

# CRITICAL LATVIAN PERSPECTIVES ON ANNA (ASJA) LĀCIS

## INTRODUCTION: THE LATVIAN LĀCIS

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PAPIER UND SCHREIBWAREN... Sie lebt in einer Stadt der Parolen und wohnt in  
einem Quartier verschworener und verbrüderter Vokabeln, wo jedes Gäßchen und  
Farbe bekennt und jedes Wort ein Feldgeschrei zum Echo hat.  
CHINAWAREN... Alle entscheidenden Schläge werden mit der linken Hand geführt  
werden.

7

(Benjamin, *Einbahnstrasse* 56-57, 16)<sup>1</sup>

Anna Lācis came to international attention as Asja, Walter Benjamin's Latvian Bolshevik love interest, and her reputation has tended to rest on that relationship rather than on her influential work mediating between the Weimar German and early Soviet cultural and, in particular, theatrical realms. She was the one, for example, who first introduced Benjamin to Bertolt Brecht and who motivated his trip to Moscow, which resulted in his *Moskauer Tagebuch*. That Lācis can be found among the "forgotten biographies" on a German website may seem indicative of the extent of the interest she has managed to generate (Krusen). However, while it might have been true of the German situation at the time (2001), the point of this special issue is to draw attention to the necessity of rigorously questioning and situating such forgettings, and to the limitations of monolingual approaches as well as the specificities of non-Anglo ethnonational discourse per se. Given that a not unsubstantial part of Lācis's life was spent, and most of her theatrical work done, in Latvia, it should not come as a surprise that Lācis has never been forgotten there. However, how has she been remembered, and why? This special issue begins to overcome the decided lack of availability of that knowledge in languages other than Latvian.

Lācis has long fascinated me because of the kind of litmus test her figure continues to function as, and the kind of cultural and academic work she made, and continues to make, possible. One can see very clearly the extent of the different types of engage-

ment with Lācis in different languages by looking at the six *Wikipedia* entries that currently exist for her (see Ingram, “Lācis as a Multilingual Ecosophy” for a reading of them). As one gleans from the piecemeal, inaccurate nature of the information provided across *Wikipedia*, Lācis cannot be studied from a monolingual perspective, no matter what that language may be. The six entries are indicative of the way Lācis’s work draws graphic attention to how language dynamics have shifted over the course of the past century and to how her work has been crossed by a number of academic and geopolitical fault lines underpinned by ethnolinguistic assumptions. While the politics of language relations may be more pronounced in places that were colonized by the European empires, they have also had an impact on cultural and academic production in the no-longer-so-new Europe, something Lācis scholarship underscores and something the study of it can help to unpack.

The contributions gathered together in this special issue are a sign of a resurgence of interest in Lācis in Latvia/n. Based for the most part on papers given at the **8** International Comparative Literature Association conference in Vienna in 2016 in a section on “Leftism and Love: The Languages of Anna Lācis’s Latvian Legacy,” they follow up a multilingual international conference organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture and held in Riga in March 2015, entitled “Kreisuma ideja kultūrā. Parole Asja/Leftist Ideas in Culture: The Password Asja.” Planned during, and following in the footsteps of, the year-long cultural program that accompanied Riga’s stint as European Capital of Culture in 2014, the Riga conference offered, as its thematic suggests, an alternative narrative to the one implicit in the EU’s celebration of culture, dedicated as it was to a woman who served as “a vivid example of how leftist ideas have influenced people’s personal and creative biographies” (Pērkone-Redoviča 8). The conference marked an important moment in the reception of Lācis’s work: the first time that she, her oeuvre, and her legacy had inspired such concentrated academic and cultural work in Latvia and in Latvian. An ambitious organizing team spearheaded by Lācis’s granddaughter, the respected Latvian theatre director Māra Ķimele, staged an elaborate three-day cultural program that included, in addition to two full days of academic papers and a trip to Valmiera to visit the opening of an exhibition on Lācis, “The Train: Asja” at the Valmiera Drama Theatre, a number of cultural events. A performance of *Kuražas māte un viņas bērni* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*), with second-year students of the Latvian Academy of Culture in Drama Theatre and Theatre Directing, was directed by Ķimele and Elmārs Senkovs. Three films were screened: the 1934 *Восстание рыбаков* (*Revolt of the Fishermen*), based on a novella by Anna Seghers and directed by Erwin Piscator, about a strike of exploited fishermen undone by their lack of solidarity, on which Lācis had worked and about which she writes in her memoirs; *Skatiens, Par Annu Lācis un Bernhardu Reihu* (*A View, About Anna Lācis and Bernhard Reich*), a 20-minute documentary directed by Leonija Mundeciema about her and her partner Bernhard Reich (1969), and *Māra*, a feature-length 2014 documentary directed by Krista Burāne, which explores “the story of women in art—what she has to sacrifice in her personal life and

what choices have to be made in order to gain success in her career.<sup>2</sup> One event even left a permanent memory trace in Riga's cityscape: a festive plaque-unveiling ceremony with an accompanying performance of *Valtera Benjaminā dzīvoklis* (*Walter Benjamin's Apartment*), so that there is now a plaque commemorating Benjamin's stay in Riga in November 1925 in an apartment that just happens to be located directly across the street from the newly refurbished Latvian Academy of Culture at which the conference was held. A further memory trace is the issue of *Kultūras Krustpunkti*, based on the conference presentations, that was published in record time under the editorship of one of the contributors to this issue, Inga Pērkone.<sup>3</sup> Of the 26 papers in the volume, 19 are in Latvian, while one, Martin Mittelmeier's essay on the influence of the concept of porosity about which Lācis and Benjamin wrote in their "Naples" essay on Benjamin's and Adorno's style, appears in German and Latvian translation. Of the remaining six essays in English, two are by Latvians, two are by native English speakers, and two—on the influence of Lācis's work on the children's theatre in Italy and Brazil—are by theatre scholars in Italy and Brazil; the Italian one was translated into English by a Latvian.

9

What the password "Asja" turns on, then, is a spotlight on dangerous aspects of the present and how important multilingual, international cooperation is to work against them. As Ligia Cortez and Jorge de Almeida noted in their contribution on "The Relevance of Asja Lācis's Kindertheater Today: A Brazilian Perspective":

But capitalism changed and the equation was inverted. Today the financial market's liberalizing capitalist ideology makes a point of ever highlighting the need to think in economic terms, cost-benefit, and supply-demand. Even in culture the financial interest ceased being civilly hidden to become an object of unmasked pride and ostentation: the list of highest sales and highest salaries gains more importance than any assessment of an aesthetic order. In this totally marketable world, it is now for the left to defend "universal," human, moral values. (Cortez and de Almeida 140)

The irony of this reversal was not lost on the participants from the former "East Bloc," and it was striking in this regard that there were only Latvian Russian-speakers and no participants from Russia itself (cf. Ingram, "Anna/Asja Lācis and the Multilinguality of the Other").

Another example of the rekindled interest in Lācis among Latvians was at documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany from 10 June to 17 September 2017. On display at the Grimmwelt in Kassel, a museum opened in 2015 to honour the close connections of the Brothers Grimm to the city that served as one of the off-site venues for this large-scale art event, was a "poignant display case" containing archival materials that documented and paid tribute to the "correspondence and close friendship" between Lācis and Benjamin (Warde-Aldam). The display was curated by Andris Brinkmanis in cooperation with Māra Ķimele, Beate Paškevica, and Hendrik Folkert. Together they gathered original materials never before displayed from the collection of Riga's Museum of Writing and Music (RMM), Māra Ķimele's private collection, the Walter Benjamin archive in Berlin, the National Library of Latvia, the Latvian National

Archives, the Latvian State Archives of Motion Picture Documents and the Russian RGALI (“Documenta 14’ Kaselē Atklāts Izpētes Projekts–izstāde Par Režisori Annu Lācis”). Unlike the plaque ceremony in Riga two years prior, whose focus was on Benjamin while Lācis’s name was not included (cf. Ingram, “Lācis as a Multilingual Ecosophy”), in Kassel, Lācis received top billing (see Figures 1 & 2),<sup>4</sup> and the exhibit received favourable mentions in English, German, and Latvian sources (see Sherlock; also see “Documenta 14”).

10



Fig. 1: Part of the Lācis-Benjamin display at documenta 14, Kassel, July 2017, courtesy of Agata Mergler.



Fig. 2: More of the Lācis-Benjamin display at documenta 14, Kassel, July 2017, courtesy of Agata Mergler.



The six papers collected in this special issue open a window onto the rekindling of interest in Lācis's Latvian legacy. We begin with a multilingual article, Jānis Taurens's "Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin: Translating Different Cities," which revisits Lācis's and Benjamin's relationship through the dual lenses of place and language. Using the "Naples" essay that they wrote together as his guide, Taurens takes us through the stations of their relationship: Capri, Moscow, Riga, and Berlin, with Paris thrown in for good measure due to its importance for Benjamin both culturally and as a temporary refuge in his flight from the Nazis.

We then switch into German for Ieva Kalniņa's "Asja Lācis: das lyrische Subjekt und Objekt des lettischen Schriftstellers Linards Laicens," which examines Lācis's influence on one of Latvia's most important poets, Linards Laicens. Benjamin was by no means the only talented writer who fell sway to Lācis's charms. Kalniņa ascertains the importance of Lācis's personality and activities to Laicens's creativity on the basis of a biographical and cultural examination of archival sources in Latvia.

11

In the next contribution, "The Work of Anna Lācis and Bernhard Reich in the Latvian Theatre," Līga Ulberte also draws on sources in Latvia to analyze the cultural underpinnings of Lācis's most serious, long-term romantic relationship: that with her life partner, Bernhard Reich. In detailing the theatrical activities that Lācis and Reich undertook both separately and together, Ulberte establishes persuasively that these activities structured their life stories, and she offers an important corrective to the supposition in Anglo-American scholarship that Brecht's and Lācis's relationship was purely a one-way street as far as influence is concerned.

The next contribution, Krista Burāne's "Dear Grandmother, How Are You?: The Influence of Anna Lācis on the Development of Political Theater in Latvia," also introduces archival material previously unknown outside of Latvia, specifically the "large and still unused epistolary archive of Anna Lācis" that exists in the collection of the Latvian Literature and Music Museum in Riga, which she also drew on to make the film *Māra*. Analyzing four of the 51 letters that Māra Ķimele wrote to her grandmother between 1953 and 1978, Burāne unpacks the personal and professional challenges facing these two intelligent, dynamic female directors and thus builds a bridge to the tradition of political theatre in contemporary Latvia.

Burāne's is not the only film in which Māra Ķimele has acted. Her most prominent role was in Laila Pakalniņa's 2003 *The Python*, and with Ķimele as a link, Inga Pērkone takes the opportunity, in "Seeing Differently: The Film Language of the Latvian Film Director Laila Pakalniņa," to identify commonalities between Pakalniņa's and Lācis's work. As recognized *auteurs*, these women introduced challenging modernist aesthetic forms in their works in order to represent political ideas. However, just as Burāne does, Pērkone also notes the difficulties female directors have faced working in the patriarchal Latvian cultural industries, and how hard won was any credit they received for their aesthetic innovations.

The final contribution, Inga Untiks's "Riga Dating Agency: Art, Intimacy and Narratives of Female Agency," tackles the dicey nature of Lācis's feminist legacy head-on through the case study of a performance piece begun in 1997 by Monika Pormale and Gints Gabrans, in which images of primarily ethnic Russian female respondents to a simulacrum of a dating agency were displayed in exhibitions across Europe. Untiks's analysis pinpoints the problematic undercurrents of locational commodification at work in both the way Lācis functions in the Benjamin industry and the way the participants do in this artwork. She perceptively links this to their both going against the normative gender roles of ethnonational narrative and shows how other Baltic works from the late 1990s, such as Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* and the *LN Women's League Project* by a collective of six ethnic Latvian female artists, help to highlight the irony of the term "agency" in the name of Pormale and Gabrans's piece.

12 These contributions are attempts to spark international dialogue about the state of a good many things in contemporary independent Latvia, from archival research to political art. From them, we can see how the themes that have dominated Lācis's international reception—leftism and love—resonate in Latvia itself. While leftism remains of interest, if not a force,<sup>5</sup> it is no longer an ideal that trumps love, which can no longer be separated from feminist concerns. There is much more about Lācis's life in Latvia that can productively be put into dialogue with contemporary concerns, and much work that is currently only available in Latvian, Russian, or German that can shed light on and add perspective to the English Lācis, such as Lācis's own reminiscences, and her daughter Dagmāra's Latvian and her partner Bernhard Reich's Russian and German autobiographies (Reich). I particularly regret that there is no contribution here on the circumstances of Lācis's marriage, in early 1914, to the Latvian Julijs Lācis (1891-1941), who later became a writer and politician and died in a Soviet prison in Astrakhan in 1941 (see Kalniņa).

Just as Lācis herself served as a conduit that connected leftist cultural, and specifically theatrical, developments in Weimar Germany and early Soviet Russia, with proletarian realities in places like Naples and Riga, so too are contemporary multilingual Latvian knowledge and cultural workers well positioned to translate that history so that it can make its way into the global academic English that has replaced Russian as the language of the left in order to initiate and facilitate conversations with knowledge and cultural workers located in places such as Germany, Italy, Poland, and Brazil, not to mention Canada. I hope that the sampling provided here will soon be joined by more multilingual academic work on these topics that is as sensitive to questions of locationality and language as the contributions here.

## NOTES

1. "STATIONERS She lives in a city of watchwords and inhabits a quarter of conspiratorial and fraternal terms, where every alleyway shows its colour and every word has a password for its echo."

“CHINESE CURIOS All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.”

(Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings* 70, 49). The latter quotation is better translated as “all decisive blows will be struck with the left hand.”

2. This is taken from the description on her website: <http://kristaburane.com/films/#mara-2014>.

3. It is available online at <http://www.culturecrossroads.lv/journal/3>.

4. Documentation in English is available at <http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21976/anna-asja-lacis>, and in German at <http://www.documenta14.de/de/artists/21976/anna-asja-lacis>.

5. For more on the history of leftism in Latvia, see Mawhood.

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