

A Few Degenerate Thoughts

Boris Benko

Far too often, we support artists who are an insult to Slovenian culture [...] We must learn to separate the wheat from the chaff and to prevent those who mock and insult Slovenian culture from being supported as representatives of Slovenia.
Romana Tomc, member of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and the European Parliament, 2020

In these times, one would expect a different, more state-building stance from culture, which is a vital part of the nation's spiritual existence and, as such, a source of strength when confronting adversity [...] Perhaps it is time for culture to hold a mirror to itself.
Janez Janša, Prime Minister of Slovenia, 2021

Being an artist is an excellent vantage point for observing the shifting tides of ideology. If you want an even better view, I recommend pursuing an artistic career in Slovenia. My homeland, Slovenia, a former republic of socialist Yugoslavia, is the perfect petri dish for studying the volatile, uneasy relation between arts and politics, between society and artists. For some strange reason, time runs faster in Slovenia. Here, ideals have a shorter expiration date. Chunks of history are labelled 'useless' and nonchalantly tossed in the bin. Countries, flags, and currencies expire overnight and then rise, transfigured, from the ashes.

In less than four decades, we have experienced at least a century of historic turnabouts. Disgruntled by authoritarian socialism, we decided to give liberal democracy a go... only to develop a new-found appreciation for right-wing populism

and illiberalism. These tectonic shifts are, of course, reflected in art. They are also reflected in society's attitude towards artists. Forty years ago, Yugoslav authorities regarded artists as dangerous subversives. Thirty years ago, artists were perceived as torchbearers of freedom. Today, artists are regularly labelled as 'degenerates' by a sizeable portion of the population and, more worryingly, by members of the government.

I will try to shed light on these surprising shifts – from the perspective of a degenerate. That is to say, a musician.

In the 1980's, alternative music and counterculture were thriving in Slovenia, despite being fairly precarious pursuits. The authorities, although not as ruthless as in other communist states, would often pressure and intimidate musicians. In spite of the fact that most punk rockers were anti-fascist, the authorities labelled the punk rock movement, spearheaded by bands like Pankrti [The Bastards] and Lublanski psi [The Hounds of Ljubljana], as subversive. Punks were persecuted and even imprisoned. Other bands, like Borghesia¹ or Laibach², were also closely monitored. Laibach's relations with the authorities were particularly lively. The German name of the group was deemed inappropriate by the presidency of the Ljubljana City Committee of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia. A formal ban of all public manifestations of the group under the name Laibach remained in effect until February 1987. Laibach's notorious appearance at the Zagreb Biennial of New Music in 1983, during which the band projected images of partisans and Tito alongside porn clips, was halted by police and military officials. Due to the incident, the national public broadcasting organization ZKP RTV Ljubljana scrapped the release of Laibach's first album, *Nebo žari* [The Sky Glows].

The music that defined the era was the very definition of what the current Slovenian government classifies, with staggering disregard for glaring historical connotations, as 'degenerate art.'³ It was openly political, controversial, and anti-establishment. Furthermore, it displayed a wilful, gleeful disregard for convention.

The bond between musicians and the general public was nonetheless remarkably strong. Despite doing their very best to break every rule in the book, punk songs from the 1980's evoke a sense of nostalgia, joy, and mischievous pride in Slovenians. Music is still considered an important part of the independence movement. For a brief and rather unique moment, artistic freedom aligned perfectly with the political aspirations of the nation.

Then, in 1991, Slovenia gained its independence. For a few interesting, slightly surreal years, profoundly subversive acts like Laibach – former outcasts who used to play in fringe, obscure clubs – became state-approved artists who performed at national holiday celebrations alongside national symphony orchestras. At these

events, Laibach did what they always do: they challenged social norms, practised impertinence, took jabs at Europe, NATO, and the local government, while politicians applauded uneasily.

Unsurprisingly enough, these performances were received far less favourably by the public. Having a go at Yugoslav authorities was one thing. It was something else completely to turn the criticism inwards; to criticise the newly established country, Slovenian traditions, the local value system, and Slovenia's political ambitions, like joining the EU and NATO.

The artistic programmes of national holiday celebrations have been regularly met with public outrage, and have generated endless polemics. At the 2016 Prešeren Awards⁴, a selection of international artists performed *Zdravljica* [A Toast], the Slovenian anthem, in different languages. This innocuous, well-meaning idea sparked an unexpected uproar. Five years later, the songs are still a frequent topic on social media – particularly the version in Arabic, which was performed by Ali R. Taha, a Syrian artist. For many Slovenians, Taha's interpretation of the anthem remains a sore point, an unnameable atrocity. Ironically enough, the anthem's lyrics, written by poet France Prešeren, reject nationalism:

*God's blessing on all nations,
Who long and work for that bright day,
When o'er earth's habitations
No war, no strife shall hold its sway;
Who long to see
That all men free
No more shall foes, but neighbours be.*

The response of politicians was similarly unsympathetic. Despite being adamant supporters of artistic freedom during the struggle for independence, prominent politicians did not appreciate the idea of receiving the same treatment as Yugoslav authorities. Slowly but surely, artistic freedom turned from a revered ideal to an inexhaustible source of irritation. Today, it is grudgingly tolerated by the left and openly attacked by the right.

A case in point was the recent clash between the authorities and Zlatan Čordiĉ – Zlatko, a rapper who has been vehemently critical of the government. The altercation culminated in December 2020, when the local Ministry of Culture annulled Čordiĉ's status as a self-employed artist on the grounds that too much of his time is spent on activities unrelated to his occupation. The decision was quickly revoked by

the courts. Nevertheless, the incident illustrates the widening schism between politics and art. It also highlights the country's political trajectory.

Slovenia's divorce from Yugoslavia resulted in a surprising matrimony between the arts and the public. However, as soon as Slovenia gained its independence, the bliss of the honeymoon period faded rapidly, resulting in a bitter divorce. Freedom proved far less liberating than expected. For a sizable portion of the population, freedom – particularly freedom of the press and freedom of artistic expression – proved a frustrating, irritating concept; a difficult pill to swallow. The old adage *be careful what you wish for, lest it come true* inadvertently comes to mind.

My bandmate, composer, Primož Hladnik and I experienced a taste of the new political reality in May 2020, while preparing an online performance during the first lockdown. The concert was to be hosted by one of the most important culture centres in Slovenia. The visuals featured quotes about the pandemic by prominent intellectuals and politicians, such as Arundhati Roy, Donald Trump, Paolo Giordano, Alenka Zupančič, and Jelko Kacin, the former spokesman of the Slovenian government. A few days prior to the performance, we were summoned by the venue manager, who insisted we remove the quotes. Moreover, we were asked to submit the repertoire for inspection. Songs with “potentially problematic titles” were to be preventively discarded. As the demands were non-negotiable, we decided to look for an alternative venue. The experience was both alarming and ironic. Five years earlier, we performed with Laibach in North Korea. Despite being hosted by a dictatorship, the censorship was less obtrusive, less heavy-handed. At the time, I remember being described as “Ambassadors of the Free World” in a Western media outlet.

Upon hearing about the incident, Laibach's Ivan Novak breathed a sigh of relief and made an intriguing observation: “At last, music has weight again”. As it turns out, it wasn't just the politicians and a large portion of the population that were annoyed by freedom of artistic expression. Artists, too, have been somewhat frustrated by the leeway they enjoyed.

Artists teeter between two contradictory types of fear. The first one is, of course, living in a society in which free speech and critical thinking are persecuted by the authorities. The second one is falling flat, failing to elicit a knee-jerk reaction, being incapable of causing a commotion. We can gauge the state of health of a society by the type of frustration the artists are experiencing.

By restoring the practice of attacking the arts, the Slovenian authorities are, once again, giving artists a voice. By discrediting and ostracising artists, the government is inadvertently increasing the relevance of their work and securing their place in history. In many ways, an illiberal government acts as a remarkably efficient

promoter of the very art it aims to suppress. Therein lies the irony of political censorship, of the establishment's perennial aspiration to domesticate art: in order for art to become toothless, artists must be given absolute freedom. In a world where artists can say and do whatever they want, art is in effect neutralised. It becomes ornamental, inconsequential.

Like politicians, artists have also proven resistant to change. According to the government, artists have lost their way and grown 'degenerate'. In reality, the government is at odds with artists because they *haven't* changed. Artistic media and aesthetic preferences may have evolved, but the artists' mentality remains firm. Artists are still their old, malcontent, iconoclastic selves. They still derive pleasure from overstepping boundaries, chipping away at taboos, and upsetting the powers that be. Their non-compliance is as indiscriminating and self-destructive as ever. Artists are still the closest approximation to Giorgio Agamben's Contemporariness. They have a singular relationship with their own time: they adhere to it and, at the same time, keep a distance from it.⁵

Just as musicians addressed the shortcomings of socialism, they address the pathologies of capitalism. Just as they challenged the Communist Party in Yugoslavia, they question Slovenia's democracy. Artists are tediously predictable in their determination to challenge the established order. They are, to use the current vernacular, as degenerate as ever. This is best illustrated by artists like Svetlana Makarovič⁶, Jani Kovačič⁷, and Laibach. Four decades ago, they were deemed *subversive elements* by Yugoslav authorities. Today, they are labelled as 'degenerate' and 'unpatriotic' by the government. Despite being in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, these artists are, amusingly enough, regularly characterised as radicals, unruly extremists.

It is not artists, but rather our notions of freedom and art that are constantly changing, adapting to wobbly political realities. The anomaly is not the rift between politics and art, which is age-old. The true anomaly was the period before Slovenia's parting with Yugoslavia, when politics and art went hand in hand, and when underground acts and the masses spoke the same language. The problem is not change, but, if anything, lack thereof. If Slovenians were, by some miracle, to wake up in Yugoslavia tomorrow, the attitude of the authorities towards artists, journalists, and the civil society would seem oddly familiar.

There are, of course, some major differences between the events of the 1980's and the current situation. The driving force behind the counterculture movement of the 1980's were punk rockers and other fringe groups. Today, it is the establishment that is at variance with the system and prevailing social norms. Unexpectedly enough, conservative politicians have discovered a budding revolutionary in

themselves. They have developed a surprising passion for noisy, rebellious, and disruptive behaviour. They venerate political incorrectness, utilise new media to promote their views, lambast the 'lying' media, thunder against the 'elite', and gnaw at the system from within. In other words, the political establishment has usurped the subversiveness and rousing potential of underground art. Nowadays, the finest punk rock performances take place in the parliament. Today's Laibach wear a suit and tie.

Artists, on the other hand, are expected to conduct themselves in a responsible, restrained, and dignified manner. According to the government, artists must adopt a different, more mature attitude, a nation-building stance. It is a fascinating reversal of roles: a government with a tendency for disruptive behaviour is demanding from artists what is traditionally expected from government officials.

Slovenia wetted its toes in liberal democracy and found the experience profoundly underwhelming. Today, we are back to disciplining artists, journalists⁸, and other members of civil society. It is hard to escape the impression that the natural order of things, illiberalism, is being restored, and that liberal democracy was nothing but a disturbing anomaly, a short tumble down a disorienting rabbit hole. This notion is reinforced by current developments in Eastern Europe, in countries of the so-called Visegrád Group.

It is hard to decide which blow, the coronavirus pandemic or the government's attitude towards art, has been more crippling for the local arts. Combined, they created the perfect storm, one that is proving hard to withstand. According to a recent survey conducted by the Poligon Creative Centre, more than half of Slovenia's cultural and creative workers are considering giving up their profession.

Being an artist is a somewhat paradoxical state. In order to persevere as an artist, one cannot afford to be delicate. And yet, one cannot be an artist without being sensitive. More often than not, being an artist entails a marginal, economically precarious existence. Still, there are times when one feels perplexingly important; important enough to receive special and sustained attention from the highest levels of government.

I, for one, will do my best to hold on to this unique vantage point. As strange as it may sound, it is an intriguing and immensely fulfilling existence, being a 'degenerate'. In the words of Pablo Picasso:

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes if he's a painter, ears if he's a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he's a poet – or even, if he's a boxer, only some muscles? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, passionate or pleasing events in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. How is it

possible to be uninterested in other men and by virtue of what cold nonchalance can you detach yourself from the life that they supply so copiously? No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.

Notes

¹ Borghesia was formed in 1982 by Aldo Ivančič and Dario Seraval, members of the alternative theatre group Theatre FV-112/15. The band used the imagery of what was prohibited, tabooed, and repressed. Borghesia's sound is often compared to that of other electronic music groups such as D.A.F. and Front 242.

² Laibach is a cross-media group, renowned for its militaristic self-stylisation, propagandist manifestos, and totalitarian statements. 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 painters from the group Irwin and the theatre group Scipion Nasice Sisters.

³ Degenerate art (German: *Entartete Kunst*) was a term adopted in the 1920's by the Nazi Party in Germany to describe modern art.

⁴ The Prešeren Award (Slovene: Prešernova nagrada) is the highest decoration in the field of artistic creation in Slovenia.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, What is the Contemporary?, in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 41.

⁶ Svetlana Makarovič (born 1939) is a Slovenian writer of prose, poetry, and remarkably successful children's books. She is also an actress, illustrator, and singer. In addition to her works, Makarovič is known for her razor-sharp political and social commentary. She regards Slovenians as servile, cold-hearted, and hypocritical, and has coined the derogatory term 'Slovencljani', which can be roughly translated as 'Smallenians'. In 2000, she declined to accept the Grand Prešeren Award, the highest decoration in the field of artistic creation.

⁷ Jani Kovačič (born 1953) is a Slovenian musician, writer, and philosopher. Kovačič, one of the most important singer-songwriters to emerge in Slovenia in the 1970's, is renowned for his gravelly voice and nonconformist stance. His best known songs, *Revolucija* [Revolution] and *Delam kot zamorc* [Working Like a Negro], have become protest anthems. In May 2021, Kovačič performed at a major rally against the current government.

⁸ Government officials have made both online and offline threats against journalists and independent media outlets. The scale of attacks against journalists from the prime minister and the leading Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) prompted the Council of Europe to issue a warning against the harassment and intimidation of journalists. The most prominent case is the government's attempt to starve the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) of funds. In December 2020, the Government Communication Office (UKOM) suspended the financing of the agency. The government refused payments for 2021, citing issues with management and reporting. On September 6 2021, Slovenia's Supreme Court ruled that the government must resume financing the agency. The case is one of several that have led the European Commission to express concern over the pressure on free media in Slovenia, an EU member since 2004.