

Lācis as a Multilingual Ecosophy

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Abstract: This article examines the multilingual academic and cultural phenomenon that is Anna/ Asja Lācis through the theoretical lens of Félix Guattari's concept of ecosophy. Lācis became somewhat known internationally as Walter Benjamin's Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend, but as that facet of her reputation has garnered only sporadic interest, causing her to fall into oblivion, there has been a resurgence of interest in her in Latvia(n). The article mobilizes an ecosophical approach that focuses on linguistic specificity as the mode of enfolding environment, social relations and subjectivity. Taking the multiplicity of naming practices as my focus, both of Lācis herself, her Latvian environment, and the scholarship that has sprung up online on her on Wikipedia, I argue that Anna/ Asja Lācis cannot be studied from a monolingual perspective, no matter what the language may be, a conclusion I find exemplary of Guattari's insistence on the multiplicity of subjectivity.

Keywords: Asja Lācis, Félix Guattari, Wikipedia, ecosophy, multilingualism

Résumé : Cet article traite du phénomène multilingue, universitaire et culturel qu'est Anna/ Asja Lācis, d'un point de vue du concept d'écosophie de Félix Guattari. Sur la scène internationale, Lācis était la petite amie bolchévique lettone de Walter Benjamin, mais cette facette de sa réputation n'ayant recueilli qu'un intérêt inconstant, elle tombe dans l'oubli. Nous observons cependant une résurgence d'intérêt la concernant en Lettonie et en letton. Cet article s'appuie sur une approche écosophique qui s'intéresse à la spécificité linguistique en tant que moyen de réunir l'environnement, les relations sociales et la subjectivité. Concentrant mon attention sur la multitude de désignations à la fois de Lācis elle-même, mais également de son environnement letton et des connaissances qui ont jailli en ligne à son propos sur Wikipédia, j'avance que Anna/ Asja Lācis ne peut être étudiée d'une perspective monolingue. Conclusion que je trouve représentative de l'insistance de Guattari sur la multiplicité de la subjectivité.

Mots clés : Asja Lācis, Félix Guattari, Wikipedia, écosophie, multilinguisme

Resumo: Este artigo examina Anna/ Asja Lācis enquanto fenômeno multilíngue, acadêmico e cultural, através do conceito de ecosofia de Félix Guattari. Lācis tornou-se conhecida internacionalmente como namorada bolchevique letã de Walter Benjamin. Embora esta faceta de sua reputação só tenha atraído interesse esporádico, levando-a a cair no esquecimento, tem havido um ressurgimento de interesse por ela na Letônia. O artigo mobiliza uma abordagem ecosófica, focalizando a especificidade linguística como modalidade do ambiente, das relações sociais e da subjetividade. Tomando a multiplicidade de práticas de nomeação como foco, tanto em relação à Lācis, seu ambiente letão, quanto em relação aos estudos que têm surgido sobre ela, na Wikipédia, argumentamos que Anna/ Asja Lācis não pode ser estudada por uma perspectiva monolíngue, não importando qual seja a língua, conclusão que nos remete à insistência de Guattari na multiplicidade da subjetividade

Palavras-chave: Asja Lācis, Félix Guattari, Wikipedia, ecosofia, multilinguismo

Resumen: Este artículo presenta el fenómeno académico y cultural multilingüe de la figura de Anna/ Asja Lācis y lo analiza a partir de la perspectiva teórica de Félix Guattari's, específicamente del concepto de ecosofía. Lācis fue relativamente conocida a nivel internacional como la novia letona bolchevique de Walter Benjamin. Este hecho llamó la atención sólo de manera esporádica, y aunque esta faceta de su reputación ha ido cayendo en el olvido, el interés en esta figura en Letonia y en lengua letona ha resurgido. El artículo moviliza una mirada ecosófica centrada en la especificidad lingüística como una

manera de entrelazar el entorno, las relaciones sociales y la subjetividad. Con base en la observación las diversas maneras y prácticas de nombrar tanto a Lācis misma como a su entorno letón, y de la literatura que ha surgido acerca de Lācis en Wikipedia, afirmo que a Anna/ Asja Lācis no se la puede estudiar desde una perspectiva monolingüe--en el idioma que sea--conclusión que considero ilustra la insistencia de Guattari sobre la multiplicidad de la subjetividad.

Palabras clave: Asja Lācis, Félix Guattari, Wikipedia, ecosofía, multilingüismo

“How can we account for a zigzagging, complex, eternally contradictory world in a linear language? I sometimes think that the humanities are really lost and doomed unless we experience with multiple languages.”
(Braidotti and Veronese 343)

Who is Asja/Anna Lācis, and why does she matter? I began asking these questions as a graduate student doing a PhD in Comparative Literature in the 1990s, who was interested in the way women figured in the telling of twentieth-century intellectual history as it intersected with autobiographical writing (Ingram, *Zarathustra's Sisters*). I was fascinated by the fact that different versions of Lācis's memoirs had appeared in German and Russian (Lācis and Brenner; Lācis, Anna) and that a rather different protagonist emerged in each version. That a Latvian version also existed was something I learned subsequently, due to my lack of linguistic access to it (Miglāne, Lācis, and Feinberga).

Now, as we get deeper into the twenty-first century and ecological issues have imprinted themselves in our discourse as the *man*-made crisis termed the Anthropocene, I find that Lācis continues to prove useful as a litmus test of the priorities and agendas of academic knowledge production, and I explore here what Lācis and her work have to say in light of ecological approaches and concerns. More specifically, this initial stab at mapping out the relations of the linguistic permutations and shifting ménages à trois that Lācis and her work have been involved in, from German-Russian-Latvian to Latvian-English-German as well as Spanish, French, Danish, Italian and Portuguese, is a mapping that is critically self-reflexive about *the process* of mapping. In other words, it is an ecologically minded mapping in the spirit of Félix Guattari's understanding of ecology, which he called an ecosophy and explained involves “an ethico-political articulation [...] between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity)” (*The Three Ecologies* 28). Patricia Pisters helpfully reformulates this as “a triple *enfolding* of the environmental, the social, and the mental that always belong together (but again, not always through straightforward, causal connections)” and notes that this “rhizomatic ‘ecosophy’” is everywhere to be found in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Pisters, italics added) as well as in Guattari's single-authored works, available in English as *Chaosophy* and *The Three Ecologies*. In what follows, I show how an ecosophical approach that focuses on linguistic specificity allows

us not only to chart recent interest in Lācis in Latvia but also to understand why it is worth compounding.

First, we must be clear that “Ecosophy is not the same thing as eco-philosophy” (Tinnell para. 6). That is, we must not conflate Guattari’s approach with that of the Norwegian father of “deep ecology”, Arne Næss, even if they both used a term (in Norwegian and French, respectively) that was translated into English as ecosophy. Ecocriticism à la Næss “typically invokes ecology as a strictly environmentalist discourse... [and] tends to prioritize the thematic study of literary representations of Nature, often espousing, at the very least, a desire to distance one’s self from technological advancements and other complexities of modern urban life” (Tinnell para. 2). For Guattari, on the other hand, ecosophy “questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations” (*The Three Ecologies* 52). Privileging art over science due to the former’s creative potential and its reaffirmation of “the plural, polyphonic character of his conception of the subject, and the importance of the subjective question which he had always encountered as a practicing psychotherapist” (Dosse 26), Guattari’s ethico-philosophical focus helped him to identify an underlying principle across the three ecologies that Bateson had identified: namely, the environment, society, and the mind. What Guattari saw each confronting us with was “not given as an in-itself [*en-soi*], closed in on itself, but instead as a for-itself [*pour-soi*] that is precarious, finite, finitized, singular, singularized, capable of bifurcating into striated and deathly repetitions or of opening up processurally from a praxis that enables it to be made ‘habitable’ by a human project.” It is this “praxis opening-out” that Guattari saw as constituting “the essence of ‘eco’-art” because it provided the possibility that “new ecosophical assemblages of enunciation will succeed in channelling these new gains in less absurd, less dead-ended directions than those of Integrated World Capitalism.” Writing during the late 1980s, Guattari was in search of a third way out of the “present ongoing crisis, both financial and economic,” a way that was beyond the dichotomy of “blind fixation to old State-bureaucratic supervision and generalized welfare on the one hand, and a despairing and cynical surrender to ‘yuppie’ ideology on the other” and that could lead to “important upheavals of the social status-quo and the mass-media imaginary that underlies it” (Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* 53). Given the truly ongoing nature of the crisis Guattari identified almost thirty years ago, what I am attempting to do in this paper is gauge how far the multilinguality of Lācis’s work and the work on her contains a potentiality similar to the one Guattari identified in ‘eco’-art. I do so by, first, providing an introduction to Lācis’s biography, after which I draw attention to the languages in which this biographical information has been transmitted. Taking the multiplicity of naming practices as my focus, both of Lācis herself, her Latvian environment, and the scholarship that has sprung up online on her in Wikipedia, I argue that Anna/Asja Lācis cannot be studied from a monolingual perspective, no matter what the language may be, a conclusion I find exemplary of Guattari’s insistence on the multiplicity of subjectivity.

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That Lācis is by no means a well-known commodity can be demonstrated by the fact that she can be found among the “forgotten biographies” on a German website that tells us that she was a director, actor, and theatre pedagogue who was born in 1891 in the Latvian countryside and died in 1979 in Riga (Krusen). Those were, of course, rather tumultuous years to have lived through, and as one learns from her German-, Russian-, and Latvian-language memoirs, which have been translated into a digital cartography, if not yet into English in their entirety, she was indeed buffeted around by the historical forces that redrew that map over the course of her lifetime (see fig. 1):

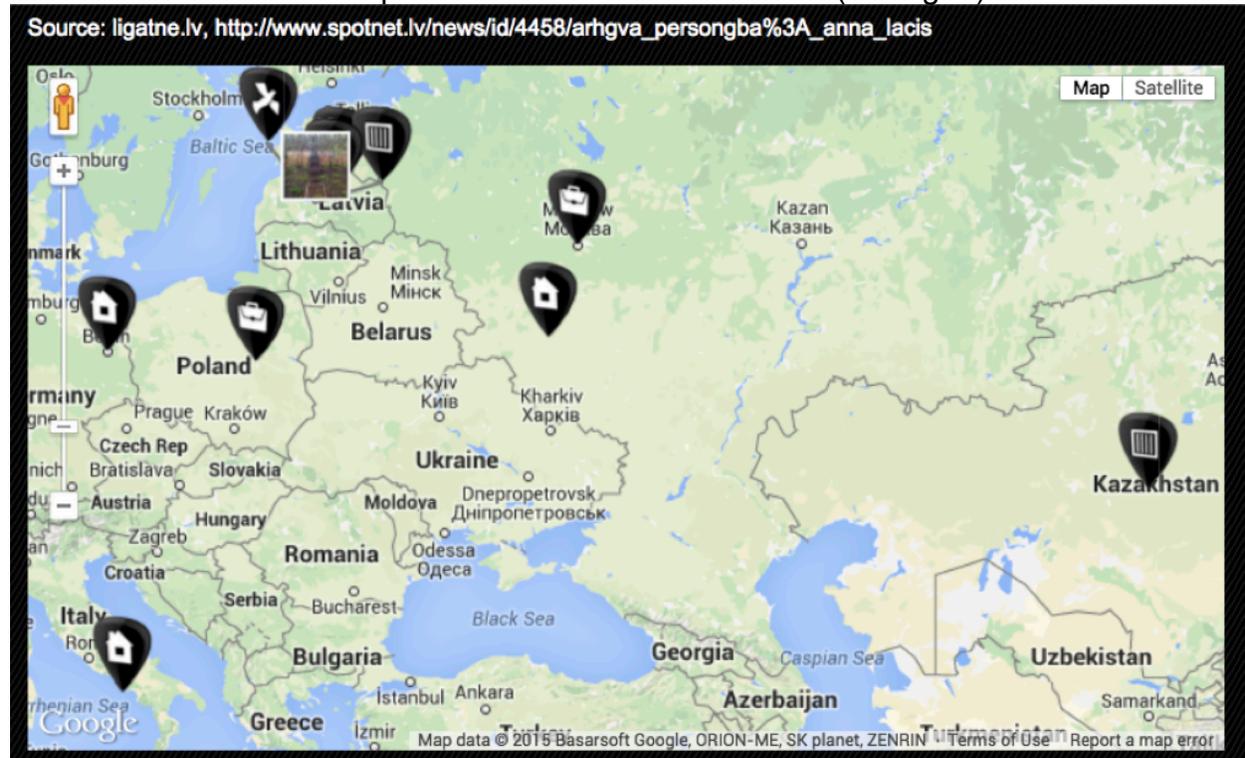


Fig. 1. A digital rendering of the places Lācis lived during her lifetime, from her birthplace in rural Latvia to Riga, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Orel, Berlin, Capri, the camp in Kazakhstan where she served a ten-year sentence, and Valmiera, where she worked in the theatre upon her return from the camp.¹

Outside of Latvia, Lācis tends to be known, if she is known at all, as “Asja,” the Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend of Walter Benjamin. They met in Capri in 1924, he visited her in Riga the following year, she introduced him to Brecht and motivated the trips he took to Riga and to Moscow in the winter of 1926-27 after the failure of his habilitation on the origins of the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*. His *Moskauer Tagebuch (Moscow Diary)* revolves around visits to see her, and his *Einbahnstrasse (One-Way Street)* is

¹ This digital map used to be available online at www.spotnet.lv/news/id/4458/arhgva_personba%3A_anna_lacis, accessed August 2016. I would be only too delighted to acknowledge the source in an updated version of this article.

dedicated to her; its epigraph reads: “*Diese Straße heiße ASJA-LACIS-STRASSE nach der die sie als Ingenieur im Autor durchgebrochen hat*” (“This street is called Asja-Lacis Street after the one who, as engineer, opened it up in the author”). Rather than containing her within erotic libidinal economies, which was my initial critique of how she figured in scholarship (Ingram, “The Writing of Asja Lācis”), what I am drawing attention to here are the circuits of Lācis’s *linguistic* desire and how they can be interpreted as a multilingual ecosophy, which is to say as an ethico-political articulation that demands one pay attention to the specific languages in which articulations are made and recognize each enunciation as “precarious, finite, finitized, singular, singularized, [and] capable of bifurcating” (Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* 53).

The fact that Lācis became known in German and Anglo-American scholarship as “Asja”, whereas her Latvian and Russian memoirs were published under the name “Anna” is indicative of her own relationship to these languages as well as the type of subject she has been treated as in them. “Anna” was the official party functionary, the esteemed artist of the Latvian SSR, whereas the diminutive “Asja” indicates that it is Lācis’s relational identity as the Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend that is of interest. As Freimane relates, no one in Riga ever called her Asja, only Anna (Альчук 170). The difference between them is captured in the following images (see figs. 2 & 3): the first of a young psychology student in St Petersburg and the second from much later in her life when she worked as a theatre director in Valmiera.

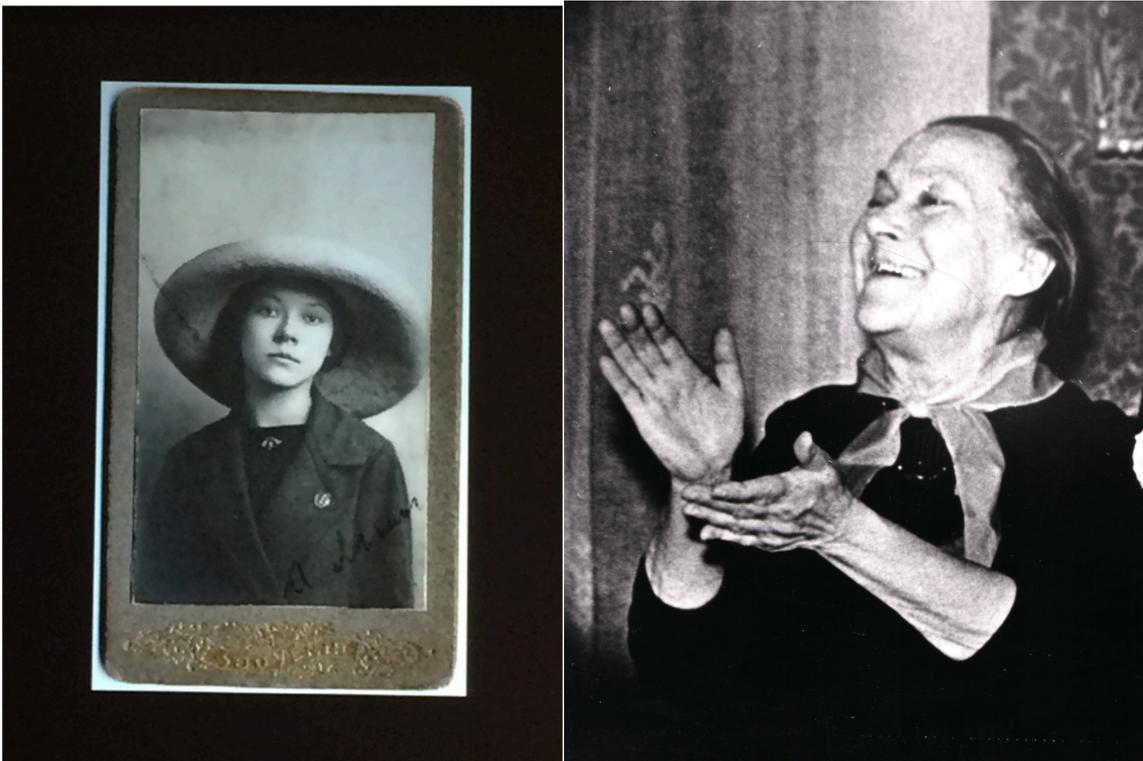


Fig 2. Lācis in 1914 when she was studying psychology in St. Petersburg. Source: tagadējais. "Ana Lācis." *Vikipedija*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 19 Nov. 2016, lv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attēls:Anna_Lācis.jpg. Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

Fig 3. Lācis during her time as a theatre director in Valmiera. Source: S. Ingram.

In the same way that Bowie scholars refer to "David Jones" when they want to refer to the legal person who was born in Brixton in 1947 and "Bowie" for his performing identity, "Asja" tends to be used to describe the mythologized international femme fatale and "Lācis" for the multilingual person buffeted about by historical forces who produced a fascinating collection of autobiographical writing. I chose to include the image of the older Lācis as a theatre director in *Zarathustra's Sisters* because in that work I contrasted her German and Russian memoirs, both of which had been composed late in life. In contrast, Beata Paškevica chose the image of Asja the student for the cover of *In der Stadt der Parolen: Asja Lācis, Walter Benjamin, und Bertolt Brecht (In the City of Words: AL, WB, and BB)*, as her focus was the strange fascination ("*eigentümliche Faszination*") that Lācis was able to exert on German male intellectuals, and the cultural work that resulted. Revealingly, Lācis's daughter, Dagmara Kimele, chose to include both names in the title for her own memoir, *Asja: režisores Annas Lāces dēkainā dzīve* ("Asja: The Stormy Life of Director Anna Lācis", as it is translated in the English Wikipedia entry) (Kimele and Strautmane), demonstrating the very fraught nature of their relationship. The privileged position of "Asja" before the colon would seem to indicate that Dagmara felt her mother was far more connected to and interested in European cultural circuits than in her immediate family or her life in Latvia, something the story and the "Mommy Dearest" reputation it has garnered bear out.

These images of "Asja" and "Lācis" act as nodal points in academic discourse. Rather than privileging one over the other, a multilingual ecosophic approach sees them as interconnected and in potential conversation with each other, not the objects of interpretation but rather presenting potential encounters.² As we know from Paškevica, Lācis's early schooling at an elite private school for girls in Riga was primarily in Russian because until 1905 Latvian was only permitted to be used as the language of instruction for a limited number of subjects (20). Whether German was part of the school's curriculum is not mentioned; however, some of Lācis's key early theatrical experiences were in German: a performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in particular (21). There was not only a German-language theatre in Riga but also guest performances by German troupes, such as from Berlin's Ibsen Theatre, and while Lācis's German was supposedly not very advanced at the time of her first visit to Berlin in 1922, it was apparently sufficient to allow her to participate in discussions that

² I am drawing here on the suggestive phrasing that Dale Hudson used during an online discussion of "Transnational Environments and Locative Places": "An ecological way of thinking demands tracing these complex, mobile intersections between the technological, the natural, the aesthetic, the geographical, the social, and the migratory in order to understand them—and then act on them. Ecology means understanding how things, people, and ideas are interconnected. Ecology also suggests constant movement, change, composting, migration, growth, decay, renewal [...] mov[ing] from *interpretations of representation* towards *encounters with presentation*" (Hudson). See Hudson and Zimmermann to see how this approach is mobilized for locative media.

involved Kant and Nietzsche (23). One can imagine that two years later, when Benjamin came to her aid in that shop in Capri where she was trying to buy almonds, how happy she was to be addressed as “*Gnädige Frau*” and to be able to converse in German (171). The encounters made possible by German, rather than Russian, are the ones that have gone into the creation of her persona as Asja.

We learn in Valda Cakare’s article on theatre in post-Soviet Latvia that the German presence in Latvia dates back to the twelfth century and the invasion of the German crusaders, after which the German nobility were able to retain their “cultural, economic, and political privileges in Latvia” until the Latvian national awakening in the mid-nineteenth century: “The national liberation was simultaneously a rejection of German supremacy and an adaptation of many German cultural institutions, since most ‘young Latvians’ had been educated in Germany” (Cakare 82). It is not an accident that the theatre helped Lācis to come by her German: “A full German Theatre and Opera Company was established [in Riga] in 1782 and its repertoire included such masters of the day as Schiller, Goldoni, and Beaumarchais. The company’s opera conductor from 1837 to 1839 was no less a personage than Richard Wagner and guest performers included such stars as Ida Aldridge and Adelaide Ristori” (Rubin 545). As Cakare further relates, the Latvians adapted this influential institution to “their national ends [...]. The stage became the visual vehicle for the creation of a national consciousness. Latvian theater did not develop out of its folklore. On the contrary, it was strongly influenced by Germany, from acting style to theater architecture” (Cakare 82). Moreover, the Latvians were not the only ones who sought to assert their presence in nineteenth-century Riga by building on the existing German cultural hegemony. The Russians did as well: the Krievu dramas theatris (Riga Russian Theatre) began operating in 1883 (Rubin 546).

Riga’s built environment still contains traces of this multilinguality. When Mūrnieku iela (Bricklayers Street) was restored to its historical appearance in the 2000s by fixing up its wooden and stone houses and recreating its cobblestones, historical signage was recreated that details and claims to demonstrate the local linguistic history (see fig. 4) (“В Столице Латвии”).



Fig. 4. A street marker in Riga in March 2015. Photo: S. Ingram.

The juxtaposition here of three different plaques with different colourings and fonts indicates the ghostly status of both German and Russian in the city. Caught between the global hegemony of English and the rise of European ethnonational forces that work to reduce each nation-state to a linguistically homogenous national entity (cf. Blommaert et al.), the presence of German and Russian on only the middle plaque demonstrates its historical orientation with respect to how things used to be but no longer are. An ecosophic reading of this sign-grouping not only draws attention to its fragmented plurality but also its impossibility. Only Latvian and English are used, in black lettering on a transparent background that contrasts notably with the white lettering of the two signs above it, to explicate to passersby the meaning of the bright blue trilingual middle section:

“Till 1877 the street plates in Riga were in German, from 1877 till 1902 in German and Russian, after 1902 in German, Russian, and Latvian. The name of the street was translated. After 1918, when Latvia proclaimed independence, the street plates were in Latvian. Till 1991, during the Soviet period, the street plates were in Latvian and Russian. The names were reproduced in Russian, not translated.”

Given these shifting language policies, the middle plaque could never have existed as it is depicted. While it does reproduce the languages that were used between 1902 and 1918, the Russian is not translated but transliterated as it would have been during the Soviet period, which began with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and ended with the dissolution of the USSR, but not between 1902 and 1918. A *Maurer* is indeed a *mūrnieks* in Latvian, but the Russian word for bricklayer is Каменщик. Given that what is now Latvia became part of the Russian Empire in 1795 and that the elaboration of the modern Latvian alphabet did not begin to take place until 1908, it is not impossible that Russian would have been at the top and old Latvian on the bottom of such a sign. However, how the street sign really would have appeared in the early twentieth century was clearly not of interest to the city officials in charge of the project.³ Nor does this history seem to be highly valued as a touristic element. It is the only such sign in the city that I am aware of, and it is not in a particularly prominent location in the city. If one does not know about it in advance, or get taken there by generous Latvian hosts, one will only find it by serendipitously stumbling across it. However one comes upon it, the three street signs only pretend to stage an encounter with the city's complex history. They tell us more about the city's current priorities, with the monolingual Latvian sign on top, than its history.

One also finds this type of inexact multilingual ecosophy (which one is tempted to term a chaosophy) in the way Lācis figures in Wikipedia. There are currently six entries on her: in Danish ("Asja Lācis (dansk)"), English ("Asja Lācis (English)"), French ("Asja Lācis (français)"), German ("Asja Lācis (deutsch)"), Latvian ("Anna Lāce") and Spanish ("Asja Lācis (español)").⁴ Only the Latvian entry contains an image, the one of "Asja" in fig. 2. As it is a Creative Commons image, the other entries could have included it, but they do not. The Danish entry is the shortest, consisting of three lines and no bibliographical references, the Spanish is the longest and has the most references, namely ten, and Russian is conspicuously absent. Taken together, the entries provide relatively comprehensive coverage of Lācis's biography, her German, Russian, and Latvian autobiographical writings, her work in the theatre, and the scholarship on her. Taken separately, however, it is sometimes hard to tell that they are entries for the same person.

If one were only to consult the five bibliographical references included in the German entry, for example, which are distributed between the categories of "*Werke*" and "*Literatur*", one would believe Lācis had only written two works, both in German: a memoir ("*Die rote Nelke* [The Red Carnation] Autobiografie, 1981"), and a work on theatre ("*Revolutionäres Theater in Deutschland* [Revolutionary Theatre in Germany]. Moskau 1935"), and that only three works had been written about her, all in German:

³ Had they been interested in reproducing an authentic early twentieth-century trilingual street sign, they could have consulted the collection of the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation: www.rigamuz.lv/km/index.php?m=par_muzeju&l=en&no_flash=1. The museum's multilingual priorities are reflected in the fact that its website is in four languages: English, Latvian, German and Russian.

⁴ These entries were analyzed as of the time of accessing them in March 2017.

“Hildegard Brenner: *Asja Lācis, Revolutionär im Beruf* [A Revolutionary by Profession]. Rogner und Bernhard, München 1971”; “Heinz-Uwe Haus: *In memoriam Asja Lācis* (19. Oktober 1891–21. November 1979). – In: John Fuegi, Gisela Bahr, John Willett (Hrsg.): *Brecht, Women and Politics*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1985, S. 138–147”; and “Beata Paskevica: *In der Stadt der Parolen. Asja Lācis, Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht* [In the City of Words: AL, WB, and BB]. Klartext, Essen 2006” (“Asja Lācis (deutsch)”). It is only by turning to the Latvian entry that this impression is properly dispelled. From the five entries it includes under *Darbi* (Works) and six under *Literatūra*, it turns out that *Revolutionär im Beruf* was not written by but rather together with Hildegard Brenner (Lācis and Brenner) and that two translations of it exist: in Italian (Lācis, *Professione*) and French (Lācis, *Profession revolutionnaire*). Further, by giving the subtitle of the work that is missing in the German entry “*Berichte über proletarisches Theater über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscatoris* [Reports on Proletarian Theatre]” (“Anna Lāce”), the work’s status as a memoir becomes somewhat less opaque.

The Latvian Wikipedia entry contains its own inaccuracies, however. Like the German entry, it claims that the 1935 *Revolutionary Theatre in Germany* was in German when it was in Russian (Paškevica 317). While it does give the (correct) Russian title of *The Red Carnation* (“*Красная звезда: воспоминания*. Rīga: ‘Liesma’, 1984”), it continues to claim, as the German entry does, that the text was published earlier in German as “*Die rote Nelke* (vāciski, 1981)” (“Anna Lāce”). I have yet to locate this text and suspect that the information was taken from the “Vergessene Biographien” website (Krusen). The Latvian Lācis entry repeats the Haus and Paškevica references but incorrectly specifies that the former is in English, not German (Haus). It also informs us of a few other works both by and about Lācis in Latvian: two she herself wrote on the theatre: “*B. Brehta lugu izlase ar priekšvārdu* [A Selection of Brecht’s Plays with a Preface], 1961”; and “*Dramaturģija un teātris* [Drama and Theatre], 1962”, and two works about her: “D. Ķimele, G. Strautmane. *Asja: Režisores Annas Lāces dēkainā dzīve* [Asja: The Stormy Life of Director Anna Lācis]. Rīga: Likteņstāsti, 1996”, the “Mommy Dearest”-type memoir written by Lācis’s daughter, Dagmara (Ķimele and Strautmane); and “M. Miglāne. *Anna Lācis*. Rīga: Liesma, 1973”, which does not credit one of the co-authors or Lācis herself (Miglāne, Lācis, and Feinberga). The Latvian entry also includes a German reference not in the German entry: a rather short doctoral thesis by Sophie Pachner titled *Aber jeder bewahrte da seinen Namen. Die Masse im Theater der zwanziger Jahre bei Asja Lācis und Bertolt Brecht* [But Everyone There Keeps Their Name: The Masses in the Theatre of the 1920s in the Work of Asja Lācis and Bertolt Brecht], as well as my article “The Writing of Asja Lācis”, but not *Zarathustra’s Sisters*. To appreciate the inadequacy of the information found on Wikipedia, it is worth considering that Paškevica’s bibliography contains three full pages on Lācis’s writings on theatre in Latvian and another page of works in Russian, German, Spanish, and English. Her bibliography, which she warns is incomplete (“*unvollständig*”) (317), is 17½ pages long.

What emerges from this multilingual comparison is not only the random, haphazard, and truly incomplete nature of much of the material available on Wikipedia, but also the national distinctiveness of each of the six entries, which Guattari would encourage us to see in terms of reterritorialization. The English entry lists no German works. It only includes her Russian memoir and specifies that it is in Russian: “Latsis, Anna (1984). *Krasnaia gvozdika: Vospominaniia* (in Russian). Riga: Liesma” (“Asja Lācis (English)”). In terms of references, it only lists three: Mark Lilla, “The Riddle of Walter Benjamin” in *The New York Review of Books*, May 25, 1995; “The Writing of Asja Lācis”; and Ķimele and Strautmane’s memoir. Similarly, the only writing of Lācis’s that the French entry attributes to her is a French translation of her work on proletarian theater: “Asja Lācis, *Walter Benjamin et le théâtre d'enfants prolétarien/ Du jeu d'enfant au théâtre d'enfants*, coll. Carnets n° 4, éditions du Portique, 2007” (“Asja Lācis (français)”), and one will notice that the translator is not acknowledged. The Spanish entry follows the same pattern in only attributing to her the Spanish translations of the works listed under “*Werke*” in the German entry, also with no translators given: “*El Teatro Revolucionario en Alemania*, Moscú 1935”; and “*El Clavel Rojo*. Autobiografía. Riga, 1984”. There are also two Spanish works on Lācis in the Spanish entry that are not included in any of the other entries: “Borinsky, Alicia (2010): «Asja Lācis: un raro amor de Walter Benjamin», artículo de 2010 en el diario *La Nación*, Buenos Aires”; and “Martínez, Virginia (2007) «El teatro es un arma peligrosa», *El País*, Montevideo, 15 de junio de 2007”, as well as three links in Spanish to external sites, two of which are in German and one in Spanish: “Bibliografía relacionada con Asja Lācis en el catálogo de la Biblioteca Nacional de Alemania”; “Vergessene Biographien (2)”; and “Walter Benjamin- La Nación, Bs. As.” (“Asja Lācis (español)”).

What the piecemeal, partly inaccurate nature of the information provided across the Wikipedia entries establishes is that Lācis cannot be studied from a monolingual perspective, no matter what that language may be. It also underscores the fractured, multiple ways in which she circulates. However, it does matter what the specific languages are in which she is discussed, just as it matters by which names she is referred to and what streets in Riga are called. Just as Russian only figures as a historical, not currently officially sanctioned presence in the streets of Riga these days, it has practically disappeared as an academic language in which Lācis is discussed. Besides the inevitable references to her in work on Benjamin and his *Moskauer Tagebuch*, the only relatively recent work on her that I am aware of is Alchyk’s interview with Valentīna Freimane, a Latvian theatre and film scholar who knew both Lācis and her daughter (Альчук).

In Latvian, on the other hand, there has been a renaissance of interest in Lācis of late. On display at Documenta 14 in Kassel in the summer of 2017 was “a poignant display case containing a record of the correspondence and close friendship between Latvian avant-garde theatre director Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin” (Warde-Aldam). Co-organized by Andris Brinkmanis, Māra Ķimele, Beata Paškeviča and Hendrik Folkert, the exhibition was displayed in a side gallery of the Grimmwelt and made available “original material from the collection of the Museum of Writing and Music

(RMM), the private collection of Māra Ķimele, the archives of Walter Benjamin (Berlin), the National Library of Latvia, the Latvian National Archives, the Latvian State Archives of Cinematographic Documents and the Russian RGALI” (“Documenta 14”).

The Kassel venture came in the aftermath of an international conference that took place in Riga on March 6-8, 2015, called “Kreisuma ideja kultūrā. Parole – Asja” (Leftist Ideas in Culture – Password Asja). The conference was an important moment in the reception of Lācis’s work, the first time that she, her oeuvre and legacy had such concentrated academic and cultural work devoted to it in Latvia and in Latvian. The conference’s aim was clearly to offer a synthetic approach to the various Lācises in circulation, as one can see from the cover of the program on which an image of a serenely elderly Lācis faces her handwritten signature of “Asja” as though she is reminiscing about how she became known as that character and the vicissitudes of her reputation (fig. 5).

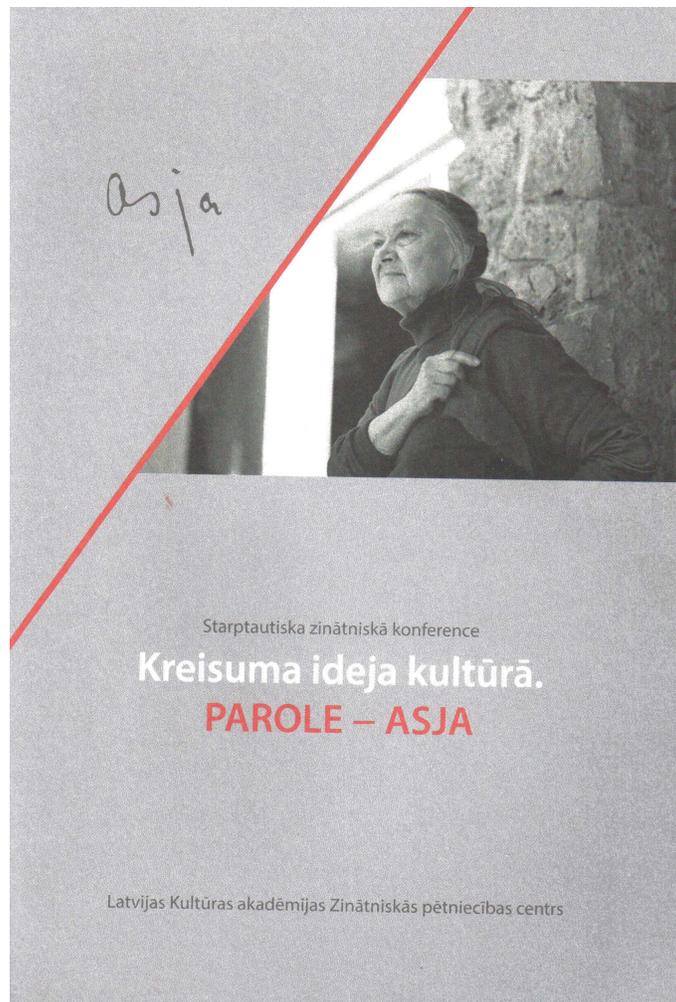


Fig. 5. The “Leftist Ideas in Culture – Password Asja” program

Similarly, during the conference the cover image of the older Lācis was juxtaposed with paintings that had been done of her during her youth by prominent Latvian artists (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. The stage in the Latvian Academy of Culture during the “Password Asja” conference.
Photo: S. Ingram.

The ambitious organizing team, spearheaded by Lācis’s granddaughter, respected Latvian theatre director Māra Kimele,⁵ also staged an elaborate three-day cultural program, which included a number of cultural events, in addition to two full days of academic papers and a trip to Valmiera to visit the opening of an exhibition on Lācis entitled “The Train. Asja” at the Valmiera Drama Theater, where both Lācis and Kimele had worked.

One event left a permanent memory trace on 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

⁵ A professor at the Latvian Academy of Culture as well as a theatre director, Māra Kimele is part of the Latvian cultural canon. In 1996, she was identified as “the only woman director [among the middle generation of Latvian directors] to have succeeded in advancing her own aesthetic program” (Cakare 91).

located directly across the street from the newly refurbished Latvian Academy of Culture, where the conference was held (figs. 7 and 8).



Fig. 7. Māra Kimele receiving help in unveiling the Benjamin plaque. Photo: S. Ingram.



Fig. 8. Māra Kimele after the Benjamin plaque-unveiling ceremony in March 2015. Photo: S. Ingram.

Both the plaque and a further material memory trace of the conference, the publication of a volume of essays in *Kultūras Krustpunkti (Cultural Crossroads)* based on the conference presentations and edited by Inga Pērkone, point to the types of alternatives that Guattari's ecosophy wants to make us aware of. The plaque, on which there is no trace of any language other than Latvian or of the reason for Benjamin's stay in the city, i.e. that he came to visit Lācis, shows us precisely the precariousness and finitude of the "for-itself" that Guattari's ecosophy encourages awareness of. The monolingual plaque offers only a repetition of the dominant narrative: the famous German philosopher came to the city. This type of repetition, which is a colonizing form of translation and serves only to make a master narrative available in a minor language, is what Guattari terms striated and deathly. Rather than opening up to a processural, habitable human project, which was the point of organizing a gathering on the idea of leftism and which was what Lācis herself claimed to work towards as a director, it encloses Benjamin in a heroic myth from which it shuts out Lācis, the instigating personality for the visit.

In contrast is the direction that Kimele provided for the conference, which is apparent in her introductory remarks in the publication: “Now... when we have lived through the collapse of Hitler’s and Stalin’s empires, a question arises: whether intensely socialized, even politicised activity of creative people has any sense. Leftist ideas of those times seem foolishly naïve, and the very concept of leftism is often perceived negatively” (M. Kimele 10). However, because her grandmother’s “little footprints forever remain in the works of Walter Benjamin,” Kimele “cannot stop asking – why exactly Asja? How powerful an impulse and acceleration has Asja’s ardour and obsession with leftism given to Benjamin’s thought? Who would Benjamin be without Asja? Who would we be without them?” (10). These questions get to the heart of Guattari’s ecosophy and demonstrate its enfolding of the environment, social relations and human subjectivity by connecting Benjamin and Asja’s relationship to those of scholars gathered together on the very street in Riga where Benjamin stayed. Kimele cannot stop asking “why Asja” because she views “Asja” and her “ardour and obsession with leftism” as a force that continues to be available to be activated in contemporary Latvia, something of obvious importance to Kimele. However, we must also attend to the languages in which these enunciations are made. “*Kas būtu mēs bez viņiem?*” Kimele asks in Latvian in the introduction, which is rendered by an unacknowledged translator in the English she does not speak as “What would we be without them?” In order to give a presence to the idea of leftism in the volume, the Russian and German of the original leftist thought have had to be abandoned, just as, for whatever reasons, Lācis herself could not be given a presence on the plaque commemorating Benjamin’s visiting her.

To conclude, if one does not attend to linguistic specificity as part of the ecosophical enfolding of environment with social relations and subjectivity, then one misses the folds. Paying attention to the specificity of the languages of enunciations helps us to recognize the importantly multiple nature of singularities, which keeps open possibilities for forms of what Guattari termed ‘eco’-art and for “less absurd, less dead-end directions that those of Integrated World Capitalism.” That the renaissance of interest in Lācis online in Wikipedia and in Latvian at conferences and exhibitions makes possible the interrogation of the idea of leftism is to be welcomed; however, approaching it in terms of a multilingual ecosophy reminds us of the ease with which it can lose its emancipatory potential and descend into deathly repetitions of the same, whether in terms of nationalism or global corporatism. In bringing an awareness of these dangers to light, my aim in this article was clearly to prevent this from happening and to demonstrate how, once again, Anna/Asja Lācis proves a valuable litmus test.

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