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“Philosophy of Treason”: Spions and the Question of Art and Life — in Parallel with Throbbing Gristle and Laibach

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Introduction

The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a striking convergence of avant-garde art, performance, and mass music. This was a period when the legacies of the historical avant-gardes resurfaced within popular music culture, often in hybrid forms that blurred the distinction between a “rock band” and a “performance collective.”

Among the many collectives of the time, two particularly illustrative and well-known cases would be Throbbing Gristle and Laibach. Throbbing Gristle, formed in Kinston upon Hull, UK, in 1975 from the performance art group COUM Transmission and active until 1981, released their work through their own label, *Industrial Records*. Their confrontational performances, noise experiments, and disturbing imagery not only destabilized the rock format but later gave rise to what became known as industrial music. Laibach, founded in 1980 in Trbovlje, Slovenia, are usually categorized as post-punk or industrial. They became notorious for their appropriation of totalitarian aesthetics — uniforms, marching rhythms, propaganda imagery — always framed with deliberate ambiguity. Their project soon expanded into their larger collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in 1984, that even declared itself a state and issued passports.

It is in this constellation that we propose to place Spions, founded in Budapest in 1977. Emerging from Hungary’s neo-avant-garde circles — where the leader Gregor Davidow (then Gergely Molnár) was already active in literature, experimental theatre, and underground film — Spions carried these practices into the format of a band. Punk and post-punk offered not just a style but a framework through which they could combine theatrical provocation, literary and media strategies, with the immediacy of rock performance. Their concerts resembled performance art as much as music.

Placed alongside Throbbing Gristle and Laibach, Spions shared a strategy of turning the band format into a platform for avant-garde practice, provocation, and the rethinking of the relation between art and life. All three invented symbolic communities — Laibach through the

NSK State, Throbbing Gristle through Thee Temple Ov Psychick Youth (TOPY), and Spions through the Overnational Socialist Party (OSP) and later the Atheist Church. Yet their strategies diverged: TG confronted ideology through shock and transgression; Laibach through deliberate ambiguity; Spions, as we will see, by treating exile — or “treason” — not as biographical incident but as the core of an aesthetic and philosophical stance.

Spions and Gregor Davidow

Budapest and the “Philosophy of Treason”

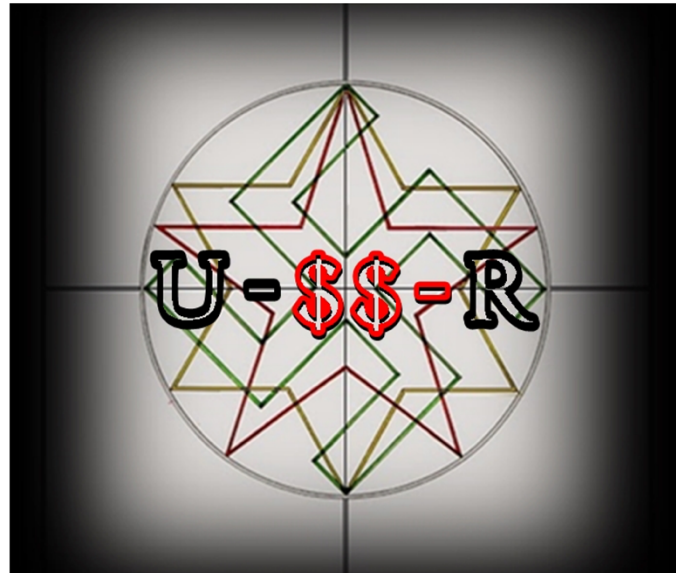
Spions was founded by Molnár Gergely — later known under various names such as Anton Ello, Sergei Pravda, Gregory Davidow, Aleph, 888, or Spiel! — together with two guitarists (Hegedűs Péter, Kurtág György Jr, or Zátonyi Tibor), along with the crucial contribution of Najmányi László, a key figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, responsible for most of the visual dimension of the Spions.



Spions, Budapest, 15/01/1978

Their activity was short-lived: with only a few concerts and demo recordings, Spions operated less as a conventional band than as a performance project, whose provocative and theatrical presence marked an early and significant moment in Hungary’s emerging punk subculture. Under Hungary’s softer variant of state socialism — a system that combined limited consumerism and cultural imports with strict political control — Spions were quickly consigned to the “forbidden” category. Their most notorious work, *Anna Frank álma*, with its violent and unsettling play on Holocaust imagery and sexuality, provoked outrage at the time and remains deeply controversial today, exemplifying just how far the group had moved beyond the limits of what could be tolerated.

Within a year the situation had become untenable: opportunities to perform disappeared, censorship tightened. By 1978, Hegedűs and Molnár chose to leave, carrying the Spions project into exile.



“The Three Emblems”

Spions’ position can be captured visually in what Davidow, or Molnar, has called their “original emblem.” (designed by Naimanyi) It parodies the Soviet acronym *USSR*, transformed into *U-\$\$-R*. The two dollar signs insert capitalism at the very heart of the socialist symbol, collapsing Cold War antagonisms into a single ironic figure. As Davidow himself noted, even the group’s secret spelling, \$PIONS\$ (dollar signs placed at the beginning and end), reflected this ironic logic.¹ The geometric star design itself multiplies this ambiguity: it echoes the Nazi insignia, the Jewish Star of David, and the occult geometries of secret societies. Victim and perpetrator, fascism and communism, state power and capital are folded together in one emblematic image.

As Davidow recently explained, (quote from my email correspondence with himself) “*Communism and fascism were equal sources of our nihilist power. But unlike Laibach, we loathed and despised our native soil wherever it happened to be. We immigrated to assimilate and subvert.*” Here Spions distinguished themselves from their Slovenian counterparts: whereas Laibach ironized national history, Spions rejected the very idea of homeland. Treason

¹ (email correspondence with the author, September 2025).

was not merely political dissent but an existential stance — a refusal of both East and West, of every origin, in order to create a space for assimilation and subversion.

This stance already found early expression in the lyrics of the demo track “*TOTAL CZECHOSLOVAKIA*,” recorded in Budapest in the late 1970s, that includes slogans like:

“Go out from your country / Go out from your religion”

“Treason remained your only true chance for change.”

“Go out from your prison / Go out from your generation”

“Be the spy of all the things you had to start / Be a traitor of yourself and fall with me in love”

Here, treason is framed as the condition of subjectivity. To betray one’s country, religion, and generation — even oneself — is no longer a moral failure but a principle of transformation. Seen together, the emblem and the song articulate treason as a total stance: a rejection of origins, systems, and conventions, from geopolitics to aesthetics. They mark the point at which Davidow began to articulate what he later named the “*philosophy of treason*” — not simply as a biographical experience of exile, but as a mystico-artistico position of refusal, where nihilism itself becomes a generative force for artistic and political reinvention.

This resonates with the broader question of nihilism. In my own work on the emergence of punk rock in the late 1970s, I have argued that nihilism is not simply despair or emptiness, but the recognition — a painful recognition at that moment — that the foundations of value and meaning had been irreversibly lost. Nietzsche and Heidegger had already exposed the collapse of metaphysical grounds, while Gianni Vattimo later proposed to embrace this loss, abandoning any claim to absolute truth and cultivating instead a “weak thought”: a hermeneutic attitude reoriented toward life, politics, and aesthetics. Nihilism, in this sense, is not an end-state but the very condition for possibility, a force that turns the absence of ground into a principle of reinvention.²

From Budapest to Paris: Treason as Program (“The Party”)

² Davidow’s own reflections echo this understanding with striking clarity. In a recent exchange, he insisted: “*Treason is not a philosophy but an attitude. It is a gene you got or not. Traitors are aliens and enemies of the Earth, universal refugees of the Pleiades.*” (email correspondence with the author, September 2025). Here nihilism is no longer resignation but energy: a refusal that becomes power, treason as the ground for artistic, political, and spiritual imagination.

By late 1978, it had become evident that Spions could not continue in Hungary. What shifted the situation was not only repression but also contact with the international punk circuit: when the British band *The Raincoats* visited Budapest for a festival, they encouraged Davidow to move to London and even suggested opportunities on the club scene. Then, unexpectedly, the Hungarian authorities issued passports. This gesture can be read in two ways: as an opening that enabled Davidow to continue Spions abroad, and as a strategy of containment, quietly removing a disruptive avant-garde formation without open confrontation.



Gregor Davidow, 1978

According to their “philosophy of treason,” dissident artists were not opponents but paradoxical ambassadors of Soviet ideology. In 1978 Spions signed with Egg Records, a sublabel of the major company Barclay, to release the single “*Russian Way of Life / Total Czecho-Slovakia*”, produced by Robin Scott — soon to become famous as *M* with the international hit “*Pop Muzik*” (1979). Around this time the French musician Jean-Marie Salaün joined on bass, later becoming central as the group’s producer.

Musically the single leaned toward punk rock, but with a minimalist sound reminiscent of *Young Marble Giants*, Welsh post-punk band. On 28 July 1978 the group performed at the New Wave French Connection festival in Lyon, and the same week received a full-page article by Rémy Kolpa Kopoul in *Libération*.

The group split again with the departure of Hegedűs. Davidow then launched a new version of Spions with fresh collaborators — Artefact, Claude Arto (*Mathématiques Modernes*), Hervé Zénouda (*Stinky Toys*) — under the direction of producer Jean-Marie Salaün. In 1979 they released a concept album under the name Spions Inc. on the Dorian/Celluloid label. Entitled

The Party, it presented the program of an imaginary political entity, the Overnational Socialist Party (OSP), framed as a five-year plan (1979–1984). By appropriating the rhetoric of socialist planning while projecting an “over-national” community, Spions turned treason into both parody and utopia: ironic in tone, yet serious in its utopian ambition to imagine a community beyond East and West. Musically, *The Party* shifted toward New Wave, characterized by the intensive use of synthesizers and electronic textures.

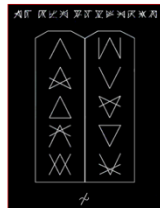
Canada: Treason and the Atheist Church

From Paris the trajectory extended further, eventually leading Davidow to Canada. If *TOTAL CZECHO-SLOVAKIA* had framed treason as an existential principle, and *The Party* reframed it as a political–utopian program, then the Canadian phase radicalized treason once more — into the realm of religion and spirituality.

The Atheist Church: The Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation



College of Time Consciousness
803, 888, 108
Toronto, Canada, 1983



The ten commandments

Room 9 SINCERITY	Room 10 HATE	Room 1 ORDER
Room 8 HONESTY	Unit 10 Rooms (10 Equals)	Room 2 FAITH
Room 7 HYGIENE	2 h 24 min (144 min)	Room 3 DISCIPLINE
Room 6 Bravery	Room 5 RESPECT	Room 4 OBEDIENCE

“Philosophy of Treason” – Lee / Zénouda



Mandala (Laszlo Najmani)

The project known as *The Atheist Church: The Temple of Nuclear Reincarnation* was rooted in the broader trend of Chaos Magic and pushed the Spions ethos into a quasi-religious form. Emerging within the punk movement around 1975 under the impetus of Peter Carroll and Ray Sherwin, Chaos Magic regards beliefs as mere tools — to be freely adopted or discarded in order to achieve a goal, their value determined by effectiveness rather than truth. Its aim is to emancipate the individual from the normative structures of belief. To achieve this, one must undergo a process of deprogramming, reaching a liminal mental state where consciousness gives way to the unconscious. For this purpose, Chaos Magic makes use of personal sigils (talismans), the invention of new rites, and the creation of new languages.

The “Atheist Church” presented itself as both parody and prophecy: ironic in its rhetoric, yet serious in its attempt to stage a symbolic community beyond both nation and religion. Seen in continuity, these stages show how Davidow’s “philosophy of treason” unfolded across three registers: as subjective refusal in Budapest, as political program in Paris, and as spiritual reinvention in Canada. Treason here was never merely the fact of exile or personal rupture. It was a systematic stance: the conviction that only through refusal — of origins, of systems, of inherited forms — could one open the space for what ought to be.



This performance took place in Montreal, in front of the local cathedral. Spiel! (Gregor Davidow) launched what he called his “beggar project,” which he continues to perform regularly. With one hand painted gold, he begged for money while repeating the mantra: *“Save your Saviour — Redeem your Redeemer.”*

Pop culture

The Spions project, even though its founding members came from avant-garde circles of performance, experimental theatre, and underground cinema, was nevertheless deeply rooted in pop culture. In Budapest, Gregory Molnár gave several public lectures on rock music. His work can be read through his fascination with David Bowie’s career and his “theory of changes.”



« PLASTIC ONO »
Anton Ello (Gregor Davidow), Budapest, 1976

In 1976, still under the Soviet regime in Budapest, he staged a performance entitled *Plastic Ono*. At that time, public art performances were prohibited, so artists turned to photo-performances, circulating the images secretly as a way of presenting their work.

This 1990 photograph was taken in London during a visit to producer Robin Scott. At that time, Spiel! had developed a repertoire of stylized hand gestures for rock singers; the pose captured here belongs to that series. Also, Gregor Davidow's lyrics are saturated with rock and pop references, creating a dense network of intertextual allusions and interpretations.

In 1986, he also authored a book of divination entitled *The Book of Reconstruction*. Designed as a kind of tarot-like system, it invited the reader to shuffle and draw cards, each linked to a short interpretive text. These texts, each titled after a figure from the rock and pop pantheon, sought to illuminate the reader's current psychological state and anticipate their near future.

Paradoxal communication

Slavoj Žižek develops the notion of ambiguity as a communication strategy. He argues that Laibach and NSK undermined the effectiveness of regimes by *over-identifying* with their hidden aspects — the latent totalitarianism of the Yugoslav government. NSK's strategy was to render visible, audible, and perceptible what Žižek calls the "hidden face" of systems and regimes. The crucial distinction (from authentically fascist groups) is that the symbols and rhetoric used here were meant to destabilize, not reinforce, the power of the ruling apparatus.

For Žižek, the most effective way to subvert a system is to over-identify with its hidden or “cursed” part. While Laibach may seem to operate as a machine for enforcing ideology, it is in fact a mechanism for exposing and questioning it.

For Spions, however, ambiguity became a curse. Many of their projects and collaborations ended in failure because they were misinterpreted as genuine identification with fascism or even Nazism. Although Spions now enjoy a cult reputation in Budapest’s avant-garde circles, this ambiguity was a central reason for their lack of recognition in the West.

An Open Conclusion: Treason and the avant-garde constellation in mass culture

To claim an experimental approach in a mass culture is an oxymoron. In this sense, it constitutes a paradoxical approach.

The history of Western avant-garde movements throughout the 20th century was built around a few concepts, the main ones being:

- A questioning of the relationship between art and life, with the ultimate goal of transforming it. “It is about thinking of aesthetic activity as an integral part of the socio-political universe. It is about thinking of a form of art-life.... Art must act directly in the social world and art must act to change life.” (“The Birth of the Western Avant-Gardes” Anne Tomiche, 2015)
- A critique of the institution of “Art”: the avant-gardes take a critical look at the institution of “art”, which is something new in the history of art.

An avant-garde in a mass culture addresses some of these points and differs in others: the institution of "art" is dissolved into the cultural industries, and the "work" must assume its new status as a cultural consumer good (simultaneously art and commodity, culture and entertainment). It must therefore be attentive to the relationship between Exotericism and Esotericism (surface simplicity allowing it to speak to the greatest number of people, and depth of purpose guaranteeing its artistic value).

The misappropriation of the values of the cultural industry implies:

- Co-constructing a demanding artistic journey with the public (purchasing records and concert tickets as a means of voting),
- Establishing situations of communication where the management of "right time" (Kairos) is essential,
- Using media objects as emblems (including social ones),
- Generating questions through paradoxical communication.

If art is to change life, its dissemination to a wider audience can only be desirable. However, mass dissemination requires the widespread use of media representations, which dilutes the creative act into a generalized spectacle.

Guy Debord, in his "Comments on the Society of the Spectacle," published in 1988, enriched his notion of "spectacle" with that of "integrated spectacle," emphasizing that there is no longer anything outside it. Baudrillard, in his book "The Perfect Crime," published in 1995, proclaims the death of reality through digital simulacrum.

Under these conditions, how would it still be possible to "change life" ?

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