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## LAIBACH'S POLITICS WITHOUT A CAUSE OR THE UNSUBLATED CONTRADICTION

Krisis, 2013, Issue 3

[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

'What is significant about Laibach? That you cannot pin them down. Theirs was an abstractly totalitarian symbolization, but one that always slipped away if one wanted to thrust in and ask, what actually is it? Is it Stalinism? Is it fascism?' (Herscher and Žižek 1997: 61), asks political theorist Andrew Herscher in his interview with the Slovenian thinker Slavoj Žižek. The Slovenian industrial band Laibach is the main object of this discussion as well as in a number of articles by Žižek himself<sup>1</sup>. Then there are also conjectures about Žižek's own connections with Laibach by asking how much of Žižek's Lacan is actually Laibach<sup>2</sup>, which only adds to the aforementioned difficulty in trying to pin this politico(?)-artistic act down. One is tempted to ask, therefore, how much political power actually has such a band not involved in any party politics. This is an age-old question, which can be traced back at least to Plato and the attack on theatre based on his assumption that it can have a harmful effect on society's morale. In the case of the industrial music scene of which Laibach is one of the earliest and well-known exponents this question gains a particular relevance.<sup>3</sup> Thus, *what is significant about Laibach* from a cultural and political perspective?

Established in the early 1980s, in the midst of political struggle and cultural chaos (the final years of the Soviet Union), the band shocked their audi-

ences with their choice of aesthetics and symbolism, which was a common feature of the then emerging industrial scene<sup>4</sup> in Margaret Thatcher's Britain (cf. Throbbing Gristle, Test Dept., etc.) and former Yugoslavia (Laibach, Autopsia, etc.). Furthermore, Laibach was a sub-project of a larger Yugoslav radical art movement, namely the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (the New Slovenian Art or the NSK), together with other similarly oriented projects such as the artist collective IRWIN and Scipion Našice Sisters Theatre. The band primarily used nationalist and fascist imagery – although Stalinism and anarchism were not uncommon – all of which manifested itself in the lyrics, album designs, costumes (uniforms) as well as the 'concert spectacle, promotion/propaganda materials, public relations such as the issuing of manifestos and the staging of happenings' (Herscher and Žižek 1997: 66). The very choice of the band's and the movement's names – Laibach being the German for Ljubljana and *Neue Slowenische Kunst* standing for the New Slovenian Art – already signals first, on a surface level, a link to German national socialism and second, on a deeper level, an imposition of this (Nazi) ideology on another nationalist (Slovenian) ideology – an explicit over-coding, as it were.

All of this created allusions to the artistic means and techniques of the avant-garde and futurist art of the early twentieth century, thus prompting Laibach to christen themselves as 'the monumental retro-avant-garde' (qtd. in Monroe 2007: 51). The band's vision was all-encompassing, creating a shocking *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an ambiguously revolutionary response to both capitalism and socialism. Moreover, musically, 'Laibach's songs use rhythms, instrumentations, and samplings from both Eurodisco and military marches', which to Žižek and Herscher seem to 'articulate each of them as regimental, automatizing mechanisms' (Herscher and Žižek 1997: 66). However, as I will attempt to show, the matter is far from being that clear, and has to do with a slightly revised and re-appropriated – shown to encompass the retro-avant-garde practices as well – version of the prominent Marxist thinker Fredric Jameson's notion of modernist Irony as a(n) (un)sublation of two completely contradictory terms by stating two diametrically opposing things at the same time instead of solving their oppositions<sup>5</sup>; this will be the main tool used to help unravel Laibach's politico-aesthetic significance.

## 1. The Setting: How the West Was Shocked

It is not surprising that the band has been accused of fascism even by Slovenia’s own cultural critics and intellectuals (Herscher and Žižek 1997: 58) due to the band’s practice of ‘over-identification’<sup>6</sup>, which is a theoretical concept used by Laibach and Žižek to describe the band’s praxis, rendering the artistic act as equally aesthetic and political. ‘Over-identification, [...] takes the system at its word and plays so close to power that it cannot bear your participation. In that way you are more dangerous. It is not a mere parody of totalitarianism but an obsessive identification with it, taking it more seriously than it takes itself.’ (Parker 2005: 107) What this practically translated into was that ‘[u]ntil 1986-87 [Laibach – A.M.] practised their role everywhere, in coffee bars, in social spaces. They were always in uniform. The design of the uniform was an art in itself. This was very important for the urban, social climate, since it was a highly visible social ritual in a very small Ljubljana.’ (Parker 2005: 108)

This also marked the extension of the text within the limits of one’s own body as well as the geographical and cultural body of the city, which creates an opposition to more common Eastern Bloc cultural guerrilla practices such as Belgrade’s underground radio station B92, which worked for 10 years in opposing Slobodan Milošević’s rule.<sup>7</sup> Laibach’s positioning of themselves at the very centre of visibility in contrast to cultural guerrilla practices’ existence in fringes, gaps, and non-spaces is already a significant gesture as it meant openly inserting fascist allusions at the centre of the official ‘anti-fascist’ policy of Yugoslavia and the whole Soviet region. For any resident of this region anything ‘official’ generally meant nothing else but Orwellian doublespeak, void of any actual political or cultural significance; thus Laibach’s gesture may be easily contextualised as an exposition of the shallowness of any official policies.

But the matter gets murkier. In 1986 Laibach made a number of European hit song covers – such a practice continues to this day. One of these was the Rolling Stones’ ‘Sympathy for the Devil’. What Laibach did in their refraction of the song was to stress the fascist allusions already present in the song via the use of the Stalin-like vocals (Laibach’s traditional deep vocal style) and military drumming (very typical of the whole industrial

genre in general). The video clip pushed these allusions to the extreme as it portrayed the band members in their usual uniforms having a Nazi feast (banquet). Fascism was already implicit in the Rolling Stones’ song itself, albeit passed in a more ‘neutralised’ and less visible/audible way. Historian James J. Ward observes that ‘[c]leverly contrived to be the “bad boys” of rock’n’roll, it is not surprising that the Rolling Stones should have included a passing aside to fascism during their high Satanic phase (1967-69). In the anthemic “Sympathy for the Devil” on the *Beggars Banquet* album, Lucifer/Mick Jagger chants: “Rode a tank with a general’s rank / While the blitzkrieg raged and the bodies stank”.’ (Ward 1996: 158) Laibach then may also be seen as exposing the implicit crypto-fascism inherent in popular music and by extension the whole music industry.

Another example is the 1985 hit song ‘Life is Life’ by the Austrian band Opus to which in 1986 Laibach released a response in their album *Opus Dei*. What Laibach did to this song was the same procedure of re-Nazification: ‘Laibach underscores this linguistic hegemony by translating the song back to German. More than this, by combining the song with other sonic elements, they clearly bring out the latent fascist elements of the original recording, which were already implicit in the song’s call for unity: “It’s the feeling of the people / It’s the feeling of the land” (Goddard 2006: 46). The video clip was even more ideologically loaded: the uniformed band members walk around the Slovenian forests and hills to underscore the message of ‘the land’ which creates layers of double meaning. Lyrically, the band made a slight subversion by changing ‘everyone gave everything and everyone sings’ into ‘everyone gave everything and perished with the rest’, which for media scholar Michael Goddard indicates ‘a clear reference to the suicidal politics of total warfare operative in the Nazi regime’ (Goddard 2006: 46).

However, despite all the interesting exposition tactics the band employs, the media scholar is too quick to champion Laibach’s critique of the Nazi regime, while the reference of this textual subversion is far from being clear. In the eighties – when the song and the video were released – there was an uneasiness and rising national conflict within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup>, which culminated in the collapse of the republic into various smaller states in 1991. Therefore, it is analytically unconvinc-

ing that such a politically conscious act would be referencing the Nazi state as such, whose relevance has waned. In conjunction with the Slovenian landscape, which semiotically clusters with other pastoral motifs ‘such as the sower or the Slovene hay-rack [...], the Stag’ (Monroe 2007: 50) the reference stands for the then current political situation, especially owing to the fact that in the same year the song was released the military conflict in Kosovo began (1987), and rather marks another over-coding of the ‘Slovenian’ ideology. In other words, Goddard in his analysis does what he claims Laibach do to popular songs: he re-contextualises the song. One should not forget Jameson’s famous dictum: always historicise!

## 2. The Subversion: Long Road from One Vision to One Nation

It is now time to provide a closer look into, and a reading of, one of Laibach’s songs in an attempt to decipher the significance of the band’s use of the fascist and Nazi references. There is a significant ambiguity concerning the band’s stance towards nationalism as well as fascism, and their texts (songs, clips, concerts) are full of *contradictions* that complicate any attempts to provide a conclusive interpretation; the texts always seem to escape such critical pursuits. The text selected for the present analysis will be the song and the video ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ (‘The Birth of a Nation’<sup>9</sup>) (1987), a remake of Queen’s song ‘One Vision’ (1985), as it helps to further explore the complex issues of Slovenian nationalism foregrounded in the previous section.

Again, not only did Laibach translate the lyrics into German, they also slightly changed them. As the band is not German, this is an important act, even more so because of the vocalist’s strong accent, which for this reason cannot be mistaken for that of a German national. In other words, it is immediately understood as a conscious (ideological) choice. What was a song (at least on the surface) about the unity of vision against racism and the transcendence of conflict – Queen’s rhetoric is not accidentally reminiscent of the famous Martin Luther King’s speech – started to sound like Nazi propaganda. Queen’s ‘One flesh, one bone / One true religion / One voice, one hope / One real decision’ becomes ‘*Ein Fleisch, ein Blut, / ein*

*wahrer Glaube, / Eine Rasse und ein Traum, ein starker Wille*’ (One flesh, one blood, / One true belief, / One race and one dream, one strong will), which transforms the Kingesque into the Hitleresque only by the means of language and such switches as from ‘one voice’ to ‘one race’.

Significantly, Laibach omits the whole direct allusion to King’s speech which is present in one of Queen’s strophes starting with ‘I had a dream’, which protects from misinterpretation what comes next, namely the strophe ‘There’s only one direction, / One world and one nation, / Yeah one vision.’ Set in the context of King’s speech it becomes clear that the text does not refer to any of the nation states but to an idealised unity of the transcendence of nations. However, when Laibach omits the strophe and sings ‘*Es gibt nur eine Richtung, / eine Erde und ein Volk, / Ein Leitbild*’ (There’s only one direction, / One land and one nation, / One vision) it arrives entirely at the ideologically opposite effect. The biggest transformation happens to the last lines of the song: ‘Just gimme / One man, one man, / One bar, one night’ becomes ‘*ein Mensch, / ein Mann, / ein Gedanke, / eine Nacht, / einmal. / Jawohl!*’ (One man, / One man, / One belief, / One night, / Once more. / Yes Sir!), which calls to mind the Nazi (mis)interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of *der Übermensch* (the Super-human).

Laibach’s song is a subversion on a visual level as well. In the beginning of Queen’s clip the camera is shown ‘walking’ down the corridor, finding the band in a recording studio. While the camera has to search for Queen, the more passive stars, Laibach are actively marching towards it and the camera has to retreat – the first shots being the close-ups of their army boots flaunts their military aesthetics. In this video Laibach performs on an empty theatre stage in front of a red background while Queen, typically for the popular song videos from the 1980s, appear in the recording studio, mixed with the scenes from their live performances in front of a massive crowd. Laibach’s theatre stage stresses the spectacle aspect of the performance, which relates to the ‘Nazi aesthetics [as it – A.M.] is primarily a visual aesthetics, since the major triumphs of Nazi propaganda are of a specular nature.’ (Strathausen 1999: 10). In this sense the lone figures on the empty stage, too, emphasise the performative aspect of the artwork. This is especially salient when near the end of the clip soldiers are raising

their hands to the heavens or are holding a dying(?) comrade, which alludes not only to the propaganda-poster aesthetics, but also indicates the pantomime and tragicomic nature of such images as the video comes to parody the song itself, and comes to stress the exaggerated style of this symbolic political act.

Interestingly enough, the vocalist of Laibach also parodies Freddy Mercury, thus creating an ‘identity collage’: he is in his army attire but without any shirt on (again, a typical sartorial choice for rock stars), wearing Mercury’s iconic moustache. This dialogue extends even further as Queen are shown playing in a relaxed manner in their holiday shirts and sunglasses, coding the performance as leisure and fun, while Laibach, in turn, are in their austere uniforms and the two drummers beat their war drums in a repetitive marionette fashion. This recodes the performance as totalitarian, as a regime, as a control: is this the leisure industry ordering the masses to enjoy? But whose performance exactly is this an example of? Who or what is the object of this (re)presentation?

When one sees Laibach’s video and then comes back to Queen’s, the latter is seen in a new light. One begins to question the purpose of the distorted and ‘Satanic’ sounding noises, inserted in the beginning of Queen’s song, which seemingly have no relation aesthetically, stylistically or thematically to the rest of the song. Also, Mercury’s performance in front of a huge crowd and such gimmicks as thrusting his hand forward (a salute?) become reminiscent of totalitarian leaders and their crowd-control tactics. Even Queen’s apparently innocent message of unity and transcendence of difference seems to be fascist in its ameliorative nature. In other words, by the re-Nazification of the song Laibach appears to expose the fascist nature of popular culture as such and the not so innocent *jouissance*<sup>10</sup> lurking behind it. By using this martial and shock aesthetics they expose the mechanisms of interpellation and control operative in popular culture, as well as the fact that *any* artistic act has a political unconscious.

Furthermore, this rendering of aesthetics goes well with cultural theorist Theodor Adorno’s idea of politically revolutionary art: ‘In his discussion of “National Socialism and the Arts”, he describes as “infantile” those who believe that, in an ugly world, art should seek to evoke images of beauty

and harmony. Instead, says Adorno, art should confront its audience with the ugliness [...]. Only in confrontational art can the link between “music and philosophical truth” be maintained [...].’ (Street 2007: 329) It would appear that the discomfort Laibach creates serves aesthetically to awaken a critical consciousness: by producing these ambiguous works they perplex the listener/viewer into reconsidering his/her own affiliations and political/philosophical thought.

Not only does Laibach seemingly encourage the taking of a stance regarding their own music, they also force one to reconsider one’s relation to the whole popular music/culture industry. These collages and re-appropriations of political and cultural artefacts then serve to intercept the listener’s/ viewer’s neat suturing – to use a film-theoretical term – to the song’s world in order to see beyond the apparent innocence of popular culture. This, again, seemingly exemplifies a Marxist critique *par excellence* as it deals with the problem of the subject’s too close embeddedness in his/her own culture and mode of production.<sup>11</sup> Because of the effects of this synchronic moment of saturation, one is incapable of imagining alternative modes of thought. Such a tendency is what has to be challenged by social critique; it is where the revolutionary and the oppositional action begin. Such would be precisely the Žižekian interpretation of Laibach’s over-identification tactics, and ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ may be seen as a case in point. However, this is only one side of the proverbial coin.

### 3. The Revolutionary: Where Has All the Certainty Gone?

Laibach’s song and video are not unary; they are full of internal contradictions the further analysis of which from a Jamesonian perspective<sup>12</sup> will help to understand why this cannot just be seen as an innocent critique of popular (capitalist) culture, just as it cannot be simply rendered a critique of German Nazism. Thus, I will further extend my interpretation of the previous section so as to provide a more contextualised reading, dealing with this symbolic act’s political unconscious. It is necessary to see how the political functions within this text in order to understand its significance within the context of the current mode of production.

For such a purpose it is highly relevant that on Laibach’s theatrical stage such props as three white stags appear, which are not only the band’s personal symbols but the symbols of Slovenia itself. As cultural scholar Alexei Monroe – who has much invested in the study of the NSK – points out, ‘[o]ver-identification is often discussed in terms of ideology, performance or politics. However, the specific visual, sonic, and symbolic motifs used to produce over-identification effects sometimes receive less attention’ (Monroe 2007: 49). Monroe thus provides an analysis of precisely the symbol of the Slovene stag that recurs in the band’s imagery time and time again. He claims that ‘although it [the Stag – A.M.] is often used in a kitsch/ironic way, its deployment can still trigger subconscious or pre-rational associations and it carries a primal charge’ (Monroe 2007: 50). In conjunction with the song’s words ‘*ein Volk*’ (one nation) the stags foreground a certain over-coded nationalist message, not the least so in the light of the year’s (1987) events. The complex relation to capitalist culture does not eliminate the song’s linkage to nationalism and the fetishistic fascination with the nationalist symbols.

Unlike in the case of most punk music (Ward 1996), such symbols do not get completely emptied of their meaning. Instead, they are re-appropriated for the then current sociocultural and economic situation. Laibach, then, are doing several things at the same time in their texts: critique the current state of (political) affairs and expose an unbridled *jouissance* in their transgression as well as convey a nationalist message, perpetuating a blind and almost mystical fascination. This entails two diametrically opposed movements – both a critical distance from and an extreme embeddedness (over-identification) within the culture in question. It is not a paradox that should be solved; it is the most distinctive aspect of Laibach’s operative logic, which yet needs to be properly understood. This is where Jameson’s understanding of modernist Irony as a(n) (un)sublation of two contradictory terms comes in; it can arguably provide a satisfying frame of reference for explaining the band’s political unconscious as Laibach is both mocking and embracing the political without being able, or having the need, to go beyond the contradiction.

This brings me to the question of the utopian impulses<sup>13</sup>, i.e. to an aspect of the political unconscious of the symbolic political act ‘*Geburt einer*

*Nation*’. It is a clear jab at the capitalist culture because of the discussed intertextual references and subversions. The song also conveys a sense of excessive pleasure taken in this transgressive, subversive act as well as in the fascination with all things totalitarian. When combined with the images, there is a nationalist message inscribed in the lyrics (words ‘one nation’ being framed by the Slovenian symbols). While it unhinges the signifiers from their original meanings (both fascist symbolism as well as Queen’s song), they are not left floating, not recombined and reified into a new ideology, as is the case in most punk music. But can one speak of a new ideology when the text says two things at the same time, is a critique of totalitarianism as well as a perverse enjoyment in it? Does it contain any glimpse, any seed of a future, or is it fully immersed within the present?

These questions gain a particular relevance because of the medium in question. As Marxist critic Jacques Attali argues, ‘Music is prophecy. Its styles and organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future.’ (Attali 1985: 11) While these claims may be equally applicable to art in general as a locus of the exploration of possibilities, music does seem to be a particularly fit medium for conceptual experimentation due to the inherent ambiguity of sound. Furthermore, as Deleuzian scholar Aden Evans remarks, ‘This is how music makes a difference, by demanding something of the listener, by directing memory to construct new subjects of hearing. Here is music’s *entrée* into the political, the social, and the economic.’ (Evans 2005: 49) Through creating the conditions for new ways of thought to emerge and helping new subjects of hearing to come into being, music is essentially political. Because of this exceptionally utopian nature of music it is even more important to ask how the utopian functions in such a controversial text as ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’.

In a Jamesonian sense, the future or the utopian impulse is not related to the delineation of any type of agenda for future political and cultural action and the subsequent creation of a society. The utopian impulse comprises a possibility to imagine or to create a dark precursor – to use a

Deleuzian term – for the emergence of thought necessary for the creation of a new society in the first place (Jameson 2005). Even though Laibach may be said to critique popular capitalist culture, this is primarily done from within without any possibility of a sublation. Nor do they present a text in which an alien, a completely different mode of thought, would be the genus, the logic-semantic level of the text – which would most likely make such a text unreadable and not interpretable. The *jouissance* in connection to everything military, totalitarian, and ideological does not seem to contradict the logic of capitalism.

However, this raises a very important question. How can a symbolic political act from 1980s Yugoslavia be an expression, a mapping out, of the logic of capitalism? Should I not be accused of a decontextualisation as surely the mode of production at stake is socialism? Here I would propose an initially somewhat controversial idea: that there was never socialism as a mode of production proper in the first place. What existed at that time in Yugoslavia was a repression of the capitalist mode of production which reared its head again and again. The point that Jameson underscores in *The Political Unconscious* is that one cannot have a different mode of production just by changing the conditions of labour. The deep structure of thinking must precede it, which was not the case in Yugoslavia.

Moreover, this idea loses its controversy as soon as one looks into the economic and political side of things. In the late 1980s the International Monetary Fund forced the impoverished but more independent of the Soviet states to go through several structural adjustments, and the Structural Adjustment Program in Yugoslavia amounted to a transition into a more neoliberal economy by introducing the privatization of property<sup>14</sup>. More importantly, as political scholar Gal Kirn, in his doctoral dissertation, claims, after Louis Althusser, the ‘Socialist’ mode of production did not exist even in the early days of its implementation (1960s); it always has been a combination of socialism and capitalism (Kirn 2012). Therefore, ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ may be seen, without much contradiction, as a revelation of the capitalist deep structure of thought that underlay the supposedly Socialist Yugoslavian social formation. Such a deep structure is most clearly symptomatised by the Ironic un-sublation, to which I shall now turn.

#### 4. The Unsublation: Choose life. Choose Good. Or choose Evil

The un-sublation in Laibach’s practice is connected to the double-sided nature of the message being conveyed. Laibach parasitically use popular culture (in this case Queen’s ‘One Vision’) and fill it with fascist symbolism, which, in turn, exposes (or constructs) the earlier song as latently fascist in the first place. But this does not simply make one critical about one’s listening experience and popular culture; this makes one question one’s sense of enjoyment and unconscious alignment. If Queen or Laibach gives one excessive pleasure, what is this surplus pleasure rooted in? Is it not coming from the essential power-submission dynamics, characteristic of totalitarian regimes, of being a part of a larger and all-powerful whole (culture, nation, [para]militia)? This realisation has certainly the potential to discourage one from various listening and viewing experiences, but it also has the reverse potential to cause a more conscious alignment with certain ideological ideas.

In the case of Laibach, it is not at all clear what these ideological ideas are. According to psychoanalyst Ian Parker, it ‘poses a disturbing conundrum, and an uncertainty about what exactly is being evoked, especially as Laibach have never been into telling the audience what to think, what the correct line is’ (Parker 2006: 106). This causes an interesting phenomenon in the reception of this music to emerge as ‘[o]ne 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’ (Parker 2006: 109). It thus proves that, in reality, cultural theorist Marc James Léger’s proposition that ‘the audience members of [retro – A.M.] avant-garde productions are compelled to give up their fantasmatic identifications as self-positing subjects’ (Léger 2012: 161) does not live up to its claim as the texts accommodate more than one (diametrically opposed) fantasmatic identifications instead of dispelling them. It is instructive that the shift in the sociopolitical horizon likewise causes a semiotic shift: within the context of the Soviet doublespeak Laibach’s practice is a commentary on the state policies, while in the Western context it creates a more contradictory effect.

This contradictory subject-effect/subject-of-hearing that results from the engagement with the text is stemming from the fact that the contradiction is already rooted in the main operative ideologemes (or themes<sup>15</sup>) of the text. For example, in the lyrics and the video one can find the theme ‘nationalism is strength’ but the same theme may be read as ‘nationalism is ridiculous’.<sup>16</sup> This refolding of meaning happens due to irony permeating all the (figurative, narrative<sup>17</sup>, logic-semantic) levels of the text. Also, there is an instructive ambiguity in the oppositional pairs: the ‘other’ is constructed as popular (capitalist) culture which is signified as dishonest, totalitarian, and interpellative. But the self is portrayed as honest, totalitarian, and interpellative, i.e. the difference regarding the subjectivisation is one of openness.

Yet, as was observed earlier, it is not at all clear what sort of interpellation one is subjected to and, therefore, the seme ‘honesty’ is cancelled out. The self (Laibach) and the other (Queen) become the same. This is a surprising way of coding as usually the violence inherent in the construction of binaries is that the marks of similarity between the Self and the Other are abolished. In this case, one witnesses the reverse of the general tendency, indeed, the reverse of the binary principle. Subsequently, the distancing and critique aspect is submerged in ambiguity. Such textual contradictions are entwined with the surfacing of Irony (the unsublation), which in this context does not mean an aspect of narrative style, but a coexistence of opposites on the logic-semantic level of the text, in the structure of possible thought. As Jameson puts it, ‘[f]or it is in Irony that we are able to have our cake both ways and deny what we affirm, while affirming what we deny. Irony is indeed the [unresolved – A.M.] synthesis of opposites prescribed in the modernist period’ (Jameson 2005: 177-178). Laibach are the proponents of this modernist Irony as their irony uncovers its contradictions as the Contradiction, the essence of the current state of things.

From a Marxist point of view, one is bound to ask whether that implies that the Contradiction is unsolvable (a failed Utopia), or whether it implies a seed, a dark precursor of solvability, of a new mode of thought? I would claim that it is rather the first option that such an unsublation entails. According to the Jamesonian approach, a failed Utopia is no less instructive than a successful one: most Utopias are inescapably destined to

fail due to the synchronic modes of thought inherent in the current, or any, mode of production. What is interesting is precisely the nature of its failure and what it can say about the operations of the political unconscious of a text and society in general.

The creation of the ambiguous subject-effect and the underlying contradictions of ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ do not manage to contain a seed of an alternative thought or political action. Instead, it offers a few (incompatible) subjectivisations, which means it gives an opportunity to *choose*. The equivalence of incompatible alternatives on the axis of selection is a characteristic feature of the capitalist mode of production/thought where everything gets to be levelled down to exchange value. Both Good and Evil become just paradigmatic choices, void of any metaphysical traces. While this proposition may appear to be somewhat abstract, Laibach exemplify how it works in actuality. In this instance, it is not the question of the circulation of money but of possible thought - although Laibach do sell their artistic production and therefore participate in this form of exchange in a very literal sense.

For Jameson, reification gets to mean not the shift from the relationship between people to the relationship between things (as Karl Marx would have it), but the abstraction of such relationships where in the late stage of capitalism all the relationships take place on an abstract, immaterial, and impersonal level: digital money transactions are the epitome of reification. What this implies is that as reification moves to the abstract level, it comes to encompass moral, political, and philosophical positions as well: perspectivism and relative ethics emerge. Such is the deep underlying structure of possible thought out of which Laibach’s song stems. It accommodates the shift in meaning that takes place when one interprets Laibach’s practices within the Western context as opposed to their original contextual horizon. ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ may be seen as both critiquing the Soviet Yugoslavia’s policies by over-identifying with Slovenian nationalism and embracing such totalitarianism/nationalism. In any case, Laibach remains firmly embedded within the Western capitalist mode of production as evidenced by such a double subjectivisation – the realm of the Ironic leads to the relativism of meaning.

## Conclusions

Laibach passes the burden of proof (and of responsibility) to the listener/viewer. Theirs is not an ironical position, which would entail an already resolved, sublated contradiction; theirs is the simultaneous endorsement of two incompatible things, as in Jameson’s Irony – an unsublated contradiction. While in the Yugoslav context the artistic practice gains a less ambivalent significance in relation to aspects of the regime, when perceived from a Western perspective it creates contradictory subject-effects and becomes a point of identification for both left-wing and right-wing political subjects. The listener/viewer has to make a leap of faith (and of affect/unconscious alignment) in choosing not only the meaning but the politics as well – even if only in an abstract, non-committal way. Most importantly, one cannot escape the political in either case.

However, this politicisation of the aesthetic is ultimately an aesthetic choice in that it does not foster a utopian impulse or a revolutionary potential. Hence this article’s title, by which I aim to emphasise such a lack of a clear political cause. That is to say, over-identification as ‘a dialectical mediation of political and cultural practice’ (Léger 2012: 135) is not an apt concept to describe Laibach’s agenda. Conceived as such, the works of over-identification will almost inevitably be the works of a failed utopian (political) nature as, in an exemplary way, ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ is not a rebellion against either the past or the current mode of production (the distinction between which is far from being clear) but a taking of its logic to its limits. What Laibach does is not to propose a certain type of Utopia but – not unlike the great modernist artists – create the ultimate dystopia inherent in the current mode of production by exemplifying the logic of interchangeability of meaning and ideology.

It becomes clear that what the band ‘over-identifies’ with are not so much totalitarian regimes or Slovenian nationalism as such but the capitalist logic of production and thought itself. Although Laibach’s unsublated Irony is symptomatic of the capitalist operative logic present in the political unconscious of this specific symbolic act, quite possibly it may be applied to other retro-avant-garde and over-identification practices such as Yes Men, Christoph Schlingensief, Janez Janša, Janez Janša and Janez Janša,

Komar & Melamid, Andrea Fraser, Jakob Boeskov, Thomas Hirschhorn, The Colbert Report, etc. as well. In fact, the notion of unsublated Irony as symptomatic of the capitalist political unconscious of an aesthetic act may help to explain their failures as explicitly political acts (Léger 2012: 135-136).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Žižek 2003, Žižek 2005, Žižek 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Parker 2005: ‘There is an uncanny crossover between some of the activities of Laibach – NSK and Žižek’s cultural-political interventions, and now some dispute between the two as to who influenced whom (there are essays on the links between NSK and Žižek on [www.nskstate.com](http://www.nskstate.com)).’ (Parker 2005: 107). However, this suggestion should be taken with a grain of salt as the NSK state itself (an imaginary state created by the artistic acts that were/are parts of the NSK movement) is rather a further provocation in the Laibachian vein. Yet Stefan Auer also claims that ‘[L]ike Laibach, Žižek is an arch-manipulator. Just as Laibach seeks to provoke by imitating old totalitarian propaganda, Žižek attempts to subvert the ruling ideology of his day[.] Recipients of both Žižek’s philosophy and Laibach’s music might be confused about the “real political meaning” of these works, the message behind the ironic gestures, but their confusion is only the first step towards overcoming their blind acceptance of the ruling ideology.’ (Auer 2009: 93).

<sup>3</sup> The typical feature of the genre is to reference in various direct and indirect ways fascism, Nazism, communism, Stalinism, anarchism, capitalism; there is a significant lack of unary meaning as the genre is permeated by double signification and coding systems.

<sup>4</sup> On the industrial genre, its sub-genres, history, and genealogies cf. Hegarty 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Sublation itself already entails a certain amount of unsublation as ‘there always remains an unmediated moment, a hard kernel of unsublated contradiction, a phantom fourth [next to thesis, antithesis, and synthesis – A. M], the trace or *differance* of deconstruction, that resists mediation’ (Schroeder 1998: 26). However, the unsublation proper is to be distinguished from this ‘unsublated residue’ within sublation.

<sup>6</sup> The concept was taken up and further developed to encompass broader radical resistance practices by the Brussels and Rotterdam-based anti-(neo)liberalist collective BAVO. Cf. BAVO 2007 and Léger 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Collin 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Various nationalist tensions reverberated all throughout the Soviet states (Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia). Cf. Dragović-Sosso 2002 and Wachtel 2002.

<sup>9</sup> It is no accident that the title alludes to D. W. Griffith’s iconic film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as its controversial nationalism, racism and other aspects resonate with Laibach’s own practice.

<sup>10</sup> Lacanian *jouissance* is not to be confused with the psychoanalytic notion of pleasure as it is precisely what lies beyond the pleasure principle: ‘[T]he result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that a subject can bear. Beyond this limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this “painful pleasure” is what Lacan calls *jouissance*[.] The term *jouissance* thus nicely expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom[.]’ (Evans 1996: 92)

<sup>11</sup> Here I follow Jameson, who, in turn, follows Louis Althusser, in understanding the mode of production as the entirety of the economic, the political and the cultural, which are interrelated without any of these layers being distinguished as a direct or a mediating cause of the others.

<sup>12</sup> In my analysis I will keep shifting between the three interpretative horizons (political, social, and historical) that Jameson outlined in his *The Political Unconscious* because they are not independent but interrelated and supplementary. It is important to stress that in every horizon the text and the object are constituted differently. Only on the first level the object is roughly identical to a single text (symbolic act). On the second level it has to be seen in terms of ideologemes and the dialogic struggle of classes. Finally, on the third level the object is rendered in terms of the ideology of form, in terms of the synchronic and diachronic developments that are traces or anticipations of various modes of production (cf. Fernand Braudel’s multiple temporalities). Cf. Jameson 1983.

<sup>13</sup> The utopian impulse may be understood as a trace or an anticipation of a mode of production and has to do with the third interpretative horizon, namely the historical.

<sup>14</sup> As economics scholar Catherine Samary argues, in the four decades (from 1945 to 1985) Yugoslavia had ‘four major systems of production and exchange, four different modalities of articulation of plan and market, that from the 1950s onwards formed self-management that became combined with different relations to the global market’ (Qtd. in Kirn 2012: 238).

<sup>15</sup> A theme is inherently an ideologeme, a unit of ideological thought. For example, in a number of books and especially television sitcoms one can find a theme ‘heterosexual marital love leads to happiness’, which is an example of the heteronormative ideology at work. Essentially, no theme is apolitical.

<sup>16</sup> Behind my somewhat simplistic formulation lies a whole context, surrounding and giving rise to this thought. In the first case (‘nationalism is strength’) the ideologeme is rooted in nineteenth-century German idealism, whereas in the second case (‘nationalism is ridiculous’) the ideologeme may be said to operate within the confines of the libertarian-eighteenth-century thought.

<sup>17</sup> The narrative dimension of ‘*Geburt einer Nation*’ primarily manifests itself as an implied narrative of a nation. However, the meaning of the story Laibach tells is again ambiguous. Narrativity in music is a problematic area and raises the question of whether in music there can be found anything resembling a narrative. However, I tend to understand narrative in a very broad sense as any kind of transformation from one state to another. As such, narrativity is present in many different forms in music: as the (implied) narrative in the lyrics, intertextual transformations (sonic/verbal direct and indirect quotations), the narrative progression of a concept album or the musical structure itself (the beginning of a musical theme, its transformation, and its coda), etc. Nevertheless, even if these aspects can be seen as forms of narrativity, they cannot be easily equated with narrative texts proper.