

Laibach, Anti-fashion and Subversion: Over-identification and Universality of a Uniform

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide renowned Slovenian industrial alternative music group Laibach, which was also a member of the multimedia artists' collective called NSK, has been a subject of many professional discussions. This article attempts to analyse Laibach's conception of a uniform according to the theory of anti-fashion. As one of the most recognizable elements expressing a mythical, totalitarian aura, inseparably linked with the performers' distant and constrained attitude, Laibach's uniform can be erroneously comprehended as anti-fashion clothing, expressing fixed and rigid social environments. The analysis of Laibach's television interview from 1983, in which the band is directly imitating the ruling ideological language, shows that the strategy of over-identification and subversion represent dominant principles of Laibach's actions, combining them with the retro-method of using symbols and images of various cultural traditions and periods, as seen in their diversity of clothing worn, including the Yugoslav military uniform, miner and hunting uniforms, jeans and shirts, and even fashionable items.

With the performative dimension in the ideological ritual and by emphasizing totalitarian tendencies in contemporary society, Laibach endeavours to show that all changeable multiform clothes are uniforms – timeless, universal and deprived of semiological meaning and thus surpasses the distinction of fashion and anti-fashion or fixed and modish costume. Nearly forty years after the establishment of the group, Laibach is conventionally dressed in regular clothes, nevertheless providing a sentiment of wearing a collective's uniform.

KEYWORDS

Anti-fashion, (military) uniform, band Laibach, retro-avant-garde, alternative culture

INTRODUCTION

Laibach, an "avant-garde industrial group" as defined in the magazine Rolling Stone [1], represents an important part of the mainstream Slovenian culture, operating on the fringes of the dominant culture as the most unconventional and provocative part of the Slovenian alternative scene. Since Laibach's first public action in 1980, when posters depicting a black cross and the word "Laibach" flooded a small Slovenian industrial town Trbovlje, their work has been associated with a totalitarian aspect of their artistic actions. Laibach performs bare concerts, refusing to create a warm and lively atmosphere, and rather focuses on the atypical frontman's movement using deliberate theatrical and automated motions in order to estab-

lish a mythic totalitarian aura. The performers appear distant, constrained and with no individuality, whilst the set, intertwined with architecture, film material and symbolism, perfectly completes the ambience, all with an intention to defy conventions of a rock concert and rather turn it into a totalitarian ritual using discourse of absolute certainty [2].

Laibach has been, not only as a music group, but also as a conceptual art collective known as *Laibach Kunst*, subject of many professional discussions analysing diverse topics, yet answers concerning their clothing within the framework of the current studies¹ are difficult to provide despite their outfit being one of the most fundamental and recognizable elements of their performances from the beginning. Laibach's uniforms, on the one hand, provoke shock and indignation of the society and on the other, encourage imitation by fans displaying strong affinity.

The main purpose of this paper is to present how Laibach, within the strategy of over-identification, understands uniform as being one of the most prominent elements of the performed totalitarian spectacle, in relation to the anti-fashion concept. By placing Laibach into a socio-political context, explaining the concept of anti-fashion as complex and ambiguous, and analysing Laibach's activity within the concepts of over-identification and subversion, we want to answer the question of why is Laibach as a collective always perceived as being dressed in a uniform. The methodological approach employed in the paper covers the analysis of traditional print media, web-based media and audio-visual materials, the analysis of scientific articles and a semi-structured interview with Laibach's member Ivan Novak in July 2018, as well as the participant observation method (as a spectator attending Laibach's concerts in Celje - June 2018 and in Zagreb - December 2017).

LAIBACH, YUGOSLAVIA AND POST-TITOIST TIME

With their industrial, alternative or, as classified by Šuvaković [4], post-avant-garde or retro-avant-garde music, Laibach, at the beginning of the 1980s, entered the public sphere, in the wake of the political situation in Yugoslavia in the previous decade. Officially, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was swamped with uncertainty in the 1980s; especially after the death of the Yugoslavian post-war leader and the dominant figure, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, in May 1980, when Yugoslav state and Yugoslav socialism, characteristic for being different from socialism and communism of other East European countries, especially once Tito cut the ties with Stalin in 1948, gradually started to fall apart [5]. The former socialist state was, especially in the second half of the 1980s, affected by increasing economic, social and political problems; an economic crisis, a rapid decline of living standard, growing social inequality and, most significantly, the rise of nationalism and conflicts between different Yugoslav states (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and two autonomous provinces Vojvodina and Kosovo) resulted in the decay of socialism [5]. This coincided with the intellectual awakening in Slovenia, the outcome of which was the multimedia artists' collective called *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK), formed in 1984 and founded by Laibach, the visual art collective IRWIN (1983) and the performance group Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre (1983). Laibach and NSK represented the most radical part of the alternative Slovenian subcultural scene in the 1980s; the scene that was in the late 1970s and 1980s known for its strong political connotations [6]. This politically and socially critical art had a great impact on Slovenian transition to a democratic political system and on Slovenia becoming an

¹ Aleš Erjavec in *The Avant-Gardes, Utopias and Clothes* (2017) concentrates on the analysis of the overalls worn by Dragan Živadinov, the leader of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre - besides Laibach, one of the groups of the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* collective. The text does not provide a more detailed treatment of Laibach's clothing, just an overall characteristic of the NSK as an "organization in Slovenia dressed, from their beginning in the early 1980s, in black" [3].

independent country [7]. Slovenia, officially the Republic of Slovenia, became an independent democratic state in 1991; unlike other former republics and autonomous provinces of Yugoslavia, Slovenia's transition went fairly peacefully with no major consequences.

The change of the political system and the switch from a socialist economical self-management to a capital market economy also resulted in different approaches to the state's cultural policy; the art which supported socialist ideology was thus sponsored and instrumentalised by the Yugoslav state institutions and governing structures in socialism. The state's most important cultural spectacle advocating the ideology of socialism and ideals of Yugoslavian society was the Youth Day, acknowledging Tito's birthday on May 25. In 1987, a competition for an official propaganda poster for this celebration took place; the poster taking the win was the re-appropriation of the Nazi painting by Rickard Klein from 1936 entitled *The Third Reich. Allegory of Heroism* created by an NSK sub-group, New Collectivism. This caused great upset leading to a scandal, which only deteriorated the situation in the already unstable former Yugoslavia [5], being considered as a "disguised art form, because the political discourse was reserved for official ideology and politically sanctioned speakers and writers" [8]. The art following radical cultural practices and criticizing the governing party - including Laibach - triggered not only strong reactions of the socio-political sphere but also its negative representation in the mass media of Yugoslav and especially Slovenian society.

Once times of socialism and former Yugoslavia passed and the ideals of the Yugoslavian society - brotherhood, fraternity and equality were nothing but meaningless words, art, and other spheres as well, could enter the free capitalist market. In the new consumer society, art either represented a new opportunity, especially for success, or something unknown and risky [6]. Not even in the post-Titoist time - in the independent democratic state of Slovenia - did Laibach lose their focal point; they merely directed their interests into the new state system, the neoliberal doctrine, the totality of the capital and the question of cultural policy. With turning their gaze towards new topics concerning a modern capitalistic world, Laibach, defined as an explicitly uniform collective [9], has made use of the same techniques using their uncommonly critical approach, together with the collective's unusual uniformed appearance (Picture 1).



Picture 1. Laibach's live concert at the Trbovlje Power Station, Slovenia, 1990 [10]

THE CONCEPT OF ANTI-FASHION: COMPLEXITY AND AMBIGUITY

A uniform is an important part of rock and punk cultures since it serves as a performative dimension of the spectacle. Besides Laibach, other groups perform in their representative uniforms as well, such as The Monkees, The Beach Boys, and even The Beatles. The uniform as such is, in fashion analyses, inseparably connected to the ambiguous anti-fashion concept. Although the following discussion concerning Laibach's phenomenon addresses especially the (military) uniform as a piece of the anti-fashion clothing, defined by the American anthropologist and the main theoretician of anti-fashion Ted Polhemus, we cannot overlook other clothing items outside the fashion system, such as functional clothes in modern society (work clothing, a variety of uniforms), traditional folk costumes, religious and subculture clothes, clothing of non-western societies, including Islamic dress, and clothes that were fashionable but have, over time, become representatives of anti-fashion (a T-shirt, jeans, a little black dress etc.).

The problem of the anti-fashion term can be particularly observed in the complex and multivalent relationship between (anti-)fashion and Islamic dress, especially due to the popularity of the topic in fashion studies. In the monograph *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (2013), Tarlo and Mors emphasize that if anti-fashion describes all clothes outside of the fashion system, where fashion is understood as an explicitly Western phenomenon, then all forms of the Islamic dress are automatically and also problematically labelled as anti-fashion [11]. A fine example is *hijab*; "representing Islamic identity and morality" [12], and embodying political connotations of Islam revival in the 1970s, it was transformed to a fashionable piece worn by middle-class women all around the world [11]. The ambiguity of the Islamic anti-fashion discourse is also shown in an analysis of Muslim minorities in Finland by Almila [13], indicating that the Islamic dress today can be either categorized as anti-fashion, fashion or non-fashion.² As shown, the concept of anti-fashion is commonly, and often uncritically, understood as any form of opposition to current fashion. Entwistle [14] states that the meaning of non-fashionable clothes originates in the opposition to fashion-dictated aesthetics. Similarly, Wilson claims in her work *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985): "Even the determinedly unfashionable wear clothes that manifestly represent a reaction against what is in fashion" [15]. A variety of terms has been used for all of the forms of clothes that are considered to be outside the fashion system, such as non-fashion, counter-fashion, clothes that are out-of-fashion or unfashionable clothes.

One of the first distinctions between fashion and "to be dressed in an unmodern manner" was provided at the beginning of the 20th century by the German sociologist Georg Simmel in the essay *The Philosophy of Fashion* (1905) [16]. According to Simmel, fashion, as a social epiphenomenon and a product of the modern class society, is a form of imitation and distinction - two fundamental fashion's functions - at the same time. Fashion creating, maintaining and justifying social differences is exclusively in hands of only one stratum of the society - upper social classes; therefore, when lower social classes adopt the fashion of upper social classes through external imitation, the fashion loses the function of differentiation, forcing the upper classes to discard it and introduce a new one [16]. A constant change becomes the essence of fashion.

Fashion as a mechanism of social stratification was also discussed in the theoretical approaches of Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of The Leisure Class* (1899) and later by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979). However, in his sociological approach to the phenomenon of fashion, Simmel goes beyond the classical understanding of the trickle-down theory. Even though he under-

² Anti-fashion of the Islamic dress is understood as a negative response to the Islamic fashion dress, as fashion being morally questionable, while the functionality and conformity to accepted norms are the basis of Islamic non-fashion dress [13].

stands non-fashion as the dressing of lower social classes within the framework of trickle-down theory and discusses groups that adopt no-fashion as a fashionable manner, being non-fashionable is, according to Simmel, primarily a personal sphere since people as “individuals [...] fear that they will be unable to maintain their little piece of individuality if they adopt the forms, tastes and customs of the general public” [16]. Being out of fashion signifies that you are in constant relation to fashion and thus affected by it in such a way that it enables you to express your individuality and your personalised lifestyle. With an established link between fashion and identity, Simmel lays the foundations not only for postmodern fashion paradigm³ but also for its main theoretician Gilles Lipovetsky.

On the contrary, anti-fashion as a concept is often associated with social groups that manifest and symbolize their beliefs, norms and values through anti-fashion clothing. A frequently used term for subcultural clothes is anti-fashion; however, again, not solely one term can be employed.⁴ Various youth subcultures in the 1960s assumed the leading role of manifesting their beliefs, norms and values through anti-fashion clothing as a product of opposing fashion in liberal democracy. This led to the rejection of social hierarchy by wearing clothes expressing individuality according to the supermarket of lifestyle. Paić [17] assigns a leading role to anti-fashion within the postmodern paradigm of fashion, where *haute couture* loses fashion hegemony and the fashion centre moves from Paris to London. However, subcultural anti-fashion clothes have also become incorporated in fashion through street style and the work of fashion designers, such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood. The analysis of anti-fashion in the 1970s in a subcultural context emphasized that Vivienne Westwood’s design “enthusiastically embraced punk, and her role underscores the *naïveté* of any rigid separation between anti-fashion and fashion” [18]. The distinction between fashion and anti-fashion thus cannot be defined as a total dichotomy.

When considering the dichotomy between fashion and anti-fashion, which is not as accurate and transparent as it may seem at first glance, a key question for further discussion has to be addressed: what are the main characteristics of anti-fashion, if it could not be straightforwardly defined as the opposite of fashion? The concept of anti-fashion was theoretically first defined in an anthropological analysis named *Fashion & Anti-fashion* (1978) by Ted Polhemus and Lynn Procter, later republished by Polhemus (2011) with a changed subtitle⁵. However, the most salient basis for the theory of anti-fashion was provided by John Flügel in his book *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930). Instead of the terms anti-fashion and fashion, he employed the expressions of fixed and modish costume in relation to a different perception of time and place; whilst fixed costume is subjected to changes in space but not in time, modish costume undergoes slow modifications in space but rapid ones in time [19]. Based on different conceptions of time, Polhemus and Procter define anti-fashion as an unchangeable and fixed form of clothing bound up with a specific place and as “all styles or ornament falling outside the system of change organized by fashion” whereas fashion is, as a variable body adornment, characterised by fluidity, dynamics, constant change and novelty [20]. Their definition tends to be problematic since it includes all forms of anti-fashion clothing, thereby not differentiating between traditional clothes or uniforms, and clothes having a negative response to modern fashion as a sign of social status and social role. To critique such an explanation, and using a sociological-

³ The division into three paradigms of fashion: modern, postmodern and contemporary, at the same time representing a theoretical approach, is based on the classification by Žarko Paić, given in the book *Vertigo in Fashion: Towards a Visual Semiotics of Fashion (Vrtoglavica u modi: Prema vizualnoj semiotici tijela)* [17].

⁴ For example, Lind and Roach-Higgins in *Fashion, Collective Adoption, and the Socio-Political Symbolism of Dress* (1985) for clothes of subcultural groups use the term counter-fashion.

⁵ *Fashion & Anti-fashion: An Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* (1978); *Fashion & Anti-fashion: Exploring Adornment and Dress from an Anthropological Perspective* (2011).

semiological approach to fashion in his work *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (1994), Fred Davis, a sociologist, introduced the term “non-fashion” for traditional and folk costumes, whilst the term “anti-fashion”, in his opinion, should be restricted to the so-called oppositional dress as a negative response to fashion changes [21]; the latter aspect of anti-fashion is often connected to already discussed subcultures.

If the distinction between fashion and anti-fashion is not perceived as a binary opposition, then anti-fashion of uniform or, using Davis’s term, non-fashion, does not represent fashion’s antithesis as it is placed beyond the organized system of fashion change. An unchanging and fixed uniform⁶, a military uniform in particular, embodies power and thus represents a symbol of hierarchy while being used as an ideological instrument and as an extension of political structures [22]. Used in a variety of non-military contexts “such as pornography, prostitution, sadomasochism, transvestism, cross-dressing, vaudeville, mardi gras, gay culture, subcultures, and stripograms” [23], a uniform as an anti-fashion item is, nowadays, applied to a range of transgressive and subversive contexts, as in case of Laibach’s collective.

LAIBACH’S TOTALITY: RETRO-AVANT-GARDE, OVER-IDENTIFICATION AND SUBVERSION

With a totalitarian spectacle and a subversive provocation being Laibach’s fundamental *modus operandi* on the one hand and with consciousness, anonymity and collectivism in the core of Laibach’s work on the other, their aim is to deconstruct mass culture, a role of ideology, a state system, popular and rock music, and norms of conventional art [24]. Using classic avant-garde methods, such as collective appearances, public provocations, interference with politics and prewritten programmed statements, Laibach makes use of symbols and signs from different periods and cultural traditions, for example, the Laibach cross, a cogwheel, NATO’s insignias and combines them with Nazi-Kunst, socialist realism, modernism, folk art and pop-elements by using the so-called retro-method known as retro-avant-garde [25]. The influence of avant-garde, defined, by the theoretician of avant-garde art Boris Groys, as the aesthetic of new and the break of traditional art [26], is observed not only in the manifesto *Laibach: 10 Items of the Covenant* from 1982 [9], first published a year later in the Slovenian magazine for cultural and political issues *Nova revija*, but also in the aesthetic politicization and radical critique of everyday life through Laibach’s uniform.

This was remarkably shown in their first television appearance in Ljubljana for *TV Tednik* (TV Weekly) on the Slovenian national television in 1983. TV-host Jure Pengov interviewed Laibach members, who replied with answers given in advance and staged a sort of media performance; the room abounding in Laibach’s posters and a strong light casting a dark shadow on the members, who were sitting in a distinguishable stiff posture (Picture 2). Due to the black-and-white television at that time, their pieces of clothing resembled Nazi uniforms, although the members of the collective wore Yugoslav Army uniforms. Uniform as anti-fashion was completely aestheticized since Laibach strove towards maintaining some of the canonical elements of the uniform, such as brass buttons, epaulettes and stark colours, stylized with high collars and different military boots; some of the members also wore ties and watches. What especially grabbed spectators’ attention was all members having their arms crossed, which brought into the spotlight the armband with a symmetrical black cross known as the Laibach cross. Together with lights, shadows, movements, blank direct gazes, prewritten statements and military uniforms, they performed a spectacle of a uniformed body. Their typical body hexis and uniform wearing constitute the habitus of Laibach’s members.

⁶ With unchangeable uniforms, it is not meant that all uniforms are the same; the idea is that they are the same among a specific social group, while they necessarily differ from the uniforms of other social groups.



Picture 2. Laibach's first TV appearance in 1983, wearing stylized Yugoslav Army uniforms [27]

When considering Laibach's performativity, it is understood as the main category of artistic action. After the performative turn in the early 1960s as defined by Fischer-Lichte, the new artistic genre is born, so-called action or performance, while "performativity results in performances or manifests itself in the performative nature of acts" [28]. The characteristic elements of Laibach's music, gestures, clothing and effects create a performative whole; each individual aspect, such as light effects, music, scenography and clothing, are well-defined, nothing is left to chance and only the combination of these individual aspects form a whole, which enables a specific performative spectacle imitating a totalitarian ritual by using uniform as the key symbol of totalitarian power.

Therefore, it is relevant to consider, first, why Laibach chose the military uniform of the Yugoslav Army as their performing clothes and, second, how important were Laibach's uniforms for the political aspect of media performance. The former can already be deciphered from the newspaper title in *Nedeljski dnevnik* of 3 July 1983: "Who Made Laibach's Shirts?" [29], which is a reformulation of the title *Who Made Videk's Shirt?* from the famous Slovenian folk tale by Fran Levstik.⁷ Naming Laibach "cultural workers", the author of the article labelled their TV appearance as "verbal diarrhoea of guys in uniforms" and recognizing the mythical, totalitarian aura, stated: "There was nothing directly Fascist in the moronic answers of the guys in uniforms, yet the feeling after the show was still immensely nightmarish" [29]. How important uniform and imitation of the totalitarian ritual is for Laibach's spectacle can also be understood from the following quote from the article: "Because - verbal diarrhoea is verbal diarrhoea, but provocation in Nazi-like uniforms is provocation. Boys, take off this rubbish and play what you can play" [29]. Their clothing representing a military uniform and staged totalitarianism generated outrage in the eyes of the audience; the socio-political sphere interpreted Laibach and their image as the incorporation of Nazism and thus insisted on a connection between punk and the ideology of Nazism, which was 'confirmed' with members' aggressive 'presence' and the band's historically problematic German name for the capital city of Slovenia, which was used under Nazi and Italian occupation during World War II [31].⁸ Consequently, Yugoslavian authorities banned the name 'Laibach', its concerts and other activities until 1987. During that time, in November and December 1983, Laibach went on their first European tour named 'Occupied Europe Tour', taking place on both sides of the Berlin Wall separating Eastern and Western Europe.

⁷ The story is about a little boy Videk who came from a poor family. Because she had to work in the field, Videk's mother was unable to sew new shirts for Videk and his six siblings. As the youngest, Videk got the most worn out shirt. When the shirt ripped, he wanted a new one more than anything else in the world. He went to the forest where he made a new shirt with the help of animals and plants (lamb, thorn bush, spider, crab, bird). Videk's siblings envied him for his shirt being so beautiful [30].

⁸ Interestingly, in 1987, the USA refused Laibach members entry for, paradoxically, being radically communist.

The misunderstanding that categorises Laibach and their acts as neo-Nazism is engendered by the fact that Laibach does not straightforwardly ironize, critique or satirize ideology and Yugoslavian socialism as the rest of the Yugoslavian punk does. Moreover, by consciously politicising their actions, Laibach has opposed generally accepted ideas about what is considered real art. If the rest of art strives directly for freedom, for the right of individual expression and consequently opposes totalitarian ideologies, then Laibach equates with it. Hence, how is it possible for artists that seem “more total than totalitarianism” at first sight to be actually perceived as a collective campaigning for democratic values [32]? Laibach do not confront totalitarian logic, but rather subvert it; therefore, their aim is not to show the power of ideology with parody, but rather to catch the spectator’s attention with the power of ideology itself by imitating the ruling ideological language and wearing the uniform of a repressive state apparatus. As said in *Laibach: 10 Items of the Covenant*: “All art is subject to political manipulation (indirectly – consciousness; directly), except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation” [9 p460], continuing later: “LAIBACH adopts the organizational system of the industrial production and the identification with ideology as its work method (...)” [9 p461]. Only in this way can ideology be deprived of its power. In his essay *Why are Laibach and NSK not fascist?* (1993), Slavoj Žižek defines their approach as radical ‘over-identification’ with an ideology or, even better, with the State/System [33]. “It ‘frustrates’ the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it – by bringing to light the obscene superego underneath the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency” [33]. As soon as ‘over-identification’ with ideology occurs, the ‘ruling’ ideology is frustrated, as the authority does not anticipate the cultural sphere to respond to their rule with ironic imitation.

LAIBACH’S UNIFORM

Laibach’s performing clothes represent a fundamental part of their spectacle, as seen in the case of the TV interview in 1983. The collective, having left behind the typical uniforms, representative of their actions in the 1980s, nowadays, opted for a variety of clothing pieces; from jeans, shirts to suits. This transition, which may be confusing for spectators of their performances, thus addresses a crucial question for further discussion: why have Laibach’s members been perceived, by the general public, as always wearing a uniform despite this not being the case?

Uniforms symbolise authority, status and power and it is, therefore, essential that its wearers and onlookers as well share a common code about its meaning [23]. If we take an example of a clothing piece, like a Yugoslav military uniform, and we analyse it from a semiological perspective, then it is evident that it represents an agreed social role and status and it, therefore, follows the concept of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic sign since its meaning is clear due to the strength and stability of the connection between the signifier and signified. The question, therefore, is what happens to the meaning of the Yugoslav military uniform worn by Laibach?

(Non)fixed uniform and Laibach’s (non)originality

Laibach, using the retro-avant-garde method by combining symbols and signs from different periods and cultural traditions, indicates the contrary; the signs associated with uniforms are not (anymore) highly elaborate and precise. At the centre of the sign is the post-structuralist crisis of representation, where the link between the consistent parts of a sign is flexible and no longer predictable [19, 21]. We are not talking about the arbitrariness of the fashion sign based on a three-way relationship between the signifier, the signified and the sign by the French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System*

(*Système de la mode*) from 1967, using the structuralist perspective [34]. In this case, this does not suggest total arbitrariness or freedom of the fashion sign since the meaning of the code is systematically controlled at all times [35].

Laibach abolishes the meaning of the sign by taking it out of its context and using the retro-avant-garde re-appropriation principle, which is achieved by combining different, non-compatible signifiers and the signified; as it can be observed in Laibach's art production, which combines elements of Nazi art, Stalinism and Slovenian national mythology, and also in their music production, which is a mixture of classical music, industrial rock, electronic, popular pop and rock music, including Wagner horns and military beats. The same concept applies to their, often overlooked, uniforms, which are a mixture of different clothing pieces combined according to a socio-political situation and conceptual orientation of their work - from a miner uniform originating in Trbovlje, Laibach's hometown (1980-1982), a Yugoslav Army uniform 'borrowed' at the end of the military service (1982-1987), hunting clothing (1987-1992), ski wear (1992-1996), to a Nazi uniform known for its streamlined silhouette consisting of a tight jacket and jodhpurs, high collars, peaked caps and black leather boots, representing a key symbol of totalitarian power [23], being worn by the collective merely once, in 2003⁹ (Picture 3) [36]. Therefore, the common belief of Laibach being clothed in a (military) uniform all the time is false since today they usually tend to be dressed in regular clothes.

In Laibach's case, the uniform is not fixed; neither at the level of form since different types of uniforms can be chosen, nor at the level of every individual uniform, since it can be styled with different accessories and Laibach's symbols. Looking from the semiological perspective, uniform is emptied of its symbolic value and is no longer an accepted anti-fashion sign.



Picture 3. Laibach dressed in a Nazi uniform with armbands displaying the Laibach cross [37]

⁹ The Nazi uniforms were borrowed from a Yugoslav filmographic studio. As an experiment, Laibach did the same photo session wearing a Nazi uniform and an American military uniform, and sent photos of both sessions to the media. Expected or not, all of them decided to publish Laibach in the Nazi uniform [36].

An important part of Laibach's appearance is accessories. They include all, from a canonical element of military uniform, such as brass buttons, an armband, headwear, badges, pins, pockets to fashionable necklaces and earrings – many of them are also decorated with their symbols, such as the Laibach cross, which first appeared in 1980 on a poster in Trbovlje and tends to be confused with the supremacist work of Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Cross* (1923). Let us take a step backwards and take into consideration the definition of anti-fashion by Polhemus: "Anti-fashion is composed of body, adornment, and clothing symbols – symbols which have clear iconic meaning within a given culture but which are unlikely to translate successfully when considered from a cross-cultural, global perspective" [20 p51]; for Polhemus, symbols of particular cultures are, therefore, the basis of anti-fashion; however, Laibach separates the symbol from what it refers to by using the retro-avant-garde principle [38], which results in the symbol itself becoming ambiguous. Laibach's accessories, by being emptied of their meaning, may cause confusion and ignorance amongst Laibach's fans wearing clothes, various adornments and souvenirs and thus symbolically expressing identity and loyalty to Laibach – similarly to fans of any other performer in pop-rock culture. The key symbolic aspect of over-identification is thus represented not only by Laibach as a collective but also by their spectators¹⁰, who, by wearing the Laibach black cross armband on their arms, do not exactly know what it represents. What also often gets misconceived is the frontman's headgear (Picture 4), which also happens to be the most recognizable Laibach's piece of clothing. If we try to understand its origin and meaning, we have already missed the point; therefore, for better comprehension, let us take a look at the 7th paragraph of the manifesto *Laibach: 10 Items of the Covenant* [9]:

"Laibach excludes any evolution of the origin idea; the original concept is not evolutionary but entelechical, and the presentation is only a link between this static and the changing determinant unit. We take the same stand towards the direct influence of the development of music on the Laibach concept; of course, this influence is a material necessity but it is of secondary importance and appears only as a historical musical foundation of the moment which, in its choice, is unlimited. Laibach expresses its timelessness with the artefacts of the present and it is thus necessary that at the intersection of politics and industrial production (the culture of art, ideology, and consciousness) it encounters the elements of both, although it wants to be both. This wide range allows Laibach to oscillate, creating the illusion of movement (development)".

Although the paragraph refers to music, its essence can be transferred to Laibach's actions as a whole as well, including their uniform and headwear as its constituent parts.



Picture 4. The theatre performance *Also sprach Zarathustra*, by the Slovenian Anton Podbevšek Teater [40]

¹⁰ In his critical analysis of the spectacle in *La Société du spectacle* (1967), written in the form of manifesto, Guy Debord focuses on the position of the viewer, taking into consideration Latin origin of the word spectacle; it derives from the noun *spectaculum* or the verb *spectare*, which refers to seeing or watching what is happening on stage [39].

Beyond the dichotomy: uniform's universality

The most explicit example of Laibach's uniform theory is a staged performance called *Liberation Day* which took place in North Korea in 2015. Becoming the first foreign group to perform in Pyongyang, Laibach has shown that every democratic country resembles totalitarian North Korea; in other words, every democracy has a totalitarian core. For this occasion exclusively, Laibach, typically known for wearing totalitarian-like uniforms, opted for custom-made North-Korean-style costumes – North-Korean suits for men and a *hanbok* dress for the lady (Picture 5, 6). Wearing traditional North Korean clothes, which can be, at the same time, used as North Korean civil clothes and as Laibach's uniform, shows that all civil clothes, as well as traditional clothes, are uniforms going beyond cultural diversity and a certain place and time. In the 6th item of Laibach manifest from 1982, the collective stated: "The basis of Laibach's activity lies in its concept of unity, which expresses itself in each media according to appropriate laws (art, music, film ...)" [9]. Uniforms are, therefore, as any other piece of clothing, a universal form emptied of their generally accepted meaning. Not having a specific origin, Laibach's uniform, the headwear, or the Laibach cross simultaneously denote timelessness and universality.



Picture 5, 6. Laibach in North Korea [41] [42]

By wearing a uniform, Laibach exceeds the bare distinction between a uniform and other clothes, introduced by the German avant-garde theoretician Bazon Brock [17], who claimed that democracy requires, for its operating, multiform clothing, whereas totalitarian dictatorship requires a uniform. Every member of society wears a uniform and the distinction between the two types of clothing, made by Flügel and later by Polhemus, for Laibach, does not exist. Their uniforms, and consequently uniforms of all people, surpass the fundamental difference between fixed and modish costumes or the dichotomy of fashion and anti-fashion. Uniform, as understood within the framework of the Polhemus' anti-fashion theory as fixed and unchangeable, in Laibach's case, tends to acquire characteristics of fashion. By that we do not mean a (military) uniform as being unquestionably a common source of fashion design where fashion appropriates anti-fashion ideas or the so-called canonical elements [23].

Paradoxically, Laibach's uniform as a totality, is, therefore, not merely an object of timelessness and universality, but also an object of fluidity, dynamics and change due to the use of the retro-avant-garde method. It is irrelevant what type of uniform or which clothing pieces Laibach wear; whether it is a Yugoslav Army uniform, a Nazi uniform, or a hunting uniform, in which Laibach performed during their probably most stylistic period marked by the song *Life is life* and the proclamation of being the fourth best-dressed men in Yugoslavia by the *Start* magazine in 1987 [36], or no uniform at all. At present, Laibach no longer wear typical anti-fashion uniforms (Picture 7), their performing clothing and uniforms consist of all pieces of

clothes, even of designed fashion items, such as a scarlet red floor-length leather coat created by the Slovenian fashion designer Peter Movrin (Picture 4). Thus, Laibach do not need to wear a uniform; whatever they are dressed in, they always wear a uniform.



Picture 7. Laibach in no-uniform clothes [43]

CONCLUSION

Almost forty years after their creation, Laibach tends to be generally dressed in no-uniform clothes, nevertheless providing us with a sense of a collective's uniform. Together with their recognisable totalitarian aesthetic and provocative use of symbols and signs with no direct communication, Laibach embodies its manifest, *Laibach: 10 Items of the Covenant*, published in 1983 by using its retro-avant-garde work method as a constant re-appropriation of different symbols and signs, taking them out of their socially accepted meaning. As an indispensable part of Laibach's performative dimension, uniform as a whole, according to the concept of anti-fashion as a fixed and solid sign of social categories, becomes a subject of constant transformation and change, which, paradoxically, provides it with timelessness and universality.

A uniform, as understood within the framework of the Polhemus' anti-fashion theory as fixed and unchangeable, in Laibach's case, by acquiring characteristics of fashion (dynamic and change), surpass the dichotomy of fashion and anti-fashion. By wearing different pieces of clothing going beyond cultural diversity and a certain place and time, everything from a miner uniform at the beginning, the most attention-grabbing Yugoslav military uniform which was often mistaken for a Nazi uniform, hunting clothes, North Korean traditional costumes, classical suits, shirts, trousers to fashionable clothes, Laibach proves that all changeable multifunctional clothes are uniforms. Every piece of clothing is a timeless universal form of a constantly changing uniform, which is worn by each and every one of us.

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