "rather sympathetic to socialism."

However paradoxical it may appear, the case of Laibach opens up a number of questions, for example as regards the relationship between purportedly freedom-supporting governments and radical art movements and alternative spaces. It can be concluded that, in the long term, investing in these movements and spaces can benefit the public good in ostensibly democratic societies aiming at social equality and prosperity[4].

[4] *Disclaimer.* I am thankful for their time, support and for having exchanged valuable points of view and references regarding Laibach to the following experts: Simon Bell, Teodor Lorenčič, Alexei Monroe, Peter Mlakar, Alexander Nym, Lilijana Stepančič, Irena Šentevska, Darko Štrajn, and Igor Vidmar. I am indebted to Laibach Informbureau for enabling me to achieve contacts and for further references that proved useful. I am also grateful to the participants of the Research Day on Innovation, which took place on May 23rd, 2024, at the Excelia Business School in La Rochelle (France), and to the two anonymous referees for providing valuable feedback on my paper. Any remaining error that may be present in this article is solely my own responsibility.

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Envisioning the Future: Laibach as a Challenger of the Yugoslav State

This contribution aims to assess Laibach's disruptive social and cultural contribution by analysing the cultural pattern of the early 1980s and discussing the strategies applied by the group to overcome official bans such as the prohibition to publicly use the name "Laibach". It analyses interviews to contemporary intellectuals who are established experts on the ensemble. The interview questions focused on Laibach's relation to the Slovenian independent culture, the political pressure experienced by the band during its early years, and the group's positioning in a setting which became functional for promoting Slovenia's call for independence. The paper argues that the band's critique was directed towards the repressive Yugoslav state and its inability to find solutions to economic and social problems rather than towards socialism as such. Laibach's example shows that governments claiming to support freedom should pay adequate attention to radical art movements and alternative spaces by proactively supporting them.

Keywords: Laibach; Covenant; Yugoslavia; Experimental music; Independent culture; The 1980s.

Envisioning the Future: Laibach as a Challenger of the Yugoslav State

Il presente contributo ha l'obiettivo di valutare l'apporto dirompente sul piano sia sociale che culturale dei Laibach attraverso la discussione del contesto culturale dei primi anni Ottanta. Altresì propone un'analisi delle strategie sviluppate dal suddetto gruppo al fine di superare i divieti formali imposti, ad esempio l'uso pubblico del nome "Laibach". L'analisi è svolta su delle interviste con intellettuali contemporanei, che sono degli affermati esperti sull'ensemble. I quesiti posti durante le interviste si sono focalizzati sulle relazioni dei Laibach con la cultura indipendente slovena, la pressione politica che ha toccato il complesso nei primi anni di attività, nonché il posizionamento del gruppo in un contesto che è risultato funzionale alla promozione della richiesta d'indipendenza della Slovenia. Il contributo sostiene che le critiche della band erano indirizzate verso lo stato troppo burocratico jugoslavo e la sua palese incapacità di trovare delle soluzioni ai problemi economici e sociali piuttosto che contro il socialismo in sé. L'esempio dei Laibach sta a dimostrare che i governi che affermano di voler favorire la libertà dovrebbero porre un'attenzione genuina ai movimenti artistici radicali e agli spazi alternativi, incoraggiandoli (favorendoli) adeguatamente.

Parole chiave: Laibach; Covenant; Jugoslavia; Musica sperimentale; Cultura indipendente; anni '80.