

ATOPIA OF MODERNITY. Children's Theatre: Art. Politics. Society.

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The Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre is a fascinating, dense and yet nearly forgotten document of the 20th Century that could serve as an important inspiration for today's struggles to find a way out of the ubiquitous crises.

Written in 1929, and co-authored by the German literary critic Walter Benjamin and the Latvian Bolshevik theatre maker and pedagogue Asja Lacis, this short manifesto presents an idea of a radical reframing of the entire pre third-level education system with its tactics, tools and goals. What Benjamin and Lacis propose is to replace public schools (whose structures were deeply rooted in the Industrial Revolution and whose aims were tightly entwined with the emergence of national states) with experimental theatre laboratories. Lacis and Benjamin accuse the existing school system of restricting students' imaginations and molds them according to the interests of the ruling class. They grow to be passive and obedient, unaware of their own needs and unable to adapt to the rapidly shifting challenges of modernity. In *The Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre* they argue that to cope with the fundamental instability of modern life, children should not be subjected to any established moral codes or ideologies. On the contrary, they should rely on their own experiences to develop their individual moral code and identity. Lacis and Benjamin suggest that only by this way, can they become the independent thinking, self-aware, critical citizens of the democratic state.

In my doctoral thesis I choose this document as a lens through which to look at the first tumultuous decades of the 20th Century and to expose the close relations between children's theatre and socio-political history. I focus on the interwar period, especially on its innovative social projects and its ambitions to contest mainstream arts discourses. I start with analysing two major political events that accelerated the radicalisation of social and artistic ideas of that time: World War I and the Russian Revolution. What I find particularly fascinating – and yet still insufficiently explored – about the effects these events had on the 20th Century is how fundamentally they have affected the position of children in society. I place this particular change at the centre of my study and aim to demonstrate how this sudden renegotiation of children's culture powered the most innovative aesthetic and political concepts.

In my exploration of this topic I follow Lacis and Benjamin in their theoretical and theatrical work. All of the ideas expressed in the programme stemmed from Lacis' experiences with "besprisorniki"; orphaned, traumatised children she took into her care in the

Latvian city of Orel, after the 1917 revolution. In her pedagogical practice she discovered that the key to unleashing children's suppressed talents and overcoming their inhibitions lay in surrendering any form of control over a rehearsal room. Therefore, she would encourage participants to improvise and follow their best instincts. Ideas coined in this ephemeral laboratory of artistic strategies in later years (after the document was rediscovered in 1968) revealed their potential to disturb official narratives and to open a space for unprejudiced discussion.

Asja Lacis should thus be recognised and remembered as an important architect of an emancipatory model, designed to discover new paradigms and to test highly radical scenarios. The creation of the *Programme* would not have occurred, however, were it not for Benjamin's anthropological and philosophical interest. In many of his writings he positions the child as the quintessential "protagonist" or "central figure of modernity" and bestows on it the task of telling the world's history anew, from a liminal perspective. His fascination with toys, fairytales, children play, carnival and various non-normative discourses (from malapropism to children's tales and the writings of the mentally ill) led him on a quest for a "vehicle of political change" that would subvert the status quo in the same creative way that he observed in children's attitude to language, rules and everyday objects. Upon meeting Asja Lacis in 1924 on Capri it became clear to Benjamin that this vehicle can be found in children's theatre.

Lacis and Benjamin's radical proposition has never been realised in the form that the authors proposed. Its theses were ridiculed for bravado and nebular ambiguity by the same political figures who commissioned it in the first place. Nevertheless, in the perspective of my research, the educational frame of children's theatre represents a unique manifestation of an *atopia* – an ancient philosophical construct, employed here to expose revolutionary potential of their *Programme*... Socratic *átopos* (a gap, a non-place, a liminal space between an old receding paradigm and a new, emerging idea), unlike Foucauldian *heterotopia*, cannot be defined in opposition to any existing reality. In my paper I use the figure of *atopia* to show both childhood and theatre as politically charged platforms for generating alternative narratives.

Atopia of Modernity offers a detailed account of the emancipatory pedagogical strategies and shows an evolution of a political art for and by children.

The main purpose of this thesis, however, is to reinstate Asja Lācis among the most influential artists of 20th Century avant-garde movements, but also to propose a new narrative frame of the interwar period, a frame in which the writings of Walter Benjamin and experiments with children theatre will become a source of radical political strategies that will prove to have the utmost inspirational value for the 21st Century left.