
THE NEW WOMAN REVISITED: ASJA LACIS BETWEEN GERMANY AND RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been much research on the construct of the ‘New Woman’ in Weimar Germany (1918-1933), there is much less study of the ‘New Woman’ in Soviet Russia of the same time period. To compare and contrast these two construct variants, I examine a concrete example of a ‘New Woman’, the renowned theatre director, Asja Lacis (1891-1979). Similarly, there has been relatively little scholarship on her, with the existing work being predominantly limited to presenting her either as a Bolshevik muse to the German philosopher and critic, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), or as a theatre director. This thesis attempts to investigate what the ‘New Woman’ concept means in the two vastly different political and cultural contexts. To conduct my analysis, I examine Asja Lacis’ two autobiographies, *Revolutionär im Beruf* (A Revolutionary by Profession, 1971) and *Krasnaia gvozdika: Vospominaniia* (The Red Carnation: A Memoir, 1984), *Moskauer Tagebuch* (Moscow Diary, 1926-27, printed in 1980) by Walter Benjamin, and *Asja: režisores Annas Lāces dēkainā dzīve* (The Stormy Life of the Director Anna Lacis, 1996) by Lacis’ daughter, Dagmāra Ķimele.

In this thesis, I discover that Lacis, as an embodiment of the ‘New Woman’ concept, presents no continuity from its Weimar to its Soviet version. Nevertheless, the ‘life-creation’ model, in which Lacis engages, can be constructively applied to her case. One of the main arguments I make in this work is that the discontinuity of Lacis as a Weimar/Soviet ‘New Woman’ is conditioned not only by her reluctance to adhere to one particular model, or by her pragmatism, but also by the important external factors. These latter include the inability of *men* to change overnight, along with the constraints of the genre of female autobiography in different cultural contexts. Ultimately, however, Asja Lacis exemplifies the *agentivity*, which was not typical of women before the spread of the ‘New Woman’ model of behaviour that allowed women’s becoming a *subject* and enabled them to become ‘directors’ of their lives. Additionally, Lacis’ case clearly demonstrates that conceptualisation of any artist’s or intellectual’s ‘whole’ identity is produced in both public and private contexts, rather than in the separation of public from private.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDF	<i>Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine</i> (League of German Women's Associations)
NEP	New Economic Policy, introduced by Vladimir Lenin
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

For the reader's convenience, the following acronyms are used:

DM	Ķimele, Dagmāra, and Gunta Strautmane. <i>Asja: režisores Annas Lāces dēkainā dzīve</i> . [The Stormy Life of the Director Anna Lacis]. Likteņstāsti, 1996. [In Latvian]
MD	Benjamin, Walter. <i>Moscow Diary</i> , ed. Gary Smith, trans. Richard Sieburth. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 29, 1986.
RB [1971]	Lacis, Asja. <i>Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator</i> [A Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theatre, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator]. Edited by Hildegard Brenner, Rogner & Bernhard, 1971. [In German]
RB [1976]	Lacis, Asja. <i>Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator</i> [A Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theatre, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator]. Edited by Hildegard Brenner, Rogner & Bernhard, 1976. [In German]
RC	Lacis, Anna. <i>Krasnaia gvozdika: Vospominaniia</i> [The Red Carnation: A Memoir]. Riga: Liecma, 1984. [In Russian]

INTRODUCTION

*Lacis liked the Revolution because she liked herself
in the context of the Revolution*

“Eto by ochen' ukrasilo moi biografiu...” 174.

This thesis examines the professional and private life of Asja Lacis, an Honoured Artist of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), as well as the author of several books in Latvian, Russian and German, and of more than a hundred articles published in periodicals on children's aesthetic education, drama, theatre, and cinema. The focus of my project is Lacis' conscious fashioning of herself as a cross-cultural and period-specific version of the 'New Woman' concept, which was prevalent in the culture and politics of Germany during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) and of Bolshevik Russia in the time of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-1928), introduced by Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Communist Party and Russian Revolution leader. Lacis became known to scholars due to her relationship with Walter Benjamin, the German critic and philosopher, after Benjamin's own name gained prominence. Initial descriptions from scholars variously defined her as “*mulier sovietica*” (Susan Ingram 79, italics in original), “Latvian Bolshevik” (Gershom G. Scholem 13) or “pleasant diversion” (Sandra V. B. Hoenle 5) in the context of scholarship on Benjamin. Recently, particularly in light of the rise of Women's Studies, it has become obvious that Asja Lacis' own personality merits interest. Lacis was not only an important intellectual current behind many of Benjamin's ideas, but an artist in her own right. Since her death in 1979, several articles and books have been dedicated to her. Susan Ingram in *Zarathustra's Sisters: Women's Autobiography and the Shaping of Cultural History* (2003) presents Lacis in the context of women's autobiographies, discussing her alongside other prominent women, such as Lou Andreas-Salomé, Simone de Beauvoir, Nadezhda Mandelstam and Romola Nijinsky. Beata Paškevica in her book *In der Stadt der Parolen: Asja Lacis, Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht* (2006) discusses Lacis' roles as a theatre director and a muse to both Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, as well as a mediator of ideas between the two. Paškevica's work is based on substantial research incorporating Lacis' personal letters, articles and autobiographies (including her Latvian one) and even the memoirs of Lacis' daughter. Karin Burk has examined Lacis as a co-author of the Proletarian Children's Theatre concept, the project written by Walter Benjamin in late 1928 and never published in his lifetime. Burk devoted approximately one third of her book *Kindertheater als Möglichkeitsraum: Untersuchungen zu Walter Benjamins “Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheater”* (2015) to Lacis, basing her analysis on Lacis' German autobiography. Based

on the above scholarship, it is clear that, one way or another, Lacis is still predominantly studied in relation to Walter Benjamin. Yet according to Lacis' own account, Benjamin's posthumous fame came as a surprise to her (RB 61; [1971]). As this thesis will demonstrate, Lacis indeed did not appreciate the full depth and richness of Benjamin's ideas. However, she contributed to them in her own way and, in turn, Benjamin's philosophies stimulated Lacis' own creative ideas.

EARLY LIFE

Lacis was born in 1891 in the village of Ligatne, part of the governorate of Livonia in the former Russian Empire, as the only child to her Latvian parents. Lacis' father, Ernest Liepinsh, insisted that she receive education, which motivated Lacis to continue learning and engaging in study throughout her life. Lacis studied at Bekhterev Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg, where she became enthusiastically devoted to Marxism. She later attended Fyodor Komissarzhevsky Drama School in Moscow, where she began to form her own theatrical style. Accordingly, by Lacis' own account, she never agreed with Komissarzhevsky's views on 'genuine' theatre, – which she felt should not be tendentious and had to serve a utilitarian purpose (RC 38). Lacis became known for her proletarian theatre troupes for children in Soviet Russia and Latvia in the 1920s. In 1922, she travelled to Germany where she planned to study German theatre. Once in Germany, she became acquainted with Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, and the Austrian-German critic and director Bernhard Reich (who later became Lacis' husband), to whom she introduced the ideas of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold. In 1924, Lacis met Walter Benjamin in Capri, upon whose philosophical thought she was to have a lifelong impact. For instance, Lacis has been credited in multiple sources as a factor in Benjamin's embracing Marxism (Mark Lilla 5-6). Yet it is worth noting that, despite Lacis' talent to "make contact with remarkable, world-famous people" (RC 4-5), the now well-established names mentioned above were not distinguished during the period in which this study is set. Most of them were young, ambitious and talented artists who were experimenting with their artistic styles and the creation of their identities, quite as Lacis did herself.

Recently, there has been increased interest in studying the concept of the 'New Woman', which was popularised in cultural and political lives of various countries at the time of modernity, but particularly in Germany during the Weimar Republic and in Bolshevik Russia in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and under the NEP. In this thesis, I argue that Lacis can and should be examined as an embodiment of the 'New Woman' concept. It should be noted that I am not focusing on Lacis' autobiographical history during her prolonged and, undoubtedly, fruitful life, but rather examining her forging of identity as a culture- and time-specific version of the 'New Woman' concept. The purpose of the thesis is therefore to discuss the period of the late 1910s to the late 1920s, at which time Lacis' identity as a 'New Woman' was constructed. This temporal intersection seems most conceptually suitable for the continuum between the German conception of the 'New Woman' of the Weimar Republic and the Russian-Soviet variant of the 'New Woman'. Moreover, it is during this period that Lacis' creative and personal activity appears to be most artistically developed, and experimental.

The originality of the present project is twofold. First, it seeks to showcase that, in addition to the conceptualisation of the so-called 'New Women' of Weimar Republic – a concept which has been studied extensively – there was a parallel conceptualisation of the 'New Women' of the early Soviet Russian period. This later variation of the concept was not limited to Bolshevik women, as might initially seem. In this thesis, I will explore the nature of both concepts and discuss how the German conceptualisation differed from its Soviet/Russian counterpart. Second, the consideration of Lacis within the context of the 'New Woman' concept is equally original. So far, as stated above, previous scholarship on Lacis has dealt with either identifying her as a theatre director or as a female autobiographical author. This project will be dealing with neither of the topics. Rather, I will outline how Lacis – who, I argue, tried to fashion herself as a 'New Woman' – exists between Weimar and Soviet/Russian representations of the concept. I further posit that Lacis sought to portray herself a 'New Woman' *artificially* in order to stay in the forefront of the avant-garde of time. In this manner, I will differentiate between Lacis' performance, or *masquerade*, in work and life from what might be called *real* Asja Lacis.

Asja Lacis was a very worldly and charismatic person, as well as an engaging conversationalist. She lived in the world's most fascinating cities of the time, including Riga, Warsaw, Moscow, Berlin, Munich, Paris, Rome, and Naples. Her professional interests always lay in theatre, literature and cinema (RC 4-5). She can therefore be regarded as a product of the rich cross- and multicultural connections of her time. Indeed, their embracing of multiculturalism was arguably what kept the Weimar and the Soviet Republics culturally vibrant. Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick have argued that the multiculturalism of today has its origins in the Weimar era, despite the fact that the term had different connotations at the time (341-343). Aside from many derogatory images of 'the Orient' (which sometimes included Russia) in Weimar art, various Weimar intellectuals were appreciative of "eastern wisdom." Some thinkers even suggested that Germany should epitomise a social system between Western capitalism and Soviet Russia (Gordon & McCormick 342). Being a multilingual, widely read and sophisticated person, well informed of literary and cultural constructs and largely influenced by the post-Revolutionary Marxism and Bolshevik discourse, Asja Lacis was a transmitter and synthesiser of various cultures (namely Latvian, Russian, German). Lacis' multiculturalism was advantageous to her self-styling as a 'New Woman', which placed her on the continuum between various models and constructs of professional woman of her time.

THE 'NEW WOMAN' OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Lacis will be presented as an example of both Weimar and Soviet/Russian conceptualisations of a 'New Woman', relative to local and cultural specifics. The emergence of 'New Women' in Germany after World War I was indicative of the intense economic, political, social and cultural upheavals of the Weimar Republic. In the changing times of Weimar, opportunities for women were abundant, but nevertheless still often hindered by traditional gender roles. Marsha Meskimmon asserts that, during the Weimar period of German history, the 'New Woman' construct is one of the most interesting to investigate. Meskimmon further argues that the reason the 'New Woman' concept has generated so much research interest is that the period has previously predominantly been studied from a male perspective (25-27). Most scholars seem to agree that this 'New Woman', – whom they tend to distinguish from the flapper-girl '*neue Frau*', – was both "a media fabrication and a flesh-and-blood individual" (Meskimmon 1). At least initially, the 'New Woman' archetype was often becoming a more noticeably independent participant of life only in the private spheres of

artistic representations (Ruth B. Bordin 5, 58). The social upheavals of the world in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Revolution increased the social visibility of women as active members of society. The women's liberation movement (also known as the feminist movement) to gain democratic rights for women had an enormous influence on the conceptualisation of the 'New Woman'. Educational opportunities along with the possibility to join the workforce were gradually becoming accessible to women, as the West became more industrialised and urbanised. 'New Women' increasingly managed to assert their rights to sexual liberation and political equality, which, according to Bordin, challenged their characterisation as a weak and parasitic social class (135).

'NEW WOMEN' OF RUSSIA

It is interesting to examine how the concept of the 'New Woman' is applicable to Russia. Russia at the time could hardly boast its all-encompassing industrialisation (Richard Stites 161-162). Nevertheless, the Russian Revolutions of 1917 had all eyes turning to the newly established Soviet Republic, which had its own views on woman's participation in the building of communist society (Eric Naiman 27-45, 181-250; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia* 78-105). The concept of the 'New Man' or *novyi chelovek* (which is not gender-specific in Russian and means a "new human being") was created and popularised by the Russian intelligentsia during the mid-nineteenth century as a means to replace the standards of the old world, aiming for a revolution which would change Russia's future. Nikolay Chernyshevsky gave literary shape to the concept of the 'New Man' in his ground-breaking novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1862) (Olga Matich, "The symbolist meaning of love: theory and practice" 41-50). Apocalyptic sense was then prevalent among writers, artists, and philosophers. Numerous hypotheses on the transfiguration of the world and design of the possible future were consequently introduced. The task of new world order comprised formation of the 'New Man' ("The symbolist meaning" 22-30). The main responsibility for facilitating such transfiguration lay with both artists and intellectuals. In light of this, the model of 'life-creation', which will be discussed below, emerged.

The term 'New Woman' as it was adapted in Soviet Russia has been studied extensively by Eric Naiman and will be introduced in *Chapter One* of the thesis. Studying the influence of Lacis as a special kind of 'New Woman' – namely as a cross- and multicultural type (German/Latvian/Russian) – on some of the most prominent cultural and intellectual figures of both Russia and Germany provides an opportunity to compare two of the most vibrant and influential cultures worldwide during Lacis' lifetime, along with the exchanges between them. In addition, studying Lacis' life and work within the framework of gender politics provides

valuable insights concerning the significance of role of women in culture and society at large. Ultimately, this thesis attempts to provide a comprehensive guide to Lacis' conscious fashioning of herself as a cross-cultural embodiment of the 'New Woman'.

THE MODEL OF LIFE-CREATION

In the context of creating a 'New Man' and 'New Life', and universal requirements for *re-creating* oneself, the model of life-creation is useful to consider alongside the 'New Woman' construct in the context of this project. The aesthetic organisation of behaviour is often discussed as an aesthetic process of self-creation (Ingram 10-14). In relation to this, it is useful to apply the model of *zhiznetvorchestvo* (life-creation) throughout the project in order to establish the degree of Lacis' self-creation and discuss the outcome reached. The notion of life-creation is multifaceted and has multiple interpretations. Its main idea lies in the blurring of distinctions between life and art. Life-creation is a two-way concept. On one hand, it provides models for transformation and aesthetisation of one's life. On the other hand, one's own life offers material for creating art, while various life events become impetus for one's writing, stage directing, or other creative practices. Life-creative behaviour implies artistic creativity and the principle of masquerade. Its general idea is transfusion of life and art, or the idea of myth-creating transfiguration, as championed by the Symbolists. Life-creative activities encourage transformation of the aesthetic into the everyday, and of the everyday into the aesthetic. Life-creation often contains a tendency to change life by means of art, which, in Irina Paperno's view, parallels theology ("The Meaning of Art: Symbolist Theories" 22).

The ideology of life-creation contains remaking of life and world. Apart from Western modernism, the idea of remaking of life goes back to the philosophy of Vladimir Soloviev, which relates to such concepts as "theurgy" and "mimesis" (Paperno, "Introduction" 7). All this is connected to the major discourse of the time – the concept of the 'New Man'. In Russian modernism, this idea was key for both Symbolists and Marxist philosophers, and, as stated above, linked back to Nikolay Chernyshevsky's theories. *Novyi chelovek* – which is a broader concept in Russian than it is in English, given that it encompasses both genders – has the ability to transform reality and is, therefore, easily identified as a 'Theurgist'. The idea of the 'New Man' (and *novyi chelovek* alike), in its essence, takes its cue from the problematics of subject formation. Life-creative practices, in turn, disclose the principles of formation of a *creative* subject (Kirsti Ekonen 135-136). The resulting process, the making of mimetic art, identifies the subject directly with the character of his/her work of art. Hence life-creation makes possible the use of various psychological or literary 'masks' – personalities that are alternative to the subject.

Life-creation assimilates life to theatre or a masquerade, and a (wo-)man to a director of his or her life. In Modernism, theatricality and the construction of life are connected to the notion of 'woman'. Ekonen in her book *Tvoret, Subekt, Zhenshchina* (Creator, Subject, Woman) refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's idea that acting is illustrative of women (137-138). This does not only highlight how deeply Nietzsche's views penetrated Symbolism, but also supports the connection of life-creation with acting and with women. In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach discusses the demonic nature of women in Victorian art and literature, asserting that in early Modernism, theatre was a mechanism through which women could realise their inner essence (205-206). For women, it had both positive and negative repercussions. Acting provided new perspectives and gave higher aspirations to women outside the home, allowing them to enter new social networks within the public sphere. Life-creation encouraged women to create new, public, identities, which, however, had the consequential effect of associating women with prostitutes. In terms of *gender*, according to Ekonen, life-creation, in spite of its various interpretations and shortcomings, allowed women to break out from biological determinism (140-141). This idea is based on the general assumption that women were simply incapable of any creative activity. This assumption even denigrated the profession of an actress, compared to that of a director. The concept of 'life-creation' therefore offers – at least, theoretically – an ideology allowing a woman, similarly to a man, become an independent creative artist. The life-creation model will be employed in various dimensions as applied to the private and professional life of Lacis. The biographical facts about the work and private life of Lacis will be examined closely in order to establish the correlation of art and life.

HOLISTIC HISTORICAL APPROACH

Knowledge of historical figures is created through various discourses, including gender, religion, location, and class. Within the scope of this thesis, I concentrate on gender, while also illustrating how it intersects with the other dimensions. Examining Lacis from all these different dimensions allows a construction of a "whole person" rather than "disembodied ideas" (Hoenle 17-19). Such a person consists of "emotions as well as intellects, bodies as well as minds, and private as well as public lives," all of which are shaped at the intersection of gender, religion, location, and class dimensions mentioned above. These intersections play a decisive part in making historical/intellectual/prominent figures and the production of their ideas possible. Intellectuals and artists are not only constructed in institutions of formal learning. Understanding intellectuals as a cultural phenomenon allows for a fuller understanding of them – an understanding that looks beyond comparing them to other intellectuals in the same field but, rather, examining their relations in social and cultural

contexts (3). These contexts can be both public and private and can include both formal and informal institutions. The field of cultural studies, to which this thesis belongs, is precisely the realm which allows for such an examination of artists. Hoenle's argument in her doctoral dissertation on Benjamin can be related to Lacis: cultural studies focus on connections between scholarship and society when discussing an intellectual or, in the case of Lacis in this work, the artist (1-3). Like other artists, she is not a harmonious or homogeneous entity but, rather, a multifaceted, and even contradictory figure. As will be demonstrated, Lacis the artist is often inseparable from Lacis the woman. Her private life and experience informed her and her work as much as the social institutions did.

As demonstrated by several researchers, regardless of the accomplishments of Lacis as an artist, she has been consistently portrayed as an insignificant appendage in Benjamin's life. Often, Lacis is dismissed or presented as "a muse to the genius, Benjamin" (Hoenle 5). Yet, Benjamin himself described his acquaintance with Lacis in Capri as a "vital liberation", providing "intense insight" (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* 245). Therefore, in this thesis, I undertake the task of providing an analysis of Asja Lacis from both the dimension of gender and that of professional accomplishments. This is supposed to reduce the conflicts of the "public/private, professional/personal split" (Hoenle 8). Lacis is more than the sum of her title – a theatre director – and the label attached to her in most biographies of Benjamin; that of a Bolshevik lover. Discussing her solely as a muse to "the great man" Benjamin arguably presents a limited and distorted picture of Lacis as an artist in particular, but also of female artists in general.

As Hoenle argues, feminist scholarship insists on the need to recognise the production of knowledge – which, in Lacis' case can be called the production of her own identity – at multiple intersections of public and private (8). In order to trace these intersections in Lacis' art of self-fashioning, I challenge myself to analyse her autobiographies in a female autobiographical context. I also examine Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, which introduced Lacis' name to the world, and the memoirs of her daughter, Dagmāra (Daga). Ingram in her doctoral dissertation and later in her work on women's autobiographies draws parallels between the 'love triangles' of Benjamin-Reich-Lacis and the more famous Nietzsche-Rée-Lou. She also occasionally refers to the model of life-creation in her argument. Ingram's treatment of Lacis' persona has motivated me to move beyond the general autobiographical focus to apply multiple tools in my study. These include the life-creation model, the 'New Woman' construct and the tradition of women's life writing (with particular focus on autobiographies). However, considering the genre of autobiography, along with other forms of life writing, has helped me to extrapolate private information about Lacis. This knowledge is

essential for my project, for it sheds the light on Lacis' private life and provides insight into the creation of her identity.

To summarise the goals of this thesis, it attempts to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent can Asja Lacis be viewed a manifestation of either Germany's or Russia's 'New Woman' constructs?
2. How is Asja Lacis' "life of the heart and family" (Matich, "The Symbolist Meaning" 50) intertwined with her professional and creative life. Hence, using Hoenle's words again, is it possible to reconstruct Lacis as a "whole person" as opposed to just a theatre director?

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One reviews the history of the 'New Woman' concept and discusses the preconditions for its emergence. The chapter also provides the theoretical framework for my analysis of Lacis as an embodiment of the 'New Woman'. First, I examine the concept of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany, and its intersection with the 'New Woman' – as part of the "New (Hu-)man" of Soviet life and art in the period of the NEP – of Bolshevik Russia. I will also introduce some of important cultural trends and developments associated with this period.

In order to define each of the 'New Woman' constructs, I examine the notion of gender and provide an overview at the changes happening to it. In Weimar Germany, I argue, the conception of the 'New Woman' is predicated on social and economic changes in society which caused changes in gender relations. Furthermore, I discuss changes in art as part of my theme by providing examples of avant-garde female artists and writers of the Weimar period, who, despite their being in the "inner exile," self-fashioned themselves as 'New Women' (Meskimmon 232-236). Women adopted the "hyper-rational" *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in order to express their concerns with the modern world both in life and art.

I analyse the differences and intersections of the 'New Women' of Germany and the variant of the construct widely used in the Soviet culture. I observe how the Soviet/Russian counterpart of German 'New Woman' is predicated more on political basis. It is almost fully ideologically constructed and then applied (sometimes, artificially) to society. Referring substantially to Naiman, who analyses the discourse of sex in early Soviet Russia, I follow the path of changing gender roles through ideology and the subsequent construction of the 'New Woman'. As stated above, the 'New Woman' in its Russian interpretation was included in the

gender-neutral notion of the “*novyi chelovek*”. However, this did not exclude the requirements for women to become ‘new’ (Naiman 199-200). In terms of tangible examples of ‘New Women’, I provide several from political, social and cultural spheres. In the sphere of arts, I demonstrate that in Russia after the Revolution, the theme of creating a ‘New Life’ and reinventing the conceptualisation of man was overarching, just like it was in Germany during the same period.

Chapter Two contains an analysis of two autobiographies authored by Lacis. The first was published in Germany – and, importantly, in West Germany – and the second was printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a response to the foreign publication. The chapter provides the theoretical framework for my analysis of Lacis as an embodiment of the New Woman. I undertake this analysis employing the tools from all the three theories outlined above: life-creation model, the ‘New Woman’ construct, and women’s life writing. Keeping in mind that knowledge about intellectuals or, in our case, *artists*, is constructed by various discourses, such as gender, religion, location, class and even race, I concentrate in this chapter on how Lacis uses her gender and reconstructs it. I also indicate how gender intersects with the other contexts.

My interest in Lacis goes beyond the scope of her personal connections with people. It is, however, valuable for my thesis to examine how she portrays the relationships with Walter Benjamin and other well-known men in her autobiographies. Lacis’ narratives help to reconstruct her identity and her ‘self’. The character which is revealed as a result is self-sufficient and seemingly self-focused. In both her private and public lives, Asja wears various ‘masks’ and fashions her image in her life narratives depending on the canons of the country the book was published in. Thus, in this chapter, I argue that on some occasions, it is more important to Lacis to portray herself as a good mother, whereas she elsewhere focuses on her career. The methods which Lacis employs in her life-creation and her “theatre for herself” – the concept of Nikolai Evreinov, a Russian director and theatre practitioner – help to define whether she aligns with the notion of the ‘New Woman’ construct.

In *Chapter Three*, I compare the image of Lacis created by Walter Benjamin in *Moscow Diary* with that presented by Lacis’ daughter, Daga, in her memoirs. Both life writings differ from autobiography and are written by people with close relationships with Lacis. She is again positioned within the context of life narratives; however, her relations and life-creative practices are examined from a different angle here. The relationships of Lacis presented by Benjamin and Lacis’ daughter in her memoirs, belonging to the private sphere, are traditionally considered a background for the creation of the intellectual (or the artist). Nevertheless, these

relationships should be carefully examined as they constitute the core of the artist's identity. This becomes particularly relevant in light of the gender discourse and within a larger context of Weimar and Soviet Russian historical and social turmoil. In the chapter, I acknowledge that Benjamin and Daga are people of different historical importance. Their opinions therefore have different magnitudes in explaining Lacis' behaviours at different times in relation to her needs or broader circumstances. However, both Benjamin's and Daga's views on Lacis are valuable for this study for they allow for the conceptualisation of the "whole" person rather than certain dimensions of it. They result in a more objective understanding of how (and sometimes, why) Lacis constructed her image and her ideal life – in other words, her life-creation – and inform conceptualisation of whether Lacis manifested either of the 'New Women'.

The *Conclusion* to this project summarises the findings established in the preceding chapters. It suggests the prospects and possibilities for further analysis. Thus, it demonstrates the importance of reconstructing one's identity through life narratives. It reveals important implications for the study of the artist as a "whole person," consisting of the intersecting private and public dimensions. The conclusion also recommends further research in terms of incorporating the concept of the 'New Woman' into the field of multiculturalism. I propose this further analysis based on the thesis' discussions of Lacis' behaviours being modelled on two interpretations of the 'New Woman' construct. Her particular example consists of a synthesis of two different cultures against a certain political backdrop. The appearance of any concept, however, can be attributed to multiple intersections not only between cultural, but also political, social, ideological, and other spheres of life.

In this project, I have compared two variations of the same concept, German and Russian. In doing so, I demonstrate the extent to which the position of women may be similar in different cultures. However, equally by examining the 'New Woman' concept enacted in two different nations, I seek to provide a corrective to the commonly held view that gender is fixed and unchanging. Based on my analysis, I propose in the *Conclusion* that gender contexts cannot be seen as static, but rather as dynamic and performative. With the help of the life-creation model, I address the notions of subjectivity and agentivity, implying dynamic behaviour and not common among women. Applied by Asja Lacis, the woman, – albeit in creative ways – agentivity opens new perspectives for further investigations in multiple fields, particularly that of gender studies.

The 'New Woman' construct, as I understand it in my thesis, entails being a human being, which is essential, albeit self-evident. For far too long women were not considered equal to men, and often were not even seen as human. Conversely, the 'New Woman', if she is a human being and equal to the male, is deemed to possess all the rights and obligations of a man. She is economically independent, because she is engaged in paid employment outside the house, and is socially and politically conscious, which becomes possible for her through access to education. In this thesis, I will primarily focus on particular representations of the 'New Woman' construct, namely during the period of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) in Germany and under the NEP in Russia (1921-1928). The 'New Women' of this period seem to most fully reflect the previous achievements of feminist movements of the two countries in question, Germany and Russia, and to exemplify most vividly the sharpest contrast with the traditional woman of the earlier periods.

There is no unanimity in the understanding of the meaning of the concept among the scholars. Carol Diethe argues that "a distinction must be made between the pejorative use of '*neues Weib*' during the Wilhelmine period and the usage of the term *die neue Frau* during the Weimar era to depict the newly-independent working girl" (*Nietzsche's Women: Beyond the Whip* 74). Other scholars, including Meskimmon, tend to refer to the aforementioned newly-independent working flapper-girls in the context of the *neue Frau*, thus distinguishing between the *neue Frau* (with a pejorative connotation) and the 'New Woman' "of yesterday". Some sources apply a socialist-feminist label to the 'New Woman' construct, which consequently makes the many 'flappers' of the time look like caricatures of the 'New Women', subverting their ideals. Thus, Mary L. Roberts argues that the post-World War I 'New Woman' differed immensely from the 'New Woman' of the pre-war period (78-80). This woman did not look hopelessly naïve, was more aloof and cynical, and embodied the war's power to undermine the certainties of nineteenth-century liberal society. Yet, others insist that the *neue Frau* represented a professional and highly educated woman, who, by means of favourable circumstances or powerful connections, along with her natural abilities and level of education, managed to acquire economic independence and maybe even left a cultural heritage. In this thesis, the term is used to denote women seeking a career and recognition, though the deviations from the central meaning shall be discussed later in the context of women's representation in modernism.

In Russia, the conception of the 'New Woman' (*novaia zhenschina*) as was coined in 1862 by Nicholay Chernyshevsky, Russian writer and one of the first socialists, differed greatly from the Symbolists' 'New Women' of the exalted "eternal feminine" (Bernice G. Rosenthal

34). The 'New Woman' of Alexandra Kollontai, Russian feminist, social democrat and revolutionary leader, had a special characteristic of being politically active and fighting for the new order of the social system. However, this 'New Woman' was totally discerned from the 'New Soviet Woman' of the Stalinist epoch, who had the three-fold burden of employment, rearing children and running a household, and social (or activist) work, though did not enjoy even the small amount of sexual freedoms of the 'New Woman' conceived by Kollontai. In addition to these 'New Women', there were multiple 'flappers' during the NEP period in Soviet Russia. The most vivid example of such women, many of whom were also 'new' in some respect, was Ellochka the Cannibal, the character in Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov's work *The Twelve Chairs* (1928). Such women were vehemently denounced by the Bolsheviks in the press, yet, such women existed and contributed to the concept of the 'New Woman' in a broader sense during this period.

GERMANY'S 'NEW WOMAN'

SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE 'NEW WOMAN' OF GERMANY

Barbara E. Clements in her work *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* argues that Germanic peoples had a higher regard for the woman (particularly, for the mother figure) than other Western European lands in the Early Medieval Period, which influenced Christianity and helped the cult of Maria (Virgin Mary) to take a strong hold (6, 13-14). Yet, the author acknowledges that the female goddess held a higher sacred role in the pantheon than women experienced in reality (13-14). Religion oppressed women in Germany as it did throughout medieval Europe, forcing young women dedicate themselves to monastic life (Karina M. Ash 2). The first attempts at liberating women in this regard were taken during the High Middle Ages in the book of an anonymous author, *Die gute Frau* (1230). The literary model of femininity presented within the text demonstrates that worldly love can not only bring the joys to this life, but also lead to salvation (150). This medieval German narrative, unlike the Old French original, promotes a more secular ideal of wifedom, strengthening the unique character of the German ideal of femininity in a European context.

The archetype of the 'woman-warrior' appears in the pages of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) published in 1796. The (male) protagonist reminisces of Clorinda, a woman-warrior who, like an Amazon, combined aspects of femininity and masculinity in a perfect form (Ronald D. Gray 225). This synthesis of male and female principles was perceived as the integrity of truth by Goethe's

generation, which is why the duel, in which Clorinda was unwittingly vanquished by her lover Tancredi, appears ambiguous at best (225-227).

This motif of the duel might have been chosen by Goethe deliberately. David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans claim that up till late nineteenth-century women in the German-speaking world fought duels (287). By doing so, Blackbourn and Evans assert women did not only make themselves look ridiculous, but ridiculed males, for such a practice blurred the distinctions between male and female honour (287). However, with increases in emancipation – however incomplete – from restricting roles in all spheres of life, there was less need for duels. Women in the late nineteenth century trained for employment, formed political views, and learned to adjust to changing gender role demands. The so-called female character started to be dismantled, and the “rigid, formal, correct” male character was forced to respond with as much flexibility as possible to this emerging figure of the ‘New Woman’ (287).

In the late nineteenth century, certain European universities began opening their doors to female students. Zurich had been swift to admit women students as *Hörerinnen* (listeners only) in the 1840s. When it became possible in 1867, the first woman to be enrolled as a student of a medical faculty, was a Russian, Nadezhda Suslova, who had been a listener at the university since 1865. There was no particular desire on the part of the university senate to support the women's struggle, but the floodgates were opening so to speak. As Diethe states, “Zurich swiftly became the magnet for a small band of highly intelligent ‘New Women’, who formed close friendships with each other” (*Nietzsche's Women* 74). Soon, there were so many foreign female students from Germany, Austria and Russia – where higher education was banned for women for a second time in 1865 – that “fears were expressed that German speakers might be swamped” (75).

With the increase in women's education and the popularity of debates on femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in both bohemian artistic and feminist circles, the notion of the ‘New Woman’ became more wide-spread. According to Roberts, the neologism “New Woman” was first used by the British journalist Sarah Grand in 1890, in reference to the educated middle-class women trying to ‘break free’ and aiming “somehow to *matter*” (78, italics in original). However, the debate on the ideal of the ‘New Woman’ among European and American feminists had started a decade earlier. Arguably, the basic idea of the notion was outlined after the release of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). The character created by the Norwegian playwright in his pro-feminist play, Nora, is a capable woman secretly providing for the family in order to maintain the harmony of the household. After the truth is revealed and Nora confronts the male ego instead of expressing gratitude, she leaves her husband so that she can achieve her potential. Ibsen maintains in the play that, in a patriarchy, it is essential for a woman

to demand her individual rights (Vijaykumar Bandal 151). Diethe argues that the theme of the 'New Woman' was further developed by Nietzsche in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-91), despite the seemingly misogynistic argument of the author ("Nietzsche's New Woman After a Century" 271-275). Ignoring the supposed misogyny and inspired by the characteristics of the *Übermensch* (Superman), the 'New Women' of Nietzsche's generation – who referred to themselves as die *Emanzipierten* or *Frauenrechtlerinnen* (feminists) – wished to propagate the term that they applied to themselves (Diethe, *Nietzsche's Women* 74). Thus, Lily Braun used it in her brief treatise *Die Neue Frau in der Dichtung* (*The New Woman in Literature*, 1896), where she maintained how Nietzsche had liberated the minds of women (Diethe, "Nietzsche's New Woman" 275).

FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN GERMANY

The origin of the feminist thought in Germany can be traced back to Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel's *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (*On Improving the Status of Women*, 1792). A German satirical writer, who had spent some time in St. Petersburg and was introduced at the court of the empress Catherine the Great, makes a claim in his book that both sexes are equal and should enjoy equal rights. Hippel argues that the exclusion of women from politics had been imposed on them by the establishment. In his view, the emancipation of women should be the task of enlightened men, stating that denying women access to the public sphere was preventing the achievement of genuine civilisation (Gisela Shaw 275-278).

By the early nineteenth century, the women's movement had grown stronger and was heavily influenced by the philosophies of socialist utopians such as Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier, who believed that with the help of education, women would be able to reach true equality. During the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon, many German women aspired to hasten their emancipation by joining 'men at arms' to defend the nation (James Retallack 106). Yet the participation of the working-class women in the social organisations of the first half of the nineteenth century was still low, for, in proletarian circles, the ideal of a male provider and female housewife persisted. By the 1850s, the political activism of proletarian women decreased sharply, whereas the level of 'anti-feminism' grew considerably (Werner Thönnessen and Joris De Bres 7-8, 14).

During the Revolutions of 1848, an unsuccessful call for women's right to vote was attempted, with Louise Otto-Peters championing female political equality in Germany. German suffragette, essayist and the founder of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein* (General German Women's Association, 1847), Otto-Peters felt a special commitment to the working class throughout her life, though realised the difficulty of integrating them (particularly,

women) into politically active work (Retallack 103). She and her followers demanded political equality, economic independence, the right to education and employment, and the right to vote for women.

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, the opposition between ‘bourgeois’ feminism and Marxism began to develop. Whereas liberal or moderate feminists wished to see a greater recognition of woman’s dignity and no obstacles in developing her *Persönlichkeit* (personality), philosophers, economists, and socialists, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels focused more on the relationship between the classes, rather than on the ‘woman question’ as will be discussed below. The followers of Marxism claimed to express the interests of all the oppressed, and critiqued liberal feminism heavily for its total neglect of the working class. Among the most successful writers and agitators among women was Clara Zetkin, editor of Social Democratic magazine *Die Gleichheit* (Equality), whose writings were making socialism more comprehensible to proletarian women (Thönnessen and De Bres 30). She was largely basing their work on August Bebel’s – which was banned shortly after – bestseller of the time, *Woman and Socialism* (1879), later renamed as *Woman in the Past, Present and Future* (1890). Bebel, a German socialist politician, writer, and one of the founders of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Germany in 1869, had an enduring effect on women, while his works became the most important educational tool among women, particularly proletarian women. Referring to his works, Zetkin and other female socialist activists prepared the ground for the achievements of the Social Democratic women’s movement in the realms of education, agitation and organisation after 1890 (Thönnessen and De Bres 37).

The disagreement between the liberal and Marxist feminism continued to grow in the early twentieth century, with the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (League of German Women’s Associations, abbreviated as BDF), stating in its program of 1920 that “as the highest and most intimate form of human community, the family must be the seed-bed of all spiritual development” (quoted in Allen 142). Founded in 1894, the BDF did not welcome working-class women, who were organised by Socialists, advocating the abolition of marriage as one of the institutions of women’s oppression. Diethe argues that BDF continued to operate “quite happily under Hitler,” creating the myth of the German *Geist* (mind/spirit) and *Volk* (people) (*Nietzsche’s Women* 149). Such rhetoric is extremely chauvinist and political, though BDF always claimed to be politically moderate. It is not limited to German feminism, however, and was used by a few other feminist movements programmatically (149).

At the outbreak of the First World War, the initial euphoria was equally strong among both liberal feminists and Socialists (Retallack 104-105). The BDF made a proposal of establishing the National Women’s Service, which, unlike the Red Cross, would gather all available women for educational work, the organisation of food supplies, and job replacement

(106). However, women's efforts remained voluntary. Socialists, meanwhile, were preparing for Revolution. After the German Revolution of 1918, a democratic parliamentary republic (later known as Weimar) replaced the monarchy and allowed for a series reforms in women's rights to occur. Despite pressure from The German League for the Prevention of Women's Emancipation, who quoted Goethe and Schiller, – "*Die Frau gehört ins Haus!*" ("Women belong in the home!") – or growing proletarian anti-feminism among male workers, women in Germany made significant gains in terms of representation in society during the Weimar Republic period (Thönnessen 9, Diane Guido 12). Following women's enfranchisement in 1919, socialists and communists demanded free access to contraception, claiming that a woman's body belongs to her (Jill Stephenson 4-5). The Weimar Constitution of 1919 ratified equal education for the sexes and equal pay in the professions, which put Germany in the absolute vanguard of the most advanced countries of the time in terms of women's legal rights (alongside Iceland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union) (4-5).

The Weimar Republic was, however, a period of political fragmentation, and the enfranchisement effectively meant women were represented, though in reality remained powerless (Stephenson 16). Unemployment, social chaos, and crime were rampant. In 1923-24, there were breaches of the constitution in that the women had experienced discrimination, yet the government had done nothing to oppose these breaches (Thönnessen 126). Moreover, women's suffrage revolutionised neither society nor the gender order, as would soon become evident. Men were consequently disappointed that women had behaved as a reactionary force, for most women (irrespective of class) voted for conservative parties. At the Berlin National Women's Conference in 1924, it was stated that the women had grown tired of the bad state of the economy and felt instinctively that it "was better before" (112). Thus, women's suffrage intensified antagonism between the sexes instead of eliminating it. With the majority of women disillusioned by the promises of the women's movement and unprotected by law, the movement saw a gradual decline during late 1920s (Raffael Scheck 45). The National Socialists, as soon as they came to power in 1933, reduced women's rights considerably (46).

For the purpose of my research, it is crucial to discuss the Marxist reflections on the position of women. Although Marx did not specifically address the concept of the 'New Woman,' he reflected upon position of a woman in society, albeit through the prism of class. Marxism played an enormous role in women's emancipation, as has been noted by Thönnessen, given that almost all women who strove to become more politically active and conscious were sooner or later drawn to Marx (37). Although Marx has been heavily criticised by some feminist scholars for the lack of development on the question of gender in his work (see Holly Lewis and Almira Ousmanova), his theories remain important for understanding the position of a woman in society during his lifetime (Lewis 6-9, 114-120; Ousmanova 44-45). Already in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels provide a strong critique of the bourgeois family, arguing that the ruling class treated women as if they were second-class citizens. "The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He has not even a suspicion that the real point is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production," – maintains Marx, concluding that the origins of women's oppression should be traced to the formation of the family and rise of class society (quoted in Sharon Smith 99). Marx and Engels predicated the eventual collapse of the family to objective factors in the capitalist system, though they were incorrect about the rapid dissolution of the bourgeois family. In *Capital* (1867), Marx writes extensively about the ways in which women and children had been exploited by the capitalist system, and further discusses the dissolution of the family (Heather A. Brown 9).

According to Smith, Marx's unpublished ethnographic notes on the oppression of women used by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) after Marx's death, though now seeming outdated, nevertheless give valuable insights into the situation of women at the time (99). Marx never addresses women's domestic labour directly, which adds to the underdevelopment of his theory with regard to defining what constitutes gender (Brown 73). Instead, Marx focuses his argument on two major elements – production and reproduction. Proletarian women employed in production were massively underpaid, which only strengthened their oppression and the whole capitalist system, while women's capacity for reproduction is used by the ruling class to reproduce its working force, and hence, maintain the capitalist social order and hierarchy. Nevertheless, these categories of Marx's thought clearly "lead in the direction of a systematic critique of patriarchy as it manifests itself in capitalism" (73).

Bebel in *Woman and Socialism* envisages marriage as a partnership of equals which could be dissolved by either side in case of disenchantment, incompatibility or repulsion

(Lynne Attwood 5). Attwood argues that Bebel denounces “ingrained prejudices” about women’s nature or about her “natural calling” to do domestic duties, persisting under capitalism (quoted in 10). Yet, according to Attwood, Bebel piles his work with references to ‘natural’ male and female biological differences, backing them up with spurious medical evidence. Thus, Bebel claims women are “easily fatigued” and “more readily excitable,” arguing that they should not be allowed in some fields of work not because of the potential damage to their health, but because they might erode their femininity (Attwood 10).

According to Tania Unludag, Clara Zetkin, as a follower of Marx, had clearly distanced herself from the bourgeois image of woman as early as 1899 (38). Yet, Zetkin could not escape the debate on the concept of the ‘New Woman,’ ‘new ethic,’ and the ‘individuality of gender’ as coined by ‘bourgeois’ feminists (38). So, she tried at least to incorporate socialist, class-specific traits into the new catchphrase. Unludag argues that Zetkin merged the ideas of Darwin and Nietzsche in their vulgar reading, along with mainstream ideas on racial hygiene – more specifically, eugenics – to create her own conceptualisation of women (39). Zetkin maintains that, after the inevitable proletarian revolution, “morally, ethically, and physically superior” proletarian woman would become a “consummate” people (Unludag 39). During a presentation in Moscow in 1928, she made a statement that it would only then be possible for women to undertake the revolutionary reconstruction of society, achievable if women “have created new people of themselves, if they help to create new people” (40). Unludag argues that proletarian women were therefore automatically considered backward when compared to the male revolutionary movement, to which they were placed in a position of permanent debt. Having to permanently blame themselves for their backwardness, women now faced an almost unachievable challenge (40).

THE IMPORTANCE OF WEIMAR DEBATE ON SEXUALITY

The ‘New Woman’ construct shattered the notion of “femininity”, which resulted from “masculinity” being shattered, as has been stated by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello (391). While the model of “calmed masculinity” gradually came to prevail in the gender relations at the end of the nineteenth century, at the time of widespread mobilisation in Europe at the outset of World War I *warfare* virility was a new example to follow (Corbin et al. 391, italics in the original). It was assumed that the war, as usual, would “put each sex back in its place . . . to regenerate and revitalise nations and to reveal to women their ‘true nature,’” and put an end to widespread and growing feminist movements around Europe (391). A whole warfare ethos linked to such a model of virility was, however, turned upside down by modern firepower, which illustrated the powerlessness of a soldier, and hence

young men, the epitome of virility. The defeat, which in the war terms is associated with 'devirilisation,' brought the disillusionment with phallocentrism as a dominating policy of society. As Corbin et al. aptly note, the reasons for devirilisation must be sought in the mutilated bodies of the soldiers of the period, rather than in the new status of women and the transformations of male roles within the family sphere. Those latter causes, which undoubtedly added to the readjustments of the gender barrier in Western European societies, especially in the defeated Weimar, were the effects of the "dismembering of the male" (394).

As has been stated by many scholars in an attempt to adjust to the challenges of modernity, men often felt they were 'losing' their virility. As a result, their attention in Weimar Germany was shifted to the theme of female sexuality, revolving around 'the masculine subject' and reflecting attempts at policing the "crumbling borders of social control" (Meskimmon 29). Women, especially of the younger generation, were defying bourgeois conventions such as love, trust and marriage. These notions were no longer considered emotional states of relationship, but practical as well as discursive obstacles to the expression of love and sexuality (Nancy Reeves 230-231). The impact of such obstacles was to be reduced in order for both genders to become equal in the so-called game of love (231).

In Weimar period, love was rarely discussed and predominantly perceived in a negative sense. A shift in discourse occurred from 'human to 'material' and from 'soul' to 'body' (Ed Cohen 73-75). French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault argues that this metonymic shift in discourse "within the ambit of modernity construed as a historical horizon" took over the life of the mankind (Cohen 79). The modernised body emerged as an intriguing artefact of continuous human interest and concern. The first German republic was, in this sense, an apotheosis of the modern body (71). It is unfortunate that, in this context of hyper-sexuality, women were subsequently commodified, which culminated in multiple acts of violence against women in the Weimar Republic. According to Robert Heynen, this was predicated by the inability of men to distinguish prostitutes (seen as the 'other') among numerous women who were now out in the city streets, resulting in women *on* the street being confused with women *of* the street (199).

Fashion is another important aspect in the creation of the 'New Woman' construct which underwent tremendous changes during the Weimar years. Tired of the ferocities of war, and encouraged by their newly gained independence, women wanted to embrace their sexuality and. According to Carol Schmid, Berlin was a latecomer to the trends of modern cities and wanted to catch up (4). In Germany, rationalised manufacturing processes were launched, which made possible the sale of mass-produced clothing of fixed prices and sizes alongside high-fashion garments. Fashion presented another 'modern' phenomenon, as it heightened self-consciousness and self-descriptiveness (4). It was soon understood by women that the way they looked was central to the way their lives were lived. Like the Baudelairian *flâneur*, the 'New Woman' assumed many of the characteristics of the male dandy, as it was her duty now to be a passionate observer of fashions.

Class boundaries, previously communicated by fashionable attire, began to blur. Fashion fuelled the illusions of glamour among young women. Along with films and the growth of consumerism, fashion offered access – or rather “ownership by viewing” – to the inaccessible world of luxury (Mila Ganeva 117). Remarkably, women's modernity was defined as “pursuit of individuality” (quoted in 70). Berlin was a boiling pot of cultures, nationalities and trends (Schmid 5). In the new world with no more corsets or long skirts, fashion became associated with a strong sense of individuality and an autonomy of choice was encouraged. One of the largest Berlin publishing companies, the Ullstein Verlag, did not present the clichéd image of the New-Woman-*neue-Frau* – young and conspicuously androgynous – in its fashion columns, but instead a middle-aged, middle-class woman. Such 'New Women' demonstrated their modernity by emphasising individuality rather than uniformity. During the Weimar years, real fashion sense was believed to be present only among people with a “world sense,” as the feeling for everything modern was now called (Ganeva 70).

During the 1920s, there were very few professional models – despite the then recent invention of the 'walking model' of Paul Poiret– who would pose for fashion photographs. This led to fashion designers promoting their clothes themselves or lending their dresses to society ladies. Often a dress would be introduced by a movie star who would wear it in a film. Fashion designers and people reporting on fashion in the Weimar Republic were granted a new social status comparable to that of renowned artists, theatre celebrities, singers, dancers or movie stars. Designer and fashion illustrator, Martha Sparkuhl, and artist and costume designer, Julie Haase-Werkenthin, posed as models in *Die Dame* in 1920. Artist and daughter of famous architect, Petra Fielder, famous for her fascination with masquerade as part of her embodied narrative of femininity, also appeared in the pages of the journal in 1927 and 1929 (Ganeva

62). Such designers as Vally Reinecke, Gerda Bunzel and Erica Mohr created costumes for movie stars and themselves posed artistically for the camera wearing fashionable outfits. Female designers at the time became role models for many women and stimulated demand among masses. Male commentators such as writer Friedrich Freksa and costume historian Max von Boehn were granted a large amount of space in *Die Dame*, alongside their female colleagues. Their articles were intended to enlighten women on the broader sense of fashion. According to Ganeva, often in a didactic and patronising tone, conservative male critics expressed a nostalgia for traditional women's dress (71). At the same time, they contradicted themselves by claiming that only clothes in which the wearer can always move comfortably become an expression of the personality. Male critics lamented permanent change and unpredictability achieved by women with the help of Mode and denied women the power to make decisions in matters of fashion (71).

Gradually getting less visible space in *Die Dame*, the photographs of female fashion editors and illustrators disappeared from its pages by 1927. The new editor Ernst Dryden took over the magazine with his drawings and essays. According to Ganeva, his articles depicted all women as self-centred, which added to further misconception of the 'New Woman' (66). His fashion layouts denied women individualisation, presenting identical geometrical silhouettes. This marked the ending of the era of the 'New Woman'. Nevertheless, careers of the female fashion designers discussed above were emblematic of the widespread and irreversible changes for a whole generation of Weimar women.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 'NEW WOMAN'

As has been stated above, since late nineteenth century, multiple articles by feminist activists of both moderate and radical movements emerged, theorising on what constituted the 'New Woman'. Unlike radical feminists, liberal activists did not want to overthrow capitalism as the source of all evil, instead focusing on advocating equal rights to vote, to education, work and self-development, and to choose a partner. When, during the economic chaos and cultural boom of the Weimar era and the streets of Berlin became well-populated with so-called flappers, the concept of the 'New Woman' both deteriorated and gained more weight. One of the liberal feminists discussing its meaning during the time was Elsa Herrmann. Herrmann worked as a teacher, before earning her Doctor of Philosophy in 1920 in Leipzig. She later moved to Berlin to become a women's rights advocate and a well-known writer. Herrmann's book *So ist die neue Frau* (This is the New Woman, 1929) served as a passionate voice in the social and political discourse on the position of women in the Weimar Republic.

Herrmann distinguishes several characteristics pertaining to the concept. She claims that the 'New Woman' preferred to forge her own path, refusing to lead the life of a 'lady' and a housewife. The life of yesterday's woman oriented her actions toward the future (Herrmann 104-106). According to Herrmann, the principal task of the 'old' woman was to care for the well-being of her children, who would be the eventual conveyors of her thoughts on the future. In sharp contrast, Herrmann viewed the contemporary woman as geared exclusively to the present (115). The 'New Woman' dismissed being considered physically weak or in need of assistance. For that reason, she no longer lived by means of external support. In order to achieve her economic independence, she sought to support herself through gainful employment (Herrmann 50-54). The goal of the 'New Woman' was to prove in her deeds that the female sex was not second-rate and fully capable of surviving independently of men (79). Herrmann asserts the concepts "female" and "male" have their origin in the erotic sphere (60). A woman, therefore, is not feminine because she cooks and cleans, but because she displays traits most desirable to men, because she is kind, soft, understanding, and physically attractive. Herrmann contends that the 'New Woman' was not artificially conjured or consciously created in opposition to an existing system – rather, she was organically bound with the developments of the last few decades. This woman was trying to achieve recognition (or matter, as was noted earlier in the chapter) for the complete legitimacy of women as human beings, the right to have her particular physical constitution and her accomplishments respected and, where necessary, protected.

THE WEIMAR 'NEW WOMAN' REPRESENTED IN MODERNISM

New movements in German art united under the name of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) reflected the change in national mood. Femininity was both an epitome of male desire and a symbol of danger and inherent fear. This led to an avalanche of evil roles 'ascribed' to the 'New Woman' (for example, the hostile robot Maria responsible for instigating a revolution among workers in *Metropolis* (1927), an epic German expressionist science-fiction drama directed by Fritz Lang). Modernity was buttressed by modernism in art. Modernist artists, susceptible to common moods, were vulnerable to grievous isolation in the new world ruled by technology. Depending on artistic movements, authors – inspired by Nietzsche – either offered a way out by means of becoming a 'Superman', whose vocation was to create art in life and educate the illiterate, or blamed technology and industrialisation for its theft of a man's identity and true self. Despite their myriad differences, most artists who preferred to lament the 'long-gone' idealised past shared tendency to blame women for the perceived poor state of affairs. This was arguably induced by the parallels drawn between technology and women,

both of whom were seen as exotic, desirable, horrifying, and dangerous (Barbara Hales 302-305).

The images of 'New Women' found in art of this period are the most vivid examples of the extent to which concepts of femininity had changed. The image of the mother now manifested control over her body and reflected the discourses of the time, such as race and eugenics. The prostitute was seen as a further representation of the 'New Woman', as was the case in the Weimar Republic. Arguably, the prostitute and mother could not live in the same woman's body and were represented as sexual commodities as a result (Meskimmon 24-28, 68-74). This was further deepened by numerous parallels in the representation of mannequins and prostitutes. In modernist art, mannequin was a sexually alluring symbol, which invoked links to consumerism and ever-increasing desire for commodities (63).

A popular theme of the time was the so-called 'companionate marriage', based on ideas advocated by Kollontai, and a German-Jewish physician and sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld. Personal liberation and free choice in love were expected to become the most important factors in a woman's choice of her partner. Nonetheless, as Meskimmon argues, marriage was an institution made by and for men, and still remained the main indicator of women's social position (128). Children were another mechanism for representing the 'New Woman'. The art of the Weimar epoch was innovative in its refusal to represent clichéd images of children as cherubs peacefully resting on their mothers' arms. In Weimar art, images of poor children playing on grimy streets or fathers looking after their children proliferated. Children of modernity were no longer raised in the private realm of the domestic – was ultimately the message of these portrayals.

Another subset of the 'New Woman' was the 'flapper,' derogatory term called *die neue Frau* by many scholars. The *neue Frau* was a popularised and depoliticised version of the 'New Woman'. The athletic, urban, pretty *neue Frauen* "leaning in all sorts of appealing ways" signified changing gender roles (Meskimmon 232). Like in bad satire, the *neue Frau* was always portrayed as a slavish follower of fashion, making many feminist critics lament that the *neue Frau* had distorted the conception of the 'New Woman'. A widely produced type of the 'New Woman' in Weimar Germany was *Garçonne*, who was portrayed as young, modish and often lesbian. *Garçonne* embodied 'otherness' and 'sapphic love' and often linked to the discourse of the bio-cultural body of the woman. In this case, female sexuality was viewed as more fluid, related to masquerade and performance. The challenges of fixed gender and sexual identity expressed by men and women of this time were reflected in what was referred to as the 'theatre' of the period.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE 'NEW WOMAN' OF RUSSIA

To understand what the conceptualisation and limitations of the 'New Woman' construct, the traditional gender relations should first be examined. According to Clements, the gender values in Russia began to be shaped as early as in the tenth century (9-12). Christianity came to Russia, the then-called Rus, later than it did to Europe and brought with it new institutions to women's lives, which merged with pagan beliefs inherited from the ancestors of the Rus people. Like Scandinavian and Germanic women, the women of the period of early Christian Russia were valued for their peace-making ability (6). Thus, there was persistent emphasis in the writings of the time on the obligation to revere mothers. Closely linked with it was the veneration of the female saints and the Virgin Mary, who symbolised the perfect mother; always forgiving, merciful, long-suffering, and protective (11). Scholars today debate whether Catholicism was focused more on Eve's fall than Orthodoxy, but one peculiar difference should be stated. The Orthodox church considered monogamy a God's commandment, therefore, remarriage after the death of one's spouse was frowned upon and divorces were very rarely granted. Catholic marriage law was less insistent on the "till-death-do-us-part" requirement and more frequently permitted legal separation (13).

It is worth noting that the secular tradition of courtly love that developed in the twelfth century and reinforced the Christian tradition in the West, never took hold in Russian culture. Sexuality was viewed more negatively in Russia than it was in the West, where it gained its positive connotations relating to bonding and commitment. In the Slavic Orthodox world, such ideas were brought about much later (with the reforms of Peter the Great) and were steadily associated with the so-called 'western depravity.' This may be where the roots of later public misconceptions regarding the question of 'free love,' as advocated by many intellectuals of the revolutionary Russia. 'Free love' – which was, among others, propagated by Alexandra Kollontai – was often understood by people as free debauchery (Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade* 200).

Originating in the traditional, pre-Christian society, the peasant ideal of femininity was widespread in Russia up to the late nineteenth century (Peter I. Barta 97). Russian peasant culture presents a sharp contrast to the westernised traditions of the upper-classes, and illustrates an acute awareness that gender is not something given and natural, but rather developed through one's occupations. "*Baba*," the traditional representation of a woman in Russian culture, meant the "backward" woman whose behaviour had to be policed. To become "*kak baba*" – a threat or curse which could not be any worse to masculinity in Russian culture

– was not simply a metaphor of an effeminate psychological inclination. It suggested an actual physical transformation, believed to take place under certain conditions. To preserve one's virility, a man should do activities determining his gender, rather than be naturally determined by his sex (98).

In the early twentieth century, radical ethnographers closely studied peasant traditions and determined that Russia's lower social strata were still largely untouched by Western customs. Arguably, emancipation implied different experiences for peasant women than for those of the upper- or educated middle-classes. Wood, for instance, argues that there were multiple, sometimes contradictory, conceptions of gender while women battled their way through to emancipation in a new society. She chronicles the changes expected in women's behaviour in order for them to fit in with the Bolshevik vision of gender neutrality (*The Baba and the Comrade* 91-94). The image of the baba, with its pejorative connotations, was effectively used in a new mobilised language to serve as a "foil to, and assistant of" the new Soviet order (17). The gender-neutral word "comrade" which assisted with this acquires here the function of the gender-neutral *novyi chelovek* and encompassing both reimagined men and women.

FIRST ATTEMPTS AT THEORISING ON THE 'WOMAN QUESTION'

According to Clements, during the first years of the reign of Emperor Alexander II (1855-1881), Russian intellectuals launched the discussion of what was then called the 'woman question', which included the scrutiny of the nature of women and debates on how to restructure society to let women fulfil their potential (114). The foremost female participant of the discussion was an economist Maria Vernadskaia, who urged genteel women to enter the labour force as a way of acquiring independence and personal happiness. This became a necessity for many women after the emancipation of the serfs (1861). Vernadskaia argued that women, as 'equal beings', should be given access to the same educational opportunities to men, and that women would later prove their usefulness to society (Clements 114). The discussion of the 'woman question' continued with novels such as Ivan Turgenev's *On the Eve* (1860) and Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1862) – books which became widely read and were arguably the most popular Russian answers to the 'woman question'. Turgenev's heroine, Elena, believes that to be good is not enough, a person needs to do good, and proves it marrying a Bulgarian revolutionary and helping him free his homeland. The central character of Chernyshevsky, revolutionary democrat and socialist utopian, Vera, enters a marriage of convenience in order to free herself from her parents, but dreams of doing good. Getting

divorced by mutual consent, finding her true love and marrying him, Vera devotes herself to running a workshop for poor women and studying medicine (115).

Turgenev and Chernyshevsky presented emancipated, 'new' women as morally good and guided by males. Both writers argued that such emancipation would be beneficial for men too, as it would emancipate them from the unjust patriarchy of Russia (115). Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* was arguably the most influential novel on the development of radical thought in nineteenth-century Russia. Utopian in nature, it still presented the strong moral position of the author, such as a refusal to worship anything constituting the establishment – social classes, masculine gender, family authority, among others. By making a female heroine his central character, Chernyshevsky was expressing the ethos of a whole generation – the necessity to emancipate the woman and to teach future generations of 'New Women' and their male counterparts mutual respect, the emancipation of women, social reorganisation, and equality in every sphere of life.

MARXISM ON THE WOMAN QUESTION AND THE VISION OF RUSSIAN MARXISTS

As has been stated above, Marxism had a huge impact on the women's movement and the conception of the 'New Woman'. It should be noted that many Marxists in Russia had their own methods and approaches to the 'woman question'. These were implemented during the Revolution, though the base for the revolutionary experiments had been established about a decade before. Thus, Alexander Bogdanov, had his views not only on the new organisation of life and society, but also on gender relations. A co-founder of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and one of the main rivals to Lenin, Bogdanov presented an influential opposition to the government from a Marxist perspective in the first decade of the Soviet Union (John E. Marot 221).

Bogdanov's convictions about 'collectivism' as a perfect way of social organisation and "conquering" nature (which was a common view at the time) found their reflections in one of the most popular science-fiction, utopian novels of pre-revolutionary times, *Red Star* (1908). The leading character of the novel, Leonid (or "Lenni", as the Martians call him), during his trip to Mars – the planet in whose name Stites interestingly drew the analogies to Marx – is amazed with collectivism of every facet of Martian life, including the interpersonal relationships. This Martian-Marxian society is far ahead in its development than Earth, in that there is equality, respect for science, the free choice of work and love, and full emancipation of women. People wear unisex clothing, have no race, and relate to one another without deference based on one's rank. There are no obvious distinctions between the sexes on the planet, which explains why Lenni cannot recognise a woman in Netti, a doctor to whom he

feels “strange attraction” (Alexander Bogdanov, Loren R. Graham, and Richard Stites 92). Even the Martian language completely lacks gender qualifications, which makes it so different to Russian. To Lenni’s enquiries as to how the Martians have managed to become so devoid of individualism – which acquires a negative connotation in the novel – and build such advanced society, the Martians respond they have completely restructured their life. This restructuring applies to Martians’ psychology, behaviour and even physiology, which explains the initial confusion of Lenni and his inability to discern Netti’s gender (Bogdanov et al. 94). To demonstrate how backward Earth is compared to Mars, Bogdanov allows Netti to write a letter to Lenni explaining that her multiple (and often simultaneous) relationships with the male Martians do not mean promiscuity as they do for women on Earth. Understanding that Lenni, in spite of his “lucid intellect”, can find it hard to live ‘share’ the woman with other men, Netti promises “there will never be anyone else” (Bogdanov et al. 105-106). Undoubtedly, conveying such an approach to interpersonal relationships, including sexual relationships, the book enjoyed a wide circulation and had a huge influence on the conceptualisation of the ‘New Woman’ of Russia.

WOMEN AND WAR

Until the Revolution of 1905, which followed the unsuccessful and violent Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and was soon christened the Bloody Sunday Massacre, the women’s movement in Russia strengthened. During World War I, there were numerous women who instigated riots as a protest to the failed promises of the government to compensate for their drafted husbands, which aggravated the mass dislike of the Tsarist regime (Clements 181). However, there were many women loyal to the regime, who did their best to support their menfolk at war. In Russia, like everywhere in the world, feminists helped during the war, hoping that their contributions would strengthen the case for women’s rights (180). A number of women served in the army either disguised as men or obtaining permission to enlist from the Emperor himself. According to Clements, many women received medals for heroism, including the pioneers of Russian aviation, Evgenia Shakhovskaia and Nadezhda Degtereva, whose exploits were widely publicised by the Russian and foreign press (180).

In spring of 1917, after the February Revolution had taken place in Russia, the ‘Women’s Battalion of Death’ (*Zhenskii batal'on smerti*) was formed under the commandment of Maria Bochkareva, nicknamed “Yashka”. A peasant soldier and a Joan of Arc of the twentieth century, Bochkareva had a vision of creating a woman’s battalion as an all-female combat unit to strengthen the morale of the soldiers and help the motherland, and eventually convinced the Russian Provisional Government to launch it. According to Melissa Stockdale,

the uniqueness of the Battalion was its mass scale: it was no longer an individual woman fighting alongside male soldiers but consisted of regimented and well-supplied companies of women soldiers (79). The author regrets that the Women's Battalion today is not well known beyond the role it played in the defence of the Winter Palace in the Revolution of 1917 (80). The popularity of the Battalion inspired the formation of other companies and battalions of female volunteers around Russia in 1917. An unexpected gender parity was experienced by women volunteers, for their battalions were on equal footing with male ones. This contributed to the transformation (however temporary) of traditional gender roles in Russia. Referring to an American war correspondent who travelled with Yashka's Battalion, Stockdale demonstrates that the military unit included not only working-class or peasant women, but also office workers, doctors, middle-class and aristocratic women (98). Hence, the Battalions revolutionised not only gender relations, but also the conception of class identity.

Not all women supported the Battalion, for they saw the expression of the 'organised violence' contradicting femininity. Among them was Alexandra Kollontai, even though she denounced the formation of women's battalions for a different reason. Kollontai, as a member of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party (RSDRP), was against the war 'sparked by imperialists' and believed that ignorant women were being misguided and exploited (Stockdale 102). Eventually, the new Bolshevik government ordered the official dissolution of any remaining women's military formations in November of 1917, but they lingered for a while longer, with women soldiers going on to fight on both sides of the Russian Civil War (95). Stockdale argues that, had the Women's Battalion succeeded in forestalling the breakdown of the Russian army, the twentieth-century European and American history of women's participation in war might have been different, for the Western world might have granted to women the citizen's right to bear arms in defence of one's country (115). Nonetheless, the women soldiers of the Women's Battalion were emblematic of the 'New Women', which strengthened the women's movement in Russia and abroad.

The Bolshevik Feminist Alexandra Kollontai established her voice as a passionate women's activist in social and political discourse on the position of women in the Bolshevik Russia. Personifying the 'New Woman' herself, her contribution to the 'woman question' was writing specifically about the construct as being representative of her time. A Russian revolutionary and a major figure in the Russian socialist movement, whom modern Western feminists consider their first theoretician, Kollontai attempts to create "a real-life prototype" in her seminal work on the 'New Woman' (*novaia zhenshchina*) (Tat'iana E. Osipovich 174-177). In her article "The New Morality and the Working Class" (1918) Kollontai refers to multiple (around forty) literary works of Russian and West European writers to underline the objectivity of her views. Osipovich showcases how Kollontai criticises Flaubert and Tolstoy who, despite providing insightful understanding of women's psyche, ignored the increasing number of women of the new type (180).

In her article, Kollontai argues that present-day conditions demanded every woman to have a profession or means of employment outside her home, which implies self-discipline, will power, and emotional control – in other words, qualities that had been an exception to the rule before (Alexandra Kollontai 17). Unlike the woman of the past, Kollontai believed the 'New Woman' must not adopt a negligent attitude towards herself or accept a wretched existence as a natural way of life (35). Instead, this woman must learn to appreciate her independence, as opposed to the woman of the past, who was lacked knowledge of how to achieve this. In case of the departure or death of her husband or master, a woman of the past would turn into a "pathetic and helpless" creature without any moral support whatsoever (Kollontai 19).

Referring to Ellen Kay, a Swedish feminist, suffragist, writer, advocate of a child-centred approach to education and parenting, Kollontai maintained that the 'New Woman' made far higher demands on men (28). The 'New Woman', according to Kollontai, does not expect exclusive possession when she loves, instead, she demands respect for her emotional freedom and accords this respect to others. In Kollontai's view, love ceases to form the only substance of the life of the 'New Woman': it plays the subordinate role, just like it always has for men (Osipovich 175). Therefore, the 'New Woman' abhors 'double morality' when dealing with a man. Whereas women of the old type were raised in the adoration of irreproachable Madonnas, preserved their purity and kept their feelings hidden, the modern woman did not need to hide her natural physical drives (Kollontai 43). This signifies the self-assertiveness of the 'New Woman', represents her biological sex, and is the most sharply delineated

characteristic of her personality (44). Kollontai's understanding of the 'New Woman' was further disseminated by other feminist writers and members of the *Zhenotdels*.

After the Revolution, Clements maintains, the debate on women's emancipation in Russia had reached the scale that Marxist utopians had never anticipated (485). Female utopians worked in the *Zhenotdel*, the Communist Party's Department for Work among Women Workers and Peasants and crafted a vision of socialist future based on Marxist views on women's emancipation (David Evans 99-102). The brief history of the *Zhenotdel* is argued by Clements to illuminate the fate of the feminist dreams in Russia. Established in 1919, the *Zhenotdel* at different times saw such chairwomen as Inessa Armand, Alexandra Kollontai, and Sofia Smidovich. Their publications openly endorsed a radical restructuring of the family and sexual liberation, understanding these as imminent part of the formation of the 'New Woman'. The female theorists argued that defining characteristics of the 'New Woman' would be independence and activism, having a "great inner fire" of her faith, and "self-initiative" (Clements 492). The 'New Woman' would be prudent, intelligent, strong, free, not inferior to man in anything, and "greedily drinking in knowledge" (487). Such women would be true believers and revolutionary fighters, and builders of this new way of life; they would enjoy drawing emotional sustenance from their work, comrades and lovers, whom they would choose or reject freely. Under communism, the leaders of the *Zhenotdel* believed, women would cease to be simply someone's wife, but would become people in their own right (487).

Utopians have always used sexuality as a marker of liberation of their perfect society. In the revolutionary Russia, the debate on sexuality was crucial for the creation of the 'New Man and Woman'. Utopians, anti-utopians and most ordinary citizens worldwide saw free sexuality as socially destabilising. Echoing such attitudes, the Bolsheviks attempted to restore social order in the 1920s. They did it by pronouncing new sexual mores, whose aim was to discipline energetic young men and protect young women from sexual exploitation (Evans 99-100). The male Party leaders, especially during the years of War Communism, were more focused on military matters than on the 'woman question'. During the Civil War, the questions of gender and sexuality were not addressed by the Party leaders and were left for the *Zhenotdel* to discuss. However, under the more settled atmosphere of the NEP, *Zhenotdel* utopianism fell under critical scrutiny of male comrades (102). In late 1920s, "middle-aged party elite hammered out a sexual code for young communists" which forced the *Zhenotdel* to withdraw from the debate on sexuality in order to preserve their voice at all (Clements 491). Consequently, the discourse on the women's issues was monopolised. In retrospect, it can be seen that the *Zhenotdel*, in trying to save their position, first agreed not to discuss sexuality and then ceased endorsing the abolition of family. In the 1930s, Party theoreticians stressed motherhood as constituent to 'proper' femininity. The process concluded under Stalin, when

the Party abolished the *Zhenotdel* and declared Soviet women had achieved full equality with men.

WHY WAS THE DISCOURSE ON SEXUALITY SO LOUD IN EARLY SOVIET RUSSIA?

As has been stated by R.S.C. Knox, many *flâneurs*, adventure-seekers and intellectuals travelling across Russia in the 1920s, expected to see a highly eroticised and sexualised society enjoying new freedoms (18-21). This was a consequence of the ‘oral-cultural’ discourse on sex and sexuality of the time, as was discussed earlier in this chapter. Yet travellers visiting Russia at this time would observe the complete opposite. Soviet Russia in reality was an absolutely asexual society to their astonishment and disappointment (Knox 25). The continuing puritan views on femininity and female sexuality were reflected in people’s festivals organised by the state during the 1920s. They contrasted sharply with the ‘nude parades’ and festivals taking place in Moscow and other large cities of Russia in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution. The slogan of the Russian nudists of revolutionary times was “Away with shame!” The discovery of the natural body drew upon the discourse of religious problem of shame and the “strict dictates of modesty” (Peter Corrigan 81). The political message of these parades, sent to the foreign delegates, was of great consequence. Initiated by Karl Radek, a leading figure of the Communist International, they were to show the equality of the sexes, the victory over the ‘bourgeois prejudices’, and the international socialism’s strength, that the Russians now presented. Only when unclothed, could the man reintegrate with nature itself, because then there was no artificial barrier between the two. Such nude parades, however, ended abruptly due to severe weather conditions and partly ‘unreadiness’ of society (James Von Geldern 199).

All over revolutionary Russia, monuments were being toppled physically, boosting intellectual movements and theories of negativism and reductionism. People seemed to expect the immediate and complete remaking of human psyche after the revolution. The dogmatic “architects” of post-revolutionary times wanted to ban “interior” families and marriages for the sake of big “collective comradeship” (Naiman 220). New people – namely ‘New Men’ and ‘New Women’ – required new comradesly relations and a “refashioning” of psychology with the help of a factory, in order to create new forms of friendship and resulting in new forms of (future) socialist life (220). Women were not immune to this ‘complete remaking’, either. In their desire to “smash, demean, profane, mock, neutrali[s]e, and ultimately destroy” the social order and its associated culture in order to create entirely new ones, the ideologists of the revolution went as far as creating a theory of an unprecedented system of procreation. At different stages of the Revolution, during War Communism, and later during the years of the NEP, a sexual context became an essential part of a rhetoric (Naiman 77). Thus, Martyn

Liadov, a Bolshevik critic of Lenin and rector of the Sverdlov Communist University from 1923 to 1929, published a book (which was severely criticised immediately after its release) *Voprosy Byta* (The Questions of Everyday Life) in 1924, where he argued that menstruation and nonseasonal sexual desire had been inflicted on female body by capitalism (3). Naiman views sex as a natural topic of discourse during the NEP, due to its retreat from ideological purity by way of commercial intercourse with the ideological enemy (81). Some women's activists – like Ekaterina Troshchenko who, along with Kollontai, wrote about women's equal rights – complained that sex-based role differentiation, which had begun to dissipate in the first years after the Revolution, was reasserting itself under the NEP (84).

During War Communism, the discourse of sexual difference was not loud, as the state was largely preoccupied with military concerns. The only form such discourse was symbolic or declarative: “The women's question will cease to exist as soon as men and women receive equal rights” (quoted in Naiman 81). “There will be no more men or women” declared the pre-revolutionary philosophers developing their theories about novel methods of procreation by an effort of will (81). Returning to this topic afterwards, some theorists boasted that the new future was near, arguing that most women during the Revolution and Civil War lost their menstruation (21-28). This phenomenon, however much it resembled a masculinisation of a woman, could certainly be ascribed to malnutrition and the shocks of the wartime. However, Russian modernism (for example, the Proletkul't's “phallic vision of unanimity”) proves that it was women who, in the opinion of artists and theorists, needed to be remoulded, not men (77). Aron Zalkind, for instance, argued that female sexuality, similarly to pre-Revolutionary ideas, tended to overwhelm and overrun the bounds of the body. Zalkind, a Russian psychologist and one of the main representatives of paedology in Russia of the time, linked the woman with bourgeoisie as the incarnation of sexuality. Thus, developed in the context of gender, the concept became a measure of class relationships and exploitation, and women would emerge as horrifically synonymous to bourgeoisie many a time (Naiman 141).

After the revolution, some thinkers proclaimed the creation of the ‘collective body’, which was expected to redeem pleasure in the communist future. It would cease being individual, but rather collective, pertaining to the collective ideal of “culture” (74). Even love was doomed to undergo fundamental “disinfection”, as it was understood as nothing more than psychosis by some revolutionary ideologists (74). The discourse of sexuality reached its apogee after the sensational case of Chubarov Alley, which was characterised by Naiman as “collective rape” and considered an outcome of this so-called “utopian desire” (251-261). The dramatic incident took place on 21 August 1926 in Leningrad and was a gang-rape of a nineteen-year-old woman by more than twenty ‘hooligans’. Naiman argues that it may have been since this case that sex became associated with hooliganism in Russian culture (261). It is understandable

in light of the hyper-sexual rhetoric of the revolutionary years, which propagated assault as a new norm. The fact that Komsomol women or female students infamously were expected to do the bidding of any Komsomol man to avoid being seen as “petty bourgeois” reflects how twisted became the free spirit of the party freedoms (94-96). Nevertheless, debates of sexuality effected in the new attitude pertaining to it among the ‘New Women’ of the new state.

AVANT-GARDE FASHION AND ASPIRATIONAL CONSUMPTION

Fashion as a reflection of mainstream society was an important factor in the creation of the ‘New Woman’. Most costumes of Russian avant-garde designers, especially those of Nadezhda Lamanova, were modelled in the 1920s by Lilya Brik and Elsa Triolet. Brik was a socialite and the muse of many leading figures in the Russian avant-garde and was most famous for her being the beloved of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Russian poet, playwright, artist, actor, and a prominent figure of the Russian Futurism. Her sister, Triolet, was a well-known Russian-French writer who, along with her sister in Moscow, promoted revolutionary styles in fashion abroad. Both sisters realised their potential and can be described as ‘New Women’, for Brik could be considered Mayakovsky’s Public Relations manager by today’s standards, and appeared on screen, whereas Triolet became a successful writer.

Being a watershed between the old and the new, the Revolution of 1917 gave workers a paramount role in the creation of the new society, which effected changes in the social role of art. Slogans such as “Art for the people” and “Art for industry”, together with Lenin’s propaganda programme, brought about the new objectives in the area of artistic production. Fashion, as the area most closely linked to daily life, allowed for possibility of producing industrially products like new fabrics, clothes and furniture. In Soviet Russia, new trends in fashion had a mission of broadcasting the image of a ‘New Life’ in a new state, with ‘new people’ being created. According to Lydia Zaletova, Franco Panzini, and Fabio Ciofi degli Atti, it correlated with Marxist productivity theory popular at the time, and accelerated change of the concrete reality and formation of the ‘New Man’ living in it (3). Multiple studies of the psychological effect of clothing on the human psyche were conducted at the time. Russian poet and major contributor to the Russian Silver Age, Mikhail Kuzmin, hypothesised in his writings on theatrical costume that clothing can alter gestures and attitudes, and determine personality, similarly to wearing a mask, thereby changing the attitudes of the wearer (28). Thus, performativity in clothing as the power of effecting change in the world – hence creating a new world – was propagated.

The construction of all new styles with brand new fabrics was overshadowed by disabled textile production in the aftermath of the Revolution and the Civil War. Nevertheless,

the temporary market economy, reintroduced by the Bolsheviks during the NEP, was gradually reviving the industry. It became possible for artists of various branches, but predominantly of the Constructivist, to experiment with textile patterns and new silhouettes of dress. Such artists as Aleksandra Exter, the Sternberg brothers, El Lissitzky, and costume designers such as Liubov' Popova and Varvara Stepanova, associated with Constructivism and *Lef* journal, aimed at designing useful pieces of art. Their clothing designs were comfortable and adaptable to both living and working conditions. Alexandra Exter was a major protagonist of Soviet fashion in the 1920s. Her creation of a so-called *prozodezhda* (work overall), despite having a limited circulation, affirmed the necessity of clothing to be differentiated depending on the job that the wearer performed (10). Varvara Stepanova had professional training as a dress-designer. It is through her that the theories of Constructivists were performed in fashion. Stepanova's well-tried principles of productive functionality were used in the creation of overalls for surgeons, firemen, pilots and practical headress. Another avant-garde Russian artist, painter and later – designer, L'ubov' Popova, used her rich and varied artistic background to design new fashion. She had switched from Cubism to what was then called “painterly architectonics” and was in charge of costume production for Vsevolod Meyerhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922). According to Zaletova et al., Popova remained one of the most austere members of the Russian avant-garde, with a clear link visible between her dynamic dresses and the doctrine of Taylorism (22).

On the initiative of Russian designer Nadezhda Lamanova, the first All-Russian Conference of Art and Industry was set up in 1919, where it was decided that “art should penetrate all walks of daily life, stimulating the artistic taste and sensitivity of the masses” (Zaletova et al. 9). Because of the economic crisis, many formulations of Lamanova – though easy to mass produce due to their clean cut and simplicity – remained merely theoretical. However, they incited a great many artists in the 1920s to experiment with new forms of clothing. Her models distinguished themselves from the European trends of the time by severe purity, the grace of the national costume that inspired them, and decorative elements. After her victory at the Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1925 together with Russian artist and sculptor, Vera Mukhina, Lamanova kept in close contact with the renowned French couturier Paul Poiret (10). These designers contributed enormously to the fashion consciousness of the ‘New Soviet Woman’ of the early 1920s (19). L'udmila Mayakovskaya, sister of Vladimir Mayakovsky, was the first Soviet designer to learn and adapt the spray-gun technique, which she used on silk, muslin and velvet, materials nearly impossible to find in the post-revolutionary Russia. She had been employed at a textile factory since 1909 – in other words, way before other female designers – and at the end of 1910 was asked to manage the Spray-Gun Printing Workshop. Mayakovsakaya's style in the 1920s was inspired by Constructivist

geometrics, and, when some of her materials were presented at the Paris Exhibition in 1925, they won a silver medal (189).

During the 1920s, Constructivist clothing could not be reproduced on an industrial scale, so most ideas were promoted through periodicals and book covers and posters and found their realisation through theatre, which brought them enormous success. The diversity and imaginativeness of the new designs played a major role in the “visual and semiotic definition” of the ‘New Soviet Woman’ (Zaletova et al. 28). At the time of the NEP, most avant-garde designers were experimenting with new styles and techniques during the daytime and tailored clothes for more affluent clients (especially the female party leaders) in the evening. Remarkably, the designs popular among this public were not avant-garde, but rather traditional, pre-revolutionary styles. This is presumably what makes Stites claim that Nadezhda Krupskaya and other female revolutionary leaders, with the exception of Kollontai, had the plainest wardrobe (132).

According to Anne E. Gorsuch, studying the NEP period enables the understanding of the trends among Russian youth at the time, and hence, in society at large (“Soviet Youth” 190). The reintroduction of a free market economy had an impact in not only the large-scale experiments of the avant-garde dress designers, but also in the demand boom for Western goods. Gorsuch asserts that light-hearted amusements of “bourgeois” nature appeared to be a ‘cure’ for the war and revolutionary traumas exacerbated by the post-revolutionary hunger, poor housing and unemployment (“Soviet Youth” 193-195). In contrast to the leather jackets and “patched shoes” of the rough-and-ready revolutionary girls, the flappers of the post-revolutionary NEP Russia wore fashionable dresses, bobbed hair and bright lipstick (Gorsuch, “The Dance Class” 174).

With the abundance of Hollywood movies (even though available in semi-official cinemas), young proletarians and former peasants residing in large cities, wanted to be fashion-forward and look like movie stars (“The Dance Class” 192). When the opportunity was given to ‘NEP-men’ to do business again, certain private apartments where latest season fashions could be smuggled started to emerge. Gorsuch describes a case of a young ‘hipster’ Komsomol girl who committed suicide when she found out that her velvet skirt had been stolen, believing that she looked like “the daughter of a nobleman” in it (“The Dance Class” 186). She argues that such a performance signified an important trend in society, which revealed the lack of unanimous support of the Revolution by the masses and outraged the Bolsheviks (185-190). Similarly to revolutionary France more than a century before, clothing and other outward symbols did not express political positions, but the power itself.

Young women who could not afford to buy real silk stockings engaged in aspirational consumption and bought imitation silk instead, and inexpensive Soviet-produced lipstick,

which was still seen as a bourgeois vice (182). Gorsuch discusses a case of one appalled Bolshevik who observed that some (female) factory workers nearly starved to have regular manicures done (“Soviet Youth” 194). Understandably, playful dress was to the Bolsheviks evidence of deviance and even opposition, owing to their ideology of remaking of everyday life. While Bolshevik moralists considered such behaviour a devaluation of the “traditional” values of the working class, lamenting that the revolutionary ideals had been ‘sold out for a skirt’, young women wondered why pleasant commodities should necessarily be defined as “bourgeois” and not just “modern” (“Soviet Youth” 197). Therefore, the experiments in fashion on both sides – the leftist avant-garde artists, and the more traditional bourgeois styles smuggled from abroad – endowed the ‘New Woman’ with more traits, making her not a mere concept, but a real woman.

THE ‘NEW WOMAN’ REPRESENTED IN MODERNISM

These changes in femininity did not go unnoticed by art. Preoccupied with the creation of a ‘New Man’, Russian Modernism included various manifestations of the ‘New Woman’ as part of its ‘theurgic’ mission. Fitzpatrick in “The Two Faces of Anastasia: Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Identity” notes that the images of women were not even present in visual art in the aftermath of the Revolution, and it took some time for them to be incorporated in both propaganda and market-oriented posters (27). Judith Vowels maintains that the reason for this is a cultural deep-rooted misogyny, already found in Russian Modernism prior to the Revolution and the era of the NEP (55-72). Russian Symbolism, being at the forefront of Modernism, was traditionally viewed as emancipatory for women, and had an enormous effect on the development of the *novyi chelovek*. Nevertheless, Vowels argues that it forced women to continue adhering to traditional norms. Thus, the trial of Natalia Goncharova for nudity as the foremost representative of Russian Neo-Primitivism in the visual arts prior to 1914, accentuated the problems with the perception of female nudity produced by a female author. The models of Goncharova were not portrayed as natural magnets for a man’s eye, but matter-of-factly and assertively. The trial, though victorious for Goncharova, nevertheless resulted in the artist’s switching to alternative themes.

In essays, novellas and plays of the time, such as Alexandra Kollontai’s *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923), androgynous women were praised for their lack of obvious secondary sexual characteristics. Such women were ideologically ‘correct’, in an age where excessive sexual activity was seen as damaging to the Revolution. Aleksandra Kollontai, generally considered a leading Bolshevik feminist, made use of ‘NEP Gothic’ in an ambivalent manner that hindered women as much as it helped them (Naiman 148-155). Naiman states that Kollontai – despite

embodying the 'New Woman' – was herself caught up and entrapped by discourse on sex, adding to the stereotype of women as irrational victims and a source of contamination (148).

'Sapphic love' is another representation of femininity in Russian Modernism. The case of two female poets of the Silver Age, Marina Tsvetaeva and Sophia Parnok, which found expression in *The Tale of Sonechka* (1938), though was written much later, provides an insight into the lesbian side of sexuality in Russian culture of modernism. The case is, however, more of a 'spiritual androgyny' and hardly liberates either poet (Svetlana Boym 160). Alexander Blok, lyricising about the purity of the Beautiful Lady earlier in his career, shifted the mood toward the prostitute. In his *The Twelve* (1918), Kat'ka epitomises a prostitute, but also Russia itself, the mother-country. Analogous to images of prostitutes proliferated in Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the poet's prostitute is a symbol of decay, urbanism and decadence (Wood, "Prostitution Unbound" 124).

Motherhood, otherwise statically presented in Russian culture, was dared to be challenged only in the unofficial literature. Maria Shkapskaya, whose writings remain little-discussed in modern scholarship, manages to portray men in her poetry as bystanders, while women are not only the bearers of life, but also its interpreters. Such depiction forces the reader to feel as an onlooker to the closed configuration of mother and child. Relating to motherhood, the theme of childhood was also present in the post-revolutionary Russian art. Children were the future of the nation, hence, the little 'New Men and Women' in need of education. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova argue that 1920s Soviet cinema attempted to make the *young pioneer* a role model for children (130). Nevertheless, in the market environment of the NEP, local production had to compete with Western imports, where adventure films of no educational value dominated (129-131). Continuing the theories of paedology, intensively pursued in 1920s-early 1930s in Soviet Russia, Soviet cinema faced an almost impossible task of making movies that were simultaneously entertaining and educational.

The 'good' women of the 1920s were depicted as avid party supporters, activists and fearless 'new' women. The 'newness' of such women was in their direct, bold look, which was devoid of any sentiment and rooted in their refusal to look 'desirable' for the opposite sex (or gender?). Their hair – one of the most vivid signs of female sexuality – was thoroughly hidden under the triangular head-kerchief, with the bulky figures resembling male bodies (Wood, "Prostitution Unbound" 129-132). Due to ideological motives, portrayal of NEP-women took a decidedly different twist. During the short period of the NEP, it was realised that market tools such as advertising could help to increase turnover. Female consumption was noticed and appreciated, which forced advertising campaigns to introduce more female types. Peculiarly, they were portrayed scathingly, dressed in glamorous clothing, alien to the 'New Soviet Man' (or Woman), and never appeared without a male figure (126-128). Depending on the purpose

of advertising, 'NEP-men' were either tolerated or debased in posters. Wood discusses an advertising poster of a tobacco company, in which NEP-men – accompanying their women – were portrayed standing in line with representatives of other social classes ("Prostitution Unbound" 133). Notably, only NEP-women were depicted; smoking and occupying an independent place. Other classes (such as the proletariat, 'the former people', or peasants) were limited to male figures.

CONCLUSION

As can be concluded from the discussion above, there were various similarities between the 'New Woman' of Germany and that of Russia. Both concepts originated from a feminine ideal, which was based on the veneration of the mother figure. So, the parallels go further, to the final stage of life of the 'New Woman', when the discourse of eugenics with the ethnically pure German mother became mainstream in Weimar, and the propaganda of motherhood and *byt* – in off-work hours – in Soviet Russia.

Another similarity is that the emancipation of women was thought to be the task of the enlightened men, which is why both countries can boast to having their first pro-feminist literature written by male authors. Nevertheless, the dark side of the picture might be that this was precisely the reason why the 'New Women' in both countries allowed the male authorities to deprive them of their rights.

Another similar trait was the importance of sexuality discourse in the formation of the concept. Closely linked to it was the importance of fashion as a means of either stressing one's sexuality or reducing it to the point of androgyny. Another common characteristic was the ardent desire of both types of 'New Women' to have a free choice in love, vocation and political life. These conceptions of the 'New Woman' had very similar representation in arts, indicating that there are more similarities between the two variations of the concept than differences.

In spite of all these similarities, the major difference between the 'New Women' of Germany and of Russia was the impulse behind their creation. The German 'New Woman' was a social category that developed naturally under certain historical circumstances. The Russian 'New Woman', on the contrary, was a purely ideological conceptualisation imposed on the women of Russia.

Asja Lacis had three autobiographies published under her name during the last years of her life: *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator* (A Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theatre, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin and Piscator, 1971) in German, *Anna Lacis* (1973) in Latvian, and *Krasnaia gvozdika: Vospominaniia* (The Red Carnation: A Memoir, 1984) in Russian. Two of them, *Revolutionär im Beruf* and *The Red Carnation*, will be analysed formatively in order to establish Lacis' continuity or discontinuity as a 'New Woman'. That said, the main focus of this chapter will be on Lacis' performance in her professional and private life as determined through the change in the behaviour mode reconstructed from her life writings. Based on the (dis-)continuity of the narrative, hence, of the 'self' the author is creating, the character of (dis-)continuity of Lacis' performance pattern will be established. This will demonstrate the consistency and/or evolution of the notion of the 'New Woman' construct as applied to Asja Lacis both in time and space.

Domna C. Stanton in her book on female writing tradition argues that women chiefly could not transcend the concerns of their private lives and only recorded them, which served to devalue their writing (4). The writings of George Sand and Colette exemplify how their fictions were branded as autobiographical and denigrated for that very reason (Stanton 11-16). Sadly, the remarks of many feminist theorists just add to the denigration of female writing. Thus, Stanton refers to Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), which, in Stanton's view, characterises "the autobiographical narrowness and narcissism" of women's life writing (Stanton 5). Katherine Goodman in her book on women's autobiography in Germany refers to the anonymous seventeenth-century *The Portuguese Letters* (4). The work was first published in Paris in 1669 and is now believed by most scholars to be authored by Gabriel-Joseph de la Vergne, Comte de Guilleragues, a diplomat, and secretary to the Prince of Conti. Noteworthy is the comparison of characteristics ascribed to *The Portuguese Letters*, where they are called "spontaneous and natural" when the author was assumed to be a woman, but "fictive, crafted and aesthetic" when attributed to a man (Goodman 4). Women's life writing and autobiography in particular may be presented in various sub-genres (*confession*, an *official* autobiography, etc.) (Edward Seidensticker 47-50). Barbara Heldt in her book *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* researches a number of Russian women's life writings, including such prominent figures as the female monarch, Catherine the Great, and the professional revolutionary, Vera Figner. Heldt discusses the sub-genre of *official*

autobiography by women and defines it as the one “with a public aim” (68-69). She argues that in official autobiographies, the author strives to create an identity worthy of a male recipient (67-68). Life writing of this kind, where the public ‘self’ eclipses the private, resembles that by men. This makes such “public” autobiographies, in Heldt’s opinion, “less interesting than [those] written by women unafraid of showing that they made mistakes, or who hesitated between the lesser of two evils” (69).

In German literature, ever since the publication of Goethe’s *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From my Life: Poetry and Truth*, 1811-1833), the subjectivity and personal experience of the author have been praised as necessary in creating an authentic piece of writing. Women’s life writing has generally been under-appreciated in the significance of the experience it conveyed. Goodman suggests that, with regard to women’s autobiography in Germany, this is explained by the inability of male scholars to allow room for revelations of qualitatively different experience (xii). “Male myopia,” as coined by Goodman, often fails to recognise the obligations female authors always had to comply with. Social class, for instance, has not been taken into consideration enough in the studies of women’s writings, though the end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed a flowering of working-class biographies, which was predicated on socialist movements all around Germany and new opportunities acquired by women. Female writers started to more directly outline their struggles for the rights of women. Women authors mingling in bohemian circles from approximately 1900 to 1933 published autobiographical works that expressed their liberated sexuality in a ‘free love’ relationship (Antje Lindenmeyer 247) Fusing life and art and staging one’s transformation through performance and costumes was another theme of women’s autobiographies of the Weimar period (247). The time of experimentation with new forms ended abruptly when the National Socialist Party came to power in 1933. Second-wave feminism of the 1960s-70s also inspired autobiographical writing in German. The genre witnessed more working-class protagonists and exemplified the ways in which women are neglected in Marxist thought (248).

The development of Russian life writing was closely bound up with political history and the history of tsarist censorship (David N. Wells 765). Under the influence of the Russian Revolution and modernist movement, life writing in its realist (or utilitarian) form began to undergo transformation. The life writing of the 1920s was diverse and included both ideologically charged life writing, such as biographical sketches of heroic Red Army officers, and non-ideological (auto)biographies, memoirs or diaries. Thus, it was possible for an autobiographical trilogy by Maxim Gorky, founder of socialist realism, to coexist with the modernist autobiography of Osip Mandelstam. One of the most representative pieces of that

period is *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (written in 1926 and published only in 1971) by Alexandra Kollontai (Viktoriya M. Topalova 489).

However, the ‘woman question’ *per se* ceased to exist for the proletarian writers of the late 1920s when women were “officially liberated” (Topalova 489), acquiring complete legal equality with men, which limited life writing only to the task of party propaganda and creating new history. The myth-making of the ‘New Man’ who came into being owing to the revolution, followed the Russian tradition of hagiography and was now the primary task of life writing genres (Balina and Rudova 767). During the 1960s, the time of Khrushchev’s Thaw – the period of relaxed repression and censorship due to the policies of de-Stalinisation – Russian literature, just like European, witnessed the revival of the genre of autobiography. By the 1970s, the genre of women’s autobiography changed its structure and style. Progressing through the 1960s into the 1980s, “new forms of emulating George Sand in Soviet literature” were distinguished by non-chronologically structured plot, “lack of any sentimentality” and original views on the changing role of the woman in Soviet society (Topalova 489-490). Most women’s life writings, though, were *tamizdat* – émigré writings or writings smuggled from the USSR and published abroad – which were published in the USSR only during Perestroika.

In her German autobiography, Asja Lacis tries to reconstruct the atmosphere of different periods of time, including the 1920s – the period of this study. However, the influence of the 1970s, when the books were published, on the genre of autobiography cannot be overlooked. With the rise of feminism in German women’s life writing, a professional woman started to present a bigger interest for the audience than a *Hausfrau*. Another area of research interest began to appear with the second-wave feminism and included a person’s social class. How the class of the woman writer informs the formation of the gendered self has since become the topic of discussion for many researchers (Phoebe S. Jackson 172).

It should be mentioned that the German autobiography by Lacis was not conceived as such. As has been noted by Lacis herself and by Ingram in her monograph about Lacis, Lacis was contacted by the literary scholar Dr. Hildegard Brenner with the request to send Walter Benjamin’s letters addressed to Lacis (RC 132). Her reply was that the letters had been destroyed. She had undoubtedly realised the fame which one of her former partners acquired posthumously and offered instead to produce a few reminiscences about that period of her life (RC 132-133). This move can be viewed as one of the first and primary manifestations of Asja Lacis in the role of a ‘New Woman’. Her ‘I’ was more important to her than anyone else’s, be it the most notable people.

Hildegard Brenner, who is named as the editor of *Revolutionär im Beruf*, in the afterword to the book claims that the name of Asja Lacis became of interest to the researchers of Walter Benjamin’s works after the publication of the *Schriften* (selected writings) in 1955.

In the period of reconstruction and more open approach to the question of class confrontation, the West German scholarship began looking back at the left-leaning bourgeois intellectuals of the Weimar period. This included a more conscious exploration of proletarian and revolutionary writers and theatre professionals and a more frequent referral to Lacis (RB 121-122). In Brenner's view, Asja Lacis – as opposed to the renowned director Natalya Sats who established and ran theatres for children – never favoured traditional theatre, but preferred experimental styles and techniques. Brenner maintains that Lacis presents an interest “for us” for she was a witness of the “artistic activities” of the political left of the Weimar Republic, she was herself an actress and a theatre director, and played the role of an ‘informant’ for the left-wing artists. Among them, Brenner names Brecht, Piscator, Becher, Kisch, and Toller as the most prominent (121). Brenner argues that Lacis took an active part in the establishment of proletarian and revolutionary theatre in Germany (in the 1920s), and even now (in the early 1970s) hers and Reich's apartment in Riga attracts “not only Soviet” artists (122). The editor meticulously enumerates the sources the book has been compiled of. Thus, apart from Lacis' early publications in magazines, she names written records of Lacis' life recollections printed in the newspaper *Sinn und Form* in 1969; freely related memories, which Brenner recorded on tape in 1968; and supplementary reminiscences produced by Lacis in 1971 (all texts were written in German by Lacis herself). The first edition of the autobiography appeared on Lacis' eightieth birthday on 19th October 1971.

In 1976, the second edition of *Revolutionär im Beruf* was released. Ingram stresses that it was the second (1976) edition that was “scaled back by ten pages [containing] childhood reminiscences” (79). This harm done by the censorship authorities made Lacis look like “an impersonal *mulier sovietica*” in the eyes of the West (79, italics in the original). In fact, it was the second edition that was “enlarged and revised”, which leaves the “guise of an impersonal *mulier sovietica*” to the first (1971) edition (RB 4; [1976]). The assumption can be made that Asja Lacis indeed looked impersonal and dehumanised in the first edition of her autobiography, but presumably after the authorities' decision, was portrayed more as a human-being in the second version. What is essential for my research is the fact that it was not a *samizdat* (‘unofficial, self-published’) publication, smuggled to the West during the Soviet rule, or a *tamizdat*, but an authorised text. Even though Latvian SSR, as well as the other Baltic states, was traditionally considered freer from ideology than other parts of the USSR, the autobiography had to be censored and approved by the authorities. This will partially explain the means Lacis chose to construct her ‘self’.

The Soviet autobiography of Asja Lacis published in Russian, *Krasnaia gvozdika* (The Red Carnation, 1984), followed the Latvian *Anna Lacis* (1973) and was a kind of reaction to

the publication in West Germany. The foreword by the writer and Honoured Artist of the Latvian SSR, Arvīds Grigulis, provides a tribute to the renowned theatre director, Anna Lacis (the formal name of Asja Lacis). In Grigulis' words, the reminiscences of Lacis offered to the reader in *The Red Carnation* differ from all her previous works. This autobiography is mainly the story of an artist's life. Grigulis also maintains that *The Red Carnation* differs from other people's life narratives in how the personality of the author is presented. Anna Lacis was a person of rare energy and mobility (RC 3-4). The author of the foreword claims that Lacis possesses a unique quality of making contact with extraordinary and world-famous people. Her autobiography represents an interest as the richest source of information, which has not been published anywhere before. Lacis and Reich have many a time addressed Bertolt Brecht and his theatre in their publications. In this life writing, however, the story of the big artist blends in with her own life reminiscences. Lacis' recollections from her contacts with Brecht help to understand the evolution of her own aesthetic ideas and worldview (5-6). Walter Benjamin was not mentioned in the foreword for he was practically unknown to the Soviet scholarship. In fact, he only appeared once in the autobiography itself.

The very recently published second edition of *The Red Carnation* (2018) provides a synopsis on a specialised web-platform for cultural institutions. The unabridged afterword added to the second edition of *The Red Carnation* is also available there. According to it, Anna Nizhnik, the author of the afterword, claims that the book was never written by Lacis (Konstantin Kharitonov). The first edition of *The Red Carnation* was based on her recollections taken from *Revolutionär im Beruf* and an interview taken from Lacis about Reich. Lacis never saw her book in print, for it was published only posthumously. Nizhnik asserts that Lacis complained in a letter to a friend and theatre theorist, Aleksandr Fevral'skii, that her manuscript had been edited and redacted as well as printed by a Riga publishing house (Kharitonov). According to Nizhnik, Lacis considered the book, which was a government contract of highlighting the Weimar culture, lacking everything which was dear to her (Kharitonov). The reaction of Lacis to the place of publication and the fact the book was edited demonstrates another time the author's manifestation of the 'New Woman'. Lacis must have wanted this book to be published in Moscow (for she already had the Latvian autobiography) and to have no editing or reviewing at all (which would have acknowledged Lacis' importance as an author in her own right).

One should not forget that dealing with an autobiography as a particular genre of life writing, a researcher does not have the luxury of tracing day-to-day activities or emotions of an author (like in a diary), for autobiography is not a chronicle with daily entries and is generally written over a considerable amount of time. Moreover, as part of the 'New Woman' topic, the primary objective of the chapter is not an attempt to reconstruct the 'truth', but the

‘identity’ produced by the author through the characteristics of the ‘self’ which the author continually creates in her writing. I will be drawing the constituents of the concept of the ‘New Woman’ through Lacis’ construction of her identity with consideration of the geolocations and peculiarities of the formative reading of either autobiography. For the purpose of my research, I have chosen to divide Lacis’ narratives into major themes and motifs, which will at times break the chronology of her life events.

ASJA LACIS’ LIFE PERFORMANCE: SEXUALITY

In the torrid atmosphere of the early twentieth century with the omnipresent discourse of sexuality, the theme was bound to enter women’s writings. Depending on the state’s policy and author’s position, it saw the polar attitudes of either tolerance or suppression. Asja Lacis in this respect is an exceptional example of discontinuity between the person’s life and creation. Whereas she lived her flirtatious life to the full, her biographical works have practically no trace of a sexuality motif. This makes it all the more inciting to analyse other people’s memoirs about Lacis, in the sense that one may unmask her identity and understand her as an artist. Until the nineteenth century there was little acknowledgement of female sexuality in European culture (Rosemarie Buikema 570). Beginning with the *Confessions* (around 397-400) of Augustine, autobiography has played a crucial role in understanding the development of the relationship between love and sexuality. Michel Foucault in his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1978) argues that even though Western culture considers itself as characterised by repressed sexuality, in fact sexuality has been a continuous subject of discourse through society’s injunctions and prohibitions (Buikema 571).

When reviewing sexuality, it is necessary to mention gender, as pertaining to sexuality at the level of identity. Gender, according to Judith Butler, “is a performance” required for “cultural survival” (139). The author argues that women “are compelled to . . . inevitably masquerade”, which can be seen as “the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a ‘being’” (47). Butler examines hyper-feminine women, arguing that, by analogy with homosexual men, they engage in performance for the following reason:

[H]omosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a ‘defense’ against their homosexuality. . . . women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men. (51)

Butler explicates this masquerade, defining “gender” as rendered “through a compulsory heterosexuality”, which makes “sexuality” male-identified (30). “Male” also “serves as the cause and irreducible meaning of that sexuality”, which leads the author to a statement that “sexuality [is] constructed in terms of phallic relations of power” (30). Realising very early that the game of sexuality is virtually a power game, Lacis might have decided she would win it and have the power. For being born a woman, she was expected – by society and by her culture – to become submissive to the fact and behave according to her gender. So, she did, in a way. Asja Lacis had several relationships with men, and it is not possible to say whether they were gratifying to her, or it was all masquerade to achieve her personal goals. However, Lacis did not recast her life in the context of every new partner so she could fit into his model of life-view, as did, for example, Nina Petrovskaya, Russian poet and translator, who would use life-creation literally to please Valery Bryusov and Andrei Bely, major poets of the Symbolist school (Joan D. Grossman 125-135). Whenever Asja Lacis began a new relationship, it was with a man more prominent (or intelligent, or affluent) than the previous one. She thus had an opportunity to go a step upward in her career, meaning the “phallic relations of power” were on her side. Using Freud’s term, the “female castration” was what happened when Lacis let men believe they have power over her (or her body) but instead used her masculinity, disguised under the mask of hyper-sexuality, to strip the men of their power and accumulate hers (Karl Abraham 51-60). This is proven by Butler’s point that a “woman takes on a masquerade knowingly in order to conceal her masculinity from the masculine audience she wants to castrate” (52).

Masculinity and femininity are intrinsic parts of one’s sexuality. In looking at the concepts of masculinity and femininity, it is beneficial to refer to the traditions of Russian literature in portraying female characters. As Rosalind Marsh maintains, Russian male writers would often relate physical unattractiveness in women to intellectual activity or feminist activism (16). The author exemplifies her view with “untidy rooms, crumpled dresses and broad red hands” of Turgenev’s, Chekhov’s and Dostoevsky’s heroines (17). Marsh proves that the ‘emancipated woman’ in Russian male literature is never allowed to express any new or even interesting ideas (e.g. Aglaia in *The Idiot*), with this tradition persisting in the twentieth century. It is remarkable how disturbing was the ‘mannishness’ of the ‘New Woman’ for both male authors and readers of the early twentieth century, which implicitly proves Butler’s point about “anxiety and the retribution . . . from men.” Thus, the heroine of Anastasiia Verbitskaia’s *Po-novomu (In a New Way, 1902)*, a ‘New Woman’ striving to establish a new type of marriage based on mutual respect, was immensely ridiculed by critics (20-21). According to Marsh, Russian literature offers very few examples of “triumphant, independent female sexuality” (22). In speaking of Lacis, it can be seen how she broke some of the stereotypes, but at the

time her Soviet autobiography was being written, sexuality had fallen out of favour as a theme in Russian literature (Topalova 489-90), which forced Lacis to downplay it. Notwithstanding this fact, it is possible to trace some hidden masculinity in Lacis' hyper-feminine performance.

Morality and ethics are constituents of the notion of sexuality. The double morality in Lacis' refined Soviet autobiography is that she describes Julis as a harsh and unloving husband, incapable of understanding his creative, talented wife with a pure soul. Asja Lacis pictures herself as a victim of family life, having to put up with his conduct. In *The Red Carnation* Lacis draws a picture of Julis maliciously wishing Lacis to be fired and then calmly drinking his tea, but mentions nothing about the strong feeling her husband had for her, or the lovers she had – according to her daughter's memoirs – almost under his nose (DM 23). Asja Lacis' morality in sexual respect – though almost eliminated from her autobiographies – can also be viewed from the point of view of the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, which Lacis could have taken in from Nietzsche and lived upon in her work as a director and while directing her life. According to Caitríona N. Dhúill, the 'Dionysian' "represents a provocative departure from conventional sexual morality" (57). Sex then detaches from conventions such as "love, romance, exclusiveness, propriety or family" and is instead viewed as "indiscriminate and anonymous" (57). Based on Dhúill's argument, the sex in the Dionysian setting can be seen as transcending the private sphere and moving to the public. This latter statement links up directly with the 'collective body', 'New (Wo-)Man' and even Marxist themes explored in the previous chapter. It also explains why Lacis flirted with every male she met (DM 27, 138). She never wanted a private life or commitment but rather enjoyed the "theatre for herself" and the awe of the audience (both in theatre and beyond). The 'Dionysian' of Asja Lacis' nature even explains the lack of domesticity in her home, as her daughter, Daga's reminiscences suggest (20-23).

Love, as an erotic and emotional constituent of sexuality, brings with it the right to marry for love. These are the rights 'New Women' advocated and fought for. As was discussed above, Lacis presents the decision to marry her first husband as her mother's. She never mentions she loved Julis in the pages of her autobiographies, which implies that she was deprived of a right to marry for love. Nor does she mention love toward Linard Laicen, a Latvian poet, who dedicated one of his most famous poems to Lacis. "During these years the most significant other became for me Linard Laicen. A close spiritual relationship grew into close friendship. . . . We swore each other to fight for a restoration of the Soviet regime in Latvia" (RC 62-63). Lacis shifts the focus to her political activity and describes the relationship with Laicen as "friendship". She mentions nothing about love to Benjamin, either. Only once, towards the end of the Soviet autobiography, does she use the word "love" speaking of Bernhard Reich. This occurrence happens when Lacis' is portraying her later life and is therefore outside the scope of my study. It was evidently a calculated move on Lacis' side, for

she only wanted to stay in history as a decent lady of high reputation, who was also Reich's legitimate widow at the time the Soviet book was being written. Since the theme of sexuality in late Soviet (auto-)biographies was non-existent, Lacis simply eliminates it from her writings.

The right to your own body is closely linked with the theme of sexuality. As it is understood under the topic of the 'New Woman', this theme was not particularly discussed by the Soviet authors at the time when Lacis was compiling her writings. Therefore, even outlining the relationship with Laicen, she has to hide it under layers of such allowed terms as "friendship", "close spirit", and obviously "common political fight" (RC 63). However, Lacis could not omit Laicen from her autobiography, and the fact that she included him – considering the reader is familiar with other sources describing their passionate relationship – in a way proves that Lacis used her right to her own body just like a 'New Woman' would. The term used by Heldt when analysing the way the female author's 'self' is designed in her autobiographies, is yet applicable to Lacis here. The "repossession of her own body, the opposite of male voyeurism" is how Lacis can be characterised in her decision to use her femininity with men to achieve her goals (Heldt 95).

When in the 1960-70s there emerged an interest in studying proletarian women's life writing in Western Europe, including Germany, researchers began connecting women's sexuality to class. The discourse in which the concepts of sexuality and femininity were constructed fused them with the notion of class, maintains Katharina Gerstenberger, who in her book *Truth to Tell: German Women's Autobiographies and Turn-of-the-Century Culture* examines Germany's working-class female autobiographies of the early twentieth century (63). The resultant categories of women were subsequently differentiated and easily subjugated, while female sexuality was dichotomised into "good" and "bad" (63). Gerstenberger argues that respectable femininity, hence, pertaining to the middle-class, was associated with "a lack of sexual enjoyment as well as sexual subordination within a contractual relationship-marriage" (63). "Sexual responsiveness" in the early twentieth century was ascribed to working-class women and equated with behaviour of "fallen" women (63). When Lacis' mother forced her daughter to marry Julis, she was allegedly trying to save Asja's compromised reputation and can be said, using Gerstenberger's terms, to "equate her moving body with the sexualised object of random male attentions" (63). However, later in her life, encouraged by the changes in gender roles brought about by the Revolution, Asja Lacis demonstrated she outgrew the corporeal subjugation and the expected mode of social performance. She herself "equates her moving body with a sexualised object of random male attentions" for she either enjoys being what would traditionally be referred to as a 'fallen' woman or considers it the only way to advance in a career. Presumably, "female sexual responsiveness" ascribed to working class women, played to Lacis' advantage. Attaining prowess in using her 'powerful'

hands, she pleasantly surprised Benjamin and Reich – who supposedly knew either ‘responseless’ women of their circle, or ‘fallen’ women – and gave them what they lacked. In *official* autobiographies, however, female writers, unlike their male counterparts, do not feel compelled to write about men as “sexual beings and never write about men as Man” (Heldt 68). While Liubov' Mendeleeva, – the wife of the Russian Symbolist poet, Alexander Blok, involved in one of the most remarkable love triangles of the Symbolist period, – whose autobiography Heldt refers to, describes her own sexuality, most women writers scarcely focus on this theme at all. There is not much on the topic of sexuality in Lacis' autobiographies *per se*, so some assumptions can only be made from the way she pictures relationships with men throughout her narrative.

Fashion as a means of creating one's sexuality is essential in uncovering the ‘self’ of a ‘New Woman’. Heldt discusses the memoirs of Liubov' Mendeleeva/Blok and states that “armed with her own developing sense of self, . . . ready to confront life [she wished for] the continuation of her own outwardly aestheticised inner sensuality” in her courtship with Blok (95). Speaking of Lacis, she can be said to possess that “outwardly aestheticised inner sensuality” to no lesser degree. However, based on her life writings and the memoirs of the people she knew, she did not seem to feel the need to hide her sensuality or sexuality under the layers of ‘outward aestheticisation’. In Lacis' case, the paramount aestheticisation of her manner and looks, on the contrary, served the purpose of accentuating her female sensuality and sexuality.

The motif of fashion as a key part in a person's aestheticisation can further be illustrated with the following episode. Once in a restaurant in Germany, Brecht told Lacis she looked nice in her new Parisian toilette and that his own coarse suit was out of place there (RB 49; [1971]). It is significant how Lacis in her German book ‘forgets’ she has to portray herself as a ‘New Woman’ of the USSR – considering her current status and repeated insertions of references to Marxism – which excludes “Parisian toilettes”. Instead, a good old ‘traditional’ woman can be witnessed in this passage, who enjoys a compliment from a man while obviously flirting with him. There is a deeper meaning to Brecht's comment. He, unlike Lacis, held fast to his belief of how a proletarian artist should look, regardless of how fancy the restaurant they were in was. Lacis, on the contrary, masqueraded as a proletarian artist only while in Russia and wore chic clothes when abroad. Many researchers of Brecht's private and creative lives note that his image and the image of his actors/actresses were very calculated to present them as proletarian (Martin Puchner 150-158; Erdmut Wizisla 105 -131; Laura Bradley 66-69, 138). Asja Lacis, who was an actress and theatre director and wanted to be conspicuous, never intended to wear a leather jacket and a red head-kerchief. She learnt from Brecht the power of costumes in self-styling and image-creation which helped her to achieve the class-conscious performance.

All the elements of sexuality discussed above contribute to the notion of gendered performance. With regard to Lacis, the performance she engages in represents an intersection between gender and class, which is most noticeable in her choice of costume. Thus, had Lacis decided to proceed with the development of purely gendered characteristics of her image, she would have worn more conventional 'feminine' garments (e.g., silk or lace) and behaved either more 'traditionally' or, *vice versa*, in a more 'hyper-feminine' way. On the other hand, if she had preferred to construct and exhibit her social mask alone, she would have no other choice than to put on the jacket and the head-kerchief mentioned above. Lacis would have disappeared among thousands and millions of similar Bolshevik 'New Women'. However, unlike Brecht, who, as a representative of the male gender, could solely afford the class-conscious image-construction, Lacis also engaged in gendered behaviour. As is illustrated by Lacis' performance, it consists of a series of postures and masks. Thus, masquerade, as a key part of any female performance (Butler 62), effectively foregrounds the constructedness of Lacis' image as that of a 'New Woman'. It is worth repeating that such performativity characterised not only Lacis' private life, but also her carefully constructed public persona. Below I will be considering the various ways of how Lacis presents and represents herself as the 'New Woman' in her professional life with regard to the gendered performance.

EDUCATION; FORMATION OF ATTITUDE TO ART

Portraying pride in achieving something faster or better than peers is characteristic of women's writing, especially of official autobiographies by distinguished women. In this fashion, Lacis stresses in her works that her father wanted her to get education, so it was decided that she would be sent to a private school. Lacis was tutored by a private teacher and eventually could enter the second grade. She proudly informs the reader that she covered the three-year program in just one year with a tutor (RC 17). In the German autobiography, she states that by the time she entered the Bestuzhev Courses, she had read Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* and come to the conclusion that "we should all fight for our goals without a Christian pseudo-compassion" (RB 11; [1971]). Apart from hinting at her superiority to other 'ordinary' classmates, Lacis demonstrates how atheism became one of her foremost tenets in work.

It is typical of women's writing to contain the description of demanding studies when nothing is ever easy (Heldt 72-74). "When I was taking my last exam, the Winter Palace was stormed," writes Lacis before she proceeds to list her jobs in Orel, Riga, Moscow and Kazakhstan (RB 20; [1971]). This phrase not only puts an emphasis on the dramatic background of Lacis' studies, it proves Anna Al'chuk right when she quotes Valentina Freimane, Doctor of Arts who personally knew Lacis: "Lacis liked the Revolution because she liked herself in the context of the Revolution" (174). Lacis was not a revolutionary *per se*, in spite of what she tries to impose upon the reader, but she was quick to recognise the changing circumstances and use them to her advantage.

There are many factors which had an impact on Lacis' views on art further in her theatrical career. First of all, she absorbed ideas from literature. Taking to reading while at school, Lacis read everything with abandon (RC 19). She names Ibsen and Dostoevsky among others, adding that she still considers Dostoevsky an unsurpassed master (19). The themes and motifs of their writing – those of women and femininity, marriage, respect and reputation (for Ibsen), and poverty, morality, the street scenes together with the atmosphere of tension, investigation into the human nature and profound philosophical and social problems (for Dostoevsky) – were later covered in her work.

At the turn of the century Nietzsche's famous critique of history as dead, or worse, deadening, knowledge, was gaining popularity again. So, the leading position of history among the humanities, which it had held for centuries, was challenged by newly emerging disciplines, such as sociology and psychology. Asja Lacis' first decision was to study psychology, which

brought her to the Bekhterev Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg. Only after she studied there a few semesters did she go to Moscow to enter Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's studio-theatre. Both disciplines, psychology and theatre, were popular in the early twentieth century, which highlights Lacis' ability to always be on the cutting edge of the progress, grasping the trends in society and filling a new, unoccupied niche. The fact that she read Nietzsche and, hence, could have absorbed his idea of "dead knowledge" was reflected in her primary focus on the new, modern and unexplored movements later in her theatrical career.

Another influence on Lacis' judgement of art was, in her own words, from the Symbolists. The private school teachers taught the pupils about the Symbolists poets, which influenced her deeply (RB 11; [1971]). Further, in *The Red Carnation*, Lacis states that, during her studies at Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's studio, every stage play prepared by the students was regularly seen and assessed by a committee. However, the run-throughs were often attended by Valery Bryusov, Konstantin Balmont, Fyodor Sologub, and Nikolai Evreinov, all of whom were associated with the Russian Symbolist movement (38). The Symbolists developed a program for a "theatre of the future" whose purpose was to make the viewer and the performer "active partakers in the mystical act," which would help to create new myth, a new consciousness, and eventually – a 'New Man' (Irina Gutkin 183). The "theatre of the future" was part of the Symbolist model of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) which had as its goal the fusion of life and art. The poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, for example, saw in theatre the potential for synthesis and renewal of art. His ideology of life-creation included a cult of art, combined with more active involvement of the audience in a performance (Michael Wachtel 174-182). Also pertaining to this goal is Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's vision on theatre directing. Lacis describes how Komissarzhevsky taught his students that a theatre director was not a "dictator with a whip", and the whole process of directing was a fascinating game (RB 16; [1971]). In this fashion, Lacis admits her own passion for directing "fascinating games" in her plays and consequently in her life. Bringing these ideas together and strongly believing that art must go beyond the traditional task of representation, rather than discovering new lives and realities, Lacis never became a supporter of the concept of art for art's sake. Instead, she applied the model of *zhiznetvorchestvo* to her own work and, presumably, life. Erasing barriers between the audience and the actor to achieve the so-called "collective creativity" (Gutkin 183) also became one of Asja Lacis' primary goals in her work. This aspect of collectivity in the creation of 'New Life' fully corresponded to the time she lived and worked in and was fully reflected in the agitprop theatre she managed to take to the streets after the Revolution.

Another important aspect of Lacis' creative endeavours was her acquaintance with Constructivism. The quotation below highlights this art school found its implementation in art by Vsevolod Meyerhold:

The experimental theatre of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) of the 1920s, especially his method of stage biomechanics (*teatral'naia bio-mehkanika*), was interpreted by its contemporary critics as a part of the Constructivist . . . movement. They also underscored the practical side of Meyerhold's method vis-à-vis the task of creating the new life. . . . Likewise, Sergei Tret[y]akov, reporting in the magazine *Lef* on the twentieth anniversary of Meyerhold's work in theatre, praised the director's achievements as extending "beyond the limits of the theatre stage into those of an organiser of the expressive movements of the masses" and therefore as an agent in the construction of the new reality. (Gutkin 183)

There is no doubt that Vsevolod Meyerhold became one of Lacis' role models in terms of his brave experimenting with directing style. Lacis in *The Red Carnation* proves this assumption by making a claim that she "was captivated by Meyerhold's tireless searchings, [especially] the richest expressive means of artistic personification" (38-39). It is also known that Lacis worked together with Sergei Tretyakov on multiple occasions. The two circumstances could have made her drawn towards Constructivism in art, which would explain why Karin Burk firmly considers Lacis to belong to it (80-103). Constructivism, according to Irina Gutkin, was well rooted in Marxist theory as many art schools of the time (179). One of the goals of this movement was to combine avant-garde aesthetics "with certain strands of Marxist thought" (179), which also relates to the vision of Alexander Bogdanov, discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. Gutkin quotes from the memoirs *Two Years with the Symbolists* (1969) by Nikolai Valentinov, journalist, philosopher and an active Marxist at the time of the Revolution:

[T]here is a great deal of similarity between [the Symbolists'] view on art . . . and . . . views of the people in the Kremlin. Like [the Symbolists], they reject art for art's sake. For them art is only a means of "transformation of life" in accordance with that absolutely true philosophy – or, if you will, materialistic religion – which they, the Kremlin theurgists, claim to possess. Artists are "engineers of souls". (196)

Most modernists of whatever persuasion actively tried to find affinity with Marxism after the Bolshevik Revolution, which was largely done out of pragmatic necessity. However, the quotation above demonstrates there is a clearly perceived parallel between the tenets of the

Symbolists – as preceding and underlying the Russian avant-garde (Denis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White 10-18) – and the views of Marxism in its Bolshevik reading and interpretation. It is the drive to construct a ‘New Life’ – albeit with different means – hence ‘New (Wo-)Men’. Asja Lacis, even though she might not fully belong to the Constructivist school of art, considered herself an avant-gardist. She could have absorbed the ‘Theurgist’ mission of a director on stage and in life from both Symbolism and later avant-garde, while there is much in common between the life-creation of the Symbolists and the ‘life-building’ of the Constructivists. Their philosophy of “rejecting art for art’s sake” intensified Lacis’ own artistic views. Inspired with the idea of creating new art, Lacis could later reinforce her ambitions by her reading of Marx.

WORK: VIEWS ON ART

Ever since women’s autobiographies experienced a boom during the first decade of the twentieth century, publishers never failed to mention the gender of the author when advertising a book (Georg Simmel and Guy Oakes 102-10). Thus, women were forced to always identify with their gender, while men could simply be individuals (103-4). In German autobiography, for instance, the man writer will always put foremost emphasis on his professional life and how he was able to shape his environment, whereas the woman will relate how her environment shaped her (Gerstenberger 22). It led many critics to review women’s life-writing in terms of how the author presented herself as a woman and consistently downplay the authors’ career or professional life. Women’s writing has long been analysed in terms of what model it could provide for women in their becoming “ideal” (22). In this chapter I will be examining Asja Lacis’ life writing in relation not only to her encompassing Woman but more so to her life in her profession. To begin with, why did Lacis choose her vocation?

According to Ekonen, modernism in Russia with symbolism at the forefront, was immensely interested in making the woman part of their art (146-47). The only thing is the woman was meant to play either of the two roles: that of an object or that of a victim (146). The participation of a woman in the realm of art was most often limited to being an actress. This occupation in theatre and the emerging medium of cinema was similar to being a ‘poetess’ in literary circles. According to Svetlana Boym in *Sexuality and the Body*, the word “poet” signifies masculinity, hence, normality, while the suffix “-ess” with its slightly pejorative meaning serves as “mark of cultural inferiority” (160). ‘Poetess’ is a commonly shared European and Russian phenomenon, meaning the representative of such a profession cannot be a genius by definition. A ‘poetess’ is rather a sort of a literary *nouveau riche*, characterised by a “lack of taste” and inevitably presenting itself as an “object for sight”, not a subject (160-

65). Both an actress and a poetess imply submissiveness and lack of creative initiative. Thus, the ideology of life-creation of Vyacheslav Ivanov, according to Anna Vislova, reflects the views of most other modernists and stresses that the woman of the world of theatre can hardly become carrier of high ideals and, overall, awakens a negative attitude (162-67).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, many professional women in the sphere of arts chose to fight the stigma of someone playing second fiddle. Ekonen substantively discusses the life-creation of the poet Zinaida Gippius, uncovering her true self and explicating her behaviour as a subtle game of a talented conductor (149-71). It is regrettable that Gippius was misunderstood by most contemporaries and seen as a ‘freak’ or even hermaphrodite instead of director of her own life (Ekonen 169-70). Asja Lacis also preferred to be referred as a creator, not just a performer. Given that ambition of hers, she decided to study acting first, which allowed her access to the realm of theatre. Either due to insufficient acting skill (which will be discussed later in the chapter) or because of her want of fame, Lacis exploited her ambition to be a creator and – though much later in her career – got a degree as a theatre director.

Responsibility to the next generation and a long-term impact on it is an essential element in life-writing both by male and female authors. Thus, Lacis describes an occasion when she had to teach Bible History at a school (in Orel) to Latvian refugees escaping the German troops during World War I (RB 17; [1971]). She was having a conflict of conscience, as she clearly showed in her autobiography she did not believe in God (and presumably considered it right to save the next generation the labour of learning what she thought was prejudiced). So, Lacis gave the pupils plasticine instead and asked them to make the figurines of Jesus and Judas (17). When the inspector came in the classroom all of a sudden, Lacis was frightened, but he really appreciated the activity (17). This memory demonstrates how throughout her career Lacis would often break the rules and yet be in the right. It may also be considered as one of the constituent elements of both being a revolutionary – which Lacis always wanted – and a ‘Theurgist’. The second implies possessing the superpowers of a Superman and the vision of a Zarathustra – the inseparable parts of the New (Wo-)Man’s mission; that of creating a ‘New Life’.

In *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis writes that when she came to Orel in 1918 to work as a theatre director, she saw *besprizorniki* (orphaned and abandoned children) in the streets, which caused a turn in her career (RB 21; [1971]). The way Lacis constructs the description of the occurrence – assuming this is really the way things happened, i.e., the *truth* – can add to her ‘Dionysian’ side. The planned and pre-established events may change in a blink of an eye is the message Lacis is conveying here. Following a preordained path is boring. It is also irresponsible when there are orphaned children around, implies Lacis’ manner of writing,

successfully transforming her into a revolutionary and Marxist, sympathetic to poor people's rights.

Straight away, when Lacis began with her Children's Theatre in Orel, she utilised the methods of improvisation, phantasy and body movements (RB 27; [1971]). In her memoirs, Lacis states that early in her career she applied Meyerhold's Theory of Biomechanics, the marionette movement theory, the freezing of gestures into emblematic positions, the technique of slow motion, spontaneity and improvisation, the method of 'sequence of episodes,' such as montage (24-27). The principle of montage, which could be applied as a transforming idea in many spheres of art, was again proposed by the Constructivists (Burk 83-84). Using that principle alongside the principle of observation, Lacis managed to unveil the limitless imagination of her *besprizorniki* actors and evoke a response from those children (Burk 111). Burk argues that Asja Lacis actively established contacts with spectators and took the theatre to the street. The whole idea of mass street spectacles and festivals of the early Soviet time goes back to Evreinov's concept of the "theatralisation (dramatisation) of society" (Walter R. Fuerst and Samuel J. Hume 99). Many modernist artists, just like Lacis herself, were inspired by this concept. Her plays enabled her actors to engage in the "*Normalität*" and "*Stabilität*" of their own society, independently of differences or passivity of its individual members (Burk 118). Thus, the constructivist elements of Lacis' avant-garde practice exemplify one of the primary principles of being the 'New Woman'. This is the creation of a 'New Life' as a true 'Theurgist', an exemplary 'New Woman', and, finally, a true *subject* of her (professional) life.

Heldt believes that autobiography in Russia is typical of presenting an overwhelming sense of duty. It can be duty as civic obligation – which is considered a male ethos and is almost always complemented by duty as motherhood – an eternal female ethos (71). Lacis' case, though, is demonstrative of how the protagonist manages to combine her civic obligation, allowing her to transcend the female ethos, with her motherhood duty – however imperfect – which will be examined later in the chapter.

Another feature of an autobiography by a woman is self-criticism. Anna Al'chuk in her article about Asja Lacis interviews Valentina Freimane, the Doctor of Arts acquainted with Lacis. In Freimane's opinion, outstanding women like Lacis never possess any self-criticism and see the world as revolving around their sole person (Al'chuk 172-174). Nonetheless, sometimes Lacis does admit her failures in the autobiography. It undoubtedly takes a lot of courage for her not only to do so when she describes her failure as an actress during the opening night of Brecht's play, but to share it with the reader (RB 39; [1971]; RC 77). Notably, the two versions of this event are almost identical in both her German and Russian books. This underscores that Lacis decides to be frank because she considers the episode important for the recipient to know. It also shows that she decides to be self-critical in order to look honest to

her reader. It allows her protagonist – i.e., her created ‘self’ – to get a more human face. Lacis, nevertheless, always compensates for her failures, which she occasionally inserts into the biographies, with the description of her overwhelming success, which normally follows right after. Thus, she immediately writes about her relative success in a tiny part in *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848) offered to her by Brecht (RB 39; [1971]; RC 77-78). The manner in which the writing is produced indicates that the author has no shame in revealing some facts, for she is certain she has achieved much and has many things to be proud of. This adds to the theme of pride in women’s autobiography.

Another thought-provoking perspective on the development of Lacis’ career is presented by her in the following scene. The author mentions in passing that Reich did not allow her to take part in Fritz Lang’s film about the Nibelungen, so the role was played by Elizabeth Bergner. It is not possible to say whether she is telling the truth. One may suspect that Lacis’ own acting talent was not quite of the same magnitude as Bergner’s. If this was the case, the occurrence with Reich’s forbiddance would showcase Lacis’ masquerade at this point. But the question remains: why did Reich suddenly forbid the young woman he just met to take such a huge step in her career? Why did Asja Lacis, who was always so independent and proud of it, all of a sudden obey the unjustified prohibition? It is certainly hard to imagine the mild-tempered Reich forbidding his over-emancipated girlfriend to do anything hindering her career. Yet, it seems to be a strategic move here, for Lacis portrays herself as a ‘traditional’ woman, a wife who would “fear her husband”. Thus, Lacis in her narrative embodies a ‘New Woman’ when it is to her advantage, and a ‘traditional’ one when she does not intend to go into detail for fear of accepting either flaws in professionalism or the insufficiency thereof – particularly when other women are concerned.

The failure at Brecht’s opening night examined above does not fail to add another facet to the multifaceted figure of Asja Lacis. According to Pasčevica, Lacis belonged to a time of radical fighters against bourgeois influence on the ‘workers’ theatre’ and expressed her objection to the involvement of professionally trained actors and elements of bourgeois theatre in the newly emerged theatre (115). In her contribution to the discussion on the workers’ theatre in a Latvian paper in 1925 Lacis states categorically that the workers’ theatre should be politically agitating. She argues that it should use a well-formulated plan and refuse to use any of the bourgeois means, “Every workers’ theatre which operates with the resources of bourgeois theatre is a traitor” (quoted in Pasčevica 115). Lacis’ vision on the exclusion of professionally trained actors can be attributed to her revolutionary style of directing. It can, however, add to her countervailing perspective. Professionally trained actors could presumably discredit Lacis’ competence, whereas amateur workers-actors would idolise her while reinventing the wheel.

Lacis' professional views were formed and changed under the influence of the significant people she met throughout her life and career. It is valuable to trace that influence. Thus, in *The Red Carnation*, Lacis writes how much she liked the play *Der singende Fisch* (*The Singing Fish*, 1921) by Alfred Brust that she saw in Berlin in 1922, which turned out to be directed by Reich (66). She admired the stage setting, sensitivity in the expression of intricacy of relationship, and consistent, strict style in music (66-67). At the time Benjamin visited Lacis and Reich in Moscow in the winter of 1926-27, Reich was writing for the Big Soviet Encyclopaedia. He organised meetings with some leading figures of the literary world for Benjamin (RB 55; [1971]). Lacis stresses that Reich was valued in Soviet Russia. Later in her German book, she describes how she asked Reich why Benjamin's ideas, once so unpopular, suddenly became of interest to many people in Germany and other countries. She even provides Reich's explanation in her own words, which is substantially based on Marxism (61). This can be viewed as a demonstration of Lacis' borrowing of Reich's point of view whenever she feels he exceeds her in intelligence and education. It also correlates with Lacis' daughter, Daga's conviction that Lacis would often have Reich write articles or books for her (DM 136-37). Lacis also mentions Brecht and the impact he had on her. According to Lacis, Reich said about Brecht: "you know Asja, this boy is a big talent" (RC 72). Right after that she states that the company of Brecht made one lose his illusions about the creative process, and that "[she] learnt that the creative process is systematic, and requires knowledge, analysis, diligence and perseverance" (73). This showcases how Lacis realised that even the most talented specialists must be knowledgeable and diligent in order to achieve something, which presumably was a revelation for her. This illustration can be said to add to her previously discussed ardent objection to the involvement of professionally trained actors on stage.

Lacis was pragmatic in her choice of acquaintances. She always felt what ideas she could borrow from each of them for her own creative work. When she met Benjamin in Capri, it must have been another flirtation for her initially. Yet, she gradually realised how his knowledge could be of use to her. In *The Red Carnation*, Lacis pictures the scene of a conversation with Benjamin, when she "made a face" (RB 44; [1971]) and asked him why he was studying 'dead' Baroque? She writes that his opinion was that allegory and symbolism of Baroque were reflected in expressionism (86). The fact can be explained by Lacis grounding her opinion on Nietzsche's concept of "dead knowledge", and not what some of Benjamin's biographers argue – namely, that the Communist was unable to understand there was no 'dead' literature or that she was just silly (Hoenle 38-39). In *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis writes that Benjamin was excited about seeing Moscow with his own eyes (42). He asked her for every detail about Moscow theatres and modern Socialist writers and poets, and she told him about Mayakovsky, Babel, Kataev and Kollontai (Lacis even writes "the Kollontai") (42). In turn,

Benjamin told her about Gide, Proust and Kafka, which later made Lacis read *The Castle* (1926) and *The Trial* (1925) (43). Lacis also asked Benjamin to read her his translations of Charles Baudelaire. She then states she had liked Baudelaire before (43). Considering Baudelaire's major themes in writing were sex (Camille Paglia 190, 290-296, Elisabeth Ladenson 47-78), dandies, *flâneurs* and prostitutes, Asja Lacis can be assumed to have formed some of her views before she met Benjamin. Yet, she listened to his translations, so she could find out some other facts. "In the retrospect, I can see how acutely Benjamin managed to seize the modern problems of form" – claims Lacis (RB 44; [1971]) but does not develop her thought. Lacis writes she now understands Benjamin's interest for dreams, for a dream often comes as a realisation of a totally different, yet magnificent existence, which a person lacks when he is awake (RB 50; [1971]). While Lacis claims earlier she could not grasp how such a learned man could be so superstitious as to concern himself with dreams, it is unlikely this interest of Benjamin's was of use to her during her 1920s career. This passage demonstrates that Lacis first mostly exploited gendered performance with Benjamin (as opposed to class-conscious performance discussed above), which is evident from her light-hearted comments about Benjamin's convictions. However, something about him struck Lacis and made her, as usual, think of the practical application of his knowledge and theories. It lays bare a major trait of Asja Lacis – her "greedy drinking in knowledge" (Clements 487) – the key characteristic of the 'New Woman', discussed in the previous chapter, as was understood by Kollontai. Overall, a two-way traffic of cultural exchange between Lacis and her acquaintances can be seen.

Portrayal of other women in an autobiography is what further shapes the 'self' of the female author (Heldt 69-76; Gerstenberger 116-136). Apart from Larisa Reissner, who most certainly became Lacis' role model, Lacis speaks of Vera Figner, whom she "met later in Moscow" (in the late 1920s) (RB 14; [1971]). Lacis speaks highly of her political activities, for she could not omit her from her autobiography, given the revolutionary spirit Figner added to Lacis' own image. Lacis says nothing new, but pays the tribute to the first woman in Russia to be executed for a political crime, who later became a heroic icon of the Russian Revolution. It is worth examining how Lacis portrays the first wife of Brecht. Pride is what often shows between the lines of women autobiographers when they speak of their achievements and of being different to other girls or women (Heldt 71). In *The Red Carnation*, Lacis writes slightly more about her than in *Revolutionär im Beruf* (where she simply mentions her name). "[Brecht's] first wife was a pretty young starlet . . . [W]hile she was out doing some shopping I was babysitting Hanne" (72). Even portraying Brecht's wife, Lacis manages to write about herself. The fact she was babysitting Brecht's little daughter is intended to add some intimacy in the portrayal of their relationship. Besides, it is a wonderful juxtaposition between the "pretty young starlet" – the words which can barely hide the condescending undertone in them – and

the renowned theatre director who was simultaneously a great housewife. It was in fact how Asja Lacis envisioned herself, yet she found it crucial to write so in her Soviet autobiography. The fact, though, remains: Lacis grew out of being a “young starlet”, for she either realised she was short of talent or she was more ambitious and wanted fame, or both. Those who did not, were of no interest to her and she did not think it necessary to hide her despise. Such disdain for ‘traditional’ interests of her sex, along with the awe with which Lacis mentions ‘other’ women, who managed to make a name for themselves, makes it plain that Lacis was herself the ‘other’, i.e. ‘new’ woman. Referring to the previous chapter, it can be seen that Lacis was trying to achieve recognition, just like the ‘New Woman’ constructed in the Weimar Republic would (Hermann 61 -70).

Role models are important for the protagonist of women’s life writing to follow (Gerstenberger 120-137). Lacis mentions Lenin’s widow Krupskaya casually for the first time, when she talks about Bestuzhev Courses that “Krupskaya also studied there” (RB 11; [1971]). So, Lacis wants to show she was no less remarkable a person than Krupskaya herself. “At the time [the late 1920s] I often met with Krupskaya who worked at the *Narkompros* (The People’s Commissariat for Education). She categorically rejected a special cinema for children but found it a good idea to adapt adult films to children’s needs” (RB 56; [1971]). According to Lacis, Krupskaya was strongly against the theatre where adults would be condescending towards children, instead considering them silly. This view was shared by Lacis herself and is therefore presented in her book on purpose. Asja Lacis had no choice or intention to portray Krupskaya other than as a very positive role model.

According to Lacis, Krupskaya was disappointed that Eisenstein, despite being “a great director”, chose an actor to play young Lenin in *October* (1928) according to their similar appearance. In her opinion, the actor never portrayed how Lenin behaved or spoke, while a director’s task should be precisely that: to convey the personality and not the looks (56). In this passage by Lacis, Krupskaya is presented as a no stranger to art, who, nonetheless, did not use her name and reputation to argue her point, but preferred to stay reticent. It can be assumed that in this respect, Krupskaya did not represent a ‘New Woman’, which was contrary to Lacis’ ‘self’ and not entirely appreciated by her. Such depiction of the scene with Krupskaya can also be viewed as reassuring for Lacis as a theatre director, for it must have reflected her own ideas on art.

Heldt in *Terrible Perfection* argues that in so-called ‘official’ autobiographies by women the public ‘self’ eclipses the private (68). There is a clear sense of mission in such writings, in which they resemble most male autobiographies. The female author feels no need to disguise her professional achievements, for she has always “felt certain of being on the side of progress and history” (68). Politics is often a leitmotif in women’s autobiographies, due to their need to position themselves as worthy citizens and to feel on equal footing with men, thus allowing complete expression of their ‘self’. In such autobiographies, women never describe themselves as “slaves of love” at either stage of their lives (68).

It should be understood that political activity portrayed in a woman’s autobiography has a strong gender relatedness. According to Judith Butler, while gender “intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities,” it is impossible to segregate gender from the “political and cultural intersections in which it is . . . produced and maintained” (3). Politics is concerned with having power and efforts to increase it and is by definition a male-dominated system of activities. Butler argues that women, as the *subject*, are usually comprised by the law as the “fictive foundation” and allegedly freely consent to be governed by men, establishing the “legitimacy of the social contract” (3). This is why gender relations, where women enjoy greater economic or political rights, thereby different from those in Western cultures, have long been simply labelled as “non-Western barbarism” (3). Butler argues that there is no and there cannot be any universal “hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination” (3). She is confident that “it is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in . . . politics,” for feminist critique must understand how the category of “women” as the subject of feminism is “produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (2).

Lacis’ political activity is likely to be engaging in itself for it indicates her love of power and control, which has long been viewed as incompatible with the “ontological integrity of the subject” of the woman (Butler 3). It is of more interest to be considered in light of her life-creation and performance which she used depending on her geolocations. Thus, there was no need for Lacis to dress plainly while she was living in Germany, for nobody would scorn her for that. She did not have to brag about reading and learning Marx by heart, for there was no such expectation. In the late 1920s, when the rise of female sexuality was facing its inevitable end in both countries, but more so in Russia, no one still expected a woman to pretend to be asexual or the faceless ‘shadow’ of a man. When Lacis was living and working in Soviet Russia, she had no choice but to wear her plainest dresses, for she clearly did not intend on putting on a leather jacket. Marx’s tenets were expected from everybody who wanted to

advance in their career and being a ‘comrade’ instead of a woman (especially after the War Communism) was the common aspiration. This implicated being genderless – something which was much more important for the Russian reality, than for the German at the same period of late 1920s. Overall, though Lacis’ political activity looks like the utmost challenge to society, she mostly did what others were doing. In the period of huge changes *not* becoming a revolutionary would be considered different, not *vice versa*.

Discussing Asja Lacis’ relationship with Marxism, it is not possible to omit her description of the childhood. “I had no toys, not even a rag-doll” – claims Lacis in the very first page of her German autobiography (RB 9; [1971]). Gerstenberger in *Truth to Tell* discusses the features of a working-class woman’s autobiography in Germany. She asserts that “the autobiographer’s abnormal childhood presents an effective narrative foil for the development of a ‘correct’ class consciousness” (120). This echoes with Mary J. Maynes’ view of German working-class autobiographies, which mostly begin with reports of poverty and depict domestic violence as a common thing (78). In the Russian autobiography, Lacis underscores how she had to make her own toys (RC 15). The main idea is not to prove these words are far from the *truth* – for her family was nowhere near poor (DM 10), – the goal is to understand how the author decides to picture herself as a true proletarian and sticks to it throughout her writing. Lacis claims many a time that she “hated petty bourgeoisie, rules and conventions” (RB 11; [1971]). She makes a claim that she “went to St. Petersburg with three rubles” not only to highlight the poverty of her family – which was exaggerated by her (DM 10-14) – but to demonstrate how close to ‘the people’ she was (RC 28). She portrays a true proletarian, who, nonetheless, became a high flyer. A perfect example to fit into the Marxist model.

Professor Bekhterev “gathered learned people around him, especially Marxists, expelled from other universities”, declares Lacis in *Revolutionär im Beruf* (11; [1971]). So, she parades the fact that she was always inclined to mingle with the intelligentsia, the dissidents, who fell out of favour with the system. In the same book, Lacis provides an abstract from her speech published in *Die Szene* in 1929. In it she criticises the ‘low’ culture of the NEP era, claiming that it even became possible due to “corruption of many communists” (69). Lacis calls to further develop and improve “the quality of the art” so that it could help develop the psychology of a man under socialism (69).

Depicting society’s impact on upbringing is inherent of both women’s life-writing and the emergence of a ‘New Woman’. It is therefore beneficial to discuss the earliest instance of Lacis’ performance in a role of a politically active ‘New Woman’. During Lacis’ school-years, she became aware of her social class and status. At private school, the atmosphere was free and differed from that of an academic institution. Lacis calls it a sanctuary of sciences (RC 18).

Lacis describes how children in this “sanctuary” would, however, bully her for her apron, made of cheap fabric, while they “all” were from families of “rich industrialists” (20). Lacis then mentions a friend she had there and finds it necessary to let the reader know that her father was “a simple lamplighter” (18). Lacis is very proud that the ‘outsider’ she is creating made friends with ‘a girl of the people’, which, in her opinion, should elevate the moral perspective and political consciousness of the ‘self’.

Portrayal of herself as both an outsider and revolutionary is characteristic of Lacis’ persona. From the very beginning of *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis positions herself as a rebel to the system and to common prejudices. In page 9 she states that her children’s game mates were Jewish children. Considering she wrote her German book at the time the USSR was blamed for not allowing the Jewish population to emigrate (Zaslavsky, and Brym 45-47), by saying she had Jewish friends, Lacis shouts right from the start how much of a non-conformist she is. Lacis provides an extract from Benjamin’s *Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters* (1929), where at the very end he states that a “true revolutionary sees what is to come from a child’s secret gesture” (RB 31; [1971]). When Benjamin speaks of a revolutionary in theatre, it is clear he picked this idea up from Lacis, for she saw herself as a genuine revolutionary in the field of children’s aesthetic education and play directing. Burk argues that Benjamin was also inspired by the theatrical aesthetics of Lacis’ children’s theatre, referring again to her familiarity with the Constructivist ideas of the Russian avant-garde (101-103).

Pride in being an agitator is what defines Lacis and adds to her being a ‘New Woman’. Thus, she told Benjamin she could have earned much money in Riga, had she not fought against the bourgeois state there (RB 50; [1971]). Apart from highlighting another time she was an agitator, Lacis makes a slip in her narrative this time. It becomes too evident for the reader how much Asja Lacis always longed for money and thought of it. It was a rather unusual trait for a true revolutionary and Marxist. Lacis argues that she decided to stay for work in Latvia when the Communist Party was illegal there (in approximately 1922) (RB 32; [1971]). Accordingly, she highlights she never chose an easy path and always stood on guard of people’s liberties and rights. In *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis mentions a literary discussion between Brecht and Johannes Becher, a German politician and writer affiliated with the Communist Party of Germany. Becher asked Lacis afterwards: “How dare you? You come from Moscow but support a petty bourgeois writer! You’re mingling with the wrong people” (58-59). Lacis’ view is that Becher meant Brecht and Benjamin, which, however, did not stop her from “the wrong mingling”. This occurrence highlights Lacis’ rebellion and her desire to have the right to express an independent vision on art.

What ‘made’ a woman slightly differed depending on a culture and society, but, in light of the universal subjugated position of a woman until close to my research period, there were common concepts. Progressing into the twentieth century, the societal expectations of a woman of any level or position were as follows: being *married* (i.e., being possessed by a certain man), *children*, *domesticity*. As a bonus there could be such a category as *femininity* – less expected from a woman than the above-mentioned, but also culturally constructed. Such an idea of ‘being a woman’ as *self-realisation* had not been discussed until the emergence of the women’s movement. It was, however, a major pillar of the concept of a ‘New Woman’, both in its Weimar and Russian meanings. *Childhood* as an inherent part of being made into a woman later is worth considering, too. Therefore, I will be discussing Lacis’ life-creation in view of the categories of ‘a woman’ provided above.

CHILDHOOD: BEING SHAPED BY PARENTS

It is essential to trace the origin of the woman in order to classify her as ‘new’. Therefore, I will discuss Lacis’ so as to justify her background. As was stated earlier in the chapter, in *The Red Carnation* Lacis writes how poor and hard her childhood was (15). She calls her father a “tinker, and dedicated socialist who would help political prisoners and spend all his money on books,” which Lacis even bothers to name: Darwin, Hekkel, Bebel (15). Lacis portrays her father as giving her “three rubles” so she could leave for St. Petersburg to continue her education there (RC 28). He said, “Can’t do anything more,” as a farewell (28). According to Lacis, the mother was against her leaving the city, thus appearing as closed-minded, while the father is presented as very progressive, yet stern for no apparent reason (28). Lacis was the only daughter, and the family was relatively well-to-do, so, who else would the parents care for if not Lacis? However, despite the fact that Lacis might be twisting the reality a little in this instance, the point of my work is not reconstructing the ‘truth’ but discussing her performance in her embodiment of the ‘New Woman’.

Continuing the theme of how Lacis’ childhood years shaped her identity, it is worth looking at the figure of her mother in more detail. In Lacis’ words, mother tried to make her kiss the hand of a baron from whom the family rented the apartment (RC 15). “Mother used to weave a coarse, plain fabric, and made paints out of plants” (15). Certainly, in the early 1980s, when the Russian autobiography was composed, it sounded outdated and even savage, while her mother actually had her own small business (DM 10-11). “Mother knew many Latvian songs and tales . . . She beat me only once” continues Lacis and provides a heartbreaking story

of how she stole a carrot from someone's garden, and how her mother, in a peasant-like manner wrung her hands in despair (RC 16). When, during World War I, Lacis and her mother were parting at a train station, the mother, according to Lacis, used the phrase: "I have a feeling this is the last time we meet" (RC 34). This line together with the whole scene is reminiscent of Mikhail Sholokhov's, *Fate of a Man* (1957), the tragic Soviet classic, which highlights that Lacis was a director even throughout her writings, making the reader, unfamiliar with other sources, nearly shed a tear once in a while.

In the second edition of Lacis' German autobiography, she writes about her parents more than in the first and in a different light; "The older I get, the more often I think of my parents" (RB 9; [1976]). The author conveys her nostalgic mood she could have as she became older and re-evaluates some of the past events of her life. Lacis claims in the second edition that "the father was often not home. When he was, though, there were often fights and tears" (11) and "He and mother got divorced. I stayed with the mother. He also took care of me, . . . paid tuition fees" (13). Is this information so important that it needed to be inserted into the second version of the book? Does it explain why Lacis divorced her first husband? Or does it contribute to the image of the poor proletarian child with traumatised psyche in order to juxtapose the huge breakthrough she managed to make in her life? It is not known, but what it does show is that Lacis' mother apparently was not such a retrograde and 'traditional' woman as Lacis might have intended to portray. Her mother got divorced, after all.

There is also more information on the mother in the second edition of Lacis' German life writing. As will be examined below, Lacis writes that her "mother epitomised the beauty ideal of the time" (RB 9; [1976]). Later she would put that "actually mother was talented," but this statement does nothing to change the picture – the only thing about the mother that Lacis valued was her appearance, which Lacis evidently considered better than her own. Other features, in Lacis' opinion, deserved either pity or disdain. This assumption can be justified by the following phrase: "Mother inherited from the grandfather that abominable, absolute honesty." Here, Lacis effectively ends the eulogy to her mother (RB 10; [1976]). So, overall, Lacis portrays her mother as obtuse, which is, in a way, how Asja Lacis' own daughter would picture her later.

Gerstenberger argues in *Truth to Tell* that mothers generally present negative role models for their daughters, while the image of the mother has either to be venerated or overcome as an obstacle in order for the daughter to enter a "morally and intellectually superior male world" (quoted in 136). Researching the autobiographies of the working-class women who became involved in Socialist movement, the author maintains that motherhood was seen by many as a burden rather than part of self-definition (135-137). Having a weak mother before their eyes was a powerful argument in favour of the daughter's later political awareness and

activity. According to Gerstenberger, it explains why some proletarian women authors shift the focus from a cruel father to their own becoming all-powerful mothers later in life (158). This view is predicated on the necessity to adjust to the reality of patriarchal society: “the gentle, faithful, weak Gretchen will always and everywhere be abandoned for a proud, cold, cruel woman for whom love is but a game; the tenderness of a wife is tiresome whereas the kicks of a lover give pleasure; her cold, scornful laughter allures and intoxicates” (quoted in Gerstenberger 158). Thus, cold-hearted women, by contrast with Goethe’s famous heroine, who “can keep their lovers in a permanent state of sexual arousal, can expect to be loved with passion that borders on insanity” (158). This argument helps to understand the decision of Asja Lacis not to be victimised like her mother, or be faithful like Gretchen, and to engage in the game of ‘theatre for herself’ later in life. Lacis might have been afraid to be abandoned, like her mother was, and chose to become a “cruel” woman instead.

The effect of Asja Lacis’ childhood on her life can be viewed from a different perspective. Alf Lawrie, Stephen Trombley, and Alan Bullock, for instance, return to the discussion of the Oedipus complex, introduced by Freud. Thus, Freud’s concept in regard to a girl means daughter-mother competition for “psychosexual possession” of father (259). When the complex is unresolved, it can lead to such further difficulties in the life the daughter; becoming a hyper-seductive woman or the one who exerts her domination over men (705). In Freud’s terms, this behaviour is based on a woman’s “penis envy” or “female castration” referred to earlier in the chapter. In view of the portrayal Lacis provides of her mother, it can be assumed that daughter-mother competition never ended for the author. Therefore, Lacis might have considered the divorce of her parents as a natural state of things, even justifying her father and blaming her mother. Consequently, Lacis could have believed that her mother (an uneducated simple woman) deserved it, while to herself (“greedily drinking new knowledge” and “cold”) this could never happen. In case Lacis was supportive of her father, she must also have learnt from her childhood experience that divorce was nothing to be afraid of.

ROLE MODELS

Role models influence the personality and its development, which is especially important in the discussion of the ‘New Woman’ construct. One of the most important role models for Asja Lacis was her father. As was mentioned above, the father was the one who sent her to a private school (RB 9-11). Lacis claims that her father introduced her to Bebel by giving her to read *Woman and Socialism* and gave her other progressive literature to read. She also maintains that he “argued furiously with her mother and berated the wealthy” (RC 15). Presumably, Lacis’ distaste for the bourgeoisie as a more affluent social class than the one her family belonged to derived from her father’s influence.

Another role model for Lacis was one of her school teachers. He said Lacis was more gifted than her bullies – who included almost all other pupils, based on her words – and advised her to focus on how to score them off (RC 23). Lacis “remembered the advice” (23). The teacher-saviour rescued Lacis from the (hostile) rest of the world and can be viewed as one of the role models. Portraying the rest of the world as hostile while herself as an outsider early in life is considered typical of proletarian women’s autobiographies (Birgit A. Jensen 61-64). Hence, Lacis wants to remind the reader her own story pertains to the working class. The teacher who ‘saved’ Lacis in the example above gave her what she needed – the proof that she was brighter or more talented than others. This was one of the criteria she used to choose her male partners when she grew up.

An undoubted role model for Asja Lacis was the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Lacis writes that she “loved how Mayakovsky [whom she saw on the street], wearing his [famous] yellow blouse, disturbed respectable ladies” (RB 14). It can be assumed that such features of the poet as independence, free spirit and the lack of fear in disturbing the normality, excited Lacis. This also reveals her disregard for the “respectable ladies”, to whom Lacis had no intention – and possibility – to belong. A more long-shot reference to Mayakovsky can also be made with regard to his yellow blouse. For whatever reason, it was precisely a yellow pashmina that Lacis wore in the 1920s, presumably inspired by the poet’s look.

It would be accurate to say that some male figures acted as anti-role models for Lacis through her younger years. When at the age of sixteen Lacis went to Warsaw to work as a governess, she had to tutor the child of a doctor. According to Lacis, the doctor was “gloomy and unfriendly” and did not allow her to take their son for a walk in a working district (RC 25-26). It is evident that Lacis was not indifferent to doctors since her early youth. It is well known that doctors were traditionally viewed as a stable and profitable profession. Many parents wanted (and still do) their daughters to marry doctors to secure a safe position for themselves

in life. The way Lacis exposes her disappointment demonstrates she disapproved of a man being grumpy and did not tolerate critique towards her behaviour of any kind.

FIRST ATTEMPT: 'TRADITIONAL' MAN AND 'TRADITIONAL' MARRIAGE

“Giving in to the pressing requests of my mother, Julis and I agreed to get married in church,” says Lacis, revealing multiple things straight away (RC 34). Firstly, the phrase shows that Lacis did not really want to marry Julis. At least, this is the impression the author wants to produce. Then, her mother is again shown as an annoying retrograde, while Lacis sees (and pictures) herself as an innovator in many spheres of life. Thirdly, an assumption can be made that Julis was not eager to marry Asja, either, since they both had to “give in”. It is evident that the two might have wanted a civil ceremony due to, for instance, being atheists. Nonetheless, the choice of Lacis’ first husband, according to her life writing, was made for her.

The description of an unfortunate experience must almost always be present in an autobiography by a woman. In Lacis’ view, this experience was with her first husband, which would continue the motif of a victim in her life writing. Evidently explaining her choice, Lacis says she liked Julis, whom her mother preferred among all other boyfriends, for his handsome face and hair and even temper (RC 27). So, Lacis had chosen even-tempered men since her early youth, presumably so she could be the leader and the unpredictable one in the couple. Despite that, Lacis claims that of the two courses of tertiary education available for women in the Russian Empire, she chose those which would allow her to study with her husband, not the other way around (RC 28). Nevertheless, Lacis writes, he returned to Riga, while she stayed in St. Petersburg (29). Lacis mentions this fact in passing, as if it never upset her. It is evident, though, that the author wants to inflict on the reader the sense that she and her husband preferred their studies and future careers to family, at least in its traditional sense.

It should be noted that Asja Lacis’ narrative method did not come out of the blue. She lived in a society which – even after the fundamental change it had to undergo – for the most part expected women to conform to traditional family practices. Being a husband’s victim has long been a theme of women’s writing. Thus, in German working-class autobiographies, the depiction of family violence is common, and fathers and/or husbands occur as the victimisers of women and children (Maynes 78-79). The writing of ‘New’ women, nonetheless, began to explode the stereotype. In their autobiographies, women authors can have projected male figures (*father, lover, husband* and others) necessary for the author to “resolve feelings of hostility or . . . compliance in themselves” toward such masculine types (Mary G. Mason, 42). Mason argues that female authors reveal most about themselves in their autobiographies when they create portraits of other people, which allows them to enjoy what they could not in life (41-42). In some cases, women writers create ‘the other’ which is neither their partner nor an

equal, but “is instead an overwhelming model or ideal that has to be confronted” for the author’s ‘self’ to be realised (41). In Lacis’ case, there may be a few such ‘models’ throughout her writings. The “significant others” (41) – which are used by the majority of women writers to relate to – can be said to represent the first group of Lacis’ models she needs to confront in writing. The other group can be tentatively called the ‘insignificant others’, i.e., those figures whom Lacis is deliberately portraying as weak, awkward, or not living up to her expectations. The significant others can be said to include Benjamin, Reich, Brecht, and Laicen. The insignificant others are thus her first husband and the petty images portrayed by Lacis as hostile to her (e.g., the doctor whose son Lacis tutored). The insignificant others may be portrayed in such a way by the author, for she felt the need to justify her actions *post factum*. In the case of her first husband, Lacis’ implicit autobiographical self-examination told her she might not always have been right in her actions toward him. Perhaps, she realised she could have provided a little more comfort for her husband or withstood from having affairs (DM 23). However, Lacis could not change the past. As a result, Julis’ portrayal is that of a cold, unloving misoneist, who does not care about Lacis’ work and only wants to imprison his wife in four walls. When in autumn of 1919, General Denikin’s army approached Orel, Lacis, according to the text, decided to stay in the city when the train with her husband on it was already departing (RC 46). “I cried out to my husband, ‘Staying!’” – the sentence looks like a perfect movie scene, with the necessary element of Asja Lacis’ voice drowning in the thrashing sound of the train. This passage alone demonstrates who was the victim in their family – it certainly was not Lacis. Therefore, in her writing, Lacis can hardly conquer the need to confront this recurrent ‘model’ of her husband.

As has been mentioned before, Julis is portrayed as cold, unloving and indifferent to Asja’s work throughout all her autobiographies. Therefore, it seems essential to present his letter to Lacis of 18 March 1917, kindly translated from Latvian into German by Paškevica. He writes:

Dear Asja,

I feel so much happiness in sharing your joy about becoming an actress. Your joy is so deep and heartfelt. And you know that I cannot feel happy if you are unhappy. . . . Stay strong, my love. Do not torture yourself so much about your studies. Think about how much our life depends on your being healthy. Say just one word to me, my beloved Asja, will you not leave me when you become an actress and play Elga, Hedda, Salome? No? Will you be with me in all your roles? I have already been hit by your “mysticism”

in its spell . . . Rare delight overcomes me when I imagine how you stand on the stage, and thousands can see your stature and your movements, hear your every word, your voice. Your timbre will be recognised by thousands. (Paškevica 49)

With this passage before the reader's eyes it becomes evident how much Julis loved and cared for his wife and her work. Nevertheless, Asja did not only leave him, she decided to belittle the man in her writing. The question as to *why*? arises here. Considering the strong feeling of the man toward his wife, an assumption can be made there was only one major thing he could not forgive her for. Lacis never mentions this thing in either of her autobiographies, instead depicting his utmost lovelessness (as is now proven – falsely). Presumably, it must have been Lacis' liaison, described in her daughter's memoirs (DM 23).

The choice of a partner is primary in deciding whether a woman was 'new', considering that a 'traditional' woman was mostly herself *chosen* by a potential partner. Therefore, it is important to look into the traits the woman valued in men. As to Reich, Lacis describes his 'aristocratic hands' when they first met (RC 66). This is notable, for it reveals Lacis' interest to this particular body part in her life writings (she focuses on her own hands, actress Koonen's and Benjamin's). Not limiting herself to the portrayal of Reich's appearance, Lacis also claims she had many things in common with him (e.g., love of literature, similar tastes and interests, but most importantly, love of theatre) (69).

Another trait Lacis valued in men was assertiveness. Peculiar is the fact, how Lacis was thrilled about Brecht persuading the Munich Chamber Theatre Direction to hire her, after they refused because she was a communist (which technically she was not). In her narrative, Lacis not only compliments Brecht as a good leader and supervisor, she gives him credit for behaving like a 'real' – in her opinion – man (RB 38; [1971]). His assertiveness, it should be mentioned, was aimed at helping Lacis, which was without a doubt appreciated by her. The inexplicable assertiveness of Reich, discussed below, is evidently pictured by the author with a different purpose in mind.

Lacis' reminiscences about Benjamin deserve even more attention. She describes her first meeting with Benjamin, who helped her with her Italian and her bags in a Caprian market. "My first impression: spectacles, . . . thick dark hair, clumsy hands, narrow nose; overall, a sound intellectual, one of the wealthy" (RB 41-42; [1971]). According to Lacis' recollections, Benjamin said he had observed her 'hovering' over the Piazza for two weeks. He got immediately interested in Lacis' children's theatre in Riga and came to visit her every day (RB 42; [1971]). So, Benjamin is presented through the prism of how much he admired Asja and her work, and the fact that he seemed well-off. The fact Lacis paid attention to that last trait of Benjamin's persona was exaggerated by most early researchers of Benjamin's heritage and by all of his biographers, according to Hoenle (36-42). Ingram, as was mentioned above, also notes that Asja Lacis was "introduced to the West in the guise of an impersonal Marxist functionary, a *mulier sovietica*" (79, italics in original). Such presentation would make inexplicable Benjamin's infatuation with her, but it is probably easier to argue that Lacis simply 'converted' him to Marxism.

Lacis also mentions Benjamin's brother whom she never met: "Sometimes Walter told me about his brother who was a doctor and a communist. I wanted to meet him so much! Benjamin promised me but broke his word" (RB 49; [1971]). Presumably, the most important detail of this passage is that the brother was a doctor, and not only a communist, as was the author's intention to convince the reader. He was single, too. Lacis, on her part, might have

wanted to find an established man who could provide for her. Given that there is little evidence, it can only be assumed that, referring to my earlier comment on the profession of a doctor, Lacis, among other things, valued stability as a quality in men. Furthermore, the brother was single, which likewise lays bare the glimmer of ‘traditional’ approach to family life in Asja Lacis, namely, getting married into a life of security. Presumably, Benjamin felt it, so never introduced the two.

In order to judge whether Lacis fully represents the idea of the ‘New Woman’, it is crucial to discuss why she comfortably continued her relationship with Benjamin while she was living with Reich. I will therefore examine what the reasons for their love triangle were. Lacis states in both life writings that she was inspired by the Symbolists. Most Symbolists practised (at least tried) the celibate marriage. Starting from Gippius and Dmitry Merezhkovsky – Russian Symbolist novelist, poet, and literary critic – the couples needed the third person (for different reasons). Olga Matich in *Erotic Utopia* calls this phenomenon “radical enterprise of Dionysian collectivity in love” (202). “Dionysian collectivity” is something Asja Lacis could have heard of since she wanted to follow the Dionysian path in her own life. Dhúill argues that Dionysian collectives “have constituted themselves through a contestation or undoing of the biological family as the primary social unit” (56). Ever since Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), modernist writers of the *fin de siècle* and first decade of the twentieth century have been fascinated with Dionysian energies. These energies seem to represent everything opposite to order, to be “a mode of the radically disorderly, of drunkenness, frenzy, ecstasy, of the wild and the orgiastic” (56). Aside from “the breakdown of social order and the violation of taboos” (56), Dhúill believes the Dionysian topos to allow for the limits of one’s ‘self’ – all of which could have attracted Lacis in her pursuit of a free union with multiple men instead of a traditional marriage. The ‘Dionysian’ is characterised by “the potential of the ecstatic collective to inaugurate both destruction and renewal” – the factor essential for Lacis’ creative work (57). This “collective” feature of the ‘Dionysian’ in the context of Asja Lacis’ personal life also links well with the ‘collective body’ – the popular discourse at her time, discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly to all famous love/marriage triangles of the Symbolists, Lacis needed Reich and Benjamin for different reasons. They fulfilled her. Also, evoking jealousy was sort of a game for Asja Lacis in her ‘theatre for herself’ – Evreinov’s concept she was equipped with since she studied his method of monodrama at Komissarzhevsky’s drama studio. This ‘theatre for herself’ must have been a powerful source of Lacis’ creative ideas.

With her love triangle, Asja Lacis can be said to have followed the example of most other well-known feminists – even that of Krupskaya herself – who put into practice Chernyshevsky’s ideals from *What Is to Be Done?* (Matich, *Erotic Utopia* 202). Matich writes:

“the erotic as well as family life strategies of the Symbolist generation were consummately eclectic and provocatively subversive” (“The symbolist meaning” 50). In keeping with the Symbolist penchant for life-creation, some of the movement’s more active representatives attempted to project their favourite ideas and cultural models onto real life. Private life, especially life of the heart and family, became an arena for experimentation with the purpose of creating a ‘New Man’ and ‘New Woman’; “The antiprocreative, androgynous, and triadic life practice among the Symbolists . . . rested on the substratum of radical utopianism of the 1860s” (50).

In Lacis’ case, ‘androgynous’ should not be understood literally, for she never masqueraded as an androgyne. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine Asja Lacis doing the ‘traditional’ ‘women’s’ chores around the house or devoting herself solely to caring for the husband and upbringing of children. The fact that Reich sometimes cooked (RC 166-167) can also be attributed to her ‘androgynous’ style of their union. Speaking of Benjamin, whom Lacis had on short leash for many years, he added to their triadic “arena for experimentation” a truly “subversive” element, essential in life-creation. The “radical utopianism of the 1860s” is hardly the basis Lacis rested her experimental family model on. She must have substituted it with what she borrowed from Marxism concerning ‘free love’ and free associations between men and women as an alternative to the ‘outdated’ bourgeois marriage. This substitution seems viable, since many Symbolists’ ideas flowed to Marxism as seen by Russian theoreticians (Irina Gutkin 182-184). Thus, in her German book, Asja Lacis remembers: “I had to go right away. I went to Riga with Daga. Reich was invited to Moscow” (RB 49; [1971]). In this occurrence, it can be seen that Lacis easily let Reich go and gave him freedom, just like Kollontai advised when wrote about an attitude of the ‘New Woman’ to her male partners. This illustrates that Lacis drew her attitude to family life and an ideal man from multiple theories and influences.

In her German life writing, Lacis recollects how, during her lecture in Germany in the mid- 1920s, she faced a stream of questions from a heckler, skeptical about a play on women’s emancipation and equality. She was quick to score them off with a counter-question: “Haven’t you heard? Men already give birth in the USSR!” (RB 65; [1971]). This remark, apart from showing Lacis’ quick wit, demonstrates her attitude to the ‘New Men’ of her time. While being an obvious paradox, the joke confirms that Lacis felt emancipated, ‘androgynous’ and even superior toward her male counterparts. Continuing the theme of Lacis’ attitude to men in general and the ‘New Man’ in her understanding of him, the following occurrence seems worth mentioning. When she was in Riga in 1925, Benjamin showed up unexpectedly; “Benjamin liked to make surprises but this time I didn’t like the surprise – I had no time for him!”, so, “he had much time to explore Riga” (RB 53; [1971]). In this wonderful passage Lacis totally expresses herself as a ‘New Woman’. She demonstrates she put work above relationship and

could only spend her time on a man when she wanted to. The juxtaposition of her valuable time (“I had no time”) and Benjamin’s “much” time supports the idea of Lacis being a ‘New Woman’ at that point in time. This also proves the assumption made above about Asja Lacis feeling superior towards men.

It is obvious that Asja Lacis’ idea of the ‘New Man’ was not a man of looks, or one who possessed incredible physical strength, but one with the brains and talent. This makes the reason she chose her first husband really stand out. Lacis states he “was handsome and even-tempered,” and – whether or not intentionally – reveals that in her youth she acted like a ‘normal’, traditional woman (RC 27). Whereas later in life, armed with wisdom, and experience of the hardships of life, Lacis no longer chose men according to their appearance. Thus, we see that Reich – apart from the “aristocratic hands” – looked sort of funny (RC 66), while Laicen did not deserve any description of his looks at all – he was a revolutionary ‘fighting friend’. Benjamin’s description does not fit, though. Lacis, describing his looks, obviously liked not only his expensive clothes, as some researches would want to stress (Hoenle 36-42), she also liked the “thick dark hair” and the “narrow nose”. This makes it even harder to believe the author when she claims later in the book “we became friends” (RB 42; [1971]).

CHILDREN

Combining work and motherhood is another pillar of the ‘New Woman’ concept and is equally important for the genre of women’s autobiography. It is often a delicate theme, which began to be discussed precisely during the period of my research, for the life writing of ‘New Women’ witnessed its rise. For a long time, women’s life writing was practically non-existent both in Russian and German literature. As was stated in the first chapter, female characters were created by male authors as touchstones of either good or bad. As Marsh firmly believes, the female characters created by Tolstoi, for instance, are “judged by the author according to whether they fulfil or betray his own definition of the feminine” (5). Using Marsh’s terms, Lacis subverts the notion of woman being either a “vapid angel,” or a “malign temptress” (16) and presents the reader with a well-rounded creation of herself. As demonstrated by many researchers, most female writers or women undertaking the difficult task of composing an autobiography, measure their life achievements against what a potential male reader would have to say. “Male authors often regard single or childless women as figures of fun or objects of pity,” claims Marsh (15). The idealisation of the mother figure is widespread in Russian masculine literature of the twentieth century. “The officially sponsored idealisation of motherhood can have harmful effects,” while the sanctification prevents mothers from ever

admitting to feelings of ambivalence toward their children (20). However, Marsh maintains that the female perspective on maternity has been consistently ignored (20). Following the deep-rooted tradition of mother veneration, Asja Lacis does not wish to disappoint her readers. It is therefore thought-provoking, that the accent on motherhood is much stronger in her Russian autobiography, which could symbolise a return to eternal traditions and re-enslavement of a Russian woman following the splash of freedom after the Revolution and during the 1920s.

In her life writings (more so in the Soviet book), Lacis often ‘throws Daga under the bus’, albeit unintentionally, to show how incredibly hard something she had accomplished was, and how amazing a mother she nonetheless managed to remain. In 1920, Lacis received a letter from her mother saying that she was ill and was afraid to die without seeing Asja. Lacis writes how difficult it was to get to Riga, especially since she had to go with a small child (RC 50). Yet, Asja Lacis presents the relationship with her daughter, Daga, as rosy. In *Revolutionär im Beruf*, Lacis feels it necessary to inform the reader how she told Brecht about a funny episode with her daughter (39; [1971]). When Daga was a toddler, she crawled onto the stage, which amused the director and actors. Later, Lacis describes how Daga would make up nicknames for Brecht, Egon Erwin Kisch and Ernst Toller (39). When Lacis lived for about two years in Berlin at Benjamin’s parents’ place (approximately 1928-30), a few times she sent her daughter Daga to a Rhythmic Gymnastics studio his son Stefan, attended. The fact Lacis describes this is evidently used to demonstrate what a progressive mother she was.

It should be noted that traditionally the society viewed couples suspiciously who did not have children for a long period of time. Therefore, it is worth briefly discussing the ‘antiprocreative’ element of Lacis’ relationships. It is not known why Lacis had no children by Reich, or why Daga was born only after six years after Lacis’ marriage to Julis (for they officially married in 1913). It might be that in her first marriage Lacis did not want children while she was studying – for she had seemingly borrowed the ‘antiprocreative’ ideas from the famous ‘love triangles’ – or that it did not happen due to natural causes. In her ‘free union’ with Reich, she was not married to him, already had a child, and, importantly, had no stable job position with the Civil War and economic chaos in the background. So, she acted pragmatically like a ‘New Woman’ and, not planning to spend her entire time rearing children, determined that one child was more than enough.

According to Mason, some women writers are most self-revealing when writing about their daughters or about their own roles as daughters (43). This method of ‘doubling the self-image’ helps the author to better define and realise her own identity. Asja Lacis felt the need to relate to her daughter’s projected image, not only to “preserve a sense of self,” but to compensate for what she might have missed out on in life (43). Lacis badly needed to construct

a valid identity of a loving and caring, yet career-oriented mother, for she could not be unaware of the fact that her daughter considered her a total failure. This explains why Asja Lacis does everything in both life writings to picture a loving and serene relationship with her daughter; or including a choice of amusing facts about Daga in her writing. This also explains why Lacis feels the need to use Daga as an excuse when describing the situations, she knew she had made the wrong choice about or felt she owed the recipient some explanation (e.g. not arriving to see her dying mother).

BYT. DOMESTICITY

There are multiple parts of becoming a 'New Woman'. For example, how the 'New Woman' managed to combine family and work is a major theme, which is important in Lacis' case. It is remarkable how much space in her autobiographies is devoted to descriptions of her studies and success at work. Images of family life are scarce and unconvincing. But then again, it should be remembered that Lacis' autobiographies do not belong to the category of 'confessions'; they are both 'official' life writings. When during World War I, in 1915, Lacis had to stay in Orel because of her husband's war duty, she "helped" the children of Latvian refugees (RC 35). Yet, Asja Lacis writes, she couldn't stop thinking about proceeding with her education. She wanted to go only to Moscow, to enter the newly opened Theatre Studio led by Fyodor Komissarzhevsky; "Julis was against it but could not talk me out of it and soon I left [alone]" (35). This action is unimaginable for most women (of most times). Lacis embodies a perfect 'New Woman' in this passage; she put her career above her husband and left him whenever he threatened to hinder that career. So, 'combining of work and family' never took place, while abandoning the husband and concentrating entirely on career did. However, on one occasion, describing how she had to babysit in the Russian book, Lacis uses the version of the word 'cook', taken from a folklore dialect (*str'apat'*), which is significant from the point of view of the textuality of the text (RC 47). It intensifies the image she is creating here – that of a good housewife. This dialectal word is counter to Lacis' 'self', yet, it does serve the author's intention.

Domesticity is one of the factors of women's life writing which play a role in the formation of a 'woman'. In the creation of a 'New Woman', this constituent part somewhat fades, though. In *Revolutionär im Beruf* (1971), Lacis remembers: "In Berlin Benjamin lived in a well-established relationship. His parents owned a villa in Grönewald, where he too lived. He knew Berlin restaurants and their specialties well" (49). Then she goes on saying that Benjamin's son attended a gymnastics class and behaved like a cavalier (49). So, Lacis exposes a lot here: she was amazed with the wealth of Benjamin's parents, how well he was brought

up, and, naturally, his son was being brought up, and the fact that Benjamin would often dine out in fancy places. On the other hand, she ‘forgets’ to mention the fact that Benjamin was still married at the time the described events took place. Could it be that at this particular point, Lacis is being a ‘traditional’ woman, who does not wish to share the man, infatuated with her, with another woman? In this case, the “well-established” relationship Lacis mentions in passing reveals her negative attitude to established relationships, which often imply not only commitment, but also domesticity.

Gutkin discusses the approach of Leon Trotsky, a Russian revolutionary, Marxist and theorist, to *byt* (everyday routine, similar in meaning to (shared) “domesticity”) (175). In Trotsky’s view, in order to struggle with *byt*, the concrete artistic experiments should have been used. Thus, Trotsky borrowed Vsevolod Meyerhold’s conception of the theatre as “a model for life”, which would encourage the nascent ‘New Man’ (176); “[The New] Man . . . will, of course, be able to add to his mundane life not only richness, brilliance, and intensity but also the highest dynamism” (quoted in original 176). Similarly to the avant-garde ideas, Trotsky’s vision of “overall transformation of reality includes a new family structure, which will liberate the woman . . . and which includes new approaches to the rearing of children” (176). The “gravestone”-like fashion of upbringing children was to be substituted with “communal initiative” and “collective creativity” (176). “Creative spirit and aesthetic principle” were also considered active elements of life transformation (177). Asja Lacis despised *byt* and everything associated with it. It could have been one of the reasons Benjamin and Reich – brought up in well-established well-to-do families – took interest in her. Lacis followed the tenets of Marxism concerning *byt* her whole life, for it allowed her not only to aspire to being “a higher social-biological type, a Superman”, in Trotsky’s words, it also saved her much time to focus on her work, and was hence, convenient.

Butler, who is referring to Simone de Beauvoir, believes that one “becomes” a woman under a cultural compulsion to become one. The body, Butler argues, is also “a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” and which “comes into being [only] through the mark(s) of gender” (8). Lacis, realising very well what constraints her historical time had and striving to preserve the image of an irreproachable elderly widow, wrote several representations of her ‘self’ into her autobiographies. She portrayed herself as a capable mother, for she knew the negative attitude towards ‘bad’ mothers in society, imposed on it over the years of Soviet rule. Lacis probably had no choice but to describe her outstanding housekeeping qualities, which in reality were non-existent, for she had to become a Super(woman) in order for her professional achievements to be taken seriously. To continue this myth-making, which adds to her life-creative practices, Lacis went further, portraying herself a wonderful wife, who was simply unfortunate in meeting the wrong person. With this she might

have gone too far, for even those readers unfamiliar with other sources may notice it was she who walked out on her first husband, no matter how well the written masquerade is.

FEMININITY. BEAUTY

Referring to Butler, such categories of ‘being a woman’ as “beauty” or “femininity” can be determined as “culturally constructed”. Of note, both categories have been constructed in their cultures with the primary purpose of pleasing the man. What every girl learnt at her mother’s knees was that the cultural normative of emphasised femininity was associated with a noble woman in both German and Russian societies, whereas a working-class woman was expected to be more ‘primitive’. However, as showcased above, Lacis intended to intersect the femininity of her image with the working-class ideology at work. Therefore, I will now examine what shaped the ‘emphasised femininity’ of the class-conscious, Marxist theatre director, Asja Lacis. Her own performance, with *fashion* as its key part, has been explored above.

According to Irina Paperno, the European decadent generation fought one of its battles on the front of gender difference, “conceiving an indeterminate and emancipatory sphere situated between male and female” (19). On one spectrum of gender fluidity, decadents saw the male dandy (or homosexual) at one end, with the “masculinised” woman being at the other (19). Referring to Charles Baudelaire, Paperno argues the dandy is an “artful self-construction” which sublimates the traditional heterosexual masculine identity. The ‘masculinised *femme fatale*’, on the other hand, looks down to the ‘ordinary’ woman, due to her emancipation from “nature’s procreative demands” (19). Such approach to gender reflects a decadent ideal fully; artifice is preferred over nature, which simultaneously helps to transcend nature. Asja Lacis must have learnt the art of “artful self-construction” and can be categorised as a ‘masculinised *femme fatale*’ thanks to her overtly mannish behaviour at work and overly feminised one in her private life. Lacis proudly claims to have read some of Nietzsche’s works, and could have borrowed some of his views. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* explored the Apollonian and Dionysian sides of Greek art based on Socrates’ ideas and viewed them as the masculine and feminine elements of art. Lacis more than once specifically states she was “for the Dionysian in art”, which is why she could have adopted Nietzsche’s vision on the Dionysian setting in her life-creation later.

Role models are undoubtedly what influenced the formation and further realisation of Lacis’ ‘self’, not only as a talented director, but also as a ‘New Woman’. When in *The Red Carnation* Lacis writes how her mother “weaved a coarse, plain fabric”, she does not deplore her openly. In fact, she tries to strike a chord among readers towards the hard toil of her poor

mother. However, an opposite effect can be seen, for it is very obvious that Lacis herself wants nothing to do with coarse fabrics or having to do any manual work. It is clear that, in terms of (unfeminine) occupation, Lacis' mother has been an anti-role model for her. Given this, it is surprising how Lacis' mother, whom the author portrays as backward, is given a favourable description in the second edition of the German book. "Mother epitomised the beauty ideal of the time – medium sized, small hands and feet, face bright and soft, big blue eyes and long thick blond hair of a mermaid with greenish notes" (RB 9; [1976]). Lacis in fact describes not the beauty ideal "of the time", but rather the one *of all times*. Given that she was read widely since her early youth, including many representatives of Romanticism (Byron, Lermontov), she was bound to meet this 'ideal beauty' in literature. Thus, Asja Lacis grew up learning, like most girls, which particular beauty ideal was glorified by men. Since this is the only positive characteristic of Lacis' mother stated in the book, it can be assumed that Lacis considered her mother to be prettier than herself, which would add to the discussion of the mother-daughter relationship in women's writing. It also can be proven by the fact Lacis was so "proud of her small hands and feet," since those would be the features she inherited from her mother (DM 131). Since Lacis did not possess – in spite of her thick hair, praised by Paškevič (17) – the romantic beauty of her mother, which male writers have always idealised, it is possible she decided early on that her behaviour would be far from romantic, too. Nevertheless, Lacis undoubtedly imbibed the notion that femininity is essential in becoming a woman.

Lacis had many role models she borrowed from literature: Hedda Gabler, Hilde Wangel, Anfissa (Andreev's character), Monna Vanna (RB 11; [1971]). Apart from those emancipated heroines, Lacis met women through her life who shaped her image. She had a teacher of Russian at her private school and liked "everything about her" (RC 18). Lacis liked "her manner, her hair, brushed back smoothly and knotted in a heavy bun at the back" and presumably followed the example in creating her own style (18). In *The Red Carnation*, Lacis writes how she was "mesmerised" by Alexander Tairov's Chamber Theatre in Moscow, especially the naked declamation by Alisa Koonen (also known as Alice Coonen, Russian and Soviet actress) (39). Her "temperament, the clearest diction, and tragic melodiousness of her voice" – was what Lacis succumbed to most (RC 40). "I have never again seen any actress whose arms would act like this" – passionately (perhaps for the first time in her autobiography) claims Lacis (40). Supposedly, Lacis learnt from the actress how to best use her own hands. Lacis states she met Larisa Reissner and that Larisa "was extravagant and wore a bright Indian shawl" (RB 11; [1971]). She also "had a chameleon sitting on her shoulder, which would change the colour whenever somebody touched it" (11). As is known from Benjamin's *Diary* and Daga's memoirs, Asja Lacis always wore a yellow pashmina over her (most of the time)

grey dress (DM 30). She must have realised that she needed a bright or extravagant detail in her costume to ‘stand out from the crowd.’

It is captivating to follow one of Lacis’ descriptions in order to trace the limitations of the genre of autobiography in the making of Asja Lacis’ identity, depending on the ‘textual geography’ and political language. In her Soviet autobiography, Lacis narrates a day in her trip with Reich to Capri, when they visited Emilio Marinetti, Italian poet, art theorist, and founder of the Futurist movement. Lacis underplays the impression produced on her so much, that it is impossible not to blame the Soviet censorship for this. She states that “everything in his house was pretentious [while] the simplicity of his wife stood out” (RC 88). The wife of Marinetti was “humble, smoothly combed woman, wearing all white” (88). This portrayal is at odds with what Lacis provides in the German book and does not allow us to assume that Asja Lacis took Marinetti’s wife as her role model. The wife of the founder of Futurism somehow does not produce the impression of being “humble” in *Revolutionär im Beruf*, while she seems almost miserable in *The Red Carnation*. Lacis writes in her German book that Marinetti’s wife “wore only two colours – black and white” (41), never adding any other details. Nevertheless, considering the meaning that costume and masquerade were having at the time for one’s performance and creation of the ‘self’, Asja Lacis found such style of dressing inspiring. This assumption is proven by the yellow shawl she combined with all shades of grey for many years to come. As demonstrated by the discussion above, Lacis clearly knew her audience and the limitations of the genre. However, even through limited descriptions, it is possible to reconstruct Lacis’ approach to beauty and femininity in her own performance.

‘Traditional’ women were not expected by society to have any self-realisation, for their primary goal in life was to obediently serve their husbands. ‘New women’, on the contrary, started talking about it, for they fought for both intellectual and financial independence from men. Both conceptualisations of the ‘New Woman’, the Weimar construct and its Soviet/Russian counterpart, though to a different degree, implied self-realisation when talking about independence. Self-realisation in this context should be understood as the achievement of one’s highest dreams or the fulfilment of the possibilities of one’s personality. Such elements of Lacis’ *professional* self-realisation as *becoming prominent in society* (by means of excelling in a chosen vocation and being recognised) and fulfilling her *responsibility for the next generation* have been considered in the relevant section *Asja Lacis as a Professional*. However, looking at Lacis’ narratives, it becomes clear that nothing could be dearer to the ‘self’ she is constructing, than seeing herself as a muse to someone’s creative genius.

In Lacis’ version of truth, Benjamin suggested they should write an article about Naples together (“Naples”), which actually appeared in *Frankfurter Zeitung* of 19.08.1925. It remains unknown who really initiated the collaboration of two authors and who needed the other more. What is peculiar here is how Benjamin transforms from a “naïve” (discussed below), inarticulate creature, who would never have found his way in life if it were not for Asja Lacis, into a confident *Man* of marked initiative. As almost always with Lacis, it must be that place in the book where she purely does not want to reveal something personal or important to her reader. Considering the earlier discussion of Lacis’ attentive listening of his translations, she can be assumed to plan on utilising his literary prowess. Lacis mentions how Benjamin told her his dreams, but she listened carelessly and interrupted, for she did not understand how such a learned man could “believe in prejudices” (RB 50; [1971]). Now, according to Lacis, she finally understood what Walter meant – dreams are reflections of reality (50). With a slight trace of self-flagellation for her earlier “careless” listening, Lacis depicts Benjamin’s magnanimous, melancholic soul, simultaneously revealing her down-to-earth one.

The ‘New Woman’ finds it necessary to share in her writing that she herself was a role model and inspiration for the men she was involved with. This continues the theme of ‘being a muse in Lacis’ self-realisation. Thus, the author firmly establishes herself as a muse to Benjamin. When Lacis recollects a scene of Benjamin telling her about his translations of Baudelaire and Goethe, she depicts how she wondered what the point of dealing with ‘dead’ literature was (RB 44; [1971]). According to her, he replied vaguely. She goes on to describe Benjamin’s writing in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) as “naïve” and “full of learned quotations,” written “not by a scholar, but by a poet” (45). Here, an element of

sentimentality can be traced. Yet, calling Benjamin a poet and naïve at the same time, sounds a little patronising toward him. Later in the page, Lacis recollects how she stopped Benjamin from wanting to go to Palestine. “All forward-thinking people in their right mind are going to Moscow these days!” was her argument, and she states boldly that she deserves credit for Benjamin not going to Palestine (RB 45; [1971]). This commentary seems very presumptuous on Lacis’ part. It is not known what could have happened had Benjamin left for Palestine to proceed with his career. After all, he did not stay in Moscow, either. Asja Lacis certainly did not and could not know what underlying reasons for not going to Palestine Benjamin had. Proudful of her newly discovered status of a muse, Lacis only saw herself and her own influence on the man, and, just as she did in Benjamin’s lifetime, never tried to ‘dig too deep’.

Lacis envisioned herself as a muse not only to Benjamin but to most men (in the sphere of arts) she knew. Thus, she states that Laicen firmly believed Lacis’ skills and expertise would be useful in Latvia and “managed to convince” her, too (RC 54). Eduard Smilgis, founder and art director of the Arts Theatre, also “invited [Lacis] to direct *The Mayor of Zalamea* [1651] by Pedro Calderon” (57). In both occurrences, Lacis portrays men who are eager to utilise her professional skills, while portraying herself as a modest young girl, talented but lacking any confidence whatsoever. We can only assume how things were in real life. After all, would Laicen even appear in Lacis’ memoirs, were he not to become a famous poet and politician? Would it appear more plausible that it was Lacis who went to him with a request to stay and work in Riga, instead of going back to Orel, where she had to help the refugees’ children? There is simply no way for Asja Lacis, who was so proud of breaking the rules by means of her sharp mind or her exquisite professional skills, to have to be convinced that she was talented. It is more plausible that Asja Lacis came to most men herself offering her service, but these autobiographies are Lacis’ version of the events, anyway. When Lacis presents the facts the way she does, it makes her own figure more significant. Such portrayal is likely made to direct the focus away from ‘inner masculinity’ – in Butler’s words – of Asja Lacis’ true ‘self’ and toward the ‘traditional’ femininity of her created ‘self’. In this fashion, Lacis in her writings conceals her being an assertive ‘New Woman’ under the guise of the constructed ‘traditional’. The case of Lacis’ performance described above highlights another facet of her self-realisation; that of wanting to make men she met *fall victim* to her charms and *femininity*. It belongs to the *gendered* self-realisation of Asja Lacis and proves that gendered performance played an important role in her becoming a woman and in shaping her identity.

My reading of both autobiographies composed by Asja Lacis, the West German *Revolutionär im Beruf* and the Soviet *The Red Carnation*, uncovers the discrepancies in her image. These discrepancies become evident, even though the narratives are written with her own hand. Lacis did indeed use the model of life-creation, with performance as its key part, both in private and in public life. She began her professional life as an actress, the vocation which already implies masks, postures and performance. Unsatisfied with the subjugating nature of this profession, Lacis switched to the more independent and respectable task of directing. Her performance was the way she masqueraded herself as a male director – for directing had long been traditionally considered a man's job. The hyper-feminine performance of the woman Asja Lacis and the male assertiveness of the director Lacis were combined in this profession. Lacis broke the stereotypes in her work (e.g., in her children's theatre) and, like a true avant-gardist, experimented with new styles on stage. Referring to Burk again, who highlights many Constructivist elements in Lacis' methods (83-103), Asja Lacis can be said to have possessed the identity of a genuine creator, the 'Theurgist', while at work. Lacis, therefore, extended her identity from female performance to a more masculine status in her professional life. Thus, she managed to obtain the position of a *subject*, not merely an *object* – something women have long been denied.

My reading of Lacis' life writings led me to believe that in her private life, Lacis wore multiple masks (e.g., *a mother, a wife*). Many of these masks – e.g., a mother or a wife – evoke the idea of masquerade or gendered performance. This masquerade, is, in Butler's words, a primary part of female performance (62). Continuing with the theme of masquerade and performance in Lacis' life-creation, she portrays her behaviour differently in the Bolshevik Russia and Latvia (where the Communist Party was still illegal in the 1920s), and in Weimar Germany with its own period of turmoil. Thus, Lacis presents herself more as a comrade than a woman in *The Red Carnation*, whereas she embodies a fashionable, impressionable, sometimes naive woman, in constant need of male protection and encouragement, in *Revolutionär im Beruf*. In both autobiographies, however, Asja Lacis portrays herself as eager to learn and develop her personality, which links her image to the motif of pride in women's life writing and to the tenets of the 'New Woman' concept. The love life, which plays a major role in a person's private life, especially that of the 'New Woman', is represented in Lacis' case by yet different performance. She emulated the 'free love' and 'free associations' notions, which, in my reading of her narratives, allow the protagonist to feel superior towards other, 'ordinary' women and envision herself a 'true' artist.

In this chapter, I will examine the *Moscow Diary* (1926-1927, first published in 1980) by Walter Benjamin and Asja: režisores Annas Lāces dēkainā dzīve (Asja: The Stormy Life of the Director Anna Lacis, 1996), the book of memoirs written by Dagmāra Ķimele, the daughter of Asja Lacis. The images of Lacis constructed in both narratives will serve the purpose of this chapter, i.e., reconstructing her identity. This will also shed the light on the ‘life-creative’ practice Lacis engaged in throughout her life.

Diary, as a form of life writing, is usually intended to remain private rather than being published. This was precisely the intention of Walter Benjamin. Nonetheless, when the *Diary* was published, it became a source for tracking the origin of many of Benjamin’s ideas during his short stay in Moscow in winter of 1926-27. Thus, Esther Leslie in her book on Benjamin admits that some ideas he acquired during his Moscow trip could later enter into his work *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*, 1928) (74, 239). John Hoffmann in his article on the optics of Benjamin’s and the Russian cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman’s works argues that Benjamin’s “depictions of daily life and cultural transformations underway in Moscow were decisive for his developing views on cinematic perception” (751). The author discusses such essays as “Moscow” and “Of the Image of Proust” (1929), claiming that they could both be affected by Benjamin’s stay in Moscow, since he was working on both texts at the same time, as can be traced in the *Diary*. Hoffmann maintains that many researchers measure the autobiographical text of the *Diary* against Benjamin’s “Moscow” essay. He refers to Scholem who finds “Moscow” to be a “reworking ... of the ... notations contained in the diary” (Hoffmann 754).

The *Moscow Diary*, as a typical diary, includes discrete entries reporting on what thoughts or experiences the author had during the course of a day. Aside from the personal experiences, Benjamin’s *Diary* is full of his most vivid comments on current events and the general atmosphere of the time. These are less relevant for my research, unlike the representation of Lacis he provides. However, some of Benjamin’s remarks turned out to be beneficial as an account of an overall discourse of the period under discussion. It is worth mentioning that it was decided by the publishing house not to publish the *Moscow Diary* in Lacis’ lifetime (Ingram 80). Ingram argues that, in light of this decision, Lacis was deprived of an opportunity to make her reply to Benjamin. Instead, she portrayed him as a friend and rested in peace (80).

A memoir is a different form of life writing, representing a collection of reminiscences of an individual about private and public events of (another) person's life. Memoirs differentiate from autobiography in their main focus on the life of another person, while also including the moments of the author's life. It should be noted that the assertions made in the memoir should be seen as factual, which leaves no room for doubt about the accuracy of the events, presented by Dagmāra, or Daga. Her book of memoirs was published in Latvia in the mid- 1990s, when Latvia was already independent. Therefore, there was no involvement of the authorities or censorship hindering the narrative process. The book may be considered physical therapy for the author, in her attempt to share with the reader her own experience of being swirled into the "stormy life of the director" Asja Lacis. For the reader's convenience, the abbreviations MD and, respectively, DM are used for *Moscow Diary* and Daga's Memoir.

It should be noted from the outset that the views of Benjamin and those of Dagmāra cannot be weighed equally. Benjamin's views on Lacis can fairly be called more valuable for this thesis not only because he wrote the *Diary* for himself, but because his own persona is – to be frank – of a totally different scale as that of Daga. Benjamin is an important historical personality, whereas Daga is not. His opinions give a different dimension to Lacis' identity – the dimension which Daga's private and sometimes even parochial reminiscences simply cannot give her – that of an artist rather than "just a woman", as was Lacis' own desire to prove. However, in order to analyse the portrayal of Lacis created by Benjamin in his life-writing, it is important to refer to some of his broader views, including those on women. Hoenle in her doctoral dissertation on Benjamin fairly maintains that in analyses of women's works in various fields the emphasis on what a woman is rather than on what she does becomes paramount for critics (41, 66). Therefore, a woman author tends to continually be viewed as "just a woman" rather than an artist. This justifies the reference to Benjamin's – owing to his being a prominent historical figure – perspective on woman in this chapter.

For the purposes of this thesis, Daga's views on her mother should also be discussed. As a person with exceptional access to the private life of Asja Lacis, Daga contributes to some aspects of the 'New Woman' concept as applied to Lacis. As will be seen, Daga's comments disclose her dissent by Lacis' failure to adhere to the traditional realm of women's activities, i.e., with what Asja Lacis is. Benjamin, on the contrary, "studies" Lacis, as he himself puts it, and does it from the magnitude of his intellect. He therefore accentuates (for the most part) what Asja Lacis does. For example, it is from his account that we are assured of Lacis' bright ideas which inspired him and of her good expertise at work with children and at theatre. Undoubtedly, my main goal is not to judge Lacis' fulfilment of traditional female duties, but rather to look at her from a different perspective – that of an artist, who creates his/her own

life. Nonetheless, if Daga's recollections were overlooked, Asja Lacis would become what Benjamin became in the opinion of Hoenle, who argues that constant overlooking of women behind Benjamin by his scholarship made him look as though he developed "in abstract realm of ideas rather than a concrete realm of lived reality" (ii).

ASJA LACIS AS A PROFESSIONAL

WORK

Lacis' work can be looked at from the perspective of the job situation during the 1920s, as it opened before Benjamin's eyes. He writes in the *Moscow Diary* that it seemed hopeless to Lacis (34). Benjamin continues his observations: "it is obvious that, even now, she [Asja] is still attracted to Western Europe. It is . . . the liberating influence her thinking underwent in Western Europe, especially through her contacts with Reich and me. Indeed, . . . it is fairly mysterious how, being here in Russia, Asja managed to develop the acuity of insight which she was already displaying in Western Europe" (34). It can be assumed that "the liberating influence" on Lacis' thinking through Reich and Benjamin was Benjamin's rendering of her words. Lacis faced the difficulties of finding a job in the chaos of NEP Moscow and was trying to have another alternative. Apart from the flattering words directed at Benjamin (and his rival, Reich), the author's observation conveys that Lacis had already displayed the "acuity of insight" while in Europe. This – although surprising to Benjamin – highlights that the artistic views and tastes that Asja Lacis had formed before she went to work and met Reich in Germany, i.e., during her studies and early work in Russia. Only much later in his *Diary*, hence, during his visit, does Benjamin state that "Asja . . . told [them] about the perspectives that . . . had opened for her, about the possibility of her getting a job as an assistant director in a theatre on Tverskaya which puts on two shows a week for proletarian children" (95). Judging from the description, this was not Lacis' dream job, but it was better than nothing. It also proves Scholem right when he states in the preface to *Moskauer Tagebuch*, that Benjamin acknowledged Lacis' lack of necessary connections (unlike Reich's) (Walter Benjamin, *Moskauer Tagebuch* 13).

Asja Lacis' performance in her work can be reconstructed from the words of her daughter. In her memoirs, Daga maintains that Lacis "always worked" (DM 30). Daga also refers to Lacis' Latvian autobiography, where Lacis affirms, rather self-confidently, that the process of creative writing is not undertaken by a writer to express himself, but to fight for the revolutionary ideals. However, in Daga's opinion, Lacis' creative process was solely aimed at "expressing herself" and aided her in the realisation of her ambitions and in scandalising the public (69). The performance of Asja Lacis at work can further be supported by Anna Al'chuk's

article, in which she interviews the person acquainted with Lacis – the Doctor of Arts Freimane, mentioned in the previous chapter. Freimane’s recollection is that both Lacis and Reich had a goal of resurrecting the revolutionary theatre in Latvia in the 1960-70s (Al’chuk 173). Such efforts of Reich and Lacis must have looked naïve in the least, for the time of the revolutionary theatres had passed, and two elderly theatre directors were hardly the right people to inspire a new trend. Their actions could, however, represent another instance of Lacis’ performance, for she clearly had a purpose of making people discuss herself, hence displayed her persona ostentatiously.

As stated in *Chapter Two*, the profession Asja Lacis chose for herself was (and to a certain degree is today) viewed as masculine during the period under discussion. In this respect, it seems valuable for my thesis to discuss Benjamin’s views on gender in the professional realm. It is regrettable that his notions on women’s place in life and on masculinity and femininity in general are ambivalent and ambiguous. Thus, in 1913, being a student, Benjamin gave a rigorous comment on a psychology course he was then taking: “for me what [the professor] says is unacceptable, since he considers woman in principle to be incapable to be of highest moral development.” Benjamin likewise was adopting an idea of coeducation and liberating women at the time and claimed that he considered “the types ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as somewhat primitive in the thought of civili[s]ed humanity” (quoted in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings 55-56). Nevertheless, already in 1918, his concept of “woman” became “archaic” (57). In a letter to a friend, Benjamin expressed the following opinion of a book *Gedanken Platons in der deutschen Romantik* (The Thoughts of Plato in German Romanticism, 1910) by a female writer, Luise Zurlinden, “The horror that grips you when women want to play a crucial role in discussing such matters is indescribable.” As can be seen, such attitudes do not exactly agree with the views expressed some five years earlier on “transcending the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (quoted in 702-703). This is partially where Hoenle’s indignation stems from, when she observes that scholarship on Benjamin takes for granted the masculine perspective failing to recognise the impact of women, whom Benjamin’s intellectual work often relies on (15, 70).

Benjamin’s perspective on Lacis’ attitude to work – for he never comments on the actual creative process of Lacis on stage or behind the curtain – should also be taken in consideration. Thus, he claims that Lacis believed that even the crows in the air were “organi[s]ed with great precision and that their leader inform[ed] them as to what to do” (MD 45). This allows an assumption that Lacis valued organisation, leadership, and rigid structure in her work. It is of interest to compare these qualities of Asja Lacis as outlined by Benjamin with the qualities his wife possessed. As Benjamin’s biographers Eiland and Jennings assert, referring to Scholem, Dora Benjamin was “a capable manager – energetic, perspicacious, and

goal-oriented” (68). It can be seen that Benjamin, being rather impractical, was drawn to motivated and highly organized women. Benjamin never mentions the acting talent of Asja Lacis. Nevertheless, he notes once, “Asja was in the worst possible mood; I had never before witnessed such clear evidence of that nasty prickliness of hers which must make her so convincing in the role of Hedda Gabler” (46). Benjamin’s observation arouses interest, for it reflects no professional traits of the actress Asja Lacis. The author’s remark only shows that he connects the mood of Lacis at a particular moment to the potential part in a play, thus drawing simple parallels. In his comment, Benjamin denies the mere possibility of Lacis’ prickly mood being put on by her intentionally to create distance and, perhaps, even irritate him. The fact is, he separates the everyday behaviour of Asja Lacis from her performance.

Continuing the theme discussed in the previous chapter, the responsibility of ‘New Women’ for the generation to come, it should be noted that much more space in the life writings of both Benjamin and Daga is devoted to the actual work with children Lacis was involved in. Thus, Benjamin maintains that “Asja was crazy about organi[s]ing everybody” and “taught the children at her theatre improvisation and how to manage their body” (MD 20). Adding to the earlier comment on Lacis’ apparent liking for a structured and organised work, it also reflects the influence of Meyerhold’s ‘biomechanics’ and Tairov’s ‘synthetic theatre’ group movements on her professional views, mentioned in *Chapter Two*.

Lacis’ daughter argues that most of Lacis’ progress on her Aesthetic Children’s Theatre was achieved in Orel, which she simply repeated later in Latvia during the 1920s. It was Orel, where Lacis started to work with Paegle and Laicen. It was during this time, when a renowned Latvian (and later German) actress, Elvira Bramberga, came to Lacis’ theatre (DM 20). “Mother had an obvious talent in working with kids,” pays Daga a tribute to her mother (20). She continues that Lacis used the system of Anton Makarenko, the most influential Soviet educator and pedagogue. Thom Gehring, Fredalene Bowers and Randall Wright in their article on Anton Makarenko note that his Children’s Colony schools included mostly “former ‘wild children’, orphans, refugees, taken from the streets.” Makarenko divided them into groups and occupied “intelligently” (333, 336). Referring to his writings, the authors argue that he emphasised the importance of the arts in teaching. Many a time Makarenko’s students put on dramas for local communities (333-343). Makarenko also had an acute insight into the teaching style. He believed that “successful performances result in students who participate willingly in the artistic world created by the teacher,” which added to his view on the use of arts in education (340). Continuing the theme of teacher’s behaviour style in a classroom, Gehring et.al. argue that Makarenko himself learnt to give his face and his posture many different nuances of expression. The educator demanded the same from his teachers, whom he believed to be “forever on stage ... in front of “a skeptical audience ... looking for signs of weakness” (339,

341). According to Makarenko, teacher mastery included both verbal and non-verbal cues, whereas the mien “should . . . be independent of the educator's mood. . . . [T]he educator had to be lively and wide-awake . . . genuinely angry when something was wicked, so . . . pupils would really feel the anger and not mistake it for pedagogical morali[s]ing” (quoted in 342). It is also worth mentioning that Makarenko's methods of education were part of the overall discourse of the “bold, far-reaching goals of . . . social transformation and the creation of a new Soviet man” (quoted in 331). “Mother could manage even the teenage hooligans, occupying their attention with some activities,” claims Daga linking Lacis' success with the fact that “improvisation became the basis of the Theatre of Children's Aesthetic Upbringing” (DM 19). Evidently, the work of Asja Lacis was inspired by Makarenko's methods, for it shows traces of “successful performance,” group division (discussed below) and occupying students “intelligently”. As to the improvisation, even though it is usually regarded as a spontaneous act, it can be assumed in Lacis' case that, with her love of structure and organisation, she pre-planned the improvisations of her students, or at least their general line. The naked declamations of the actress (and the wife of Tairov) Alisa Koonen, mentioned in the previous chapter, could also have served as sources of Lacis' improvisations.

Lacis' attitude to work can be seen in the following comments made by Benjamin: “I read her random passages from the *Moscow Diary* . . . I chanced upon the part where I dealt with communist education. ‘It's utter nonsense,’ said Asja. She was annoyed and claimed I knew nothing about Russia” (MD 82, italics added). This remark demonstrates that Lacis indeed cared about her project and explains her utter intolerance towards the ideas she considered false or unreasonable. This assumption is further buttressed by another observation made by Benjamin much earlier than the one above:

She spoke with great animation about her work with children at the children's [Centre]. [She told me] the story about the child in her care who had bashed in the skull of another of her children. . . . [T]his often happens to me: I barely hear what she is saying because I am examining her so intently. [H]er idea [was]: the children must be divided up in two groups, because it is utterly impossible to keep the wildest ones – she calls them the most gifted ones – busy with the others. [It is] evident that Asja is most successful . . . with the wildest children. (MD 21)

In addition to the fact that Benjamin admits he never really hears what Lacis is saying, this scene is remarkable on several counts. It explains the reason for Lacis' staying at a sanatorium and the cause of her nervous breakdown. This is supported by Lacis' daughter's account of the

event: “When in summer camp, two boys ran away at night, later one of them was taken to hospital with a serious head trauma. If he had died, Asja would have been sued” (DM 72). It also is one of the many manifestations of the real Asja Lacis, who, aside from masquerading and engaging in any sort of performance, committed to her work with children and genuinely enjoyed it. As a person, truly devoted to something and aware of her success at this, she could indeed be intolerant to other people’s ideas or suggestions (which was earlier proved by Benjamin’s account of the communist education idea). Armed with Makarenko’s system, Lacis also suggested dividing children into various groups according to their abilities, which shows her as a capable leader / educator / director, depending on a particular group she worked with. The last sentence of Benjamin’s statement is of interest in terms of Lacis’ working style, as well as demonstrative of her personality type. She was “most successful with the wildest children” and called them “the most gifted ones” – highlights that she disliked working with the calm ones. This portrays Lacis not as a genuine educator – who is supposed to work equally well with all children – but, to use a strong word, more as a disciplinarian in the field of children’s education. For, in spite of what Lacis was ready to believe herself, or what image she created in her life writings, here the trace of her masquerade / performance is visible. Asja Lacis became involved in her work not because she was eager to aesthetically educate children, but because she wanted to ‘shine’ and this sort of occupation provided the basis for her performance. As a former bright student who was to face some difficulties in her own socialising within the classroom, Lacis could also have liked a real challenge, which motivated her not only to work with the former hooligans, but to develop their aesthetic skills. On the other hand, she might have associated herself with ‘free spirits’. This argument partially derives from the earlier discussion of her nonconformist approach to work coupled with her sharp criticism of traditional methods (e.g., of the bourgeois theatre). If Lacis saw herself belonging to the ‘free spirits’, psychologically she could have needed to assert this by establishing her authority and control. As seen from these assumptions, Asja Lacis could have had conflicting impulses at work, which did not prevent her from succeeding in it.

SELF-REALISATION

Being praised for a job well done with children and gaining a relative renown in the world of theatre was clearly not enough for Asja Lacis. This did not correspond to her aims in life or the feeling of self-realisation. According to Daga, Lacis wanted to be viewed as a theorist and liked to imagine herself a prominent intellectual (DM 138). However, the daughter makes an assertion that Lacis was a utilitarian, good at team work, and through her whole life, Lacis piggybacked her way to fame on Reich’s shoulders (and intellect). Thus, Daga claims she heard

how Reich dictated to Lacis what would later become her book, *Revol'utsionnyi teatr Germanii* (Germany's Revolutionary Theatre, 1935). Lacis' daughter heard how Lacis argued with Reich but eventually gave in. In Daga's opinion, Lacis "was not silly" and did so every time she felt Reich was better and broader educated (137).

Lacis' ardent desire to be seen as a theorist can be confirmed by Benjamin. "[W]e got to talking about the 'piano' as a piece of furniture that functions in the petit-bourgeois interior as the true dynamic centre of all the dominant miseries and catastrophes of the household. Asja was electrified by the idea, she wanted to write an article on it with me which Reich would then turn into a dramatic sketch" (MD 28). The author of the *Moscow Diary* not only supports Daga's assertions, he unintentionally resolves our hesitation about Lacis being the initiator of the collaboration at work discussed in *Chapter Two*. Keeping in mind that Benjamin did not intend to publish his *Diary* and wrote it exclusively for his own use, a very objective observation can be made that it was indeed Lacis who wanted (or needed) Benjamin to co-author with her. The reason for this wish of Lacis is further explicated by Benjamin. In the *Diary*, he mentions three articles for a Latvian communist newspaper Lacis hoped would reach Riga by illegal means, for it was very important to her to be read there (MD 21). In this respect, Lacis seemed to manifest the exact type of a working-class woman, researched by Gerstenberger and Jensen. Both scholars discuss how their protagonists differentiate themselves from their former proletarian peers and think of them as requiring their "intellectual prodding and protection" (Jensen 70). Using their own "unique 'ascent' [to a higher class or better life]," the proletarian women writers do nothing other than assume the role of the class which used to look down on and edify them, namely, the middle class (Gerstenberger 115-117, quoted in the original; Jensen 67-70). Since Lacis found it important to be read in Latvia, she, too, can be assumed to have conceived her former class peers as requiring her 'lessons'. Here it should be made clear that Lacis' origin and belonging to a particular social class are not straightforward. Her father, being a skilled worker, belonged to the working class, even though he made enough money to send her to a private school. Her mother, owing a small bed linen business, could be referred to the lower middle class. However, it was a safer choice for Lacis, during the time of the Revolution, to highlight her working-class background. Considering that both her parents worked 'with their hands', Lacis can hypothetically be said to belong to the proletarian class. In this thesis, however, it is more relevant to follow the picture of herself Lacis created, not the reality as it was. In her desire to mentor her proletarian peers, Lacis might have unintentionally assumed the middle-class role, too, which, in turn uncovers her duality another time, meaning her pronounced hatred of the bourgeoisie.

The question presents itself as to whether another part of Lacis' self-realisation can be considered as serving as a muse to someone. In the opinion of her daughter, Lacis never became

a muse who would inspire a great man from behind the curtain in the full sense of the word. She wanted to be in the limelight herself and was granted this right by the people who loved her (DM 30). In her memoirs, Daga also argues that Lacis' dream was to make every man her admirer so that no woman could look down on her (31). She further confirms her suggestion by writing that Lacis wanted to prove to everyone that she was not just a wife but an artist in her own right (138). These comments explain why Lacis disliked domestic chores and everything connected with domesticity (which will be examined below), or why the house was always full of people (which, in Daga's view, deprived it of the status of home). They also partially prove why Lacis did not become a genuine muse to one of the distinguished men she was involved with. The "muse", incidentally being a feminised epithet, implies victim behaviour on a woman's part. It also suggests infinite love and perfect obedience, the qualities Asja Lacis did not happen to possess. She was likewise a person, more egocentric, to devote her whole life to anyone else's inspiration.

Even though Lacis might not be considered a muse in the direct sense, she was good at her profession and was a source of inspiration to others. Having grateful people, therefore, can be viewed as part of Lacis' self-realisation as a professional. Thus, the actress Bramberga, joined Lacis' Children's Theatre in Orel at a very young age. Later, she would be grateful to Lacis her whole life, for she believed Lacis made her an actress (DM 20). In this particular case, it is not worth discussing whether Lacis' primary goal was masquerade and presence in the limelight, or a wholehearted devotion to her profession. She inspired the future prominent actress in some way, which, in view of this topic, adds to the theme of her self-realisation.

Among the grateful people was Walter Benjamin himself, whose account of Lacis' methods of inspiring him can be considered most sincere and even objective. This is explained by him merely describing the events of the day, rather than having to pay tribute to the renowned director Asja Lacis. Thus, on one occasion Benjamin writes: "Asja reminded me of my intention to write something critical of psychology, and I once again reali[s]ed just to what extent the possibility of tackling these subjects depends on my contact with her" (MD 18). The entry allows an assumption that Lacis managed to direct Benjamin's writing efforts the way she could benefit from them. There is little doubt that Lacis did so to help Benjamin promote himself. However, she might have needed this promotion more than he did. The more prominent the name of Benjamin would become, the more audience would read their co-authored articles, which, it may be assumed, were for the most part written by him.

On various accounts, Benjamin confesses Lacis made an intellectual impact on his views. "Asja's opinion may take on importance for me" (MD 43), "I read the project for the Diary and she made a number of pertinent observations" (71), "[Asja's] comments [about Benjamin's writing a reply to the obituary on Rilke] encouraged me to rework it that very

evening” (99). Gershom Scholem in his book on friendship with Benjamin notes that the unflattering obituary outraged the latter. Benjamin’s rejoinder was never published during his lifetime. It was his only article on Rilke, which “betokened a greatly altered attitude toward [him]” (Scholem 80). These entries show the message the author is conveying: Lacis was capable of affecting people intellectually, and her opinion could be considered. In the case of Benjamin, she, too, was a representative of a different culture and, giving credit to one of her life’s primary goals, of a different class. Therefore, Lacis’ comments might have made Benjamin ‘come down to earth’ and look at his writing from a different angle. After he met her, his views indeed became more Marxist-based.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY: WAS IT JUST A POSE?

Continuing the theme of Lacis’ revolutionary practices as one of the masks in her masquerade brought up in the previous chapter, it is worth mentioning that in Benjamin’s *Diary* there is not much information on it. The author had feelings for Lacis, so most space of the text is confined to his description of those feelings. Unlike Benjamin, Daga was certainly given free rein in her memoirs. Using her life writing as a sort of therapy for her traumatised psyche, she devoted much space to the analysis of Lacis’ use of the political situation. Thus, Daga claims Lacis was always cunning. She used her ostensible revolutionary devotion, her theatrical ideas and her “unusual power over men” to achieve her own prominence. As indicated above, Lacis wanted to be the author of wise books so that people would admire her (DM 138). Daga allows the reader of her memoirs to follow the route of Lacis’ revolutionary practices, which she calls a “revolutionary pose” (27). She states that during the studies in St. Petersburg, Lacis mingled with the left-leaning youth and already realised her life and work would not be possible without an element of politics. Later, during World War I, Lacis had to leave Orel and went to Riga. She did not want to go back to Russia, torn by the Civil War, but she did not want to stay in Riga, either. However, the daughter believes, that later, when the longest part of her life was over, Lacis had to compile her autobiographies according to common canons (DM 16, 24).

Daga discusses the utmost duality of her mother, which she was shocked by. The daughter suspects that Lacis chose to wear the mask of a revolutionary for the same reason she chose her vocation – in order to be able to break stereotypes and scandalise society (DM 27). Daga also argues that at the time the image of an ascetic fighter was highly appreciated in society. In Lacis, contempt for the bourgeoisie went hand in hand with greediness and love of elegant outfits and fine jewellery, which enabled her to imagine herself a real aristocrat. In Daga’s opinion, Lacis was always envious of other people’s wealth and possessions. The feelings of love of fancy clothes and enviousness of wealthier people could go back to Lacis’

own description of her school years, examined in *Chapter Two*. Assuming the facts she presents in her own life writings are true, Lacis had to wear an apron made of cheap fabric, whereas all the other female pupils had more expensive ones. This argument also allows to draw parallels between Lacis' later manner of behaviour and a competitive desire to outshine other women. The theme of Lacis' duality is continued by the following occurrence presented by Daga. At school, Daga made friends with children who came from a working-class family. Lacis was furious and forbade this friendship, even though the family of "sympathetic Russian people" treated Daga as if she were a member of the family. Lacis' admonition, according to Daga, was, "there are children of writers in your class, make friends with them!" (128). These remarks made by Daga lay bare an interesting detail about Lacis' revolutionary actions. They reveal at least two motives lying behind – Lacis' competition with other women and her class snobbery. The competition unmasks Lacis' vanity, as discussed in the relevant section, whereas class snobbery is another demonstration of her duality.

According to Hoenle, in the face of the social and political disturbances of Weimar Germany, to Benjamin, Lacis "was a living example of both intellectual exploration and practical progressive political change," in both of which he wished to become involved (15). This opinion accords with what is known of some of the women in Benjamin's life, including his wife, Dora (whom he met in one of the student politics circles) – i.e., their interest and participation in political life (Eiland and Jennings 64). Therefore, it can be stated that Benjamin preferred not only intellectually, but also politically active women. As to Benjamin's account of Lacis' revolutionary mask, it is more limited than Daga's portrayal. However, it is eloquent. He pictures the scene of a conversation with Lacis after receiving an unsuccessful reaction to his article on Goethe. The reaction was from Karl Radek mentioned in *Chapter One* as an initiator of the 'nude parades' in post-revolutionary Russia. Benjamin shared the news with Lacis, who "immediately started off by saying that there must have been some justification for what Radek had said. [T]hat I didn't know how one had to go about things here. . . . Then I told her straight to her face that her words merely expressed her cowardice and her need to bend, at whatever cost, wherever the wind was blowing" (MD 81). Benjamin's portrayal proves Scholem right when, in his preface to *Moskauer Tagebuch*, he argues that Benjamin was disappointed to trace a certain cynicism and opportunism on Lacis' part during his visit (Benjamin 13).

If Lacis' contempt for the bourgeoisie is to be viewed as part of her "revolutionary pose", the following illustration by Benjamin serves as an addition to it. Having invited Lacis to his hotel room, Benjamin engaged in reading a lesbian scene from Proust to her (MD 94). "Asja grasped its savage nihilism: how Proust ventures into the tidy private chamber within the petit bourgeois . . . and then mercilessly smashes everything to pieces" (94). Lacis' dislike

of bourgeoisie was presumably to be later used in her own work. So, Benjamin's ideas not only inspired her creatively, but also supported the legitimacy of her revolutionary masquerade. All the accounts above (again) confirm the opinion of Freimane, expressed in Al'chuk's article: "Lacis liked the Revolution because she liked herself in the context of the Revolution" (174). That said, the revolution consolidated Lacis' disdain for the middle class, her desire to masquerade herself, and her professional ambitions. The post-revolutionary situation played to Lacis' advantage and allowed her to step into the foreground, potentially achieving more than she could have, had the revolution not taken place.

BECOMING A WOMAN

FEMININITY

BEAUTY

As explored in *Chapter Two*, Lacis must have imbibed her views on femininity and beauty both from her mother's looks and from literature. It was already mentioned that she took enormous pride in her small hands and feet. For this, she was highly ridiculed by her daughter, who claims that Lacis' small body parts enabled her to believe in her "ostensibly 'noble'" descent (DM 127). This demonstrates how Lacis convinced herself of her fantastic origin and corroborates the previous claim to Lacis' duality. As Simon N. Patten – an influential American economist who was not indifferent to questions of sociology – argues in his article "The Evolution of a New Woman" (1914), in literature, small hands and feet were symbolic of noble descent (116-121). They represented fragility (of a woman) and implied the desire of a man to protect her. It is alarming to see, how serious Patten is in his argument, that (some) women's small bodily parts are a sign of feminine "retardation" and physical inferiority (118). And, while the author contends that "a race of fully developed women" with big, same as men's, bodily traits should eventually develop through the suffragist movement, he himself admits, regrettably, that "men's choices [of "this false ideal of womanhood"] still remain conventional" (120).

Returning to literature, it can be seen that, whenever a literary heroine of low descent happened to possess such features, it usually meant trouble and sorrow for her (e.g., Esmeralda or Thumbelina). The reason for this is that for the woman it meant aspiring to a place (in society) she was not granted, hence, did not deserve by birth. Such a woman was also partially guilty in arousing noble men with her small body parts, for they fell victim to her deceptive noble femininity. The dissonance which was consequently created was frowned upon, for it

defied convenient stereotyping. It included the view that peasant / working-class girls must have big / red / clumsy hands. Therefore, living in the era of ruined stereotypes with new ones emerging, Lacis considered her small limbs a still useful feature adding to the cherished beauty ideal. The Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, briefly mentioned by Lacis in her life narratives as one of her favourites, seemed to “remain conventional” in his choices, too. Thus, several scholars researching Turgenev’s work have noted such epithets appearing throughout his novels, “small delicate hands,” “beautifully groomed hands,” “graceful hands” (Robert Reid and Joe Andrew 109-113; Jane T. Costlow 122-135). Daga confirms Lacis’ claim that, already in her school years, she read Turgenev. The daughter suggests this is when (in approximately 1911) Lacis chose to be called “Asja” instead of Anna, after Turgenev’s most famous female character (DM 17). These facts allow the assumption that, inspired by Turgenev, Lacis felt even more secure in her confidence about the incomparable beauty of her limbs. As discussed, some researchers at the time of ‘New Women’ propagated the ideas of masculinising femininity – through bigger limbs and taller stature, – which can be considered another affirmation of the superiority of the masculine. However, as seen from Patten’s article and from Lacis’ manner in Berlin – discussed below – (many) men continued to prefer small hands / feet / statures. The fact remains that small hands (or other body parts) were both part of the ‘New Woman’ typology and an essential attribute of the literary ideal of feminine beauty. It leads to a conclusion that there is continuity in relation to this particular quality of femininity, hence, in the construction of the ‘New Woman’ concept as a whole.

Benjamin’s portrayal of Lacis’ appearance seems to present more interest for this project, due to the passion he is trying to overcome throughout his writing. At the very first instance he sees her in Moscow upon arrival, he notes: “Asja did not look beautiful, wild beneath her Russian fur hat, her face somewhat puffy from all the time she had spent bedridden” (MD 9). It also accords with Ingram’s discussion in her book on women’s autobiographies and Lacis in particular, where she maintains that Benjamin is frank, direct, and even cruel in his writing. His description of Lacis’ countenance links with what Heldt declares about femininity traditionally being seen through the prism of “male voyeurism” (95). Ingram also discusses Benjamin’s “rather unflattering portrayal of his alleged object of desire.” She compares his description of Lacis’ appearance with portrayals of their objects of affections by other men of fame. Ingram’s argument discloses the similarity of “curious discrepancy” in their feelings and attitude to those women (81-82). It also seems beneficial to know Benjamin’s tastes in terms of a woman’s looks. Thus, one of the “only” three women Benjamin ever loved (Hoenle 90), Julia Cohn/Radt is described by a friend as “petite” and having a “slight body” “creature” who “moved gently and cautiously in a literal and symbolic sense” (Eiland and

Jennings 141-142). The descriptions above bring back the theme of small female bodies cherished by men and illustrate that Benjamin's tastes lay toward gentleness and cautiousness in women. As will be seen further in the chapter, Lacis used her body movements very calculatingly and liked to produce the impression of a "gentle creature," too. Presumably, this is why Benjamin did not appreciate the look of Lacis' fur hat, which he connected with wildness. It produced the dissonance between the expected and the actual experiences of seeing Lacis for him. These arguments allow the assumption that, despite the ideals of beauty and femininity undergoing changes at the time, the importance of these notions was still significant. It is also evident that men continued to hold a traditional view on them, indeed applying the "male voyeurism" towards women. Therefore, Lacis' own –at times, frantic – adherence to the 'traditional' beauty ideal could have been caused by the unwillingness of men to change it.

COSTUME

The theme of costume / masquerade as a dominating trend of the time was examined in *Chapter One* of this thesis. In his *Diary*, Benjamin merely continues this theme with his observations on people of Moscow both in theatres and on the streets:

Admittedly the convention of not caring how one dresses is beginning to be overturned. Once a uniform of the ruling class, it now threatens to become a sign of those who are weakest in the struggle for existence. In the theatres, the first formal gowns are gingerly emerging. . . . Fur vests, velvet jackets, urban elegance and village costumes are blended among the men and women. (MD 70)

The dishevelled group of people as they appeared before Benjamin's eyes, can be said to fully represent the turbulent life of Moscow during the NEP. Discussing the ways Lacis constructed her costume at such a period of time is beneficial as it can enhance the understanding of her personality and the causes for this or that behaviour chosen by her at a certain point in time. Benjamin writes: "we visited a number of stores on Petrovka in order to buy fabric for her dress, her uniform. At least, this is what I call it, for she insists that her new dress be exactly the same cut as the old one from Paris" (27). The fact that Lacis "insisted" on a new dress being exactly the same as the previous one parallels the art of costume she might have learnt from Brecht, discussed in *Chapter Two*. Lacis did not need just a dress, she needed a uniform, as was wisely noticed by Benjamin. Her prudent choice of a costume, thus, highlights the idea of masquerade in her approach to her representation. As was stated in the previous chapter, such approach reflected the intersection of gender and class in Lacis' act of constructing her image.

Further Benjamin notes that Lacis “was again wearing her yellow shawl. Her face has an uncanny sheen to it these days” (MD 57). Wearing a yellow shawl evidently disturbed Benjamin. His use of the epithet “uncanny” fully reflects it. Benjamin once mentioned the “hostile elements” about Lacis in the *Diary* (35) and here he is physiognomically – as he did before with Lacis’ mood and acting skills – connecting Lacis’ appearance to certain aspects of her behaviour. Presumably, Lacis’ behaviour scared him. This adds to the overall misunderstanding of Lacis by the author, which echoes with the theme of misunderstanding during his trip, researched by many scholars.

Unlike Benjamin, Daga provides a different perspective on Lacis’ costume and overall image. She is convinced the image Asja Lacis created – no makeup, long hair pinned down behind her head – was picked by her deliberately to produce the impression of explicit sexuality combined with a strong intellect (DM 30). The daughter may be right, for had Lacis chosen to wear makeup, she would have fallen under the category of the Weimar *neue Frau*. At the time, makeup was often mis- or over-used and associated either with actors / actresses during a performance, or with ‘loose’ women. Daga claims that “young girls would always wonder what dress Asja was wearing this time” (30). The daughter argues that Lacis used to dress extravagantly but her taste was not developed enough. Apart from this, Lacis was untidy all her life, including her clothes. Nonetheless, Daga notes that her mother was always conscious of her lingerie (30, 138). These observations, made by the daughter, confirm such a trait in Lacis as her liking of embarrassing the public. They also highlight another aspect of her persona – not going into detail. Lacis did not wish (or need) to develop her taste, for the main details of her attire she had chosen – e.g., the extravagant shawl and fine lingerie – were sufficient for her. It may likewise be assumed that the daughter’s resentment over her mother’s methods of rearing is passively aggressively directed at her presumable lack of taste. Daga might be searching the shortcomings of her mother’s style, which is explained by the many things she herself was deprived of in her childhood (as will be shown below). For this particular reason, it is of interest that Benjamin speaks of Lacis’ uniform, whereas Daga – of her mother’s extravagant dressing. It can be assumed that they either describe different periods of time – for Daga was very young at the time Benjamin visited Moscow – or this is indeed the daughter’s resentment talking. It is regrettable that Benjamin left no account of Lacis’ way of dressing when she lived in Berlin, and that his *Diary* descriptions are limited to Lacis either wearing a sanatorium robe, or her uniform. It can be assumed, though, that what he calls Lacis’ uniform at the time was becoming her preferred style, rather than a professional outfit. If this assumption is correct, Lacis at the period of interest could be carefully constructing her image with the help of costume. It was bound to lead to the creation of individuality, which, Lacis must have known, was timeless. Daga, on her part, might be over-interpreting facts in her memoirs, which

she does not really remember. The daughter may remember how, amidst the greyness of a miserable existence of Moscow under the NEP, other women turned their heads to watch Lacis wearing her bright yellow shawl. Combined with random recollections of Lacis' lack of *byt*, childhood resentment, and with what Daga read later in her mother's life writings, she is creating her own Lacis in her narrative.

BEHAVIOUR MODE

Lacis' behaviour mode, as was stated multiple times, was characterised by *masquerade* activity. Her daughter recollects that, "when Asja lived in Berlin, she realised soon enough that she needed to stand out to attract the attention of 'fine' people" (DM 141). In Daga's words, Lacis found the German women at the time "mostly stiff, unclean and shameless" (141). She particularly emphasised their big hands and feet. This made Lacis assume the role of a childlike, innocent female. According to Daga, the German ladies were shocked but looked at Lacis as though she was an exotic flower (141). As is well known, the majority of German women of Weimar hardly intended to hide their masculinity behind the hyper-feminine masquerade. They had no time or energy for this. With few men left after the war, the women wanted to show them straight away what they wanted. So, often there was no room left for flirtation. On the other hand, getting the feeling of what it is to have a job and an independent income while their men were at war, many women did not need men anymore and became self-sufficient. All this makes Lacis call them "stiff, unclean and shameless," for, even though she worked all her life, she never lived on an independent income and was always (financially) supported by men. At the twilight of female femininity and sexuality as a main discourse in both societies, Lacis' behaviour, chosen by her in Berlin, could have been her most vivid performance. It is worth noting that this sort of masquerade must have worked on Benjamin, for he clearly enjoyed a certain eccentricity in women (Eiland and Jennings 141-142). Moreover, his own life presented "an ongoing set of improvisations or masks" through which he constructed himself (quoted in 143). Lacis, who had a particular goal of enchanting Benjamin, did not limit herself to either of the manifestations of the 'New Woman' – the Weimar or the Russian counterpart. She instead created a mix of 'new' and 'traditional' behaviours a woman could engage in.

It is worth discussing Lacis' 'masquerade' of her origin. Engaging in a masquerade during a particular behaviour of her choice was certainly not the only aspect of Lacis' performance. Thus, Daga writes that Lacis despised the bourgeoisie with its customs but considered herself an aristocrat (DM 129). This envisioning never stopped Lacis from stressing her own working-class origin – as mentioned above – whenever she could (129). This type of masquerade may symbolise Lacis' inner conflict with her origin. For, she clearly saw herself as better than the other working-class women (hence, the pride of her small hands), yet, she

looked down on the middle class. The reason for this second object of despise must have been rooted in her origin again. Having studied at a private school and at the (only) tertiary courses available for women at that time, Lacis was bound to meet girls and women of different origin, but more so of the above-mentioned middle class. She herself writes in her autobiographies that all the other pupils (at school) were “the children of rich industrialists”. Presumably, in spite of all her efforts, there was still a gap between her cultural level and theirs, at least outwardly, in terms of manners and upbringing. Thus, the Revolution worked to her advantage, allowing her to combine her unresolved inner issues with the official ideology.

In Lacis’ behaviour mode there was a conspicuous trait worth discussing. This is Lacis’ *greediness* pictured by her daughter and partially reconstructable from Benjamin’s narrative. In the *Moscow Diary*, Benjamin writes, “I gave her presents” (12), “I [bought] her some halvah in a pastry shop” (14), and describes the following scene:

[We took a] walk along Petrovka. A splendid fur outfit with variegated pearls was hanging on the wall. We went to find out how much it cost and learned that it was a piece of Tungus work (and thus not an “Eskimo” suit as Asja had thought). It was priced at two hundred and fifty rubles. Asja wanted it. I told her: “If I buy it, I’ll have to leave right off.” But she made me promise that I would some day give her a big present that would remain with her for the rest of her life. (22)

Realising that her seemingly simple, yet pragmatic, request ended in failure, Lacis managed to turn it into a highly romanticised promise of a memorable gift. For the infatuated Benjamin, such a present would mean a thing for Lacis to remember him by, while she simply wanted to have her “little wool”.

On another occasion, Lacis is portrayed by Benjamin from an even more negative standpoint. Approximately in the middle of his trip, he makes an entry in the *Diary*:

[W]e were walking side by side when suddenly Asja asked me if I could lend her some money. [But he himself had borrowed from Reich]. She replied that I never had any money when one needed it, proceeded to make other reproaches, mentioned the room in Riga that I should have gotten for her. . . . I was . . . extremely exasperated by the subject she had so tactlessly broached. . . . I wanted to turn off in another direction, but she held me back hanging on to me as she had almost never done before, not letting up

on the topic. Finally, beside myself with anger, I told her that she had lied to me. She had assured me by letter that she would immediately reimburse all my expenses. (84)

It can be seen how Benjamin in this scene behaved like a petty, meticulous rationalist, which can partially be explained by his lack of a reliable income throughout his life. Apart from what his parents provided, he did not have much money and enjoyed only sporadic earnings. Furthermore, it is worth discussing Lacis' actions. Here, she represented neither of the 'New Women', but, remarkably, either the *neue Frau* or Ellochka the Cannibal types, mentioned in *Chapter One*. Just like the publicly scorned and ridiculed, yet flourishing, images did, Lacis demonstrated the following attitude: when she is with a man, he should pay for her. She consequently allowed the man to be with her / use her, or, respectively, sold herself. This was not what the proponents of the 'New Woman' construct suggested, for it subverted the idea of a woman's independence of a man.

Lacis' avarice can be further reconstructed from the portrayal provided by Daga. The daughter claims that, despite Lacis' attempts to present their life as that beyond poverty in all her life writings, the family, as foreign expats, lived "way above the living standard of other Muscovites" (130). The family had the right to do the shopping in most prestigious stores, including the Eliseev store, or *Eliseevsky* (DM 131-132). The Eliseev store was named after its original owner is Russia's most famous grocery store with a grand interior, located in the very centre of Moscow. The store was nationalized after the Revolution but continued to work under the name *Gastronom # 1*. In spite of this, the Muscovites and people from other cities – who often came from the farthest places of the USSR to just look at the amazing interior – continued to refer to it by its original name. Lacis' ability to shop at such a store was in itself counter to being a revolutionary fighting for the people, for the people could not afford to shop there. Daga recalls how Lacis sent her to sell surplus food from the Eliseev store at a local market and never shared it with the friends, including fine white bread, which was a luxury at the time (the early 1930s). Overall, the daughter describes the mother as covetous and avaricious (133).

Further on, Daga recalls how the actress Bramberga assumed that Lacis invited her to visit them in Berlin. When Bramberga went there, the disappointment on Lacis' face revealed her discontent with this visit. She made Daga, a little girl, take Bramberga sightseeing around Berlin. Elvira was shocked by such a reception but continued to be friends with Lacis and helped her throughout her life (DM 20). This particular instance can be interpreted as another evidence of a certain covetousness about Lacis, which links with her reluctance in sharing food (from the Eliseev's) with friends. However, the object of her coveting here was not material. In this case, Lacis was certainly greedy for Benjamin, whom she was trying to get to marry her, which is sustained by Benjamin's biographers (Eiland and Jennings 315-316). Such

attitude was not demonstrative of the 'New Woman' construct, but again of the petty *neue Frau*, who would normally try to get her "little something" for it is better than nothing. These predominantly 'shallow' women could not be imagined sharing something with the peers, especially other women, whom they saw as rivals and only wanted to annihilate. Lacis must have invited Bramberga to Berlin hypothetically, not planning to ever see her there. She evidently did so to present herself as a (wo-)man of the people, sociable and ready to help. However, the performance faded when the actress did show up at a place, where Lacis worked with determination in order to change her fate for the better. Lacis' presumable greed for Benjamin is supported by Paškevica, who in her book on Lacis discusses Lacis' letter to Bramberga from Capri when she was there with Benjamin. Paškevica argues that Lacis primarily described the beauty of Italian nature and did not share a word about Benjamin (172). It is evident that the last thing Lacis wanted to interfere with her plan was another woman (especially, another actress).

The theme of *rebellion* as part of the image of Asja Lacis was touched upon in the previous chapter. Lacis' rebelliousness can be explicated now from the point of view of how other people saw it. When Benjamin describes Lacis' ward in a sanatorium, he states that "Asja stirred up a rebellion among the other women with the result that the patient [who had mental issues] was removed" (MD 31). He does not comment on the occurrence; however, it may look as an addition to the motif of political activity and the revolutionary mask, discussed above and carefully elaborated by Lacis herself in her autobiographies. On the other hand, one might like to remember the instance of Lacis' "bending" after the negative reaction of Radek to Benjamin's article. Why did Lacis not "stir up a rebellion" at that point in time? To Benjamin, whom she was trying to convince of her most sincere love, it would have been more important than her justifying Radek's position. Why did she not at least object to Radek's review, considering that he knew next to nothing about Goethe to criticise Benjamin's text? It would have proven the legitimacy of the revolutionary image, deliberately constructed by Lacis, for she would look like a genuine justice fighter. She did neither of those. Instead, Lacis rebelled against the mentally unwell patient who would otherwise have made Lacis' stay at the sanatorium much less comfortable and even dangerous. The conclusion which can be made is therefore that Asja Lacis was a rebel only when it suited her and when it did not cost her anything. She rebelled against some minute matters and fought for her own comfort, not for the people's rights as she envisioned herself.

Religiousness seems to play a more important role in the creation of Lacis' image than she could have predicted it herself. As was shown in *Chapter Two*, one of Lacis' primary goals in constructing her 'self' was to create an atheist revolutionary, who looked down on religion and religious people. In this light, it is captivating to follow the lines of Benjamin's *Diary*,

where he subverts Lacis' myth-making. Thus, he writes, "I entered the church of Our Lady of Kazan, which Asja had told me was one of her favourites" (MD 51). The author conveys that Lacis not only went to church but attended churches regularly and even had her favourite among them. During the 1920s, apparently, Lacis' upbringing was not overthrown overnight. The traditions and customs she later wrote she hated were honoured by her at the time. Even considering that Lacis could have belonged to a different religious confession and went to churches to get an aesthetic experience, it is possible that 'the brave revolutionary' was a very religious young woman at the time. The official autobiographies of Lacis were written much later. In them, just like everyone else, Lacis had to follow certain common canons, as was fairly noted by her daughter (DM 24).

Of note, *vanity*, another pillar of Asja Lacis being a woman, features prominently in her daughter's memoirs. It is presumably explained by the 'blindness' of Benjamin who was doomed to see mostly positive things about the object of his passions. This can be explicated from the standpoint of gender, for, what Daga sees as vanity, Benjamin could have deemed an expression of Lacis' affection for him (as he often did). Daga, on the other hand, was not in love with Asja Lacis, was also a female, yet, differed from her mother significantly. Thus, she claims that Lacis liked to study life, was always amazed by it. Probably, Lacis' passion was to a considerable degree a performance. She liked to 'shine' with her skills and knowledge, she wanted to be above not only women, but men. However, the triumph of a woman was on no account the primary goal in her life. She wanted to establish herself as a prominent person and a major artist. Everywhere Lacis wanted to turn the eyes, and she knew how to do this. It added the spice to her life and to the "consciousness of her attraction" (DM 27). The message Daga is conveying is that Lacis was indeed very conceited throughout her life. This assumption is made valid by further remarks of the author. "When Asja met Bertolt Brecht in Munich," Daga writes, "she must have been extremely happy for she adored this kind of life" (60). The daughter continues:

Asja was especially proud of her famous acquaintances. She was happy to have the reputation of a 'femme fatale' who became Benjamin's muse and was convinced that 'an average' woman could never do this. One of Asja's biggest sorrows was that she did not have a relationship with Brecht. . . . Brecht respected Asja as an educated woman and a fighter at the front of experimental theatre. . . . Asja's frustration was so big that she had a crude photomontage in which she is embracing Brecht made for her.

(134)

In the book of Daga's memoirs, one can indeed see the photomontage she is describing. In place of little Daga Lacis was originally holding in her arms, there is the image of Bertolt Brecht cut out from another photograph. Daga extends the theme of vanity of Lacis' character, claiming that Lacis "especially liked to dine in fine restaurants where she spent heaps of money. . . . Poor Benjamin had to treat her with this." Daga argues Benjamin was indifferent to such entertainment for he was a "man of the study" (139 - 141). The examples above illustrate Lacis' vanity, for they present the reader with a character who thinks herself better than others. It concerns other women to an even greater degree than men, for Asja Lacis considered herself a person of superior charm and intelligence. Vanity as a trait of her character was bound to influence her behaviour type, hence her masquerade and overall performance.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

The remarks made by Benjamin accord with the overall atmosphere of the period, as it was outlined in *Chapter One*. As opposed to the hyper-sexualised time in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the situation during Benjamin's trip was different. After another visit to the cinema, he makes the following entry in the *Diary*, "Russian film knows nothing of eroticism. As is well known, the 'bagatellisation' of love and sex life is part and parcel of the communist credo" (MD 55). Subsequently, he writes, "the period that lies ahead seems to me to distinguish itself from the previous one in that the erotic is becoming far less of a determining factor. My observation of Reich's and Lacis' relation has, to a certain extent, made me more conscious of this" (72). These views confirm the idea that the discourse of sexuality was fading in Soviet Russia during the NEP, after the authorities decided the people were not 'ready' for 'free love'. In this respect, the hyper-feminine behaviour of Asja Lacis with elements of masquerade could be the most conspicuous aspect of her entire personality. As to the nature of her relationship with Reich, Benjamin's observations demonstrate that there was no spark about it, but convenience, support and habit – hence, the attributes of stability, valued in men by Lacis (as discussed in *Chapter Two*).

In this sub-section, it is worth reminding ourselves of a direct connection between sex, the prostitute, and sexuality as the overarching discourse of the early twentieth century. Therefore, Benjamin's views on the topic should be considered. In 1913, he wrote that the prostitute was not "some kind of beautiful object" of "shallow aestheticism" which should arouse respect similar to that aroused by Mona Lisa (quoted in Eiland and Jennings 56). Benjamin believed that calling prostitution "poetic" deprived the women behind this profession of their souls. His biographers suggest that for Benjamin at the time, the "significance of the prostitute (who will re-emerge as a prominent ... type in *The Arcades Project*) l[ay] in the fact that 'she d[rove] nature from its last sanctuary, sexuality.'" The authors imply that "the

sexuali[s]ation of the spirit” was what Benjamin saw in the prostitute (quoted in 56). Eiland and Jennings infer that with this analysis of the symbolic meaning of the prostitute, Benjamin really went into the “woman” question (55-56). As discussed in *Chapter One*, both in Russia after the Revolution and in Weimar Germany, the boundaries between ‘good’ women and prostitutes were being blurred, which added to the confusion in both societies in terms of gender and social roles played by women and, consequently, by men. In light of this, Benjamin’s opinion on the prostitute in particular and on sexuality in general is helpful for the purposes of my study. Hoenle rightly notes that Benjamin’s passion for Lacis was caused by her being exotic. The author further alleges that Lacis’ “assertive, independent sexuality made her unlike either a ‘mother’ or a ‘whore’, the two basic roles assigned to women within a Western patriarchal system” (15). As already established in the previous chapters, the exotic element was seen as constituent in the ‘New Woman’ construct. So, in terms of sexuality, Lacis indeed manifested a ‘New Woman’ archetype. It is interesting to mention Benjamin’s own “relative lack, or perhaps introversion, of a bodily erotic element” based on the firsthand accounts of the women he was involved with. For them, Benjamin was “incorporeal” (Eiland and Jennings 142-143). These facts demonstrate Benjamin’s own sexuality (or lack thereof?) and allow an assumption that Lacis’ explicit sexuality and the intersection of the *mother* and *whore* elements in her image were one of the factors which awakened his interest in her.

Sexuality is part of one’s femininity and plays a major role in the context of the ‘New Woman’ construct. Asja Lacis began expressing her liberated sexuality, hence asserting herself as a ‘New Woman’, early in her life. According to her daughter, Lacis “entered the family of Julis, her future husband, in 1911,” even though they officially got married – without the blessing of his parents who “did not want such a daughter-in-law” – only in 1913. (DM 18-19). Lacis had been in a relationship with Julis, who was one year her junior, for some time before. She spent most of her time in Julis’ room, which was done secretly from his parents. When the parents walked in on Lacis lying naked on Julis’ bed, she was not put to the blush but defiantly sat up on the bed. “What do you, primitive and antique people, know? A woman’s body is beautiful! . . . Why are you so surprised? A woman needs a young and healthy man!” (18). As is commonly known, sexual relations before marriage at the time would automatically place the woman in a ‘special’ socio-cultural category. The norms of morality were supposedly looser with regard to sexuality and premarital sex among the working-class women. Jensen, discussing autobiographies of the proletarian women, argues that the working class was an “incarnation of . . . wanton sexuality and lust.” In the author’s view, the body of an early twentieth-century working-class woman was “placed under corporeal constraint that serve[d] to increase her ‘market value’ . . . on the marriage . . . market.” The woman of such origin was expected to discipline her emotions and relations, so that the conduct of her body would not

“reflect poorly on the rest of the family” (62-64). Therefore, when later Lacis’ mother managed to marry her daughter to Julis (as discussed in *Chapter Two*), Lacis can be said, in Jensen’s terms, to have felt “inner compulsion to appease” her mother’s fear of ruining the family’s reputation. So Lacis, in the one instance of her marriage, chose to keep her devalued female body “subdued in compliance with the gender ideals she ha[d] internalised” (Jensen 67-68).

The unfortunate (based on Lacis’ own account) experience of having her body repressed by both social and familial norms ended in its further reasserting by Lacis. As stated by Daga, Lacis used Lenin’s “glass of water theory” (which denounced Kollontai, being wrongly ascribed to her) throughout her life and was “absolutely free of prejudices.” Lacis “solved many problems in life using this ‘traditional’ method” for she believed it was the easiest, most convenient and most effective way (DM 22). As can be seen, Lacis again consolidated the liberated sexuality of the ‘New Woman’ concept with the method, old as Abel, and ‘traditionally’ used by women to improve their life conditions at low cost or sacrifice. Millions of women before Lacis did so, and she invented nothing new in her approach.

The *Diary* entries of the infatuated Benjamin continue the theme of sexuality of Asja Lacis as a manifestation, albeit partial, of a ‘New Woman’. At the beginning of his visit, he writes, “I cannot remember a woman granting gazes or kisses this long – [her kisses] have lost none of their power over me . . . the control she has now imposed on herself in erotic manners, tell me she is fond of me” (MD 35). While Benjamin was in love, he was fully concentrated on himself and sees everything Lacis does as applicable to himself. Nevertheless, the control she “imposed” on herself in “erotic manners” can very simply be explained by Lacis’ unwillingness to get pregnant. It is known that, at the time of the Weimar Republic in Germany, contraception became widespread, giving women more knowledge about their body (Regina Braker 78). In Russia of the 1920s, there was much less knowledge about contraceptives or opportunities to obtain them (Zinara Z. Mukhina 9). It is unlikely that Benjamin, absorbed in his genial thoughts, would have thought of the consequences, i.e., of bringing ‘protection’, which again put Lacis in the ‘traditional’ gender position, where a woman had to think of everything.

The motif of sexuality in the (self-)construction of the ‘New Woman’ archetype implies the right for one’s own body, which consequently includes the right to use any parts of that body as one pleases. Knowing from Daga’s memoirs how proud Lacis was of her own hands for being small and, following the assumption that she decided to take Koonen as a role model, Lacis’ life-creation certainly included calculated body movement and gestures (DM 131). The following passage from Benjamin’s *Diary* supports the argument above and demonstrates that Lacis succeeded with her hands, too:

Asja had me remove the letters and she lay down on the bed. We kissed at length. But the thing that excited me the most deeply was the touch of her hands; she herself had in fact once told me that everybody who was attached to her felt the extremely powerful forces that emanated from her hands. I placed my right palm directly against her left one and we remained in this position for a long time. . . . Then I read her the lesbian scene from Proust. (94)

So Lacis drew Benjamin's attention to "the extremely powerful forces that emanated from her hands" in relation to other men – "who [were] attached to her" – once again forcing him to return to that part of her body in his thoughts over again. From the position of a 'New Woman', this was a very calculated move which allowed her to win Benjamin over and continue keeping him on a leash. It also is another proof of how Lacis would always find a trait or characteristic in someone and try it on for her own masquerade.

The fact that Benjamin "read [Lacis] the lesbian scene from Proust" was used by Gerhard Richter to demonstrate how Benjamin was trying to arouse Lacis (109-111). However, even if he did, it would most probably have been in vain, for Lacis, with her love of 'traditional' methods when it came to men, did not seem to produce the impression of a lesbian (or bisexual) woman. Richter uses the same scene in his discussion of Benjamin's "implied" impotence at the time he lived in Moscow (109-111). He buttresses his argument with the following scene from the *Moscow Diary*: "I said that I hoped things would have improved by the next time we see each other. – You mean you'll be fit enough again to be at me twenty-four hours out of the day? –, I was only thinking of being closer to her, of talking to her. Only if I were closer to her, would this other desire then return. – "How lovely," she said. – This conversation left me very unsettled" (MD 108). It can be inferred from this quotation that sex did not play a minor role for Lacis ("be at me for 24 hours"). Since sexuality is a major pillar of one's femininity, it will partially explain Lacis' hyper-feminine performance, which, as can now be seen, was not just a pose or a means to an end to her. She indeed enjoyed the 'traditional' methods when dealing with men. Benjamin, on the other hand, is presented (by himself) rather objectively as the one who is uncomfortable to discuss the topic: "I said this was not exactly what I had had in mind." Assuming that Richter is right about Benjamin's condition in Moscow, his discussion proves multiple researchers wrong, when they claim that Lacis used her eroticism to tease Benjamin. Based on the *Diary*, Lacis "lay down on the bed" on several accounts, but he made a voluntary choice to read her his translations. If Richter is correct in his argument, Lacis' daughter's inability to understand one thing can be explicated. Thus, Daga wonders in her book "why Asja

was always so cruel to Benjamin and laughed at him.” Lacis’ “mockery of Benjamin behind his back” (DM 127-128) can go back to his presumable impotence.

Love as an inherent aspect of one’s sexuality will now be reviewed briefly. In the *Diary*, Benjamin is focused on himself, and his utmost subjectivity with respect to love becomes visible. Daga can be said to be more objective, for she had an opportunity to extrinsically observe her mother’s behaviour. Thus, the daughter claims Lacis did not understand the ethical meaning of the word “love” (DM 19). In her words, Lacis often claimed she could only fall in love with an intelligent man, which, in daughter’s opinion, undermines her mother’s understanding of the word. Lacis was unpredictable and had an unusual sexual appeal but could always control herself like an “iron lady.” Daga is convinced this is because Lacis did not know what love was and believed she could play men any way she liked. The daughter believes, however, that Lacis’ constant victories and impunity in fact tormented her mother (27).

In light of the theme of love in Lacis’ image, it seems of interest to compare her with Thackeray’s most famous literary character, Becky Sharp, who also “played men any way she liked,” and whose “constant victories and impunity” did not seem to bring her happiness. Thackeray’s heroine “manipulates and contrives, while maintaining a façade of innocence” (Ellen O’Brien 8-9). Many researchers have pointed out that her ‘double morality’ in practice was caused by her love of performance and admiration, which is why she never felt real love (Juliet McMaster 42, 106; O’Brien 5-9). Similarly to Becky Sharp, who has been named a nascent ‘New Woman’ by many scholars, Lacis played – or ‘performed’ – love, but, presumably, never allowed herself to fall victim to the feeling. Just like Kollontai – whose name and ideas resounded in Russia and beyond at the time discussed – advocated (failing to do so herself) Lacis never seems to have put love above other (important) things in life. This, at least partially, proves Daga right in her claim that Lacis “did not understand the meaning of the word ‘love’”.

For Benjamin, love was fashioned in terms of inspiration he got from “people he loved unrequitedly” (quoted in Eiland and Jennings 143). He “could not face physical love for any length of time” and displaced his erotic impulses into work (quoted in 143). Nevertheless, love played a significant role for Benjamin. Hoenle indicates that “in his own estimation, the state of being in love and the woman/women with whom he was in love played a decisive role in making him who he was – both as a man and as an intellectual” (90). Benjamin’s perception of love in Lacis, however biased it may be, is strangely similar to that of Daga. The words he uses to describe Lacis’ emotions related to love are “affection,” “attachment,” “closeness,” but never “love” itself. The only instance he uses the word derivative from “love” is as follows, “But I have no idea whether I could even now bear living with [Asja], given her astonishing hardness and, despite all her sweetness, her lovelessness” (MD 35). Even though all the epithets

above are demonstrative of Benjamin's perception and very subjective perspective due to the state of infatuation, they make an addition to the reconstruction of Lacis' personality. Thus, it can be assumed, that she was capable of masquerading as a woman "attached" or "close" to Benjamin but could not give the performance of love. This serves as another argument in support of discontinuity of Lacis' manifestation as a 'New Woman' archetype, for even the man in love with her, whom she was trying to coerce into marriage, felt her "lovelessness."

RELATIONSHIP MODES

FIRST ATTEMPT: 'TRADITIONAL' MAN AND 'TRADITIONAL' MARRIAGE

Jensen in her article on working-class women argues that in any given society, there is a number (usually limited) of identities one chooses to adopt in order to fit in. Working-class women, especially, had to behave as 'good daughters' and were expected to obey the parental wish (e.g., to marry them) (63-64). Jensen names this phenomenon the "hegemonic construction (or rather, obstruction) of their selfhood as women" (64). Such construction implied the subjugation not only to various social factors, but also to "dominant [family] discourses" (64). Asja Lacis in her youth fell victim of such "hegemonic construction," too. When her mother wanted Lacis to marry Julis, it could have been explained by the fact that she 'compromised' her reputation, hence cast a shadow on the familial identity. Using Jensen's terms, Lacis' self-identity had already been shaped by "coercive practices of the self" which suggested "disciplining emotions" (as stated above) and monitoring reactions arising within her family (63). Therefore, Lacis had to give in to her mother's wish, likely realising that she indeed ruined her and her family's reputation. The subjugation of her will and body, which followed as a result, denigrated Asja Lacis as a person and transformed into a "sexualised object of random male attentions," as was discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, later in her life, Lacis herself equated her moving body with such an object. As was assumed earlier in the thesis, Lacis either enjoyed being what would traditionally be called a 'fallen' woman – and hence, revenged her mother *post factum* in such a perverted manner, – or used the 'traditional' method very pragmatically and calculatingly to achieve her goals. In any case, Asja Lacis managed to turn her origin and the traditional expectations of 'looseness' from it – hence, her "bad sexuality" (Jensen 63) – into her benefit.

The idea of Lacis' 'revenge', caused by the subjugation of her body to the marriage, can be continued from the daughter's perspective. Daga wonders why Lacis hated her first husband so much (DM 29-31). Her view is that Lacis could not forgive Julis for remarrying after their divorce and leading a happy life. The thought about another woman replacing her

and inspiring love to the man Lacis previously ‘possessed’ must have “driven her crazy,” which later turned into “pathological hatred” (30). It is obvious in Lacis’ life writings. The hatred, though, can be explicated by the same subjugation. Presumably, Lacis could not forgive Julis for marrying her against her will. She could alternatively have hated him for genuinely loving her and marrying her for love, whereas she was simply practicing her performance skills on him. The hatred can be assumed to originate from Julis’ attempts to “bring Asja to normal life,” which were seen by her as “petty bourgeois, patriarchal despotism” (19). It may likewise be explained by the fact that Julis knew Lacis from a young age, and her masquerade or performance did not work on him. He saw the real Lacis behind those practices and tried to coerce her into doing what the duty of being a wife required of her. Apart from this, Julis shared the culture with Lacis and was closer to her in terms of the class. This observation relates to Gerstenberger’s argument of the working-class women’s autobiographies. The author examines the life path of a proletarian woman, who differs from her peers in her literacy level, view on life or ambitions, and can eventually find happiness only when she marries a man of a different (higher) class (100-139). It can be assumed, that Asja Lacis also found her happiness only in relationships with men of a different class, who did not anticipate ‘normal’ behaviour from her. Daga in her book finds it paradoxical why Lacis who had many admirers throughout her life and could finally settle down with one of the richest, never did so (DM 27). In Daga’s opinion, it is because Lacis always wanted to be in the limelight and call attention to herself. These qualities of her persona would make it less possible for her to live the life of a rich man’s wife (27-28). Referring to the argument above, however, it is becoming clear that such a life would require ‘normality’ and – albeit of a different sort – subjugation, which were alien to Lacis’ nature.

Going back to Thackeray’s Becky, it is worth mentioning that Lacis, too, came from a different social class than the men she had relationships with. Lacis, too, spent most of her life trying to prove other women that she was better than them as an act of retaliation for real and imagined hurts she experienced during her school years. The fictional Becky Sharp is similar to the real-life Asja Lacis in that she was also artistically gifted, tried herself as an actress, but had to confess that she enjoyed manipulating people more than professional acting, hence, became “an actress in her life” (McMaster 42). She even had the infamous “small, lady-like” hands and feet, which, however did not make her a real lady, precisely because she devoted too much of herself to climbing up the social ladder (128). In an untimely answer to Daga’s question, another argument concerning Becky could be provided. McMaster suggests that Thackeray’s character did not know it, but she simply was not “created” for a comfortable, rich life. Instead, she was created a vagabond who enjoyed playing people more than the well-established life of the wife of a rich man. As far as Lacis is concerned, she, in McMaster’s

words, can be said to have been “preordained” to spend her life “shining,” not to marry into wealth and stability (10). The argument above seems to explain much: her dislike of the middle class, her contempt for well-established relationships and not marrying a rich man, her ‘maniacal’ desire to outshine all other women, and even her pride in her small hands.

It is also important to note that in Lacis’ autobiographies, as mentioned in *Chapter Two*, she pictures her divorce as a decision initiated by herself. Lacis plainly explains it by Julis’ inability to understand her and support in her creative urges. Daga in her memoirs contradicts Lacis’ presentation. She states that, one night, Lacis did not come home but turned up only the next morning (DM 22). When Julis asked Lacis where she had been, she replied, simply and in a rather dismissive way, that she had spent the night at her lover’s place. According to Daga, the reply made Julis faint. He filed for divorce and Lacis had to leave Orel where she was working at the time (22-25). In Lacis’ version of the events, she left Julis (because he was heartless) and then she left Orel because the city was “way too provincial” for her (RC 34). As stated before, my objective is not to establish the truth. Yet, in her narratives, Lacis invents facts and twists reality, which sheds light on her personality and the image she herself is shaping. If the divorce was the decision of her husband as the daughter claims, Lacis evidently tried to avoid this detail as shameful and continued constructing herself as a ‘New Woman’, independent in her choices. It is peculiar that the same fate befell Lacis as her mother before, i.e., she became a divorced woman. This happened in spite of Lacis’ education – as opposed to her mother – or rejection of traditional norms (as was suggested in *Chapter Two*). However, Lacis, unlike her mother, did not choose to “wring her hands in despair” or confine herself to seclusion, but continued to preach the ‘free love’ approach (16). She might have been piqued by Julis’ decision but proceeded with her masquerade. Lacis’ presentation of the divorce as solely her decision, combined with her masquerade afterwards, can be said to contribute to her performance and life-creative practice, undertaken by Lacis to construct the life she wished.

I shall begin this sub-section with the suggestion of Lacis' daughter as to why Lacis did not continue the relationship she had with Linard Laicen, the famous Latvian poet briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Daga claims that her mother left Laicen, because "there was too much of this man for her" which made Lacis feel it would be difficult to compete with him (DM 54). The daughter's view supports the argument made before about Lacis picking men who would allow her a position of attention. In her relationships, Lacis seemed to prefer weak or passive men, happy to be led. In Lacis' relationship models, there was no room for living up to a partner or, worse, giving in. The primary desire of Asja Lacis was to 'shine' in public, which meant a comfortable, 'unburdensome' family life. Technically, Lacis never had a family life, but the fact remains that one of her main requirements for a man was his ability to arrange a life in which she could shine.

The relationship Lacis simultaneously had with Reich and Benjamin has already been characterised as a 'love triangle'. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that Benjamin himself preferred "a complicated triangle" as a favoured "form of erotic entanglement," ideally "with the love object already firmly attached elsewhere." (Eiland and Jennings 415). He was "free of jealousy" during his wife's extramarital relationship and even asked her advice on his own "falling hopelessly in love" with Julia Cohn (142). Dora Benjamin also asserted that in the 1920s, the German writer and Benjamin's friend, Franz Hessel, supplied her husband with "a series of young women of loose morals" (252). So, Benjamin's liberal views should not have been disturbed by the model of relationship practised by Asja Lacis. In *Chapter Two* it was discussed how Lacis applied the model of 'free love' based on the love triangles of the Symbolist marriages, which were in turn based on the model suggested by Chernyshevsky. Here, with the help of the *Moscow Diary*, it will be seen how Lacis manipulated the participants of this love triangle into getting from each of them exactly what she needed. The reader of the *Diary* can read the following comments of Benjamin, similar in their style and motive. Thus, at the very beginning of his stay, Benjamin states: "Reich arranges, much against [Asja's] will and mine, a game of dominos between us in the recreation room of the sanatorium" (MD 13). He later writes: "Asja bought me a pair of galoshes . . . it was not as difficult as Reich had claimed" (17). After a theatre play, Benjamin makes the following entry in the *Diary*: "Our seats were not adjacent so I only sat next to Asja during the first tableau. Then Reich came to sit by me; he thought the strain of translating was too much for her" (25). Closer to the end of his trip, he describes how Lacis invited him to see a play for children in a theatre she might get a job in. However, she did not show up and, after Benjamin had to wait outside in freezing weather, sent a note saying she confused the day. Recalling the next day, Benjamin puts in his *Diary*, "I discovered that [Reich] too was going to the children's theatre to which Asja had

invited me. The sum total of my preferential treatment thus turned out to be a futile half hour wait” (100). Through these remarks, the author imparts the common aspect to the style of relationship he himself was involved in: Lacis, during Benjamin’s stay in Moscow, was fostering a rivalry between him and Reich, making the enamoured men jealous of each other.

Other observations of Benjamin suggest that the relationship which developed between Reich and Lacis was more exclusive than the one between Lacis and himself. It becomes evident from the *Diary* that to Benjamin it was a revelation. On one occasion, he writes: “[Asja] never turned up. Reich learned in the afternoon that she had not been well that morning. But he wouldn't let me go see her in the afternoon either” (25). As is clear from this comment, Reich possessed more information about Lacis than Benjamin did. Reich also was able to not let Benjamin see her, which was unimaginable the other way around. This showcases a different style of Lacis’ relationship with Reich, more intimate, close, and even habitual. Referring to the comment above, it did look like a family. The relationship of Benjamin with her reminded more of an affair, which means it – just like an affair is supposed to – was doomed to end sooner or later.

Lacis’ attitude to Reich from Benjamin’s perspective is even more valuable for the purposes of my study. The following entry in the *Diary* seems to be very eloquent: “[Reich] had had a heart attack. Asja was very agitated. It struck me that Asja was dealing with Reich’s ailment the same way I used to deal with Dora when she was sick. She was scolding him . . . in a provocative manner, acting like someone who wants to make the other person aware just how guilty he is for having gotten sick” (32). The message the author is conveying – apart from that he was not the best husband – is that Lacis needed Reich (e.g., as a source of financial and intellectual support). She indeed needed him, yet, did not want to look after him. This is why it is evident from Benjamin’s remark how much Reich tired Lacis with his illness, which is caused by the lack of care or interest on Lacis’ part, whatsoever.

It is of interest to follow Benjamin’s track of thoughts as far as his own view on the future with Lacis is concerned:

On three or four occasions I directly or indirectly avoided sharing a future with her. . .

What came into play were not the financial considerations, nor even the fanatic urge to travel, . . . but rather the fear of those hostile elements in her which only now do I feel I can confront. In the past few days I also said to her that had we decided to join together back then, I don't know that we wouldn't have split up long ago. Everything happening in and around me combines to make the idea of living apart from her more intolerable

to me than it ever was before. A contributing factor is certainly the fear that in the future, when Asja is finally well again and living here with Reich on stable terms, it will only be with a considerable amount of pain that I will be able to come up against the boundaries of our relationship. (35)

The further indication of rivalry between Benjamin and Reich can be extrapolated from the text. Aside from it, Benjamin unintentionally shows why Lacis did not (and probably could not) represent the continuity of the 'New Woman' construct. As seen from the citation, Benjamin was in no haste to let his 'male advantage' 'slip away'. He found it convenient to avoid talking about "sharing a future" with Lacis and admitted the preference of travelling to having her. He was in no rush with a divorce, either, for the status of the affair with Lacis was easier and more convenient for him. Even "living apart" from Lacis was "intolerable" to him not because he was amorous, but mostly because it implied Lacis' living with Reich "on stable terms." This latter argument lays bare a peculiar trait in Benjamin, which he can be said to share with the object of his infatuation. Benjamin evidently disliked the "stable", "established" relationships as much as Lacis did. This assumption confirms his own hesitations about "sharing a future with her" and the suggestion that "[they] would . . . have split up long ago." This assumption is in line with the argument above about his preference of "complicated triangles" as a form of relationship. In light of this, the question naturally arises: why did he not divorce his wife, if he found established relationships such an incumbrance? Benjamin's biographers argue that his marriage was hardly ever happy (Eiland and Jennings 68). However, referring to Scholem, they themselves object to this straightforward point of view. Thus, Scholem claims that she was "a decidedly beautiful, elegant woman" and testifies to the "affection for each other" between Dora and Benjamin (quoted in Eiland and Jennings 68). This accords with Hoenle's argument that "the most striking deviation from the norm in the Benjamin's marriage is that they chose to marry for love rather than money" (90). As seen before, the significance Benjamin placed on love was enormous. This apparently made it difficult for him to divorce Dora, even despite his passion for Lacis. Hoenle maintains that Benjamin's "sentimental" view of love did not, however, capture the practical side of his marriage (89). This view is supported by his biographers. "Dora was in many ways a perfect complement: if Benjamin ... lived the life of the mind, venturing forth into practical matters only occasionally, ... it was often [Dora's] practicality that made possible Benjamin's thought and writing," conclude the authors (Eiland and Jennings 68). Even after the "bitter" divorce, Dora continued to support her former husband financially (467-468). It can be seen that Benjamin's choice whether to divorce (which would become a firm decision in 1929) was not

an easy one. This highlights the significance of both Dora and Asja in his life and proves Hoenle right when she emphasises that “Dora Benjamin [was] much more than an insignificant appendage of her husband, just as Asja Lacis [was] much more than Benjamin’s lover” (73).

Returning to the passage from the *Diary* about “avoiding sharing a future with Asja,” it can be seen that Benjamin reveals many hesitations in the text. These hesitations may partially explain Lacis’ “tolerant contempt” – mentioned further – towards him (behind his back), which surprised Daga her whole life (DM 121). The “hostile elements” in Lacis, mentioned by Benjamin, in turn, show her tiredness of the role she plays with him, hence, occasional dropping out of it. By adopting a seemingly far-fetched assumption, it may serve another proof that Lacis was good at acting only when the role accorded with some elements (presumably, not only “hostile”) in her. Naturally, this is a sign of an amateur actor rather than a professional.

To end this discussion, it seems useful to refer to the memoirs of the daughter again. In her book, Daga suggests that Reich had an inkling about Lacis’ relationship with Benjamin. She also claims that Lacis “cheated on both Reich and Benjamin” during the whole length of their relationships (DM 65). In this case, Lacis’ model of relationships with men reflects what she might have borrowed from Kollontai. That said Lacis did not see exclusiveness a necessary part of any relationship she began. Nevertheless, her attitude seemed different from what Kollontai advocated. Considering that Lacis chose only prominent or useful men and received something from each of them, her style of relationships looks more like what a *neue Frau* would do, not a ‘New Woman’. The type of relationships Lacis preferred seemed to differ from Chernyshevsky’s model of a family, too. Aside from some similar features (a union not for procreation, but for shared ideology and life interests with a partner), Lacis’ unions (including the ‘love triangle’ of interest) were neither “celibate”, nor “spiritual”, nor “asexual”. There seemed to be no trace of altruism, advocated by Chernyshevsky, either. While Gippius called such partnership “a common cause associated with the transformation of life,” to Lacis it seems to have been more of a calculated move towards the ‘transformation of her life’ (Matich, “The Symbolist Meaning” 42). Successful partnerships could potentially lead to a marriage (as was discussed in the example of Benjamin’s brother and will be further demonstrated below). A marriage, in turn, could transform Lacis’ life entirely in terms of a social status, comfort and respect she seemed to yearn for. However, this assumption brings to mind Daga’s confusion as to why Lacis never settled down, though she had multiple opportunities to do so. Supposedly, the men who would suit the role of her husband did not wish to marry her (including Benjamin at the period of interest and Reich, who would only marry her much later in life), whereas those who might wed Lacis were dismissed by her. In any case, the relationship mode Lacis engaged in, as one of the pillars of the ‘New Woman’ concept, another time brings to light not only her

duality as a person (proving Daga right), but the discontinuity of this concept when applied to Asja Lacis.

SHORT LEASH

ENVISIONING CLOSENESS

In this sub-section I will examine the nature of Benjamin's relationship with Asja Lacis in detail. It is of importance for this thesis for several reasons. As opposed to his thoughts about the common future with Lacis, the description of actual facts can help to reconstruct some characteristics about Lacis' personality. Then, it should not be forgotten that Benjamin wrote the text for his own eyes only, hence was free of censorship, except his inner censorship, as was fairly noted by Scholem (Benjamin 9). Lastly, the assumptions based on Benjamin's account of Lacis' actions can help to recreate her identity. This 'unvarnished' image will be useful for the project as an important aspect of Lacis as a 'whole person'. The following entries in the *Diary* illustrate how Benjamin likes to imagine closeness between Lacis and himself, sometimes where it did not exist. "Asja was looking at me very affectionately. An allusion to a decisive conversation in Riga [in 1925]" (MD 10). Benjamin was very sure of the meaning of Lacis' look on this occurrence, however, according to Daga, Lacis looked this way at every man she met. The daughter describes an instance when Lacis cast her glance upon a very young man, new to her and Reich's apartment. She claims that the mother, who was in her eighties at the time, still managed to make the man very uncomfortable (DM 30). It can be assumed that such a look seemed 'super sexy' to Lacis, while the young man felt embarrassed by it, for he came to the house of a renowned theatrical family presumably to learn from them. It is also possible that Lacis' look of "high sexual appeal" appeared bizarre, while it surely did work on certain men.

The theme of (imagined) closeness continues with other assertions of this respect by Benjamin. He writes, "We talk. I observe that she basically forgets nothing that involves us. (That afternoon she had told me she thought that I was doing well. That it was not true that I was going through a crisis)" (MD 15). It can be seen that Lacis not only told Benjamin what he wanted to hear ("no crisis") but played her role of seducing him diligently. Trained as an actress, – leaving aside her level of expertise – Asja Lacis knew that as a first step to being successful in a role one must know the lines well. Remembering their conversation from more than a year before, Lacis recited it for Benjamin and reinforced the illusion of 'togetherness'. Benjamin goes further with this illusion: "If I am still holding out fairly well, it is also because despite everything, I recognise Asja's attachment to me. The familiar *Du* seems to have gained ground between us, and the long gazes she directs at me . . . Also, she often says my name"

(35). The message the author is trying to convey is how skilful Lacis was at the game of seduction. Benjamin continues, “I have barely spoken to Asja in private of late, but in the few words we do exchange I believe I detect her closeness to me so distinctly that I feel a great sense of calm and well-being. I can think of nothing that has as healing and yet as intense an effect on me as the most trivial little questions she puts to me about my affairs. To be sure, she doesn't do this often” (45). It is amusing to note that Benjamin “detected closeness” whenever Lacis spoke of him. As will be seen below, he himself was not capable of this act of mutual care and interest. Tentatively it can serve as yet another proof of the role Lacis was playing at this moment. Having little interest in Benjamin apart from the very pragmatic one, she, nevertheless, realised the soothing effect of nice words for a person, especially a frail one. Nonetheless, Lacis did not overindulge Benjamin with such comforting words (“she doesn’t do this often”), which links with the motif of her ‘whip’ discussed later in the chapter.

It is of importance to emphasise in this sub-section, that Benjamin clearly was not powerless or blindly in love with Lacis, as one might suspect. In fact, it is captivating to follow the few occasions he managed to say “no” to Lacis, with respect to their relationship. He asserts that “Asja spoke of wanting to live with [him] in the Grünewald and was very upset when [he] told her it wouldn’t work out” (105). He does not provide detail as to why, for he is writing for himself. The reader, though, can envision the picture: Benjamin said “no” to Lacis’ desire to live with him in the house of his parents. A few pages below, he continues: “But my wish to travel had in fact been more powerful than my desire for her . . . there is of course her nostalgia for Europe, which is closely connected to what she might find attractive about me” (108). Here, again, Benjamin saw everything as having to do with his sole persona, just like a man in love would do. Thus, on several occasions he claims decisively that “[he] feel[s] the desire to learn Russian” just because “Asja is now often near to [him]” (106). As a continuation of the assumption that Benjamin was not powerless before the ‘dark mystery’ of Asja Lacis, he himself acknowledges that his “wish to travel” was stronger than his (vague) desire for her. His ability to deny Lacis’ requests and demands can be further supported by the following wonderful passage from the *Diary*:

Asja told me . . . that there had been a time when she would have very much wanted to marry me. [But later] she had thought about how unbelievably comical it would have been to introduce herself as my wife to my acquaintances. . . . But there was no more future in store for us now. I: But I am going to hold on to you, even if you go to Vladivostok, I’ll follow you there. – Do you want to go on playing the family friend with the Red general as well? If he is as dumb as Reich and doesn’t throw you out of

the house, I have nothing against it. And if he does throw you out, I have nothing against that, either. . . . In the end I said, “The first days after my arrival here I told you I was ready to marry you immediately. But I don’t really know if I could go through with it. I think I wouldn’t be able to stand it.” And then she said something quite beautiful: Why not? I’m a faithful dog. When I live with a man I adopt a barbarous attitude – it is of course wrong but I can’t do anything about it. (108)

As is perceived from the author’s point, although it was hard for him to do so, he told Lacis that he doubted whether “he would be able to stand” marrying her. This develops the motif of doubt and hesitation mentioned earlier, for even in this, relatively short, passage Benjamin manages to express diametrically opposite views on their common future (“I am going to hold on to you,” “I was ready to marry you immediately,” “I don’t really know if I . . . would . . . be able to stand it”). The brilliance of this *Diary* entry is that it is very versatile. Thus, it demonstrates Lacis’ attitude to Reich and her opinion of him behind his back. It parallels the similar attitude to Benjamin, mentioned by Daga and already examined in the chapter. It also continues the motif of rivalry and can be assumed to represent Lacis’ attitude to every man, when she was not in immediate proximity to him. Lacis’ comment that “here had been a time [meaning, it had passed] when she would have very much wanted to marry [Benjamin]” was apparently aimed at lulling his vigilance. Another comment that it would be “unbelievably comical . . . to introduce herself . . . as [his] wife to [his] acquaintances” conveys that Lacis was denting his ego. She must have wanted him to feel bad for not being able to decide whether he wanted to marry her. What Lacis expected Benjamin to do was to reassure her that there was nothing “comical” in being introduced to his acquaintance as his wife. She must have anticipated it to lead to his subsequent proposal, which, however, did not occur to Benjamin. Anyhow, Lacis did not seem to yield her goal of marrying Walter Benjamin. This is easily explained by her later comment made just a few lines below: “Why not? I’m a faithful dog.” This later remark undermines the previous one and demonstrates that her desire to marry Benjamin – and, in fact, her proposal to him – remained open. As to the “faithful dog” part of the line, Benjamin, as a genuine artist was able to appreciate its beauty, but did he believe it? It is certainly hard to tell. Considering that later he did divorce his wife (but then Lacis refused to marry him), he may be assumed to have believed in this.

Lacis' actions towards Benjamin cannot always be explained logically. There were certain outbursts described by him, which are important for the overall picture of Lacis' performance. Rosalind Marsh in her book on women in Russian literature argues that such 'outbursts' were characteristic of many heroines in male-authored fiction. So, the "demonic woman," who "figures in many of Dostoevsky's novels as the object of male desire, curiosity and hostility," represents an "extreme incarnation of the notion of woman as mysterious, emotional, dangerously sexual *Other*" (Marsh 11, italics added). The sudden expressions of emotions which surprised and pleased Benjamin could be the manifestations of Lacis' masquerade as a "demonic woman." The "mysticism" mentioned earlier in Julis' letter combined with her love of Dostoevsky would also sustain this theory. Thus, Benjamin writes in the *Diary*, "I was writing my diary and had given up hope that Asja would stop by. Then she knocked. As she entered the room, I wanted to kiss her. As usual, it proved unsuccessful. [Then Benjamin says something impertinent] and for this 'impertinence' she kissed me, even hugging me in the process" (MD 27). He continues, "as I was in the process of leaving her room to avoid an argument, she grabbed hold of me violently and ran her hands through my hair" (35). Here, Asa's use of her hands can be observed again. The description of Lacis' sudden emotions is continued further: "She was as a result in a somewhat agitated state and when we were alone in the corridor (both she and I had telephone calls to make), she clung to my arm in momentary access of her former boldness" (74). The latter remark is yet another one, demonstrative of Benjamin's concentration on himself, for he connected Lacis' current lack of "boldness" with her deep affection for him (as discussed above). Another account of Lacis' 'outpouring of emotions' is evident in the following passage: "Dora had written that money was on its way . . . I mentioned this to [Asja], and she threw her arms around me. . . . [F]irst I asked Asja for a kiss . . . then . . . as I was trying to talk or read aloud to her she kept on insisting on yet another kiss" (94). The irony of this remark is its exhibiting evidence (time and again) of Benjamin's being a miserable husband. His wife managed to scrape some money so that he could spend it on his lover. As to Lacis, the throwing of her arms around Benjamin is another illustration of her multiple outbursts, unexpected and gratifying for him.

Dostoevsky's female characters which could have inspired Lacis, derive from his real-life femme fatale lover, Apollinaria Suslova and present interest for many researchers. His "demonic" or "infernal" heroines, especially, have been classified into various categories. According to Nathan Rosen's division, there are such categories as the "eternal victim" or "virginal aristocrat" (265-266). "The eternal victim always comes from the lower classes. Her parents are serfs, down-at-the-heel landowners, clerks, deacons, etc. Rosen argues that the eternal victim is defenceless and often mistress of a merchant. Grushenka in *The Brothers*

Karamazov or Nastasya Filippovna in *The Idiot* fall into this category. According to Rosen, "Nastasya takes on or "invents" the role of the crucified one. She feels that her rebellion is in the name of all the victims of society, of all the insulted" (267). Nastasya Filippovna's raging nature, torn between her inner purity and external evil forces which robbed her of her good name, make her "desperately playing out the role of 'fallen woman'" (quoted in the original). She "confesses that she is not what she makes herself out to be, and that [only] the Prince [Myshkin] has figured her out" (Harriet Murav 56). This heroine of Dostoevsky convinces herself she is indeed a fallen woman and wants to seem worse than she is as a form of self-punishment. This explains her eccentric behaviour. Nastasya Filippovna is a woman of feeling, yet she is not capable of feeling love. Wounded pride, contempt, and disillusionment – are the primary feelings which drive her into seducing new male victims (Natali'a I. Zimina 56-57). Rosen maintains that Dostoevsky wanted to emphasise the difference in social origin of the "victims" and the "virginal aristocrats" (266). Katerina Ivanovna from *The Brothers Karamazov* or Aglaia from *The Idiot* can be referred to this category. Dostoevsky's "virginal aristocrat" invariably belongs to the upper classes. She is "young, fresh, unsophisticated," proud, generous, chaste, spontaneous, innocent, "and in some way childlike" (268). "Virginal" in this context is understood as "inexperienced, unaware of life" and entails "an adult view of life as duty" (268). As can be seen from the reconstructed image of Asja Lacis, she emulated several manifestations of Dostoevsky's women in her life performance. Thus, Lacis, very much like Nastasya Filippovna, used her sexuality for teasing, yet, never marrying, Benjamin. As noted by Daga, Lacis was incapable of love, whereas her romantic victories did not gratify her. It can be assumed that she, too, was mostly driven into such eccentric behaviour by her "wounded pride, contempt, and disillusionment". These could have originated in Lacis' attitude toward men, love, injustices of life, and social class. At the same time, it can be seen that Lacis mimicked the behaviour of the "virginal aristocrat" woman, whenever it suited her goals. In Berlin, she chose to be an innocent, childlike woman, whose ostensible "unawareness of life" was so conspicuous to the Weimar women. Lacis' spontaneity, which surprised Benjamin, is also mentioned many a time in the *Moscow Diary*. As far as can be established, Lacis was neither chaste nor generous, and her innocence was all but another instance of masquerade. Nevertheless, she was not a "defenceless" victim of circumstances, like Nastasya Filippovna, in spite of some other, demonic, traits she chose to emulate. While it is not certain whether Lacis consciously modelled herself after Dostoevsky's heroines, she clearly demonstrated several peculiar traits borrowed from them. Being well-read and familiar with literature of different countries, Lacis knew what type of a character's behaviour could result in what reaction in men. In her theatre for herself, Lacis could have unconsciously patterned herself on characters of various authors. In view of her liking of Dostoevsky, the emulation of his female

characters can be said to contribute to Lacis' pervasive duality, which could itself derive from the motif of 'doubleness' in Dostoevsky's fiction. Just like Lacis always did, she borrowed the most marked characteristics of either fictional or real-life prototypes and used them in the creation of her own image.

As can be easily demonstrated, the outbursts seemed unexpected and curious only to Benjamin, always plunged in his thoughts and going through a difficult period in life. They were indeed transparent. Whenever Lacis felt that Benjamin was evading her or her demands, she applied a "demonic woman" mask of her masquerade directed at him. As opposed to the previous sub-section, the 'outbursts' were not aimed at developing closeness between Asja Lacis and Benjamin. It is evident that for closeness Lacis used comforting words, whereas she employed kisses and hugs to arouse his passion. Such manner seems not only to prove the assumption of Lacis' prowess at the art of seduction, but also to illustrate her quick wit and ability to see which way the wind was blowing.

ASJA LACIS' WHIP

Susan Ingram, already referred to above, in her book *Zarathustra's Sisters* discusses the autobiographical works of women. These women became famous for their "fatefully fleeting relationships" with young men, unknown at the time, whose work was destined for significant academic acclaim (29). Ingram's core argument revolves around these women's own literary heritage, which has been under-appreciated by scholars. Examining the "holy trinity" of Nietzsche, his friend and literary critic, Paul Rée, and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Ingram mentions the famous 'whip' photograph in regard to the meaning it later came to have in *Also sprach Zarathustra*. She refers to some of Nietzsche's biographers who argue that "in creating the Superman, Nietzsche was merely translating Lou into the masculine" (28, quoted in the original). Ingram develops her argument and claims that feminist scholars frequently mention the elements of Lou's character – "ressentiment," "serene optimism," "*amor fati*" – which are often interpreted as Nietzschean (28). The motif of the "whip" has also been researched by Cornelis Verhoeven in his essay "Do Not Forget the Whip." The author argues that there can be several interpretations of what Nietzsche meant to say about women in *Zarathustra* in his dictum about the whip. The first and most obvious interpretation is that a man should use the whip to tame the women. "Do not forget the whip" can also mean that a man should not forget that sometimes in history, women used the whip to tame men. The third interpretation, according to Verhoeven, is as a symbol of emancipation and distance, for it is precisely Lou who is holding the whip in the photo, and she was suggested to do so by Nietzsche himself (177-187).

Asja Lacis read *Zarathustra* in her school years and could have interpreted the work in the third way noted above. The ‘whip’ she used on Benjamin was not an instrument of masculine oppression in her hands, but rather served her personal goals. The fact that this ‘whip’ had a side effect of stimulating Benjamin’s intellectual activity, which later gained him considerable academic credit, was a mere bonus Lacis was not even aware of. I will now examine the way Lacis utilised her ‘whip’ methods. The first stage of ‘whipping’ Benjamin is the jealousy Lacis inspired in him. In the *Diary*, Benjamin writes about a discussion concerning Toller: “how Asja had escorted him, how he wanted to give her something as a gift, how she had picked out the most inexpensive belt for herself, and the crazy remarks he made” (MD 16). Near the end of his trip, he describes Lacis’ room: “there was an ever-present Red Army general who had only been married two months but who was courting Asja in every conceivable fashion and who had asked her to run off with him to Vladivostok, where he was being transferred. He said he wanted to leave his wife behind in Moscow” (101-102). Both entries are the account of Lacis’ words which can be considered a cunning way of setting up jealousy. Benjamin, already feeling resentment towards Reich as his biggest rival, was bound to face other male acquaintances of Lacis. She, on her part, presented them as potential candidates for Benjamin’s ‘position’ in order to keep him close.

Jealousy was not the only way Lacis used her ‘whip’. Benjamin writes: “With Asja still the usual switching back and forth between the formal *Sie* and the informal *Du*” (19, italics added). He later states, “I’ve only been here a week and already I have to confront the ever-increasing difficulties of seeing her, not to mention of seeing her alone” (21). At one time, Benjamin describes the walk with Lacis: “The entire outing [with Asja] was dull and drab. It began with her reproaches: I was dragging Reich along with me everywhere and tiring him out. . . . I have no idea why it should be that of late all the life has been drained from the time we spend together and the looks we exchange. . . . I am considering curtailing my afternoon visits to her” (56). The difficulties arising at Benjamin’s attempts to see Lacis alone, her switching between the formal and informal forms of addressing him, and the reproaches she directs at him, concerning Reich – all these are elements of Lacis method of ‘spurring’ Benjamin. As is evident in the *Diary*, normally, after such sort of punishment with a ‘stick’, she applied the ‘carrot’ approach towards him. With this, Lacis managed to continuously raise his curiosity.

Daga’s reminiscences shed light on Lacis’ ‘whip’ approach, too. Daga writes: “Benjamin was a handsome man, with a real aristocratic aura, tender and absolutely helpless against my cruel mother, who enjoyed torturing and humiliating everybody who loved her. . . [T]here was something sorrowful about Benjamin. However, mother expressed nothing more than ‘tolerant contempt’ toward him” (DM 121). In Daga’s opinion, Lacis made Benjamin believe that she loved him and wanted to marry. After he divorced his wife, Lacis realised that

most of the family property was left to his former wife and their son. So, Lacis “stated firmly [in approximately 1929]” she would not marry him (128). These remarks convey that Lacis’ bounds of decency and propriety were much looser than most people’s. She considered it appropriate to “humiliate” close friends (and kin) or to break her word to marry the man who loved her. It is evident that, given most of those people continued to love / respect / be friends with Lacis, humiliation was not the only thing she ever did to them. As was shown above, Asja Lacis was capable of disseminating great ideas, for which people were grateful to her. However, the method discussed above is a valid manifestation of the ‘whip’ approach of Asja Lacis.

BYT AND DOMESTICITY MASQUERADE

The motif of masquerade in the realm of *byt* and domesticity has already been discussed. Here, it will further be maintained by the reminiscences of Lacis’ daughter. In her memoirs, Daga writes, “Asja creates the image of a starving couple with a daughter in her books, i.e. during the time of Benjamin’s visit.” However, as has been discussed, Daga claims that they were considered a very well-to-do family who made good money as foreign expats and had exclusive rights (DM 130-132). These facts provided by the daughter buttress the claim that Lacis did engage in the masquerade practice with regard to domesticity. In the two autobiographical writings discussed in *Chapter Two*, one can observe her performance nearly step by step.

Another facet of the *byt* performance of Asja Lacis was present when her private life – the *byt* as it was – met with the public life. Daga notes that Lacis was untidy her whole life, and that chaos surrounded her (30). Every night in Moscow Lacis and Reich either went to the theatre or had visitors. However, when the guests were to arrive, Lacis had not cleaned the house in advance but pretended to create the “chaos of creative process,” while the house was a mess (138). Such description certainly dispels the myth meticulously created by Lacis in her life writings, where she presents a good housewife who cooks and cleans (as discussed in *Chapter Two*). This myth is further dispelled by Benjamin’s account of his conversation with Reich, where the latter depicts Lacis’ “anxiety about where to live next” which “greatly tormented her.” Benjamin states, “Basically, all [Asja] wants at this moment is a few weeks of tranquil, comfortable bourgeois existence, which Reich can obviously not offer her here in Moscow” (MD 45). The author of the *Diary* was very sensitive to the fluctuations of Lacis’ mood. His scrutiny also helps to dispel another myth, presumably more important, about Lacis’ life performance. The “tranquil, comfortable bourgeois existence” which could not be provided by Reich yet again unmask Lacis’ duality. The image portrayed by Lacis in her autobiographies

and – as was demonstrated by her daughter – in life, in which she hated anything even remotely connected to the bourgeoisie, turned out to be just another mask. In fact, Asja Lacis, like most people, liked comfort, yearned for it, and became anxious when her life lacked it.

CHILDREN: VIEWS ON PROCREATION

DAGA

Marsh in her book on woman in Russian literature provides evidence that a woman character indeed cannot be simultaneously sexually appealing and a mother (5). In *Chapter Two*, it was examined how Lacis constructs the image of a capable mother in her books, presumably realising it was far from being true. Based on the reminiscences of her daughter, it will be seen, whether Lacis' real-life example fits Marsh's argument. According to Daga, in 1929, she (aged around ten at the time) was sent alone from Russia to Berlin, where Lacis was working (and living with Benjamin). Daga also recollects how Lacis bought her a coat several sizes bigger and made Daga wear it from ten years to twenty. Overall, the daughter describes the mother's method of upbringing as sadistic. Daga claims that Lacis cut back on her daughter's expenses but never on her own (DM 132-134). After Lacis' first husband filed for divorce and she had to leave Orel, she "had no option other than go to Julis' parents to leave [Daga] there." The daughter is convinced that even then Lacis had no pricks of conscience for she considered herself a comrade and a highly motivated citizen. Julis' parents took Daga happily for she was to them "the child of their dear son" (25). "Unfortunately," writes Daga, "I did not get to spend all my childhood with the grandparents, for mother used any opportunity to take me back and leave in the charge of some strangers, which is why I developed diffidence and passivity." Later in the book, the daughter wonders, why Lacis never used her pedagogical experience in the upbringing of her own daughter? In Daga's opinion, this was because it never gave Lacis applause, and the primary thing for her as an actress was fame and recognition (26). Daga continues with her childhood resentment of her mother in her account of their infamous Capri trip. She relates how "in 1924 Reich was expressing great interest in her," so, when Daga got sick and the doctor recommended warmer climate, "Reich sponsored Asja's living in Capri with her daughter for half a year." Lacis would reproach Daga with that Capri trip all her life and say that the daughter was not grateful. In Capri, Lacis soon made many new acquaintances and "led a turbulent life, where a child was out of place" (61). "I had no childhood as a child," laments Daga, "mother was never at home" (26). "Mother did not love to love her child" resumes Daga her passive-aggressive untimely reproaches (27). All the remarks above without exception seem to prove Marsh right – even though Lacis is not a literary character – in her

assertion about the inability of a woman character to combine sexual appeal with good parenting skills. Referring to Lacis' love of literature again, it can be stated that she could have known and imbibed all traditions and stereotypes of Russian literature. On the other hand, she constructed her 'self' as an exemplary literary character in all her life writings. Albeit unintentionally, Lacis did try to dismantle a literary stereotype in her autobiographies. Evidently, Asja Lacis envisioned herself a 'super-mum', which is why she wrote so in her books. The reality, though, – at least in her daughter's words – seemed to speak louder. Lacis again represented a traditional woman – at least, the one traditionally portrayed by men writers in Russian literature – and disclosed her duality, in regard to the upbringing of her child.

Benjamin's view of Lacis as a mother is more limited, yet, worth considering. After visiting Daga at a boarding school with Lacis, he relates that Daga had torn shoes and stockings, was virtually barefoot. "Asja was so upset she could barely muster a word . . . Asja [was] absolutely despondent . . . On the way back I spoke of the dramatic idea that had been suggested to me" (MD 114-115). Apart from – unintentionally – portraying himself as a bad father and a tactless person on the topic of children, Benjamin presumably proves Daga wrong, when she pictures Lacis as a total failure. Based on his observations, Lacis indeed had some feelings for the daughter and may have tried to do her utmost to find better living conditions for her. In the economic chaos – which one should not forget – of NEP Moscow, sending Daga to a boarding school was indeed better for the child. It meant regular meals and heated rooms, unlike the lack of stability Lacis had at home. As a mother, she could have realised, that her way of life did not suit the child and sought to provide her with better opportunities. Having found Daga in the miserable condition she was in, Lacis might have truly felt "absolutely despondent", for she had hoped that at least about her child there was some stability. In her reproaches, Daga does not seem to be quite right. Lacis was evidently not the best mother, but, considering the circumstances, she tried to 'do her best'. On the other hand, the lack of childhood comfort and care was later compensated by the easier path for Daga's daughter, the acclaimed Latvian director. Having made the name for herself, as she always ardently desired, Asja Lacis, in her own way, proved herself a good enough mother.

MORE CHILDREN?

As was expressed in the previous chapter, Lacis' attitude to procreation could not be reconstructed with the highest degree of accuracy. It is known that in her relationship with Reich there were no common children, which draws another parallel between it and the triple unions of the Symbolists. In this sub-section it will become clearer what the reasons behind not having a child by Reich – as Lacis' most stable partner – could have been. Firstly, however, I will be looking at Benjamin's opinion on children. In the *Moscow Diary*, Benjamin declares,

“Today I told her that I now wanted to have a child by her. . . . At one point in the past few days she said it was entirely my fault that we were not now living on a ‘desert isle’ and didn’t have two children. . . . The thing I would prefer the most would be the bond a child might create between us” (35). It is amazing to follow the author’s track of thoughts throughout the entire *Diary*. In view of the fact that he was indecisive as to whether he wanted to marry Lacis and spend the rest of his life with her, having a child by her did not look like a very viable or mature alternative on his part. Although it cannot be established for certain, it can be assumed, that, had Lacis had that child by Benjamin, he would have left for Germany as easily as he did anyway. Firstly, Benjamin did not appear to be even remotely practical or capable of providing for the family on stable terms (Eiland and Jennings 92). Secondly, he was still married at the time and did not manage to find a firm position in the USSR, which in itself implied an imminent departure. Lacis, on the other hand, would have been (abandoned) with another child to maintain. Benjamin took no part in the rearing of his own son and “never really [was] a true father but more an intellectual figure; someone very distant” (245). In his *Diary*, the author portrayed himself as a person who had no idea what it required, which was indeed sustained by his biographers (100, 191).

Referring to the argument made by Richter about Benjamin’s implied impotence, the baby, Lacis could give him, would be a sign of renewed potency for him (109-111). As is fairly argued by Hoenle in her dissertation on Benjamin, “[his] desire to have a child at this point could, of course, be a desire for physical proof of their union —and his virility” (191). Lacis’ future, as that of the main caregiver, did not seem to be considered by Benjamin at all. As to Lacis’ view on procreation, it is partially unmasked in Benjamin’s remarks, too. She told him they could have had “two children,” which means she was not against the idea of having more children. Nonetheless, it did not work out her way, for having more children evidently implied being married to ‘the rich’ Benjamin.

It seems valuable for this study to look at Reich’s attitude to children and procreation, as well. Benjamin relates in the *Diary*, “I invited Reich out for a cup of coffee before going home. And then he started in: the more he looked around, the more he reali[s]ed what immense pests children were.” The message conveyed by the author here is that Reich’s opinion of all children was quite negative. Benjamin continues:

There had been a young and moreover very well-behaved boy present at the comrade's place, and as we were all sitting around playing dominos, having already waited two hours to eat, he had begun to cry. But in reality the child that was on Reich's mind was

Daga. He spoke of Asja's chronic bouts of anxiety, which for the most were focused on Daga, and he went into the whole story of her Moscow residence once again. (45)

It can be seen that Daga, too, was simply tolerated by Reich. His overall view on children was that they were a great burden. In this light, it is likely that this was the main reason for Lacis not to have another child (by Reich this time). He barely tolerated Daga, but, as a real man (or, rather, 'traditional'?) supported her and her mother. A more far-fetched assumption can be made, that Lacis had to be a 'New Woman', albeit not the perfect specimen, rather than wanted to be. As was seen above, she would have been glad to become one's "faithful dog". Having a child by Reich in this case, could have given her a legitimate reason to marry him. However, if Reich had stated right from the start of their relationship, that he did not want to have children, Lacis simply had no choice but to remain in the position of his partner. Later, as is known, Benjamin did not live up to her expectations in terms of his prosperity, and then, presumably, Lacis got used to living without being united in wedlock. Reich's description of Lacis' "bouts of anxiety," presented by Benjamin, incidentally adds to her identity. She once again appears before the reader's eyes as not so horrible a mother. Supposedly realising that Reich was the only man who could really support her, Lacis shared her fears about Daga and her future with him. Despite the closeness envisioned by Benjamin, he never describes any conversations of the kind with her. The closeness he imagined was entirely based on Lacis' eulogies for him. This allows the conclusion that, at the time Benjamin was living in his illusions concerning Asja Lacis, between the two rivals, Reich was already winning.

CONCLUSION

This chapter is based on the sources written by people close to Lacis and not entirely impartial. Thus, Benjamin was impassioned with her, while her daughter needed to share her childhood resentment. Nevertheless, the discussion of Asja Lacis' personality as constructed in their narratives, unmask the image, similar to the one, reconstructed in *Chapter Two* from her own life writings. As my readings of life writings of the people close to Asja Lacis have attempted to demonstrate, she could have conflicting impulses at work, such as the need to establish her authority, or to express herself and shock the public. Lacis might have become involved in her work because this was part of her 'theatre for herself' – hence, her life-creative practice – not because she was eager to aesthetically educate children. Nevertheless, aside from masquerading, Lacis committed to her work with children and genuinely enjoyed it. Armed with Makarenko's system and Meyerhold's, Evreinov's, and Tairov's methods, Lacis became

a capable educator and theatre director, who managed to combine good work with personal performance.

As part of Lacis' self-realisation, inherent in the conception of a 'New Woman', it can now be seen that it was Lacis' desire to co-author articles with Benjamin, not the other way around, as she presents it in her autobiographies. The fact that Lacis wanted to be published and read symbolises her want of fame and, as has been discussed, the belief in her utter superiority enabling her to edify others. Lacis' ardent desire for fame can be explicated by the need to prove to everybody she was not simply a woman but an artist in her own right. This was Lacis' main motivation behind all her professional achievements. The revolutionary devotion of Asja Lacis, also carefully constructed by herself in her life narratives, has been argued to be just a pose. It fit well with her readiness to break stereotypes and with the time of "ascetic fighters." The Revolution played to Asja Lacis' advantage unleashing her disdain for the middle class, her desire for masquerade, and her professional ambitions.

My exploration of Lacis' portrayal by Benjamin and Daga has argued that Lacis constructed herself as a woman using different means. Her dress, called a "uniform" by Benjamin, could be becoming her preferred style during the period of my study. Combined with pinned hair, no makeup, and hyper-feminine behaviour, it strengthened the intersection of gender and class in Lacis' image. Neither in Russia, nor in Germany, Lacis adhered to a single manifestation of the 'New Woman'. One of the main priorities in her life was to become conspicuous, which is why in Berlin, she modelled herself so that she could differ from the German women, while in Russia she behaved differently from the majority of Soviet 'New Women', i.e. the Bolshevik women. In terms of becoming a woman, Lacis thoroughly constructed her femininity, matching traditional elements with new ones. This is argued to be predicated on external circumstances. While men play an integral part in one's becoming a woman, their unwillingness to change their views (on women's place in life, beauty and femininity) – hence, their own gradual becoming 'new' or "remaining conventional" – conditioned women's invocation to good old tactics in reaching their goals. As demonstrated by researchers of Benjamin's work and life, despite occasionally going into 'the question of woman', most of his writing fails to address the discourse of gender. Benjamin "continued to subscribe to a worldview that defined women's roles with little regard for their lived realities" (Hoenle 15). The lack of certainty in Benjamin's understanding of woman impacted his attitude to Lacis. In many respects, Asja Lacis was a perfect woman for Benjamin. With her he could feel the unrequited love he cherished, the utmost sexuality she so vividly expressed – the theme which interested him from a young age – she was 'all ears' when he read to her, and, most of the time, she was far away (so, there was no physical presence and hence no chance of

becoming a hindrance to him). In any case, his treatment of Lacis affected the role(s) she played and the image she created.

Lacis' personality traits could not help but intervene with her 'theatre for herself'. Thus, it has been established that Lacis' greediness and vanity were contrary both to the revolutionary identity she herself created and the idea of the 'New Woman' construct. Her rebelliousness, she proudly wrote into her books, was aimed at her own comfort and by far overshadowed by her opportunism. In terms of relationship modes preferred by Asja Lacis, she again can be seen to have embodied both the liberated sexuality of the 'New Woman' and the method, old as Abel, and 'traditionally' used by women to improve their life at low cost. Just like Kollontai advocated, Lacis put other things above love, indeed 'performing' the feeling. Nevertheless, Lacis' approach is different from what Kollontai propagated. Lacis chose only prominent or useful men and received something from each of them, therefore, reminding a *neue Frau*, and not a 'New Woman'. Lacis preferred passive men in her relationships, who could support her and allow a central position. She occasionally dropped out of the role she played with men, hence, displayed no continuity in either of the 'New Woman' archetypes she might have chosen for herself. As was stated in *Chapter Two*, combining motherhood and work was a delicate theme which began to be discussed during the period of my study. In her life writings, Lacis presented herself as a wonderful mother, following the tradition of mother veneration in both Russian and German literatures and breaking the stereotype that a woman cannot be a good mother and a professional. In this chapter, however, it has been shown that Lacis was ambivalent in her methods of upbringing, which again reveals her duality.

As a summary for this chapter, it can be emphasised that the performance of Asja Lacis and her everyday behaviour were inseparable. Lacis has fairly been called "an actress in her life" by her daughter, which corresponds with my findings. Asja Lacis, in all of her manifestations of the 'New Woman' construct, displayed elements of duality and discontinuity. Nevertheless, I propose that the life-creation of Asja Lacis can be considered successful. Using the words of Ioffe from his article on the semiotics of Russian life-creation, Lacis can be said to have entered "the realm of total theatricality, from performative and theatrical 'masks' to the turbulent aesthetics of 'private theatre,'" as developed by Evreinov ("Modernism in the Context of Russian 'Life-Creation'" 22).

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have attempted to discuss the ‘New Woman’ construct, how it has evolved, and what it becomes in reality. I have examined two variations of the construct – one developed in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), and its Russian-Soviet counterpart, prevalent in the Bolshevik Russia of the post-revolutionary and NEP period (1921-1928). Most previous research on Russia’s ‘New Woman’ has focused on the ‘New Soviet Woman’ of the Stalinist epoch and later periods. I argue in this thesis that the ‘New Woman’ conceptualisation of the time period of my study is different from the ‘New Woman’ after the abolishment of the NEP. The originality of my work lies in the fact that I am the first who has ventured to search into differences and similarities between the ‘New Woman’ construct of Weimar and its Russian counterpart and make an extensive comparison between the two during the relatively free atmosphere prevailing in both countries at the time.

I have used the renowned theatre director Asja Lacis as a real-life prototype for this project. Here lies another aspect of the originality of this project – I am the first who has endeavoured to study Lacis, not as the object of passions of the German thinker Walter Benjamin, but as a creative intellectual in her own right. Moreover, I have discussed Lacis in the context of the ‘New Woman’ concept, or rather, as the embodiment of both variations of the ‘New Women’. Lacis has served as a perfect exemplar for the comparative analysis of the two ‘New Women’. She is a creative artist (who started as a performing one), which implies theatricalisation, and hence fits perfectly into the ‘New Woman’ discourse.

Asja Lacis’ identity as an artist developed on the borderline between two cultures with substantial cultural heritage: German and Russian. Although she was Latvian by birth, the two cultures which had academic prestige and influence in Latvia were German and Russian. Lacis stated herself that she loved Russian literature, which could have developed her “demonism” and “mysticism” (inspired by Dostoevsky, as was discussed in *Chapter Three*). Her love of Turgenev, on the other hand, developed such a trait in Lacis as ‘aristocratic arrogance’, which originated in her – ostensibly ‘aristocratic’ – small hands. As my readings of Lacis’ daughter’s memoirs suggest, Lacis fantasised about having ‘aristocratic’ origin, basing her fantasies on the symbolic value of small hands. Being an avid reader of Nietzsche, Lacis must have absorbed the ideas of “omnipotence” and female emancipation, which were buttressed by her readings of Ibsen and other European women’s rights advocates in literature. Lacis never claims in her writings that she read Kollontai’s works, probably due to the latter being in disfavour in the time of Lacis’ autobiographies were published. Nevertheless, as stated in her German autobiography, Lacis told Benjamin about “the Kollontai” (RB 42). My analysis demonstrates that Lacis was very likely inspired by emancipatory ideas, as well as the ideas of

free sexuality, from various sources. Just like many other women in search of self-styling, she tried to fit the trends of the time.

My work has revealed the deviations in the way Lacis constructed the New Woman image and applied it to life. Lacis' behaviour mode demonstrates that she emulated the 'free love' and 'free associations' ideas, applying the model of life-creation. As has been seen, these ideas go back to several intellectual currents. In Germany and worldwide, Nietzsche's treatment of the theme of the 'New Man' and the role of Woman and, in Russia, Chernyshevsky's views on the *novyi chelovek* and 'New Life' gave rise to many discussions and interpretations. Thus, free choice in love was a popular discourse both for Bolshevik-Marxist theoreticians and in Weimar Germany (e.g., 'companionate marriage' based on Kollontai's theories, mentioned in *Chapter One*). As was argued by Kollontai herself, she failed to practise what she preached about the love life of the 'New Woman' archetype. She fell a victim of love and behaved very much like a traditional woman, stalking the object of her passions (Osipovich 183). Asja Lacis, unlike the world's most prominent proponent of women's emancipation, followed exactly the tenets of the latter. As my readings of her own life narratives, and the life writings of those close to her demonstrate, Lacis controlled her emotional and sexual life rigidly. Therefore, she can be said to never have depended on a man in a way where she would allow him to define her life. Hence, Lacis fully manifested one of the most essential aspects, universal for both archetypes of the 'New Woman' construct. My examination of Lacis' 'self', which I have reconstructed from various sources, indicates a certain degree of opportunism in her. Although this trait may not accord with the image of a revolutionary, which Lacis carefully constructed in her life-writings, it can be said to fit into the 'New Woman' concept. Predicated upon Kollontai's doctrine of a woman's self-sufficiency and moral certainty, it proceeds into the aspect of independence, common for both Weimar and Soviet/Russian 'New Women'.

My exploration of both Lacis' own life narratives and those written by close people has argued that Lacis' emulation of Chernyshevsky's ideas – which later transformed into Marxism and were most probably borrowed by her from it – was different from the original. Advocating love triangles, Chernyshevsky meant asexual union with one of the partners was needed in order to achieve spiritual unity and even sublimation with both. Ol'ga A. Voronina suggests that Chernyshevsky's idea was "the elimination of gender roles and stereotypes rather than any 'biological abolition of sex'" (40). Lacis, for her part, simply enticed men into supporting her using her sexuality. When Chernyshevsky argued that there should be a degree of egotism in relationships, he was trying to stop the 'victim attitude' among women, especially widespread in Russian culture and literature. His notion of egotism was bound to be followed by all-encompassing altruism, which was viewed as a remedy and a real change for society – hence

the inception of 'New Life' (40). I have shown in this project that there is evidence of Lacis being self-centred and calculating. Her altruism, on the other hand, is not presented in the writings about her. Lacis' egotism, therefore, can be said to have originated in her pragmatism, rather than the desire for the sublime. She was – as my readings illustrate – more and deeper intellectually developed than most girls of her class, yet she tried to enter a higher class – the one which allegedly did not exist during the period of time under consideration. Fed by her own fantasies about the 'aristocratic' descent, Lacis attempted to get into and mix in the best society. Thus, devoting her life to social climbing, Lacis demonstrated the very features for which women of lower descent had continuously been ridiculed in life and art.

As this project has attempted to demonstrate, neither of the 'New Women' was entirely consistent in Lacis' creations of her 'self' or in the one constructed by other people. Living in Berlin, she added too much innocence and *naïveté* into her performance to be considered the Weimar 'New Woman'. In Russia, Asja Lacis never represented the *comrade type* of the 'New Woman' construct, either. She was too feminine, stylish and self-fashioned 'aristocratism' in her manner. This made her persona conspicuous, while the 'New Woman' archetype manifestation deviant. In both countries, Lacis enjoyed the impression of foreignness she produced, hence, the exoticism. This – being a part of the construct – could add to her "new-womanness", had she not used the traditional methods so often. Just as any new model of behaviour, the model of the 'New Woman' was in dialectical relationship towards the old one. The 'New Woman' concept incorporated some elements of the previous model of behaviour, while rejecting others.

My work has illustrated that there was another circumstance which has most probably interfered with the wholeness of the 'New Woman' archetype Lacis tried to embody. As was demonstrated in the thesis, *men* surrounding Asja Lacis – hence, the 'New Woman' in real life – were changing with the rhythm of modernity only gradually. Often, they lamented women's more rigorous change and blamed them for destroying stability. In fact, the stability was already illusory, for circumstances required the emergence of 'new' men, 'new' women, 'new' children (more aesthetically educated, and life and politically-conscious, as briefly noted in *Chapter One*) – hence, the *novyi chelovek* (the new human being) in general. However, the inability to change the circumstances and the relics of history often led to the duality of the 'New Woman' construct (or, in this particular case, of Lacis). Her duality in both private and public life demonstrate the inability – more so than the lack of desire – to incarnate the 'New Woman' archetype fully. Conditioned by the circumstances, Lacis enacted those elements of the construct, which suited her goals in a particular situation. Thus, Lacis often took advantage of the support offered to her by male acquaintances. As shown in *Chapter One* of this thesis,

such attitude undermines the essence of the 'New Woman' concept, negating women's independence.

What I have tried to present in this work is the successful application of the life-creation model by Lacis. One of the implications of my analysis is that Lacis, modelling her behaviour on the 'New Woman' concept with the help of life-creation, displayed agentivity. As stated earlier, the trace of opportunism in the sometimes double identity of Asja Lacis fits in the conceptualisation of the 'New Woman'. Leaving aside the negative connotation of the word "opportunism", this project demonstrates that for Lacis it was a means of gaining control over her life. As assumed by agentivity, it implies independence and self-sufficiency, which proves again the success of her life-creation. In her work life, Lacis predominantly demonstrates the independent type of a fully-accomplished professional, which indeed puts her in the category of 'New Women'. However, she sometimes takes refuge behind the pretext of *being only a woman* subjugated by a man. As my interpretations of her life-writings have illustrated, she does so to distract the reader from the real reasons of what she herself considers her failure. Even though such actions might seem to deviate from the above-mentioned independence of the 'New Woman', they still fit in Lacis' agentivity and subjectivity. Constructing her written and her lived life the way Lacis preferred, she already was more than *only a woman* – hence, an *object*, – she was a *subject* capable of designing her life. As stated in *Chapter Three* of this thesis, the performance of Lacis' everyday life was inseparable from her creative work life. She can legitimately be called "an actress in her life", using her daughter's words. Referring to Evreinov's term again, Lacis can be said to have achieved "total theatricality" of her life, which she consciously directed as her own "private theatre" (Ioffe, "Modernism in the Context" 22).

This work has attempted to demonstrate that both private and work life of Asja Lacis have been examined by me within a larger context of understanding her persona. In order to reconstruct her as a "whole" person, as opposed to *only* Benjamin's "pleasant diversion" or *only* a theatre director, I have considered the private side of her life as much as her public self (Hoenle 5, 17). In this respect, the analysis of Lacis' life narratives along with her daughter's memoirs and Benjamin's *Diary* was beneficial for my study. In order to construct the life, she desired and later write it into her books, Lacis applied the methods such as masquerade and "theatre for herself," engaged in behaviours of 'traditional' and 'new' women and followed the spirit of the time in terms of 'free love' and revolutionary ideals. The tracing of Lacis producing her 'self' and enacting the 'New Woman' construct in the life-writings has allowed me to shape her as a "whole" person, rather than a set of "disembodied ideas" (17-19) or a stilted copy of what she has been shaped by previous research.

The results of this project recommend further work which will extend beyond an isolated analysis of the 'New Woman' construct in one particular country or, as was the case

with my study, the comparative analysis of its two manifestations. This work has shown how many similarities there are between various representations of the concept, depending on the context and the locale. My hope is that this topic would allow a confluence of studies invoking new methods and approaches. The ‘New Woman’ concept is considered both an “icon and agent” in both its German and Russian forms (Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco 111). It has great promise for cross-cultural comparative analysis and dialogue. There should be a larger and wider comparative study of a number of personalities at the time, not only in Germany and Russia, but perhaps in the wider Central-Eastern Europe. Representatives could include personalities from Poland, for instance, a country strongly influenced by its neighbours. Additional analysis might be needed of women who shared the same profession with Asja and who were actively involved in the spheres of ideology and socio-political life and art of the country. Such study would lead to pointing out the models of difference and similarities. It would also allow for better understanding of how this group of women conducted their performances in daily lives and on the screen or stage and how they inspired other women as role models. These valuable comparisons would help to expand the fields of gender studies, modernism, and interculturalism.

The study of the ‘New Woman’ conceptualisation now, in the twenty-first century, provides a different perspective, compared to the earlier view on it. Discussing the concept in light of the rise of women’s and gender studies, it can be said to present interest for a number of reasons. Thus, a further investigation of the ‘New Woman’ construct as directly connected to the model of life-creation could provide an explanation for performance, and even “showing-off”. These tropes relate to the notion of “imposture”, which in its turn relates to identity (Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!* 4-8, 29-50). Imposture can signify things being not what they seem and a person being unable to occupy a place ‘legitimately’ meant for them. Under the disguise of a masked character, one feels (s-)he is allowed to play any role, which results in the absence of a social conscience in any community. This consequently leads to lawlessness, which often follows periods of political – though, not exclusively – turmoil and revolutions (4, 77). Therefore, this project allows further exploration of imposture and how and why it succeeds (or fails).

In the context of gender, the implication of my analysis is that, engaging in the practice of modelling one’s behaviour (and even life) on the ‘New Woman’ model with the help of life-creation, women displayed *agentivity*. As stated above, agentivity normally indicates the presence of a conscious agent. The agent is expected to exhibit dynamic behaviour, which is not fixed, but changes with circumstances. Whereas Lacis’ agentivity was mostly creative and implied making choices as to which of the two ‘New Women’ archetypes to manifest depending on a situation, this quality can be used for further research. As has been shown in

the project, agentivity was not typical of women in general, and of the women of Germany or Russia in particular, before the spread of the ‘New Woman’ concept. It is, however, essential in one’s becoming a *subject*. The fact that women did try to enact features of ‘New Women’ – though not always continuously – proves their ability to be “directors” of their lives. Further investigation of performance in terms of life-creative practices could provide a useful framework for a deeper conceptual understanding of one’s becoming a subject.

In conclusion to this project, I propose that any artist’s (poet’s, or intellectual’s) identity is produced by the interrelations between the public and the private, rather than the separation of work from life, or of public from private. “Family secrets are the other side of the family’s public face” – acknowledges Nancy K. Miller (quoted in 1996). Using these words in relation to my theme, it is worth noting that you cannot value the artist of any art, isolating their work from private life. In my view, the full significance of the artist lies in the appreciation of his/her relation to *all* aspects of life. I ground my opinion on Hoenle’s assertion that the making of an intellectual/artist should include an examination of both “cultural and educational processes” in his/her life. This would mean “a relational analysis ... that stands counter to most scholarly analysis, which ... [is] looking at abstract interactions between ideas” (7). My exploration of various forms of life-writings has argued that the private side of the artist’s life, seen through the eyes of a person of little historical importance (e.g., the reminiscences of Lacis’ daughter, Dagmāra), can be as important in reconstructing the artist’s image as the thoughtful analysis of their work made by professionals. Therefore, the results of this project can provide a basis for further studies. These can attempt to shape the person as a whole entity, using different forms of writing.

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