

RED STAGE, OR BRINGING THE AUTHORITARIAN STREAK OUT



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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is often labeled a hermit kingdom, supposedly one of the most isolated, mysterious, and inaccessible countries on earth. A world in black and white. Reaffirming this notion, many who travel there, journalists, academics, and tourists alike, carry a duty to expose hidden truths, to capture "real" life outside of state curated itineraries and staged performances. Photojournalist David Guttenfelder, for example, who spent several years in the Pyongyang bureau of the Associated Press, "felt it was his responsibility to show the outside world the reality away from stage-managed events." Aside from the obvious problem of separating real life from staged life, the trouble seems to manifest in relentless attempts to reveal the secrets behind the totalitarian curtain. But what if the question is not where one looks, but rather, how?

Like the red safelight in a photographic darkroom, red is the only color that can operate within the logic of silver halide coated papers and chemistries that facilitate the emergence and fixing of an image. With a red light, latent images can come to life, whereas natural light or incandescent light would destroy them. It is the mode of a red safelight, then, that illuminates Laibach's provocative Pyongyang concert in August 2015. Their controversial performance was not simply the first avant-garde rock concert in one of the most restrictive societies, as is frequently described, but in fact a larger collective performance that transcends the boundaries of north and south, darkness and light, totalitarianism and democracy, what Slavoj Žižek describes as bringing the authoritarian streak out. This paper explores the anxieties, desires, and ambiguities that proliferate at the edges of this event—going to the stage, a Red Stage, that enables the encounter between worlds imagined as radically different.

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