



According to the dominant interpretation of Walter Benjamin's relationship with Asja Lacis, it was driven primarily by two factors: the erotic and the political. Susan Buck-Morss, for example, writes of Lacis' influence on Benjamin, "for anyone who has known the creative intensity of the erotic and the political as a double awakening, wherein work and passion are not separate corners of life but fused intensely into one, the decisive significance of their relationship will come as no surprise" (21). This interpretation is not unfounded; especially early on, it seems there was plenty of voltage flowing between the German Jewish intellectual and the Latvian theatre director and the current was sexual, but also intensely political, since it was Lacis who first inspired Benjamin to engage actively with the ideas of Marxist communism. However, this way of understanding their connection focuses exclusively on the differences that made this coupling charged, even explosive: man vs. woman; metaphysical scholar vs. Marxist revolutionary. In doing so, as Gershom Scholem's commentary shows repeatedly, it ultimately makes a puzzle of this relationship, since viewed either in terms of erotic attraction or as an exchange of political ideas and arguments, the interaction between Benjamin and Lacis appears to consist of brief periods of intensity, followed by little clear development.¹ This makes Benjamin's own insistence on the enduring and pivotal importance of this relationship seem somewhat mysterious.

What is almost completely overlooked in this reading, however, is the passion that Lacis and Benjamin shared in common, not for one another but for the genre which drew them together, and became the track along which their differently directed energies would become so productively aligned. This was the genre of theatre. When they

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met, Benjamin was writing a dissertation on German drama, while Lacis was a politically committed director and actress who had already begun her pioneering work in proletarian children's theatre in the Soviet Union. As their relationship developed, Benjamin would go on to provide a theoretical foundation for Lacis' practical work, and even more notably, to apply and adapt the principles of this work to dramatic effect in his own writing. To identify the theatre as an essential starting point for understanding the coupling of Benjamin and Lacis is to solve the puzzle posed by Scholem, and to provide a crucial element in explaining the marked change in the style of Benjamin's writing that occurred after he met Lacis. It also has the benefit of displacing the crude gender stereotypes that have largely

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filled the explanatory gap created by Scholem's ignorance of this aspect of their relationship.

To solve one set of problems is to uncover another, however. Once the significance of the genre of theatre for the productive coupling of Benjamin and Lacis is recognised, it becomes difficult to understand how it could ever have been overlooked. On this point, I suggest that the misreading of their relationship that has stemmed from Scholem's mystification depends heavily on the assumption that there are clear boundaries to be drawn between genres, in this case between the genre of political thought and that of theatre. Because Benjamin is viewed in this context as a political thinker, it is assumed that any significant influence Lacis might have had on his work must have come directly in the form of political ideas. The simple fact that she was a communist thus comes to obscure, almost to the point of erasing, the much more interesting and complex fact that she was a communist director of children's theatre. It did not occur to Scholem, and has barely occurred to later readers of Benjamin, to look for concepts or principles embedded in the concrete detail of Lacis' theatre work which might have entered into Benjamin's philosophy or ways of writing. The major purpose of this essay is to rectify this oversight.

the couple in transformation

whenever a great love came over me, I changed so fundamentally that I was very astonished to have to say to myself: the man who said such unanticipated things and who displayed such unexpected behaviour was I. This is so because true love makes me similar to the beloved woman. My most forceful and violent transformation into the similar was ... my union with Asja [Lacis]. (Benjamin qtd in Richter 125)²

This transformation began when Walter Benjamin gallantly used his knowledge of Italian to help Asja Lacis purchase some almonds in a shop on Capri in 1924.³ This chance meeting would lead to a passionate and long-lasting connection, but one that never progressed into the settled form of marriage or a de facto relationship. As an erotic relationship it flared

into life from time to time in the years that followed their meeting, but was more consistently lived in the modes of deferral and frustration. Benjamin and Lacis did not live together for more than very short periods, and for most of their relationship they were separated both by geographical distance and by the fact that Lacis was more stably and conventionally involved with the German theatre director Bernard Reich, whom she married. Benjamin, too, had a much more substantial relationship with Dora Kellner, his wife for thirteen years. And yet Benjamin's own accounts of his passion for Lacis suggest that what he calls his union with "one of the most remarkable women I have ever met" (Letter, 7.7.1924, 1966, 351) was, in its transformative power, the most significant coupling of Benjamin's life.

It was a union that corresponded less to the sense of *couple* as "A married or engaged man and woman; a set of two people who are habitual companions, live together, etc." than to more technical meanings of the word: "A pair of equal but opposite forces acting along parallel lines, tending to cause rotation," or "A set of two plates of different conducting materials in electrical contact, between which a voltage arises" (*OED*). The energising and reorienting effect of his contact with Lacis was to have a profound impact on the direction of Benjamin's thought and writing as well as his personal life. His effect on her was less obvious; of the two, she was the more strongly established in her chosen field of work when they met. Nevertheless, Benjamin's contribution to Lacis' theatre work and its legacy would prove decisive.

If Lacis and Benjamin could be described as "equal but opposite forces acting along parallel lines," then I would argue that these "lines" run deepest in relation to the genre of theatre, an art-form of passionate interest to them both. This is not to deny but rather to illuminate the most commonly recognised aspect of Lacis' influence on Benjamin, that is, the engagement with Marxist political thought that her challenges and example inspired in him. For without an understanding of the material form that Lacis' commitment to Marxist communism took, the nature and extent of this influence cannot be fully

appreciated, and appears to amount to little more than the initial stimulus that led Benjamin to begin reading Marxist theory. It is worth noting that under Lacis' influence Benjamin decided to study Lucács' *History and Class Consciousness*, and wrote to his old friend, Gerhard Scholem (to Scholem's astonishment and dismay), of his "insight into the relevance of a radical communism' as a highly legitimate possibility of political life" (qtd in Scholem 122). Her influence can also be seen in the fact that after their meeting, Benjamin began to ask himself whether he should join the German Communist Party, a question which he continued to ponder when he visited Lacis in Riga in 1925, and did not resolve (in the negative) until after his visit to Moscow to see her in late 1926 and early 1927. These are, however, relatively superficial aspects of the way in which Benjamin's work benefited from his relationship with Lacis.

Much more significant, I would argue, is the effect Lacis had on the genres in which Benjamin wrote. There is no question that after meeting her his writing style underwent a marked change. The highly academic, abstruse style in which not only his postdoctoral dissertation but also his first major published work of literary criticism (a long essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*⁴) was written gave way to a much more accessible and popular, although still highly original, mode of expression. As the "Publisher's Note" to one collection of Benjamin's work puts it:

From 1926 onwards, the character of his output underwent a drastic outward alteration – in a word, from hermeticism to publicism. He became a prolific book-reviewer, travel-reporter and radio-scriptwriter, forsaking his more esoteric diction for an often disconcertingly concrete language, metaphysical for more topical terrains. (In Benjamin, *One-Way Street* 33)

This change can be attributed to both pragmatic and philosophical factors. After the failure of the postdoctoral thesis Benjamin completed on Capri, he came under renewed financial pressure to find a way to earn a living: journalism was his solution. The appearance of a piece on Naples, the first of Benjamin's articles to be published

in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, has been described as marking "the real inception of his journalistic practice";⁵ it was co-authored with Lacis. Under the influence of the communist thought to which Lacis introduced him, Benjamin also aspired to a more politically effective role. In *One-Way Street*, the book that marked this new direction in his work, and which he dedicated to Lacis, he declared: "The critic is the strategist in the literary battle" (66).

Apart from the motivations of financial need and political orientation, in regards to which Lacis appears as collaborator and comrade, the mediator, perhaps, rather than the originator of the forces that came to shape Benjamin's writings, there is a third aspect of the change that took place in his work at this time which is tied still more closely to his relationship with her. I will argue that many aspects of Benjamin's emerging style of thought owe direct and concrete inspiration to the theatre work of Asja Lacis. To make the case for this interpretation of Benjamin's writings naturally requires some familiarity with the nature of Lacis' work. Since her theatre practice has barely been discussed in any English-language commentary,⁶ I shall describe it in some detail before coming to the question of how the principles it embodies were taken up in Benjamin's own writing practice.

the theatre work of asja lacis

When Benjamin and Lacis met in 1924, the rather esoteric character of Benjamin's interest in theatre at that time was evident in the topic of the postdoctoral dissertation he was completing: a study of the conceptual basis of German baroque drama.⁷ Lacis' work in the theatre, on the other hand, had already taken a strikingly innovative, contemporary and politically committed turn. Having completed her training at the Fjodor Komissarshevski Studio for actors in Moscow during the days of the Bolshevik Revolution, in which she participated, Lacis had been sent in 1918 to Orel (in the Soviet Union) to take up her first directing post in a municipal theatre company. On her arrival, however, Lacis came into contact with children who had been orphaned during the First World War, and

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decided that the needs of the municipal theatre could wait; it was more important to do something to help these “children without a childhood.” With theatre, she knew she could provide a task “which would completely take hold of them and set their traumatized abilities free” (Lacis, “A Memoir” 25). This idea was to lead to the creation of one of the first proletarian children’s theatres in the Soviet Union.

During the 1920s, Lacis would go on to establish similar children’s theatres in Riga and Moscow. The trajectory of her involvement in theatre thus moved along an axis that drew her away from any abstract practice of art for art’s sake, or even the pedagogical style of political theatre practised by Brecht (with which she was familiar, having worked as assistant director to Brecht in Munich in 1923), and towards a politically engaged form of theatre as radical socialist justice in action. This repeatedly led her into confrontation with the Stalinist state. In the 1930s, her use of theatre to develop children’s critical and creative abilities was considered politically dangerous, and in 1938 she was sent into a ten-year exile in Kazakhstan.

Back in 1924, when Lacis met Benjamin on Capri, he showed “tremendous interest” in her children’s theatre, and declared that he would write a program for it, providing a theoretical foundation for her practical work. He did eventually write such a program, in 1928, when Lacis was planning to set up a children’s theatre in Berlin. When the program was read to the theatre workers, however, “everyone laughed. ‘Benjamin must have written that for you!’” (Lacis, “A Memoir” 27). Lacis returned the text to Benjamin and told him to write it in a more comprehensible way. This gave rise to a second version which was eventually published well after almost all of the rest of Benjamin’s writings.⁸ According to Hildegard Brenner, the chief editor of *Alternative*, the German journal in which excerpts of Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre” [“Program”] finally appeared in 1968, the text had been suppressed by Benjamin’s literary executors, Theodor W. Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, because they wanted to play down Benjamin’s

Marxist position – a position which they saw as tied intimately to his relationship with Asja Lacis.

This act of censorship⁹ did not merely veil the fact that Benjamin’s contact with Lacis stimulated his engagement with Marxist thought. It also inhibited understanding of the material form taken by Lacis’ own commitment to Marxist communism, and the potential significance of her theatre methods not only for readings of Benjamin’s work but equally for future developments in her own field. This problem was compounded by the fact that Lacis herself did relatively little to ensure that her discoveries and innovations would be passed on to future theatre practitioners. The bulk of her published writing about theatre focuses not on her own creative work but on that of the well-known male theatre directors she knew and worked with: she published a book in Russian on *Revolutionary Theatre in Germany*, and a volume of memoirs in German entitled *Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theatre, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator*.¹⁰ It appears that it is only Benjamin’s valorisation of her work with children – and other people’s interest in *his* philosophical text about it – that encouraged Lacis (or her publishers) to consider her own principles of theatre work worthy of being preserved in written form and made available to the public. When Benjamin’s “Program” was finally published, accompanied by Lacis’ commentary and reminiscences about the work that gave rise to this text, its importance was immediately recognised within the milieu of German experimental theatre: the principles Benjamin distilled from Lacis’ work were quickly taken up and became the basis of the practice of several radical theatre groups in West Berlin and West Germany.¹¹ Benjamin scholars, on the other hand, have been remarkably slow to give this material any critical attention.

Benjamin’s “Program” and Lacis’ accompanying “Memoir” reveal that her approach to children’s theatre was shaped by two major, interlinked factors: her commitment to Marxist communism in the form of a “proletarian” as opposed to “bourgeois” educational philosophy; and the fact that she worked with children whose traumatic backgrounds and lack of parental care

meant they were more than usually resistant or unresponsive to standard methods of education. These children and the challenges they posed fell into two categories. First, there were the institutionalised war orphans, who were materially well cared for, but emotionally destitute: “They had a roof over their heads, but they looked at you like old people – with sad, tired eyes. Nothing interested them” (Lacis, “A Memoir” 25). Then there were the violent, thieving gangs of abandoned children that Lacis found on the streets of Orel and the other cities of the Soviet Union in which she worked – the *Besprisorniki*. Any efforts to institutionalise these children failed – the children constantly ran away. Lacis, on the other hand, found effective ways to work with them. As Benjamin remarks in a diary entry: “It is very evident that Asja, as she herself says, is most successful with the wildest children.”¹²

This success flowed from a clear recognition that to subject orphaned and abandoned children to the “foreign power” of a director and a script, and expect them to produce a performance, would be futile. In any case, Lacis was opposed to methods of education that focused on a “good” to be produced, seeing this as reflective of the bourgeois capitalist society she opposed. The goal she set herself was that of developing the children’s aesthetic and moral capabilities. For this it was important that the children were permitted and stimulated to take an initiating, creative, active role in whatever went on. Instead of being trained narrowly to develop special skills, directed to the rapid “production” of performances, the children were taught all the varied skills involved in creating theatre – from painting to music to the building of props – and were encouraged to discover and develop their own talents within an understanding of the collective process. Performances took place only when the children called for them. Benjamin points out that this “proletarian” form of moral education was never a matter of imposing a “moral influence” on the children, or any immediate influence at all. Rather, the “children’s collective itself takes responsibility for the inevitable moral adjustments and corrections. That is why the performances of the

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children’s theatre necessarily affect adults as genuine moral instances” (Lacis, “A Memoir” 29–30).

Two central practical principles guided this form of education: improvisation and observation. The use of improvisation meant that the “play originated as children performed for children.” From initially engaging in a system of activities directed by adult educators, the children were led to discover “a more demanding, collective aesthetic form” as they created scenes and plays together. For Lacis this corresponded to “the goal of Communist education [which] is to set productivity free on the basis of a generally high level of education, and to do this for those who have special skills as well as for those who don’t” (26). From the children’s perspective, she found that the improvising play “meant luck and adventure” (27). It aroused their interest, and led them to work seriously, with surprising results: even children who seemed limited demonstrated unexpected abilities.

Corresponding to the work of improvisation was the practice of observation. The children were encouraged to observe “objects, the relations of objects and people to one another, and their changeability” (26). The discipline of observation was equally if not more important for the adult educators. In working with the children, they were required to keep themselves in the background, and observe and assist rather than seek to direct the children’s improvisations and emerging abilities. This meant that ideology was never forced upon the children; instead, they were encouraged to appropriate insights drawn from their own experience.

Indeed, the educators had as much or more to learn from the children in this respect as the children did from them. Benjamin lays great emphasis on this aspect of the work done in the children’s theatre. He begins his “Program” by claiming that “the self-complacency of parliamentary stupidity comes straight from the fact that the adults keep to themselves” (28). A little later he suggests that if the bourgeoisie considers theatre to be dangerous for children, this is because it does not wish to perceive “the most powerful force of the future summoned up in children by the theatre” (29). He concludes his

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text by returning to this idea, suggesting that if theatre can have revolutionary effects then this will not be through “the propaganda of ideas” which excites audiences but leads to no change in their behaviour, since any resolutions taken under the sway of the actors’ performances are inevitably “dismissed at the theatre exit in the first sober moment of reflection.” Real change is more likely to be provoked as a result of observing the child’s life as it emerges in the play of theatre: “What is truly revolutionary in effect is the *secret signal* of what will come to be, which speaks from the gesture of children” (32; emphasis in original).

The techniques of Lacis’ children’s theatre had an immediately transformative effect on the lives of the children who had the chance to benefit from them. An indication of this can be seen in the story Lacis tells of how the *Besprisorniki* of Orel became involved in her first children’s theatre. When she first invited these young outlaws to join the theatre, Lacis was met with jeers and threats. Repeated visits to the gang gradually brought about better relations, and finally they turned up at her theatre on a day when the other children were improvising a scene as robbers, sitting around an imaginary camp-fire and swapping stories of their exploits. These more timid children were terrified by the sudden appearance of the gang, who had dressed for the occasion, wearing paper helmets and armour made from branches and pieces of lead, and wielding sticks and spears. After the initial shock, Lacis managed to restore order; she persuaded the children who had been improvising to ignore the intruders and go on with their exercise. The gang stood back and watched until their leader decided to lead his band of marauders into the middle of the scene. The street kids then shoved the others aside, and proceeded to play the scene themselves, trying to outdo each other with their outrageous speeches. Finally they got up and “looked at our children with scornful condescension: “That’s what real robbers are like!”” (Lacis, “A Memoir” 27). Needless to say, after such a satisfying entrance, the gang were motivated to return and became active members of the theatre.

We might imagine the contours of this story, and the principles it demonstrates, repeated in

other contexts involving work with groups whose experience has alienated them from the dominant “adult” culture – whether we are speaking of members of what Benjamin calls the “children’s collective,” or of members of other “collectives” within society whose spirit and desires are consistently ignored or suppressed by mainstream consumer society. The core principles of observation, improvisation and respect for the “secret signals” emitted in the spontaneous and truthful gestures of actors might be applied to beneficial effect in the context not only of experimental theatre but also in much wider educational and political settings. This was a potential that Benjamin clearly recognised, and not merely in the statements of the “Program” he wrote for the children’s theatre. More telling is the fact after he met Lacis, his writing, both for the print media and for radio, increasingly displays a theatrical and experimental quality that reveals Benjamin’s own employment of the methods and principles he had identified in her work.

the theatrical turn in benjamin’s writing

After finishing his postdoctoral thesis, Benjamin wrote more often about cities, or the life of cities, and literature, rather than directly about theatre or forms of drama, but he did not abandon his interest in this genre. Rather, he turned from taking drama primarily as a literary object of study and interpretation to enacting a kind of improvised theatre in the construction of his own texts. From *One-Way Street* to the enormous, unfinished work of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin began to create texts that, rather than presenting a philosophical argument in a linear manner, set out a series of aphoristic or meticulously observed passages, like so many thematically connected scenes in an improvised piece of theatre that has no overarching plot, no single directorial vision guiding the performance. Ernst Bloch, in a paper entitled “Philosophy as Cabaret,” wrote of *One-Way Street*: “its form is that of a street, a sequence of houses and shops whose windows are full of bright ideas” (94). It is even more like a street in which a festival or carnival of street theatre is taking place, where

passers-by are encouraged to watch or even to take part in whichever of the many short scenes take their fancy. Rather than a virtual streetscape designed for the orderly commercial exchange of ideas, it is a space in which Benjamin hopes the reader might lose his or her way, which is not the same as merely not finding it. As Benjamin put it in his autobiographical text on *A Berlin Childhood around the Turn of the Century*: “Not to find one’s way about in a city is of little interest. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires practice” (qtd in Sontag 10).

It requires practice in the way that learning to improvise takes practice, especially if one’s natural playfulness has been inhibited by the discipline of an elite bourgeois, academic education, like the one Benjamin received (or at the other end of the social spectrum, by the damaging effects of childhood institutionalisation). Benjamin adds “I learnt this art late in life.” Did he take his first steps in learning this spontaneous art form in Naples, at the age of 32, with Lacis as his slightly older guide, as they wandered through the city, and wrote together about it? It seems plausible to suppose so, especially given that *One-Way Street*, Benjamin’s first solo performance in this dramatic genre (or anti-genre) of political-literary-historical-autobiographical-philosophical writing, was emphatically dedicated to her: “This street is named Asja Lacis Street, after her who as an engineer cut it through the author” (45). It was a street under construction, in which the power of theatre was put to work in the service of social and political change. Just as we might say that Lacis sought to produce an image of socialist politics in her work with the most marginalised sector of Soviet society, Benjamin told Scholem that *One-Way Street* was to represent both the philosophical application of surrealism (and thereby its sublation) and the attempt “to establish the image of history even in its most inconspicuous fixtures of existence, its rejects” (Letter, 9.8.1935 in Benjamin, *Briefe* 684–85).

The influence of Lacis’ theatre work on the forms in which Benjamin expressed his ideas after meeting her is equally evident in the innovative radio work he produced from 1927 to 1933.

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His broadcasts in this new mass medium included a regular program for children in Berlin which, as Buck-Morss puts it, “had a pedagogic purpose, to teach their young audiences to read both the urban landscape and the literary texts generated within it as expressions of social history.” She comments that whilst the politically critical stance of these programs is explicit, they are

totally free of an authoritarian voice. Rather, the didactic message emerges effortlessly and disarmingly [. . .] As a storyteller, Benjamin seems to be in complicity with children – and also with the lower classes for whom education has traditionally been a lesson in intellectual humiliation. (34–35)

Benjamin had showed “profound interest and absorption in the world of the child” (Scholem 66), since his son Stefan was small, so a mutual interest in and understanding of children is something that drew Lacis and Benjamin together, rather than evidence of her influence on him. However, the avoidance of any authoritarian style of direction in favour of providing children with the skills to explore the city of streets and ideas for themselves, and the solidarity Benjamin displays with the proletarian class, bear the distinct stamp of Lacis’ methods.

Buck-Morss acknowledges this, remarking that Benjamin’s radio programs “show the influence of Lacis’ work with proletarian children’s theatre in their antiauthoritarian approach to political education.” However, she immediately adds: “And they bear strongly the impact of his friendship with Brecht in their use of entertainment forms for didactic content” (35). This is true of the “Hörmodelle,” a series Benjamin produced for adult radio in Frankfurt am Main, but Benjamin did not meet Brecht until early 1929, so this friendship could have had no earlier impact on the children’s radio programs he began writing and presenting in 1927. In this respect, Buck-Morss’ emphasis on Brecht’s influence is slightly misleading. However, it must be admitted that she is one of very few commentators to recognise that Lacis’ theatre work was of any importance for Benjamin. To understand why so little attention has been given to this crucial aspect of their relationship, we must turn

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to the highly influential work of Gerschom Scholem, for whom Benjamin's relationship with Lacia was a puzzle he could not solve.

scholem's puzzle

Scholem, whose interpretation of Lacia's influence on Benjamin can be seen at work in Buck-Morss' and most other accounts of it, suggests that the "inspiration [Benjamin] had derived from Asja Lacia" (128) when he met her in 1924 did not come to fruition until 1929, a year which in Scholem's view "constituted a distinct turning point in his intellectual life as well as a high point of intensive literary and philosophical activity" (159). The year 1929 was that in which Benjamin met Brecht (through Lacia, with whom Benjamin was living at the time), and Scholem implies, without actually asserting, that Benjamin's friendship with this intellectual man of the theatre was the more important relationship in turning him towards Moscow and away from Jerusalem, politically, intellectually and literally (Scholem had long nurtured a plan for Benjamin to join him and his wife in Palestine, which definitively faltered after 1929).

Scholem is open in acknowledging, however, that Benjamin gave him very little to go on in judging the significance of his relationship with Lacia. In their correspondence, Benjamin avoided mentioning Lacia by name, and after his divorce, which was finalised in 1930 after a protracted and bitter struggle, ceased to mention Lacia at all. This may well have been out of consideration for the fact that Scholem was close friends with Benjamin's wife. Whatever the reason for it, the result was that Scholem was given few clues as to the basis or effects of Benjamin's passion for Lacia. As Scholem says, with regard to the period after 1929 until Benjamin's death in 1940, "this side of [Benjamin's] life remained completely dark to me" (158).

Before 1929, however, Scholem was privy to occasional shafts of light on this topic, and in the book in which he gives an account of his friendship with Benjamin, he records them with a faithful accuracy which allows readers with more familiarity with Lacia and her work to see significance in them that Scholem himself

could not. For instance, he says that from the time of Benjamin's first meeting with Lacia (and well before Benjamin had met Brecht, of course), he had perceived a duality emerging in his friend's thought: a "struggle between his metaphysical mode of thinking [which derived from the Judaic tradition in which Scholem himself was steeped] and the Marxist mode into which he sought to transform that thinking" (123). More specifically, he reports that from the time of Benjamin's return to Berlin from Capri until the period of their last contacts, Benjamin referred repeatedly to "the experimental, heuristic nature of his associations with the thought world (or, as it seemed to him, the practice) of communism" (123-24).

For Scholem, who never met Lacia, and knew little, if anything, of the principles informing her proletarian children's theatre, Benjamin's insistence here on the "experimental" and the "heuristic" indicated nothing more than a lingering loyalty to an earlier way of thinking:

it was exactly in keeping with his true convictions, which at no time permitted him to write *finis* to an old way of thinking and to start a new one from a freshly gained Archimedean point. Instead, there now appeared an often puzzling juxtaposition of the two modes of thought, the metaphysical-theological and the materialistic, so that the two became intertwined. (124)

Scholem acknowledges the productive qualities of this "puzzling" union of opposites, claiming that this:

interlocking of two elements that by nature are incapable of balance lends precisely to those of Benjamin's works that derive from this attitude their significant effect and that profound brilliance that distinguishes them so impressively from most products of materialistic thought and literary criticism, noted for their uncommon dullness. (124)

If Benjamin's own insistence on the "experimental, heuristic" nature of his engagement with communist practice is taken seriously, it can be seen that what Scholem is pointing to here is that strikingly theatrical quality of Benjamin's

writings which derives not only from the combination of metaphysical and materialistic modes of thought but also from the principles of education through improvisation he learnt from Lacis.

Much less helpful for later interpretation of the relationship between Lacis and Benjamin were remarks made by Scholem in his "Preface" to Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, a piece he wrote after the deaths of both Benjamin and Lacis. Here, Scholem is less careful to restrict himself to what he actually knew of Lacis' effect on Benjamin, and the "puzzle" posed by what he now describes as an "infinitely problematic" relationship takes on a sharply negative quality. He interprets Benjamin's dedication of *One-Way Street* to Lacis as evidence that "his erotic attraction to her was linked to the powerful intellectual influence that she exercised over him" but then immediately goes on to raise doubts about "this intellectual dimension of the woman he loved" (7–8), claiming that the diary of the two months Benjamin spent in Moscow, visiting Lacis in 1926–27, leaves us without insight or understanding in this respect:

The times [Benjamin] waits in vain for Asja, her continual rejections, and finally even the erotic cynicism that she displays to no uncertain extent – all this, registered in the diary in desperate detail, makes the absence of any convincing evocation of her intellectual profile doubly enigmatic [...] Part of the puzzle therefore remains unsolved, which is in fact entirely appropriate to a life such as Walter Benjamin's. (8)

Scholem effectively admits, once again, that he has been left in the dark by Benjamin in this matter, but simultaneously lets the reader understand that he has solved at least part of the "puzzle," by speculating that Lacis exerted a power over Benjamin that was primarily erotic rather than intellectual, and that she was not above abusing this power. What surely remains a painful enigma to him is why his highly intelligent friend should have succumbed to such manipulation. I would suggest that what we encounter here is the unhappy perspective of Benjamin's wife, Dora Kellner, who saw Lacis as

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responsible for Benjamin's decision to request a divorce in 1929.¹³ Scholem adopts the viewpoint of his friend, but cannot help feeling that there is something incomplete or inconsistent about it. At this point, in the mystifying vacuum created by the absence of relevant facts (particularly about Lacis' work in children's theatre and Benjamin's appreciation of it), gender stereotypes come into play: Lacis is typecast as a dangerous femme fatale, and Benjamin as a man whose libido has overcome all higher functions.

In the hope of clearing away these caricatures, I shall devote the last part of this paper to a short reading of Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*. This will serve both to put Scholem's remarks in context, and to provide further insight into the sense in which the coupling of Benjamin and Lacis might be compared to a "pair of equal but opposite forces acting along parallel lines, tending to cause rotation." I suggest that it is worth paying attention to the fact not simply that the genre of theatre was an essential starting point for the creative connection between Lacis and Benjamin but more specifically that it was the world of *children's* theatre that yielded the principles which Benjamin applied and adapted to his own purposes. This is important because children's play is liable to disregard the rules and limitations that define any genre, including the genres of theatre and philosophy.

sex and gender in moscow

In an essay written after his visit to Moscow in 1926, Benjamin says that a stay in Russia "obliges everyone to choose his standpoint. Admittedly, the only real guarantee of a correct understanding is to have chosen your position before you came. In [such cases], you can only see if you have already decided [...] someone who wishes to decide 'on the basis of facts' will find no basis in the facts." Benjamin was speaking of ideological standpoints, but his words are provocatively descriptive of the way in which positions are often established on questions involving sex and gender. In the present context, this "Russian" principle could be taken to endorse Scholem's reading of the *Moscow Diary*. Under the influence of Kellner, he seems

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to have chosen his position on Lacis' character as a woman and her relationship with Benjamin, in particular with regards to its sexual nature, "before he came" to this text. However, to Scholem's credit, he is not stable in this "correct understanding" of Lacis: he vacillates between condemning her and admitting that there is a puzzle here that prevents him from definitively endorsing this position. And this marks him as a true friend of Benjamin. For if the words of Benjamin's essay on "Moscow" are read in conjunction with those of his *Moscow Diary*, their implications shift.

The diary shows that Benjamin came to Moscow without a clearly defined position regarding either his political allegiances or his personal intentions. Indeed, he came in search of "facts" which might help him decide whether or not to join the Communist Party, and whether or not to leave his wife and pursue a relationship with Lacis. But he found that the facts, such as he could judge of them, provided no basis for decision. And precisely because he had not chosen his position on either of these (interlinked) matters before he came to Moscow, he spent much of his time in the city in the dark, unable to see what was plain enough to others, to those whose positions had been chosen in advance, whose understanding was "correct" – correct in terms of political ideology, but also correct in the sense of practical common sense. But his lack of "correct understanding," whilst it certainly led to considerable frustration, irritation and moments of despair, did not mean that Benjamin saw nothing. On the contrary, it was the condition for bright, unexpected moments of insight and perception, illuminated as if by the matches he lit in a darkened storeroom on his last full day spent in Russia:

I was burning with impatience to get to the shop with the papier-mâché toys; I was afraid it might already have closed. Which was not the case. But when we got there at long last, the house was already completely dark inside and there was no lighting in the storeroom. We had to feel our way around the shelves at random. Now and then I would light a match. In this way a number of very beautiful items came into my hands which probably wouldn't have happened otherwise since we were obviously

unable to make it clear to the man what it was I was looking for. (*Moscow Diary* 119)

This scene provides a condensed allegory of Benjamin's stay in Moscow. Particularly early on he burns with impatience to see Lacis alone, something which is rarely possible, due to her illness and the almost continual presence of her lover, and Benjamin's friend, Reich. Any erotic hopes or expectations Benjamin may have harboured in relation to his time in Moscow are quickly shown to be unrealistic. In his first entry Benjamin describes Lacis' appearance on his arrival: "Asja did not look beautiful, wild beneath her Russian fur hat, her face somewhat puffy from all the time she had spent bedridden" (9). Five days later, he finds it necessary to "explain to her that she feels uneasy in [his] presence" (16). He is also tormented by the fear that he may already have missed his chance with her (at several points he relates conversations in which he and Lacis talk of what might have been, if Benjamin had been willing to commit to the relationship more clearly earlier on).

Benjamin soon realises, however, that nothing is clear or likely to happen quickly in this scenario, given the state of Lacis' health. For almost all of his time in Moscow, Lacis is staying in a sanatorium, recovering from a nervous condition, and her energies are very limited.¹⁴ Remarkably, Benjamin considers this to be the saving grace of the situation. Two weeks into his stay he writes that "it is only the total impossibility of advancing any further, only the fact that Asja's illness, or at least her weakness, pushes our personal affairs into the background, that keeps me from becoming completely depressed by all this" (35). Short of turning on his heel and returning to Berlin, Benjamin has little choice but to solicit and accept Reich's help in making his way in Moscow literary and theatrical circles. Even with his generous assistance, he is often in the dark, as it were, feeling his way at random in situations in which he cannot speak or understand the language, let alone negotiate the political niceties of social interactions.

In one respect Benjamin is peculiarly well equipped to persevere under such

difficult conditions. Scholem describes him (in another context) as “the most patient human being I ever came to know.” He relates the impression that Benjamin reportedly made on his fellow prisoners during his internment in a camp near Paris and in Nevers in the autumn of 1939 “by his infinite and stoic patience, which he demonstrated without any ostentation whatever and under the most difficult conditions.”¹⁵ As Susan Sontag points out, Benjamin himself saw this character trait in a different light. In *A Berlin Childhood around the Turn of the Century* he describes his “propensity for seeing everything I care about approach me from far away. This is perhaps the origin of what others call patience in me, but which in truth does not resemble any virtue” (qtd in Sontag 14). Virtue or not, Benjamin’s remarkable capacity for patience had the advantage of making it bearable for him to stay in Moscow, even after any expectation of erotic satisfaction has been crushed. In remaining, he shows his faith in a principle he had enunciated in *One-Way Street*: “ARC LAMP: The only way of knowing a person is to love them without hope” (77). And from time to time Benjamin’s hopeless faith is rewarded with moments of happiness and illumination which would surely have eluded a more decisive lover and traveller, one who could have made it clear to others precisely what it was he was looking for.

Occasionally, such happiness derives from gestures of affection, complicity and even passion, from Lacia. Sometime it is stimulated by one of the many theatrical productions Benjamin went to see while in Moscow. More reliably, however, it relates to children and toys. Benjamin spends many of his happier hours in Russia visiting toy museums and buying Russian toys from shops and street stalls for his son Stefan, and Lacia’s daughter Daga, as well as for his own extensive collection.¹⁶ He also takes particular pleasure in a visit with Lacia to see Daga, who is living in a children’s home outside Moscow during her mother’s convalescence.¹⁷ Two weeks into his stay in Moscow, at which point Benjamin feels himself to be “facing an almost impregnable fortress,” he even expresses the improbable wish to have a child with Lacia: “Today I told [Asja] that I now wanted to have a child by her [...] The thing I would prefer the

most would be the bond a child might create between us. But I have no idea whether I could even now bear living with her, given her astonishing hardness and, despite all her sweetness, her lovelessness” (*Moscow Diary* 35).

This is the kind of comment that inclines Scholem to judge Lacia harshly. In light of Benjamin’s remarks about how his passion for her brought about a “violent transformation into the similar,” however, we might wonder whether it is not himself, or his life as an intellectual, that Benjamin is describing here, displaced onto the person of his beloved. The question of whether Benjamin could bear the life of the mind which he had chosen, or which had taken hold of him, whether he could survive its astonishing hardness, especially in the form of financial hardship, and the sense that the culture which might have supported his work was being destroyed in Europe, was one which arose with sufficient force for Benjamin to contemplate suicide several times before he actually took his life during the Second World War. For him, the work of collecting, documenting and creating ideas was, despite all its undoubted sweetness, often a loveless occupation, given that his achievements went relatively unrewarded and unrecognised during his lifetime.

Benjamin’s relationship with Lacia was not one that could save or shield him from these hardships. On the contrary, her example and influence was important in driving him to continue with his work of intellectual observation and improvisation in an environment of increasingly extreme economic and political precariousness. The idea that he might retreat from such challenges into a life of domestic comfort, conceiving and raising a child with her, was a fantasy rather than a realistic hope. However, it points to a second respect in which Benjamin and Lacia were aligned. I have argued that the first respect in which Benjamin and Lacia were in sympathy, rather than in tension with one another, was in the shared interest in the genre of theatre. A second, related point of commonality is their mutual and striking complicity in the world of children. This gave each of them not only the ability to communicate effectively with children where most other adults and institutions

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failed but also to take a critical perspective on the dominant political culture of their time and place, to see through the received wisdom of ideology, whether bourgeois or Marxist, and articulate principles that could pass the litmus test of the unerring instinctive responses of children.

conclusion

The coupling of Benjamin and Lacis was never destined to fall into the well-defined gender roles of mother and father or husband and wife. Nor were the ideas and methods they exchanged apt to be contained within the limits of particular genres. Rather, to borrow a concept and set of images from the essay Benjamin and Lacis wrote together about Naples, we might say that in the textual traces left by their relationship, the borders that separate one gender from another, one genre from another, even one person from another, are *porous*: they resemble stone cliffs that are hollowed out to create caves containing cellars and taverns, or buildings filled with courtyards, arcades and stairways, spaces through which life moves, and takes unpredictable shape: “In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise.’”¹⁸

It is finally this porosity in relation to both gender and genre that has been perhaps the greatest obstacle to productive interpretation of the coupling of Lacis and Benjamin. I suggested at the outset that interpretation of this relationship has suffered from a tendency to assume that the boundaries that separate genres are fixed and impassable, making it difficult to imagine that Lacis’ work in children’s theatre might provide the key to understanding her influence upon the development of Benjamin’s philosophical writing. It is as though it is not possible to imagine that the boundary separating philosophy from theatre might be porous – that one might be able to do philosophy as theatre, or theatre as philosophy, and that concepts and practices might be exchanged between these hybrid art forms.

This failure of imagination – and observation – seems particularly surprising, however, given that

Benjamin was hardly a thinker who observed conventional expectations regarding borders between genres. But it can be explained by reference to an additional layer of rigid interpretation that comes into play because, besides being a communist, Lacis was also a woman. The combination of these two descriptors seems to have a quasi-hypnotic effect, preventing those affected from noticing almost anything else about her, and provoking them to take positions that have nothing to do with the relevant texts, and everything to do with stereotypes and another set of assumed boundaries, this time between genders. While it may be possible for a man like Benjamin (or his friend Brecht) to transcend the genre boundaries that define the work of more conventional thinkers, it seems it is much harder to imagine that a woman could be equally capable of this kind of independent intellectual behaviour. Fortunately, the evidence that has survived of Lacis’ remarkable work means that in this regard we need not rely on imagination alone. And once limitations of imagination based on rigid conceptions of gender and genre are exposed, we can begin to do justice to what Walter Benjamin meant when he wrote of the forceful “transformation into the similar” that was his coupling with Asja Lacis.



notes

I am grateful to reviewers for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper and to Moira Gatens for stimulating me to reflect upon the gender–genre problematic.

1 Scholem’s puzzlement, especially in regard to what attracted Benjamin to Lacis during and after the erotically frustrated and disappointing episode recorded in Benjamin’s *Moscow Diary*, is discussed in detail later in this paper.

2 Original German text: Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 427.

3 The meeting is described in Lacis’ autobiography in a passage quoted in Smith 140.

4 The essay was composed in 1922 and published in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s journal *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* in 1924–25.

5 “Publisher’s Note” in Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, 36. From 1930 to 1933, Benjamin published an average of fifteen articles per year in this paper, using it as “a forum for a politicised discussion of the literary writer’s social situation” (Buck-Morss 34).

6 See Ingram. Apart from her own article, Ingram remarks that “an obituary and a book review represent the extent of the interest Lacis has so far generated in English” (160). She is referring here to Haus, “In Memoriam Asja Lacis” and Parmalee, review of “Revolutionär im Beruf.” To this list should be added a short article by Zipes. Ingram is excluding texts in which Benjamin is the main focus, and mention of Lacis is only incidental or secondary.

7 The dissertation was eventually published in 1928 as *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* [*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*] (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1928); reissued in 1962 (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp).

8 Excerpts from Benjamin’s text first appeared within an article by Lacis, “Das ‘Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters.’” The full German text of the “Program” was published soon afterwards, along with a memoir by Lacis: “Städte und Menschen. Erinnerungen,” *Sinn und Form* 21 (1969): 1326–57. An English translation of the “Program” and a short memoir by Lacis appeared in *Performance* 1.5 (1973): 24–32.

9 See Zipes 23–24. The intention to erase the record of Lacis’ importance for Benjamin is even more flagrantly displayed in the fact that when the “Naples” essay was published in 1955 as part of Benjamin’s *Schriften*, Lacis’ name as co-author was omitted, and the dedication of his book *One-Way Street* to Lacis was also removed. See Ingram 159.

10 Asja Lacis, *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (Munich: Rogner, 1971). This work has also been published in French as *Profession: Révolutionnaire. Sur le théâtre prolétarien: Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin, Piscator*, trans. and intro. Philippe Ivernel, afterword by Hildegard Brenner (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1989). A more personal memoir written in Russian was also published five years after Lacis’ death, entitled *Krasnaya Gvozdika, Vospominanya* [*The Red Carnation*] (Riga: Liecma, 1984). For a comparison of the German and Russian memoirs, see Ingram 159–77.

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11 Zipes 23–24. Such theatre groups included Theater im Märkischen Viertel, Gruppe Spielumwelt, Grips, and TAT.

12 Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 21. This diary entry also testifies to the difficulties involved in working with these “wild” children: Benjamin relates Lacis’ anxiety over an incident in which a child in her care had “bashed in the skull of another of her children [...]” (which could have had grave consequences for Asja; but the doctors were convinced that the child would be saved)."

13 Scholem reports that Benjamin and Kellner’s marriage had effectively already ended by 1923, before Benjamin met Lacis, and from that time onwards Walter and Dora lived together only as friends, primarily for the sake of their son, but “presumably out of financial considerations as well” (Scholem 94). In spite of this, Kellner reacted very badly to Benjamin’s request for a divorce, and saw Lacis as “the only real calamity” their marriage was unable to withstand. She wrote to Scholem at the time of the divorce suit, claiming that under the spell of Lacis, her “poor Walter” had been reduced to a creature who “consists only of head and sexual organs, everything else has been completely shut off, and you know, or can imagine, that in such cases it doesn’t last long until the head is also switched off” (qtd in German in Hans Putties and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana: Eine Biografische Recherche* (Giessen: Anabas, 1991) 144–45; English translation in Ingram 169).

14 This was a recurrent complaint, in which Lacis’ co-ordination of movement was affected. It seems to have been a neural disorder, rather than a psychological condition, as has often been assumed: see Ingram 172–73.

15 Quoted in Sontag 14. Scholem also says that “to deal with Benjamin one had to have the greatest patience oneself. Only very patient people could gain deeper contact with him.”

16 After the trip to Russia, Benjamin published a short article on “Russian Toys” in the *Sudwestdeutsche Rundfunkzeitung*, which appears to have been part of a longer manuscript, now lost. The article is included as an appendix to Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 123–24 (translation by Gary Smith).

17 This visit is related in Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 30 (entry for 17 December). In a letter of 26 December 1926, addressed to Julia Radt (the other

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of the three great loves of his life), Benjamin describes this visit like something out of a fairy tale: "There have been many beautiful things: a sleigh ride through the Russian winter woods to visit a pretty little girl in a first-rate children's clinic" (appendix to Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* 123).

18 Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacin, "Naples" in Benjamin, *One-Way Street* 169. Buck-Morss notes that the concept of "porosity," which is central to this essay, was suggested by Lacin (Buck-Morss 26).

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Justine McGill
SOPHI, Faculty of Arts
Main Quad A14
University of Sydney
NSW 2006
Australia
E-mail: Justine.McGill@arts.usyd.edu.au