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The "New Wave" in Yugoslav Rock and Roll in the 1980s (Musical Creation within Totalitarian Frameworks)

Abstract: *In the last decade of communist Yugoslavia's existence, the totalitarian system gradually lost its power, retreating to nationalism. On the Yugoslav music scene, the "New Wave" brought different rock formats (punk, goth, darkwave, industrial). The paper is showing examples of the rock bands from Belgrade, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Skopje. The lyrics of the songs anticipate the collapse of ideology and of Yugoslavia as a state and concept.*

Keywords: *Yugoslavia; rock and roll; communism; totalitarianism; resistance.*

In the last decade of communist Yugoslavia's existence, the totalitarian system gradually lost its power, retreating to nationalism. On the Yugoslav music scene, the "New Wave" brought different rock formats (punk, goth, darkwave, industrial). The lyrics of the songs anticipate the collapse of ideology and of Yugoslavia as a state and concept.

Laibach is a music and cross-media group from Slovenia established on the 1st of June, 1980 in Trbovlje. The name of the band is the historic German version of the name Slovenia's capital Ljubljana. From the start *Laibach* has developed a "Gesamtkunstwerk" – multi-disciplinary art practice in all fields ranging from popular culture to art (collages, photo-copies, posters, graphics, paintings, videos, installations, concerts and performances). Since their beginnings the group was associated and surrounded with controversy, provoking strong reactions from political authorities of former Yugoslavia and in particular in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. Their militaristic self-stylisation, propagandist manifestos and totalitarian statements have raised many debates on their actual artistic and political positioning. Many important

theorists, among them Boris Groys and Slavoj Žižek (Bell, 2011; Goddard, 2006; Hlačar, 2020; Komelj, 2012; Stefancic, 2023), have discussed the *Laibach* phenomenon both from an analytical as well as critical cultural point of view. The main elements of *Laibach*'s varied practices are: strong references to *avant-garde* art history, *nazi-kunst* and *socialist realism* for their production of visual art, *de-individualisation* in their public performances as an anonymous quartet dressed in uniforms, conceptual proclamations, and forceful sonic stage performances – mainly labelled as industrial (pop) music. *Laibach* is practicing *collective work*, dismantling individual authorship and establishing the principle of *hyper-identification*. In 1983 they have invented and defined the historic term '*retro-avant-garde*'. They creatively questioned artistic '*quotation*', *appropriation*, *re-contextualisation*, *copyright* and *copy-left*. Although starting out as both an art and music collective, *Laibach* became internationally renowned foremost on the music scene, particularly with their unique cover-versions and interpretations of hits by Queen, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, etc.

In 1984 *Laibach* initiated the founding of the wider collective of NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*) together with the painters from the group Irwin and the theatre group *Scipion Nasice Sisters*. This led to the establishment of a strong platform for social, cultural and political activity within the climate of liberalisation and pluralisation in 1980's Yugoslavia.

Laibach was formed in 1980 shortly after the death of Marshal Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslavian post-war leader who had spent his political career establishing the principles of non-alignment within the 3rd, 2nd and 1st world and especially within communism. His death initiated a period of uncertainty in Yugoslavia, resulting in power struggles between conservative nationalist hard-liners and more liberal politicians; a period, which saw struggles and disagreements between the different republics constituting Yugoslavia. *Laibach*'s response to this confusion was to present their group as a totalitarian organization whose zeal for authority far outstripped that of the state. They announced their formation and activities through poster campaigns around the Slovene cities of Trbovlje and Ljubljana, utilizing elements of National Socialism and Socialist Realism propaganda imagery coupled with partisan folk art to create a startling effect. Confronted by these powerful images and the fact that *Laibach* is actually the German name for Ljubljana, Slovenes were forcefully reminded of their own wartime past under the Nazi and Italian occupation during World War Two. Hailing from the

small city of Trbovlje (16.000 inhabitants), in a region known for its industrial landscapes, mines and political activism, *Laibach* members were determined to keep this tradition of agitation alive and wilfully baited the Yugoslavian government at every opportunity. This was evident in their first outing in September 1980 when they staged a show called "Rdeči revirji" (Red Districts – popular name for the Trbovlje region, where Slovenian communist party was created back in 1937). This event was scheduled to take place in their home city with the sole intention of challenging a number of contradictions that the group saw as being inherent for the town's political structures at that time. Not surprisingly this provocative project was banned before it had even opened, on the grounds that it incorporated an inappropriate use of symbols, an accusation that was made constantly during *Laibach*'s early history.

The state intervened on the second year of *Laibach*'s existence, too, when their compulsory military service prevented the group from staging any projects during 1981 except for a minor retrospective exhibition mounted in Belgrade's Student Cultural Centre that featured painting, graphic works, articles and a presentation of *Laibach*'s music. Re-emerging in 1982, the group resumed their radical operations with an added zeal, staging their first concert in Ljubljana and following it with shows elsewhere in Yugoslavia before returning for a confrontational headline appearance at Ljubljana's Novi Rock festival in the centre of the city in September. Dressed in stark black and grey (mainly Yugoslav army) uniforms, *Laibach* performed ferocious noise assaults before a backdrop of totalitarian regalia and wartime slides with political speeches from Tito, Jaruzelski, Mussolini, and others spliced into the mix. Playing in front of aggressive hostile crowds was not without its risks as lead singer Tomaž Hostnik discovered after a bottle struck him during the show. Although bleeding from a facial wound he showed no reaction and the photograph of the wounded Hostnik is now one of the most iconic *Laibach* images. Unfortunately, Hostnik never performed to more appreciative audiences as in December 1982 he took his own life.

Determined to continue the work that Hostnik had helped to begin, in June 1983, the group made their first television appearance in an interview on the current affairs programme TV Tednik (*TV Weekly*). Wearing military fatigues and white armbands bearing a simple black cross, *Laibach* were interviewed in front of graphic images of large political rallies more than a little reminiscent of those in Nuremberg whilst

reciting their “Documents of Oppression”. Their flirtation with such controversial imagery once again revealed uncomfortable similarities between Fascist and Socialist Realist iconography; similarities which instantly posed questions about the freedom of the media and the message. Their extremely provocative appearance on this program prompted the show’s host to brand them “enemies of the people”, appealing to respectable citizens everywhere to intervene and destroy this dangerous group.

In the same year Laibach announced their highly important manifesto, “The 10 Items of the Covenant”, first published in *Nova revija* (No. 13/14, 1983), a Slovene magazine for cultural and political issues. Here the group describes itself as a collective, practicing anonymity, with membership hidden under the four names: EBER, SALIGER, KELLER & DACHAUER. Members of the group still use these pseudonyms and avoid the use of their individual names. Government officials and politicians had also watched the group’s TV debut and in response to a wave of outrage they banned all planned public appearances in Slovenia and even the use of the name *Laibach*.

Despite the total ban on their performances in their native Yugoslavia, the group made a successful anonymous appearance at the Malči Belič Hall, Ljubljana, in December 1984 before co-founding Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art), a guerrilla art collective and movement, created from the union of three groups, namely *Laibach*, Irwin – the visual artists collective – and the Scipion Nasice Theatre.

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. *Laibach*’s recording and touring history covers tectonic shifts in their country’s development, including a Yugoslavian war and Slovenia’s independence. In November 1995, at the NSK Država Sarajevo event, the national theatre in a besieged war-torn Sarajevo was declared NSK state territory for two days, involving two *Laibach* performances, an exhibition and speeches. NSK state passports issued at this event were subsequently used by several individuals to leave Sarajevo during the Yugoslavian war. In 1996, the Slovenian foreign minister Zoran Thaler ceremoniously handed *Laibach*’s NATO album to N.A.T.O. Secretary-General Willy Claes. As well as being Slovenia’s unofficial state band, these examples illustrate the way *Laibach* and the NSK are directly connected to their country’s political history. (Bell, 2013, p. 112).

“Malchiki” is the second single by the Serbian new wave band *Idoli*. Vlada Divljan, the member of *Idoli* wanted to create a song which would be a parody of the Soviet socialist realism. The Soviet embassy condemned the release of the song. In the video spot, the song depicts a sort of Stakhanov like proletarian who enthusiastically wakes up in the early dawn to go to work in a mine and a metallurgy factory. The official release of the song featured the following lyrics: ("Fiery dawns wake me from my dream / Factory mornings, smoke from the chimney"). (Janjatović, 2007)

The Yugoslav Serbian band *Ekatarina Velika* (EKV) emerged as one of the most influential rock acts of the 1980s. Through poetic and emotionally charged lyrics, EKV subtly criticized the constraints of the socialist regime and expressed a deep yearning for individual freedom. While never overtly political, their music resonated with a generation disillusioned by the system's emptiness and stagnation. EKV became a voice of quiet resistance, channeling dissatisfaction through art rather than direct confrontation. (Janjatović, 2007; Pogačar, 2015).

Another Serbian and Yugoslav rock band named *Riblja Čorba* is known for their sharp political satire, used their music as a vehicle for social commentary during the Yugoslav socialist era. Their song "Neću da budem član mafije" ("I Don't Want to Be a Member of the Mafia") cleverly plays on the double meaning of “mafia” as a metaphor for the ruling political party. Through biting lyrics and rebellious tone, the band criticized corruption, conformity, and the oppressive nature of political structures. The song stood as a bold statement of individual defiance in a time when dissent was often silenced. (Janjatović, 2007; Gordy, 1999).

The Croatian Yugoslav band *Azra* founded in 1977 was renowned for its fearless lyrical content and social critique. In their song "Kurvini sinovi" ("Sons of Whores"), frontman Branimir Štulić delivers a scathing indictment of the Yugoslav secret police, UDBA. The song's raw language and aggressive tone reflect the fear, surveillance, and repression that many citizens experienced under the regime. *Azra's* music became a form of cultural resistance, boldly confronting the dark underside of state power in a way few others dared. (Janjatović, 2007; Vučetić, 2012).

The Yugoslav and Croatian band Jura Stublic and Film, a key player in the new wave scene of the early 1980s, often used metaphor and irony to address social and political issues. In their song "Chicago," the lyric "In Chicago, gangsters robbed the entire people" serves as a

thinly veiled critique of Yugoslavia's own ruling elite. While the narrative appears to target American crime culture, the underlying message clearly points to the corruption and exploitation within the country's communist leadership. Through catchy rhythms and clever allegory, Film offered a subversive commentary that resonated with a generation craving honesty and change. (Janjatović, 2007).

Zabranjeno Pušenje (No Smoking) is a Bosnian rock band, formed in Sarajevo in 1980. The band was formed contrary to the then prevalent Yugoslav punk rock and new wave, closely associated with the New Primitivism cultural movement and the radio and television satire and sketch comedy show *Top lista nadrealista* (Janjatović, 2007). During their first Yugoslavian tour, at their concert in Rijeka on November 27, 1984, singer Nele Karajlić declared, referring to an amplifier that had just broken down, ("The Marshall croaked. I mean, the amplifier"), which was recognized as a pun on Tito's death, landing the band in trouble. They were criticized by the media and a campaign against them resulted in the canceling of their concerts and the removal of *Top lista nadrealista* from the air. The affair got attention of the Yugoslav Security Administration (UDBA) as well. They were rescued by some leading liberal intellectuals, and magazines such as *Polet*, *Mladina*, and *Slobodna Dalmacija* who raise their voices in the defense of the group members and that affair snaps without prison sentences. Later, guitarist Sejo Sexon said that their amplifiers weren't even Marshall, and that it was a joke. (Tomić, 2011).

Mizar is a Macedonian rock band from Skopje. The band got its name after Mizar, which is a guiding star for the orientation of travelers in the deserts. *Mizar* was formed in 1981 in the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia (part from SFRJ). Because of the band's avant-garde sound and image, its Christian leanings and support for Macedonian self-determination, they were viewed with certain degree of suspicion by the former authorities. Still, the group received great media attention including numerous appearances on the national television. The group is notable for its first self-titled album as it was the first popular music album in the former Yugoslavian countries in Macedonian language. The album was a major success and it is listed among the top ten rock albums ever released in former Yugoslavian countries. *Mizar's* musical style is post-punk, darkwave and gothic rock. Besides influences such as Joy Division for instance, Mizar also uses elements of traditional Macedonian folklore and Byzantine music (Trajkoska, 2009).

The last decade of existence of Yugoslavia brought the complete fall of communist ideology and severe economic and political collapse. In 1991, a civil war started in Yugoslavia, which brought an end of its existence. These musicians in the 1980's were foretelling and foreseeing the events that eventually happened during the 1990's (Gordy, 1999).

In this context, at the beginning of the Yugoslav civil war in Croatia and Bosnia, which marked the start of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, we conclude our paper with the Yugoslav and Montenegrin musician and artist Rambo Amadeus. He used his public platform not just for satire, but for bold political statements in the face of war. During a live broadcast on TV Studio B in 1992, amidst the early stages of the Yugoslav Wars, he stunned the audience by saying: "While we are playing, bombs are falling on Dubrovnik and Tuzla. We will not entertain the electorate. Fuck all of you."¹ His words, raw and unapologetic, broke through the silence and fear dominating the media landscape. In a time of rising nationalism and censorship, Rambo's defiance on live television became an unforgettable act of artistic and moral resistance.

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¹ (Rambo Amadeus - Antiratna izjava na "Beogradskom proleću" 1992 godine, retrieved at 16. 05. 2025 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAR1R191sws>)

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