In the autumn of 1928 the Latvian theatre director Asja Lacis visited Berlin as part of her work for Narkompros, the culture and education department of the government of the Soviet Union. Among her priorities for this visit, undertaken as a member of the film section of the Soviet trade mission, was to make contact, on behalf of the “Proletarian Theatre” group within Narkompros, with the German Union of Proletarian Revolutionary Playwrights. She also gave lectures on film, based on recent work developing a children’s cinema in Moscow. During the course of conversations in Berlin with two leading members of the German Communist Party (KPD), Gerhard Eisler (brother of the composer Hanns) and Johannes Becher, Lacis described some of the work she had done in the early years of the Soviet revolution, making theatre with children in the Russian town of Orel in 1918. Becher and Eisler were sufficiently interested in what she told them to imagine that her work might provide them with a model for the development of a children’s theatre at the KPD headquarters, the Liebknechthaus. They asked Lacis to work out a program for them. Her friend Walter Benjamin, with whom she had discussed this work before, when they first met on the island of Capri in 1924, and who had been very interested in it, now volunteered to help her with the program: “Ich werde das Programm schreiben,’ sagte er, ‘und deine praktische Arbeit theoretisch darlegen und begründen.” Lacis recalls that Benjamin’s first draft was “monstruously complicated” and that when Becher and Eisler read it, they laughed and recognized immediately that Benjamin must have written it. She took it back to Benjamin to be rewritten more clearly, and it is his second draft that exists today as “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater,” the text to which this chapter is devoted.

1. READING “THE PROGRAM”

This short text is a kind of manifesto for the work of the passionate amateur. Or, to put it another way, it is a claim staked on the revolutionary
value of play and an amateur’s vision of a world in which work under capitalism is suspended or even abolished. It challenges four very powerful and widely held ideas: that work is inevitable, that work is good, that work might lead to a better world (the consolation offered, perhaps, by Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*), and that a better world is something toward which anything might or ought to lead. As this chapter will seek to show, it holds out the prospect of a complete reorganization of work and time in relation to theatre; suggests a radical attempt to undo precisely the capitalist professionalism that had been establishing its hold over theatrical production; and, at the same time, proposes an alternative to the cult of work itself. This vision is articulated through the figure of the child-as-amateur, who finds her fulfilment in the now of her beautiful childhood rather than in the development of her skills in the service of capitalist development or even in the teleology of the revolutionary project. It is articulated, however, in a context—political and cultural collaboration within the Second International—where the teleology of revolution and the moral value of work were both hegemonic. Once again, the professional and the amateur live in a paradoxical relation with one another, in Benjamin’s text, in the text’s own relationship to Lacis’s practice, and in the various contexts—which this chapter will explore—from which both the text and the practice it accounts for and imagines arose. Within the broader logic of this book, Benjamin’s “Program” warns that as long as passionate amateurs continue to work according to the logics of industrial capitalism, the radical potential of their activity will be continually suppressed.

Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” starts right in the grip of its own paradoxical position, claiming that while this “proletarian education must be based on the party program,” the party program itself “is no instrument of a class-conscious education” (201). The party program itself, because it is ideology, will only ever reach the child as a “catchphrase,” and while it would be easy enough to have children across the country “parroting” catchphrases, this will do nothing to ensure that the party program is acted upon once these proletarian children have become adults. Thus the program of which Benjamin’s “Program” will form a part is of no use for the purposes it seeks to realize by including Benjamin’s “Program.” Benjamin’s “Program” is, in effect, an attempt to insert a form of antiprogrammatic thought into the party program. Its “de-schooling” requires, more or less a priori, the abandonment of “program.” While Benjamin’s text might be said to observe the letter of the party program, its underlying logic suggests an ironic radicalization of
that very program. He must both mean and not mean what he says when
he writes that “proletarian education must be based on the party pro-
gram.” In this irony lies its own “secret signal” that the “party program”
itself, if it is to be the basis for proletarian education, must change, and
change to such an extent that it somehow ceases to be a program.

The “Program” is here already showing signs of Benjamin’s familiar
tendency (which will be examined in a little more detail below) to think
against the logic of a unidirectional linear time, associated with both the
relentless forward march of capitalist progress and the redemptive hori-
zon of revolutionary teleology implied by an overdeterministic reading of
Marx. Less familiar, however, is the possibility that such disruptions to
historical time might also be performed at the level of the everyday. But
that is precisely what is suggested in the “Program.” Benjamin proposes
that “the framework of proletarian education from the fourth to the four-
teenth year should be the proletarian children’s theatre” (202). The logic
of the “Program” suggests, furthermore, that when this theatre has ceased
to be the “entire life” of the proletarian child, once the child has passed
the age of fourteen, it may have no further role to play. Since Benjamin
declares his “Program,” and, by implication, the theatre that he values, to
“have nothing to do with that of the modern bourgeoisie” (202), we might
reasonably conclude that in the society formed by graduates of the prole-
tarian children’s theatre, theatre will no longer take its place within the
structure of life determined by the administrated alternation between
work and leisure. Theatre will cease to be a place where people come to
sit in the dark in their leisure time to watch people at work in the light. Its
place in the composition of a lifetime will change. Now it is something
people either do for a living or attend occasionally in the evening after
work. In the future (which must also be, of course, for Benjamin, now)
theatre is something you do for ten years as a child but that you may
never do again. To think in Brecht’s terms, this constitutes an Umfunktion-
ierung (repurposing) of the theatre, far more comprehensive even than the
Lehrstück, whose theoretical proposal, in its emphasis on continual re-
hearsal rather than an orientation toward performance, was frequently
evaded in practice, including by Brecht himself.6 Benjamin’s Umfunktion-
ierung of theatre is a redistribution of activity in time that detaches itself
from the patterns of life imposed by the working day, including those that
involve working during the day and going to the theatre in the evening.

This interruption of temporal logic, at the levels of both history and
the life of the individual, is therefore a direct challenge to the normaliza-
tion or naturalization of work as the purpose or meaning of a life. All the
more so, in the case of the “Program,” because Benjamin does not conceive of this proletarian education in terms of preparation for work. Instead it must precede “the teaching curriculum as such,” in which specific skills and knowledge might be acquired. It serves as “an objective space within which education can be located,” while a bourgeois education needs “an idea toward which education leads.” Lacis makes a similar distinction in her own account of the work on which the “Program” was based:

Bourgeois education was based on the development of a special capacity, a special talent. To speak with Brecht: it seeks to make sausages of the individual and her capacities. Bourgeois society requires that its members produce things as soon as possible. This principle is obvious from every aspect of a child’s education. When such children play theatre, they always have the result in mind—the performance, their appearance before the audience. That’s how the joy of playful production is lost. The director is the pedagogue in the background, drilling the children. [. . .] It is the goal of communist education, on the basis of a high general level of preparation, to set productivity free. 7

Lacis here clearly sees the activity of making or “playing” (she uses the German verb spielen) as productive, however, whereas the rather more paradoxical logic of Benjamin’s text tends to suspend the idea of productivity as such, through its interruption of the temporality with which it is normally associated. This suspension—of production and of teleology—is incomplete, of course (either partial or temporary), in that the ultimate purpose of his antiprogrammatic program is to ensure that “the party program is acted on in ten or twenty years” (201). Productivity and program are suspended in order that the program’s objectives may be produced. Things to be achieved at a future time depend upon the suspension of all movement toward that time, a suspension that takes place through the conception of education as the fulfillment of activity in a defined “space” rather than as progress through time: “It is only in the theater that the whole of life can appear in a defined space, framed in all its plenitude; and this is why proletarian children’s theater is the dialectical site of education” (202). 8

This interruption of a unidirectional temporality in which education is understood as training for productive work is repeated in the uncoupling of the idea of making theatre from the presentation of professional theat-
tical productions. The idea that a performance, as such, is only likely to emerge as a kind of by-product of playfulness, as a kind of “mistake” or “prank,” as Benjamin puts it, means that there is no place in this theatre for the “bourgeois Regisseur” (765), a term that is translated into English as “manager” but that in a theatrical context also, of course, refers to the “director.” That the theatre director is an industrial “manager” was a central claim of the preceding chapter. But the productive forces at play in the proletarian children’s theatre do not need to be marshaled and coordinated into a repeatable production designed to enter the repertoire of a theatre company. The “Program” proposes an alternative to the industrialization of theatre. It unseats the recently appointed “Regisseur” who, as we have seen in chapter 2, had taken managerial control not just of the process of production but also of the education of the theatrical workforce. This is not simply a repudiation of a bourgeois logic. While Stanislavski’s initial practice takes shape in a decidedly bourgeois context—and might even be understood as part of a systematic bourgeoisification of the theatre in Russia—its insistence on work, training, and the production by such means of a “character” proved substantially consistent with the ostensibly antibourgeois production priorities of the early Soviet period, which saw work as the means by which a “new man” might be produced. Although Benjamin did not know Russian—as the linguistic misfortunes detailed in Moscow Diary clearly show—and is therefore unlikely to have studied Stanislavski’s account of his work as a director and teacher, first published in Russian in 1926, it is still tempting to interpret his insistence in the “Program” that the leader of the proletarian children’s theatre should not be a “moral personality” as a criticism of the figure of the director exemplified by Stanislavski, whose work as the director of Rimsky-Korsakov’s The Czar’s Bride he had seen in Moscow in 1927.

Of course Benjamin’s ideas here are also in sharp distinction with what I have earlier called the “incipient Taylorization” of theatre carried forward in the work of Meyerhold. I shall develop further the implications of this contradiction between Benjamin’s “Program” and Soviet communism’s glorification of work in the section that follows. What matters here is the task Benjamin’s “Program” assigns to the leader, who, far from being a Taylorist manager driving his charges forward toward defined future production, offers, in an attitude of “unsentimental . . . pedagogic love” (203), his or her observation of what the children are doing and making. It is this abstention from productivist goal setting, in which the future is crafted by work in the present, which allows the leader of the
theatre to become a receiver of the “signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands” (204). This “world” is a future, too, but very different from a future whose outlines and contents have been planned in advance and then realized through the industrial production process of rehearsal. It is a future that, in its reception in the present, takes place now; it is a fold or rupture in the progressive historical continuum. What Benjamin’s text suggests, then, is that the role of the manager in the process of production is, at least in part, to look after that continuum. Professionals keep history on track by keeping the workers in line. The unsentimental love of the passionate amateur derails it. Instead of leading the children forward, away from childhood itself, and toward the adult responsibilities of productive work, the “Program” claims to offer its young participants “the fulfilment of their childhood” (205), while its adult facilitators are privileged with a glimpse of an unplanned-for future in the “secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child” (206). The signals are coming back down the yet-to-be constructed line to the future, reversing the normal direction of pedagogy repudiated at the start of Benjamin’s text: “the propaganda of ideas” that seeks to make the future in its own image is jammed by what the future has to say back to the present.

The “Program” that turns out to be so antiprogrammatic is therefore one of those moments in Benjamin’s writing where his thinking about theatre appears as part of a theorization of history or rather, in this case, perhaps, where a theory of history underpins a theorization of theatre. The outlines of Benjamin’s theorization of history are visible in his 1919 doctoral dissertation, “The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism,” where he links a critique of the ideology of progress, as articulated by Friedrich Schegel in particular, with the idea of messianism, which, he suggests in a letter to Ernst Schoen, constitutes the “centre of romanticism,” even if, as he claims to Schoen, he is unable fully to explore this improperly mystical concept in the context of a text composed for academic examination. It is realized rather more substantively, if only in typically and appropriately fragmentary form, in his 1940 text, “On the Concept of History.” Benjamin’s history is a crucial concept for this book’s attempt to explore distinctions between the practices of the passionate amateur and those of the “professional”—either bourgeois-capitalist, reformist, or revolutionary—for whom working toward the future construction of the ideal community is the dominant mode in which history might be experienced or enacted. Werner Hamacher, in the very act of drawing attention to the persistence of the motif of the “critique of prog-
ress” from Benjamin’s early work on romanticism to his later historical materialist reflections of history, also cautions that “one should not identify the configuration of messianism and critique of the ideology of progress in this very early work with his later outlines on the philosophy of history.” Nor, perhaps, is the conception of history underlying the “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” of 1928 strictly identical with those in play in either the earlier or the later texts. All the same, there is at the very least an inclination in all three moments toward an understanding of history in terms of rupture and possibility, rather than continuity and progress. It is in its interruption of continuity and the possibilities that might thereby be realized that the practice of theatre proposed in the “Program”—nonprofessional, antiprofessional, amateur theatre—attains its particular significance, for Benjamin and for the present project. Hence, and taking the form of a momentary digression from the forward movement of this chapter, in which a historical account of the practice (Lacis’s) on and for which the “Program” came to be based lies in the imminent future, the time has come for a brief account of how this particular text takes center stage in the conception of the “passionate amateur.”

Let us think first of the “secret signal” from the future, in relation to the “weak messianic force” with which, according to Thesis II of “On the Concept of History,” we have been “endowed” on the basis of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.” One might imagine, then, that it is the “weak messianic force” carried by the adults of the present generation that solicits the “secret signal” from the children. The “signal” comes as a kind of recognition that the “weak messianic force” is still, or rather, will continue to be, alive. It is a testimony that the “secret agreement” is still in place. The agreement is “secret” inasmuch as neither generation knows its content; what it is that is agreed can only be known in the moment in which the signal is received and recognized. The arrangement is a little like an encryption software program, in which both sender and receiver possess private keys that the other cannot know, but where the interaction of one’s private key with the other’s public key (or vice versa) allows the file or message to be decoded. It takes both parties, both generations, for the signal to appear or to appear meaningful. It cannot simply be projected from the present, intentionally and knowingly, into the future, to be redeemed there, without already being there. As Hamacher writes, this “weak messianic force” is

never messianic in the sense that we ourselves are enabled by it to direct the hope for our own redemption towards the future or, to
be more precise, to future generations, but only in the entirely different sense that we have been “endowed with” it by former generations, even by all former generations, as the compliance with their expectations.¹⁴

In the present, it is an endowment through which “the past has a claim” upon us. The “secret signal” from the future is a recognition of the persistence of this claim. In other words, our capacity to recognize in the gesture of the child a secret signal from the future is the evidence for the existence of the “weak messianic force,” that our own claim upon the future might be recognized, even if the content of the claim we might be making cannot be specified in advance (now) but is only realized or redeemed in its relation to the specific historical situation of a future we cannot know.

This messianic force is weak, Hamacher suggests, because it is always susceptible to failure, open to the possibility that possibilities (for happiness, justice) might be missed. If they are not grasped by someone capable of rising above the lethargy produced by the “automatism of the actualities unfolding homogeneously out of possibilities,”¹⁵ the future will conform with the present, in a reproduction of the same oppressions, over and over again:

A historian and a politician takes a stand for the historically possible and for happiness only if he does not see history as a linear and homogeneous process whose form always remains the same and whose contents, assimilated to the persistent form, are indifferent.¹⁶

The problem is not just the urgency with which industrial capitalism asserts its claim upon the future—with its relentless expansionist drive—but also, and perhaps most disastrously, the conformity of anti-capitalist political movements in the very same historico-temporal logic. As Benjamin writes in his “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”:

In the idea of the classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an “ideal” that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an “infinite [unendlich] task.” And this doctrine was the school philosophy of the Social Democratic party—from Schmidt and Stadler through Natorp and Vorländer. Once the classless society had been defined
as an infinite task the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance, provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance of a completely new resolution of a completely new problem.\(^{17}\)

There is a possible paradox here, which the “Program” exposes rather clearly. Once political opposition to capitalism comes to regard itself in terms of the “infinite task,” it seems to abandon itself to doing nothing, in sure and certain expectation that the revolution will just turn up. At the same time, in regarding its opposition to capitalism as an “infinite task,” it aligns itself with precisely that historically specific logic of capitalism itself—that value is derived from work—from which it might, more radically, choose to dissociate itself. Thus in Benjamin’s uncoupling of play from productivity, and in his extraction of theatre from the leisure (or culture) industry, there is also a possibility that the progress of capitalism’s “empty and homogenous time” might be interrupted. It is no longer a matter of either waiting or working one’s way through that expanse of time in order to build something for the future. In place of more of the same of this homogenous time of capitalism, then, there might come some “flash” of a possibility not to be missed, a constellation of two different but related “Nows” in which true historical time—the time of politics and of happiness—might appear. Hamacher writes that, in Benjamin’s concept of history, “there is historical time only insofar as there is an excess of the unactualised, the unfinished, failed, thwarted, which leaps beyond its particular Now and demands from another Now its settlement, correction and fulfilment.”\(^{18}\) The “Program,” in its rejection of the very logic of program, insists upon the constant generation of the “unactualised, the unfinished” in its refusal to finish either an education or a piece of theatrical performance. This is a refusal that does not content itself with waiting, either: it must be active in its interruption of the logic in which history is progress made by work. It is not a matter of replacing work with doing nothing. What is crucial is that a determinate “nonwork” must substitute for work and thus, in a sense, negate it.\(^{19}\)

Theatre—if it can be taken out of its place in the culture industry, stripped of its professionalism, and radically repurposed—seems like a loophole through which the passionate amateur might exit from the “conformism” defined by the “illusion that the factory work ostensibly fur-
thering technological progress constituted a political achievement.\textsuperscript{20} As a “defined space” in which “the whole of life” can “appear,” it constitutes the stage upon which an image of missed possibilities, overlooked in the submission to work and progress and flashing into visibility in the coincidence of two different “Nows,” might appear: “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.”\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps that is precisely what becomes visible, as the latent possibility of even the industrial theatre, at the end of Chekhov’s \textit{Uncle Vanya} and, in chapters yet to come, in the revolutionary school-holiday school of Godard’s \textit{La chinoise} and the “romantic” evocation of “exodus” in the work of the theorists of post-Operaismo: the passionate amateur’s determinate negation of work as dialectical image.

Over and over again, in Shakespeare, in Calderón, battles fill the last act and kings, princes, lords, and attendants “enter in flight.” The moment when they become visible to the audience stops them in their tracks. The stage calls a halt to the flight of the dramatis personae. Entering the sight of non-combatants and true superiors allows the victims to draw breath as fresh air takes them in its embrace. That is what gives the stage appearance of these “fleeing” entrances their hidden significance. Implicit in the reading of this form of words is the expectation of a place, a light (daylight or footlights) in which our own flight through life might be safe in the presence of watching strangers.\textsuperscript{22}

\section*{2. PRACTICE BEFORE THE “PROGRAM”}

Perhaps it is appropriate that the idea that Asja Lacis might develop a “Proletarian Childrens’ Theater” based upon this “Program” was never realized— not because its realization would represent some betrayal of the text’s antiprogrammatic character, but rather because the practice to which it gestures had already taken place ten years earlier. In October 1918, Lacis was asked to take up a position as a director in the theatre in Orel, a city about three hundred miles south west of Moscow and two hundred miles east of the border of Belarus. On arrival in Orel (Oryol), Lacis was immediately struck by the presence of large numbers of homeless children on the streets. Such children—widely known in Russian as
the *besprizorniki*—had become a feature of city life before the Revolution of 1917. As Alan Ball explains, the phenomenon of *besprizornost*—not by any means new—had been amplified and intensified by the impact of World War One. In the first place mass mobilization from 1914 deprived families of their main breadwinners, forcing women to work long hours outside the home and children, too, to find ways of earning money simply to survive. Many children moved between homes that could no longer support them and streets where they could improvise a precarious life out of “begging, peddling, prostitution and theft.” Then, as the war progressed and German forces pushed eastward into Russian territory, mass evacuations eastward from Ukraine and Belarus resulted in the separation of families from one another, as well creating conditions in which many adults died, leaving their children both orphaned and displaced. In the immediate post-revolutionary years the care and education of children were identified by the new Soviet government as key priorities, and radical proposals were developed in which both care and education might be provided by the state rather than by the family. By 1918 at least three new government agencies were claiming responsibility for making and implementing policy: in addition to the commissariats for Health and Social Security, Narkompros, the Commissariat for Education (which also oversaw artistic production), saw child welfare as part of its sphere of operation.

The idea that a theatre director—and one who already had experience working with children, as Lacis had—should see the welfare of such children as something to which she might contribute is thus entirely consistent with both artistic and social policy in the first years of the Soviet Union, a clear expression of revolutionary ambitions for the transformation of social relations. In Orel, some of the *besprizorniki* had been accommodated in an orphanage where, Lacis reports, they received food and shelter but, as their “tired, sad eyes” showed, “nothing interested them”: they had become “children without childhood.” Lacis herself was living in an old aristocratic house, in which the characters of Turgenev’s novel *A Nest of Nobles* were supposed to have lived, and she proposed to the head of city education that she should transform it into a space for children’s theatre rather than direct conventional productions for the city theatre. Her proposal was approved, and the rooms of the house were opened up for Lacis and the homeless children. In Lacis’s account she was aware from the very beginning that in order to liberate the creative faculties of these traumatized children, it would be necessary to abandon any idea of working toward specific goals such as the performance of a play under
the guidance of the “director’s will” (Willen des Regisseurs). The rejection of the manager-production complex as it is articulated in Benjamin’s “Program” thus represents both a theoretical position derived from a critique of bourgeois education (which is how Lacis herself frames it, in the passage already cited, on the “goal of communist education”) and a practical response to a specific historical situation. Lacis is proposing to “re-purpose” (umfunktionieren) her own role as both teacher and director. She is doing so, as we shall see, at a moment of historical possibility in which all prior assumptions as to how basic social functions should be organized are in flux. In undoing recently consolidated bourgeois assumptions—that the care of children should be undertaken in the home of the “nuclear” family and that activities like education, welfare, and theatre should be guided by appropriately qualified “professionals”—the Bolshevik revolution’s moment of historical possibility also threatens the Platonic foundations of propriety upon which, at least in the political sphere, the distinction between professionals and amateurs (workers and rulers) depends. Jacques Rancière’s critique of Plato, in which he advances the idea that only those with no qualification to govern are qualified to govern, might indeed be said to have found concrete expression in this immediate post-revolutionary moment, in which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick observes in her account of the first years of Narkompros, “almost nobody [. . . ] had any administrative or organizational experience outside the sphere of emigré revolutionary politics.” In this moment, then, the revolutionaries, Lacis among them, are “passionate amateurs,” undertaking an experimental practice of individual and collective Umfunktionierung, before circumstances seem to require that they should settle down into becoming “revolutionary by profession.” However, rather than merely recapitulating a familiar narrative of the revolutionary potentiality of the “amateur” giving way to the bureaucratic totalitarianism of the Soviet “professional,” this observation serves to unsettle another familiar conceptualization, in which Lacis the “professional revolutionary” repurposes or “turns” Benjamin, the dreamily romantic amateur.

In Lacis’s own account of the origins of the “Program” itself, it seems as though this strongly gendered articulation of people to their work is already in play. Benjamin is reported as announcing that, in writing the “Program,” he will turn Lacis’s practice into theory. In his first attempt to do so, he fails to be sufficiently practical as an author of a proposal for action, and the “professionals” in the Communist Party leadership laugh at what he has produced. Here Benjamin the amateur, a figure that seems to have contributed substantially to the slightly cultish way in which his
work has been received in some quarters, appears to be a distinctively male, almost gentlemanly role. Benjamin appears here as the gentleman whose dilettantish skills as a *feuilltoniste* license his self-nomination as the theorist-advocate of the professional woman, as though, to return to Hannah Arendt’s distinctions, he alone has the time to write (to speak, to act), while Lacis, condemned to the sphere of mere labor, does not. In this scenario, the laughter of the “professionals” at the appearance of a theoretical text so clearly not “fit for purpose” serves only to reinforce this distinction. Benjamin is too naïve, too unworldly, to accommodate himself to the heteronomous demands of professional revolutionary practice, just as, in the broader narrative of Benjamin as heroic failure, the rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift* marks his inassimilability to the limiting structures of the professional academy.

This dyad in which women’s labor supports men’s (political) action appears with varying degrees of stability throughout the material with which this book engages. In the Platonic conception the exclusion of women from Athenian citizenship rests upon a gendered division of labor; in Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* it turns out to be Vanya (who imagines he could have been “a Schopenhauer, a Dostoevsky”) who relapses into idleness during the visit of the Professor and his wife and Sonya who just keeps on quietly working; in Godard’s *La chinoise*, as we shall see, it is Yvonne, the young woman from the countryside, who serves tea and polishes shoes for the young people playing at revolution; and, in a theoretical exposition of the gendered division of labor that makes capitalist (and orthodox revolutionary) production possible, it is Maria Rosa Dalla Costa who notes the fundamental significance of the work of women in the home for the conceptualization of post-Fordist “immaterial labour.”

Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” has the potential to undo this dyadic figure of the female professional and the gentleman amateur by putting to one side the logic of work around which this gendered valorization takes shape, even as accounts of its conditions of production point to the extent to which that logic continued and continues to operate. This book’s organizing figure of the passionate amateur always stands in an ambivalent place: if on the one hand, in its dependence upon conventional understandings of the “amateur,” it might suggest a certain kind of male subjectivity, on the other it seeks, at least, a trajectory that might escape both gender distinctions grounded in work and the very professional-amateur distinction upon which its concept seems to rest. It does so acknowledging, all the same, that both such distinctions remain fully operational within capitalism. Like the related fig-
ure of Rei Terada’s “phenomenophile”—who prefers to let his attention stray from the matter at hand toward the seemingly inconsequential and flickering detail—the passionate amateur will tend to appear more readily in male than in female form. Recognizing Lacis’s children’s theatre in Orel as the work of a passionate amateur, however, rather than as a practice to be elevated into action by a subsequent theorization by someone with time on his hands, represents, then, an attempt to hold on to the historical contingency of the category itself and of the construction of gender involved in capitalism’s labor theory of value. It also points to the passionate amateur’s inherent potential for self-dissolution in the resistance to work itself. Historical circumstances, foremost among them the new state’s need to compete economically with its capitalist antagonists, meant that the potential for repurposing that the Soviet Union seemed in its early years to offer would never reach so far as to question the purpose of work itself. As the revolutionary project of communism came increasingly to identify itself, in Lenin’s terms, as “soviets, plus electricity,” and to promote figures such as Stakhanov as its ideological heroes, the self-dissolution of the passionate amateur would become one of the movement’s unattempted trajectories—“unactualised . . . unfinished . . . failed . . . thwarted”—but returning, in the “Program,” ten years later, as a potentiality that had yet to expire.

At the heart of Lacis’s account of her work in Orel is a story that seems to value precisely the kind of potentiality with which an aprogrammatic and nonprofessional radicalism might wish to affiliate itself. Although she had decided not to work in a conventional way, directing the children in a production of a play, Lacis and her coworkers had chosen, as the basis for improvisational work by the children, a play by Meyerhold (Al-inur) based on a story by Oscar Wilde (The Star Child), although they had not told the children that this text was determining the improvisational scenarios they were invited to play. Lacis had successfully engaged children from the orphanage, and work was proceeding very well with them, but she had yet to persuade the street children to take part. One day the children are improvising a scene suggested to them by Lacis, in which a group of robbers are sitting around a fire in the forest, boasting about their exploits. It was during the playing of this scene that the street children decide to pay their first visit to the “Turgenev house.” At first the children from the orphanage are frightened of the intruders, but Lacis urges them to continue with their scene and to pay no attention to the intruders. After a while the “leader” of the street children signals to his fellows, and the group invades the scene, forcing its players to one side.
and improvising their own far more ambitious boasts of murders, arson, and robbery, trumping the imaginations of the original improvisation. At the conclusion of this performance they turn on the other children and announce, “So sind Räuber!!” For Lacis, the moral of the story lies in the interruption or suspension of all pedagogical rules into which this intervention has forced her. In its way this is a classic anecdote of radical and child-centered pedagogy, in which the unschooled and fully embodied imagination of the streets offers more to the theatre than the tamer confections of the more docile participants. It is a story in which the pedagogue confronts the limits of her pedagogy, “tears up the rulebook” in the face of “real creativity.” But it is not just a story about spontaneous creativity. Its alternative moral is a deeply Platonic one, in which the theatre is interrupted by the real, in the form of those who don’t have to pretend to be “robbers.” The street children’s claim is that they know better. They are, as it were, professionals, and this qualifies them for the role of theatrical robbers in preference to the supposedly less convincing efforts of the children from the orphanage. At the conclusion of the story, in which Lacis chooses to emphasize an anarchic overturning of professional regulation (“I had to interrupt all pedagogical rules”), there’s a dynamic counter-interruption staged on behalf of a theatre based paradoxically on specialist expertise, rather than on the mere imitation of something the actors know nothing about. The passion of the street children expresses the craft pride of a labor aristocracy.

3. WORK, EDUCATION, COMMUNISM

The story of the robbers in the forest is for children and romantics and above all for those romantics who, like Benjamin himself (his doctoral dissertation, “The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism,” recalls the significant place of the Jena Frühromantiker in the formation of his thought), return again and again to the memory or the imagination of childhood. It is a story for Jean Paul, one of only two writers mentioned in the “Program” (the other is Konrad Fiedler, a nineteenth-century art theorist who emphasized the artist’s capacity to see “with his hand”), of whom Benjamin notes that he was one of only “a few unusually perceptive men” to have glimpsed the world from which the “secret signal” of the child is sent. And it is a story for Friedrich Schiller, the hero of whose Robbers, Karl Moor, is a dramatic prototype for leaders of revolutionary movements. In the contradictory figure of the “robbers” of Lacis’s anecdote lies
a tension between two potentialities of the child, a tension that Benjamin’s
text also expresses: between children as fairy-tale romantics or as revolu-
tionaries in the making, between pure amateurs or professionals in train-
ing. This tension might also be understood in terms of a historical rela-
tionship between bourgeois and proletarian conceptions of education and
its function. This relationship is largely one of contradiction, a contradic-
tion that is to be found within the emergent communist discourse, seek-
ing an alternative to bourgeois education, as much as in the differences
between that discourse and either conservative or liberal approaches to
bourgeois education. In terms of both the structure for education and the
conception of history implicit in Benjamin’s “Program,” this contradic-
tion opposes Marxist-Leninist work for a communist future to a romantic-
utopian attempt to produce the future within the present by drawing
upon the forces of the past (what Benjamin earlier conceptualized by way
of his notion of “origin as the goal”). The “Program for a Proletarian
Children’s Theater” does not just look back ten years to Lacis’s work in
Orel; it also recalls some of Benjamin’s own first intellectual and activist
engagements, in the youth and student movement of the final years be-
fore World War One.

Benjamin was one of the leading members of a relatively short-lived
left-leaning youth movement operating in both Vienna and Berlin called
Anfang. Among its fellow members were Siegfried Bernfeld from Vienna,
who later became a psychoanalyst, and Gerhard Eisler, who, as we have
already seen, would become a leading member of the KPD. The leader-
ship of the movement also included one exceptionally influential older
“mentor” figure, Gustav Wyneken. Wyneken was already well known as
a theorist and practitioner of radical education. Benjamin had spent three
years at a rural school at Haubinda in Thüringen, directed by Wyneken,
apparently as an alternative to the Kaiser Friedrich Gymnasium in Berlin,
which he hated, and had subsequently joined a movement for school re-
form in Freiburg, formed in response to a public appeal for collective ac-
tion by Wyneken. In a statement in the inaugural issue of the move-
ment’s journal, also named Anfang, published in May 1913, Wyneken,
Benjamin, Bernfeld, and Georges Barbizon (a leading Berlin member of
the group) established its main principles, conceived as a direct attack on
the mainstream education of the time. As Philip Lee Utley notes:

In most members’ experience, the school employed curricular and
noncurricular practices that made it the adult world’s worst of-
fender against five values. The values were major tenets of the
movement’s program: social justice, universalist national neutrality, individual freedom, communitarianism and sexual liberation.36

A crucial “framework of unifying ideas”37 for Anfang was Wyneken’s concept of Jugendkultur (youth culture), which affirmed that, far from being a mere transition of the infant toward adult maturity (a transition for which formal education was conventionally assumed to be necessary), childhood was a distinctive moral or spiritual condition:

Autonomous youth were morally superior—more spiritual (geistig) in a Hegelian sense than any other age-group. Youth’s spiritual character (Eigenart) meant that youth were idealistic rather than materialist, the theory ran; therefore they adhered to absolute values and were inclined to realize them without compromise. Inherent in their spiritual character was also a need to be exposed to humanistic culture—art and the humanistic and scientific disciplines—and absorb what was consonant with absolute values in the material learned. If given autonomy, youth would select spiritual teachers who would aid in this task. Thus armed with absolute values and spiritual culture, youth were considered the dialectical antithesis of the material, philistine adult world, which they struggled to modify.38

Rather than seeking to acquire the skills and behavior necessary for her incorporation into the adult world, the child has a spiritual mission (in this extremely Hegelian formulation) to transform the adult world itself into one in which the values of the child could find full realization (as absolute spirit, presumably); or, in a more Benjaminian formulation, the child’s mission is to blast open the continuum of successive homogenous time in which she moves automatically along the path to adulthood, thereby collapsing industrial modernity back into an idealized, romantic vision of its own past (of childhood, or of the medieval forest). This means, as Benjamin explains in an essay published in Anfang in 1913, that the adult cannot look back at the child from a standpoint of superiority, based on knowing what it is that the child will become. To do so would be to fail to recognize the child as the condition in which the adult might wish to ground her own social or political reorientation, toward an “origin as a goal.” Benjamin writes that the adult who claims to have “experienced” things and to know more than the young person
smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture, before the long sobriety of serious life. Thus the well-meaning, the enlightened. We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of youth; serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life’s drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years.  

It is not hard to discern in this early text, and in another that appeared a year later as a published version of a speech given by Benjamin as president of the Berlin Free Student Group, the emergence of Benjamin’s distinctive conception of history as a necessary corollary of this valorization of childhood. The two ideas appear linked to one another in these early texts just as they are in the “Program.” In his “presidential” speech, given first in Berlin at the start of the 1914 summer semester and then again in June of that year in Weimar, at a meeting of all the Free Student Groups, Benjamin announces that his aim is, in effect, to do precisely what he will later propose as the goal of the Proletarian Children’s Theater:

There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along the path of progress. [ . . . ] The following remarks, in contrast, delineate a particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single point. Like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers. [ . . . ] The historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute. [ . . . ] the contemporary significance of students and the university [ . . . ] as an image of the highest metaphysical state of history.  

What follows is a critique of the instrumentalization of knowledge and scholarship in the university that sounds very much like later critiques of higher education such as the famous 1965 text produced by members of the Situationist International—On the Poverty of Student Life:

Being a student is a form of initiation. An initiation which echoes the rites of more primitive societies with bizarre precision. It goes on outside of history, cut off from social reality. The student leads
a double life, poised between his present status and his future role. The two are absolutely separate, and the journey from one to the other is a mechanical event “in the future.” Meanwhile, he basks in a schizophrenic consciousness, withdrawing into his initiation group to hide from that future. Protected from history, the present is a mystic trance.  

While one might readily imagine that the militants of Strasbourg would view Wyneken’s notion of Jugendkultur, and its development by Benjamin into the idea of a childhood that finds its own fulfillment, as just another “mystical trance,” there is an insistence in both texts, over fifty years apart (at the beginning and at the end of the period of the Fordist exception), upon the relationship among history, education, and work. Both texts share a desire to interrupt the process by which education prepares its subject for the work that will ensure the continuation of the very historical sequence in which education leads to work. In his 1914 speech Benjamin writes:

It leads to no good if institutes that grant titles, qualifications, and other prerequisites for life or a profession are permitted to call themselves seats of learning. The objection that the modern state cannot otherwise produce the doctors, lawyers and teachers it needs is irrelevant. It only illustrates the magnitude of the task entailed in creating a community of learning, as opposed to a body of officials and academically qualified people. It only shows how far the development of the professional apparatuses (through knowledge and skill) have forced the modern disciplines to abandon their original unity in the idea of knowledge, a unity which in their eyes has now become a mystery, if not a fiction.  

The simultaneous subject and object of the historical sequence that Benjamin wishes to interrupt is, of course, the bourgeois professional: the “doctors, lawyers and teachers” among whom Benjamin himself was supposedly destined to take his place but from whom he was soon decisively to separate himself, first by refusing to assimilate his “knowledge” to the institutional demands of the “modern disciplines” and then by orienting himself toward a radically different “community of learning” from that envisaged by the romanticism on which his rhetoric here seems to draw: the proletariat.  

Benjamin’s views are not simply a restatement of romantic Humbold-
tian ideals, however, but may also be understood in their own particular historical context. Despite the lip service paid to such ideals in the often self-authored historiography of the modern German university, the real transformation achieved during the nineteenth century was the simultaneous expansion and diversification of university studies in order to facilitate the development of an increasingly bourgeois cadre of professionals in administration; law; and, crucially, industry. This process, implicit in the establishment, by the Prussian state, of Berlin University in 1810, accelerated and intensified at the end of the nineteenth century.

Now universities faced competition from the Technische Hochschulen, specialist training institutions that were adapting themselves more readily than the universities to the demands of new industrial processes and forms of industrial organization. Universities were accused of being out of touch and unsuited to modern economic conditions. Between 1890 and 1914, however, the universities not only expanded (from twenty-eight thousand students to sixty thousand) but also diversified and professionalized, in what Konrad Jarausch describes as a “transition from the traditional elite to a modern middle-class university.” Geoff Eley summarizes the findings of Jarausch’s extensive research, which shows that this diversification and professionalization had two dimensions. The first, Eley writes, was “the upgrading of commercial, technical, and pedagogical institutions, the proliferation of teaching and research fields, and the reconfiguration of the academic career structure into an elite of senior professors and a new subordinate category of Assistenten.”

Previously lower-status institutions of higher education (including the Technische Hochschulen) acquired new status because they could meet the needs of an industrializing nation, and higher-education institutions in general started to adopt organizational forms derived from commerce and industry. The second dimension of this process “concerned the societal dynamic of professionalization and the growing imbrication of professional, managerial, and administrative careers with a system of regulated higher educational qualification.” Thus the professionalization of the university itself became integrated with the industrial world of work in which university graduates were increasingly seeking employment, and their university qualifications became an increasingly standardized requirement for finding such work.

As Jarausch notes, therefore, this expansion was more than just a matter of quantity; it would transform the very nature of the university. Conservative defenders of the existing elitism, in which the Bildungsbürgertum, or academic bourgeoisie, who were at least rhetorically committed to
the supposedly Humboldtian ideals of scholarship as vocation, held themselves apart, like gentlemen, from the “arrivistes” of the petty-bourgeoisie and feared that the traditional experience of the university life (much romanticized in memoirs) would be contaminated. But optimistic advocates of the integration of university study with the demands of an industrializing economy sought to imagine the university itself as a kind of factory. Jarausch cites the celebrated historian of Rome, Theodor Mommsen, who, in 1890, had “coined the term Grosswissenschaft as a scientific counterpart to big government and big industry.”

In 1905 Mommsen’s friend, the liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack, director-general of the Royal Library, published an article, “Vom Großbetrieb der Wissenschaft,” in which he explicitly compares even the most apparently arcane scholarly labor of philology—its editions, its accumulation of knowledge about sources—to the factories of industry, arguing that scholarship was now becoming a process of industrial knowledge production.

Jarausch sees this conception of collaborative research—which extends, as Harnack is keen to emphasize, to formal international partnerships and exchange—as “signalling the arrival of the mass research university.”

Harnack is fully aware of the objections that might be raised against this terminology and the practice it names:

So whoever speaks against the large-scale industry of scholarship—the word is not beautiful, but I can find no better one—does not know what he is doing, and whoever seeks to inhibit the progressive extension of this method of global conquest is damaging the common good. Of course we know the dangers of this industry—the mechanization of work, the valuation of collecting and refining material over intellectual insight, and even the genuine stupefaction of workers—but we can protect ourselves and our collaborators against these dangers.

The emergence of the idea that the highest form of education and the scholarly inquiry with which it has become associated in the German university during the nineteenth century is now best understood as a large-scale industry, contributing to the general good by means of its participation in a global network of production, signals a key moment in the professionalization of thought. It was not simply that the university was losing touch with its supposed mission to cultivate a unified knowledge, as Benjamin seems to claim, a mission betrayed by means of specialization and subservience to the demands of the profession. The transforma-
tion is much more foundational. The structures and ideologies developed for the purposes of industrial production have come to determine how knowledge itself is understood. The emergent epistemology of the professional understands the production of knowledge according to a newly dominant ideology of work, which consigns the amateurism of the old *Bildungsbürgertum* to an increasingly residual position. Such residues can become resources for subsequent emergent forms, however. Benjamin’s defense in his 1914 speech of the “original unity” of academic disciplines in the “unity of knowledge” need not be seen as a gesture of elitist nostalgia. Instead it might be viewed as an attempt to reach toward a new unification of faculties that would resist the division of labor in the large-scale industries of modern capitalism. Only a few years later the educational reformers of revolutionary Russia would seek to realize such a vision through either the “polytechnic” or the “united labour school”; reformers in Germany would pursue similar projects; and, Benjamin himself, following his own encounter with communist thought, would develop ideas about education radically different from any that might once have been associated with the *Bildungsbürgertum*. In the “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” these ideas take their most “amateurish” form, whereas in another text of the same year, a review of the communist educational theorist Edwin Hoernle’s *Grundfragen der Proletarischen Erziehung*, they seem to acquire a “professional” orientation. This tension between “free” work and productive work in these two texts of 1929 is evidence of two very different critical responses to the ideology of work that had taken a very firm hold in both Soviet Russia and the major industrial economies of capitalist Europe and North America and of Benjamin’s interest in both.

The establishment of an ideology of work (many of whose proponents saw it as a science, of course) derived initially from mid-nineteenth-century developments in physics that supported the conceptualization of the human body as the medium through which labor could be applied to nature in order to produce the materials necessary for human progress. Anson Rabinbach, who traces this development in some detail, suggests that this ideology—and the scientific practices in which it was instantiated—led to a major shift in how labor was generally conceived. Where once it might have moral value, either positive, as in Christian ideas of work as a spiritual mission, or negative, as in the aristocratic Greek view of work as a degrading activity, it came, during the nineteenth century, to be regarded as a neutral (even natural) foundation for human existence, without specific purpose or teleology but capable of
being directed toward one. This, Rabinbach argues, helped the ideologists of the science of work to claim, after 1900, that their ideas transcended politics. In Germany, the idea of a science of work (Arbeitswissenschaft) was developed by the psychologists Emil Kraepelin and Hugo Münsterberg, with a view to placing the insights of the scientific study of human behavior at the service of industrial production.56

Critics of their work, including the sociologist Max Weber, complained that their theorizations were remote from industrial application and responded by developing an alternative and empirical approach that would be pursued through the participation of the Verein für Sozialpolitik. This was a professional organization, originally founded in 1873 and composed of academics, civil servants, and a few industrialists, that concerned itself with applying the achievements of social science to central issues in German social policy. In 1908–9 the Verein für Sozialpolitik conducted a survey of the “impact of industrial work on workers’ attitudes and circumstances” directed by Alfred Weber, Heinrich Herkner, and Gustav Schmoller, on the basis of a theoretical blueprint mapped out by Max Weber. This example of “the new empirical social science” was, Rabinbach notes, “primarily concerned with determining the optimum yield of labor power conceived as a social phenomenon.”57 Frederick Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management was published in a German translation in 1912, arousing criticism from advocates of the “science of work,” who feared that Taylorism’s explicit drive toward maximizing the productivity of workers at the expense of their well-being would undo scientific claims to political neutrality. So although Taylorism was far from universally accepted, a broad consensus took shape around the belief that work was central to social and economic progress and that its productivity could be enhanced through the application of scientific research to industrial processes, including, of course, to the training and education that was to prepare children and students for participation in the economy. This consensus included significant sectors of the German left: “In the early phase of the Weimar Republic, industrialists, experts in fatigue, and Social Democratic trade unionists generally shared a positive view of the science of work as compensation for the negative effects of Taylorism.”58 Few voices seem to have been raised in resistance to what we might call the Großbetrieb der Arbeitswissenschaft (the large-scale industry of the science of work and its application to everything that moves) and its ambition to ground and justify the whole of social life in terms of work. Even the leading educational theorist of the German Communist Party, Edwin Hoernle, envisages “large-scale industry” as the basis, the location, and the purpose of a
“new pedagogy” for “mass” or “proletarian education.” Walter Benjamin concurs, affirming that Hoernle’s book is “at its best” when it offers a “program” of “revolutionary education for work.”

The immediate inspiration for Hoernle’s program lay in the radical proposals for the transformation of education adopted in Soviet Russia in the first decade of the revolution. The “communist pedagogy” so enthusiastically welcomed by Benjamin in his review of Hoernle’s work thus took programmatic form in precisely the historical circumstances in which Asja Lacis developed the theatrical practice upon which Benjamin’s “Program” is based. One of the central elements of Narkompros education policy from 1917 was the idea that all children should be educated through the United Labour School, which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick explains, “according to the Narkompros programme, was ‘polytechnical’ but not ‘professional’: it taught a variety of labour skills without specializing in any one of them or providing a professional or trade qualification.”

There were two competing versions of the United Labour School. One, advocated by the commissar himself, Lunacharsky, and his colleagues in Petrograd, was largely based on the “orthodox progressive” position of antiauthoritarian, nonscholastic education and the full development of the child’s individuality, using Dewey’s activity school approach as the basis for a polytechnical education. The other, advanced by leading figures in Moscow, emphasized the school-commune, in which children would live seven days a week and where labor skills would be acquired by taking part in “life itself” in the organization and maintenance of the commune. While both visions decisively rejected the idea that education should be organized in order to facilitate the specialization upon which the division of labor in industrial capitalism is organized, the Petrograd version seems, on the face of it, to offer education a greater measure of autonomy from the workplace, since the Moscow version effectively turns the workplace into the site of education, or vice versa. However, the Moscow version, with its idea that the “school is a school-commune closely and organically linked through the labour process with its environment,” offers a vision of childhood as a complete way of life (“life itself”) with its own intrinsic value (achieved through its own labor), rather than as a transitional phase through which children pass on their way to productive labor. In this respect, its relation to work—and, indeed, to historical progress—is utopian in character and resembles more closely than the Petrograd version the proletarian education envisaged in Benjamin’s “Program.” It seeks its own realization (the fulfillment of childhood) here and now rather than by way of an orienta-
ination to a future still to be produced by the full development of adult capacities by the maturing child.  

Hoernle’s *Grundfragen* specifically credits Lunacharsky and Narkompros with providing a blueprint for the development of a new pedagogy suitable for a proletarian education and refers, in particular, to an exhibition presented in Berlin titled “Labour Schools in Soviet Russia.” His own proposals seem to echo the Moscow approach, rather than that of Lunacharsky and the Petrograd vision of the United Labour School, however. In repudiating the associated “orthodox progressive” approach, he is also distinguishing the communist approach from that adopted by German social-democratic school reformers who, like Lunacharsky, drew on a liberal tradition encompassing Pestalozzi, Frobel, Dewey, and others. But one cannot read his text without also noticing the extent to which it seems, simultaneously and paradoxically, to subscribe to the ideology of work in terms that suggest a clear affinity with the goals of “global conquest” through professional work as articulated by Adolf von Harnack:

The proletarian school will not only, as the pedagogical reformers demand, be “loosened up,” it will not just be “rationalized” in terms of performance by new teaching and learning methods (Montessori methods, Dalton plan), it will become ever more closely connected to the public life of the proletariat and the industrial and agricultural operations, it will become an important link between economic production and public administration. Large-scale industry has created all the material, social and psychological prerequisites for this new pedagogy. Large-scale industry brings the child into the factory, albeit in the evil and murderous context of capitalist exploitation. It creates the possibility for the application of the hands of children to the machines, it places the creative child alongside the creative mother, alongside grown-up men and women. It creates thereby the new social role, the new social function of the child. But thereby it creates the possibility for a new, higher stage of children’s education.

In approving the idea of a “revolutionary education for work” Benjamin appears to respond to this idea of the potential of human creativity, developed holistically rather than in order to reproduce the division of labor in capitalist specialization, as the key contribution of a communist pedagogy. This communist pedagogy perhaps enables him now to imagine the replacement of the nostalgic attachment he expressed in 1914 to an “orig-
inal unity in the idea of knowledge,” with a commitment to “universal labor” in which polytechnical education is the lever for the Aufhebung of a principle formerly negated by industrial capitalism:

The immeasurable versatility of raw human manpower, which capital constantly brings to the consciousness of the exploited, returns at the highest level as the polytechnical—as opposed to the specialized—education of man. These are basic principles of mass education—principles whose seminal importance for young people growing up is utterly obvious.69

The apparent contradiction between the “amateur” impulse articulated so forcefully in the “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater,” on the one hand, and the pedagogy of a “revolutionary education for work” celebrated in the review of Hoernle, on the other, is one in which any romantic anti-capitalist sensibility seeking to move toward a communist politics is very likely to find itself. In theoretical terms, the only way of moving beyond this contradiction would be to undo the ideology of work itself and to detach value from labor. The “labor theory of value” is not a universal or transhistorical constant; it is a regime of value specific to capitalism. To move beyond the contradiction, then, would require nothing short of the abolition of wage labor (which Soviet Russia, over ten years after the revolution, had not even yet attempted). Or, to put it in more practical terms, until an alternative is found to a form of life in which the adult human works for a living, it is likely that education will continue to focus on preparing her to do so, however the division of labor is organized. Any program of education that seeks to exit this logic is likely to be compelled to return to it in some form or other: either by accepting that education is preparation for work or by making work and education one and the same. Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” lingers much more insistently in this contradiction than does “A Communist Pedagogy,” as though Benjamin wished to continue to make available, to thought at least, the possibility that it might be otherwise and as though Lacis’s theatre practice had shown that it might.

In the absence of a truly communist society in which a communist pedagogy might indeed be emancipated from its subjugation to wage labor and the labor theory of value, the virtue of a polytechnical education lies in its potential to release human creativity from the restraints of the division of labor. The virtue of theatre, as a mode of polytechnical education, is that it is an artistic practice that can be practiced, collectively, by
amateurs, rather than produced by professionals for the consumption of others. In “The Storyteller” Benjamin suggests that the oral transmission of stories has been largely superseded in industrial capitalism by the novel, a literary form in which the professional establishes herself as both author and principal subject matter of the story. The kind of theatre that Benjamin and Lacis have in mind—a theatre in which children enact stories that exist in a collective repertoire, rather than in the commodity form of the book—might be precisely the performance form in which the tradition of the “storyteller” might return and the experience of experience be restored. Edwin Hoernle, too, like Benjamin and Lacis, grasps this possibility and desires its realization within industrial capitalism (rather than in a romantic retreat to the pre-capitalist forest). For Hoernle, like a number of other German socialist and communist writers and artists of the early 1920s, saw a proletarianized fairy tale, stripped of its conformist moralism, as precisely such a new form of collective artistic production, crucial to the education of proletarian children:

The proletariat will create new fairy tales in which workers’ struggles, their lives and their ideas are reflected and correspond to the degree which they demonstrate how they can continually become human, and how they can build up new educational societies in place of the old decrepit ones. It makes no sense to complain that we do not have suitable fairy tales for our children. Professional writers will not produce them. Fairy tales do not originate at the desk. [. . . ] The new proletarian and industrial fairy tale will come as soon as the proletariat has created a place in which fairy tales are not read aloud but told, not repeated according to a text, but created in the process of telling.70

Benjamin, Lacis, and Hoernle are all, then, insisting upon the value of a kind of theatrical improvisation, which they all view as an artistic practice that might allow one to “continually become human” (Hoernle), that might “set productivity free” (Lacis) and receive “a secret signal” that would “blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin). This theatre is one of those artistic practices that Susan Buck-Morss suggests might, at the beginning of the revolution in Russia, have been the basis for an “ungoverned cultural revolution”71 but that was eventually unable to do so because

it could not challenge the temporality of the political revolution which, as the locomotive of history’s progress, invested the party
with the sovereign power to force mass compliance in history’s name. Hence the lost opportunity: the temporal interruption of avant-garde practice *might have continued* to function as a criticism of history’s progression *after* the Revolution.\textsuperscript{72}

Such practices look, she writes, like “one of the dead ends of history” but “still merit consideration”\textsuperscript{73}—not simply as historical curiosities but as possibilities that, “unactualised, . . . unfinished, failed, thwarted,” might yet leap into a new now and demand “fulfilment.”\textsuperscript{74}