

'Theatre, Revolution and Love': Moral–aesthetic education in Asja Lācis' proletarian children's theatre

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Abstract

This article explores the educational philosophy of Asja Lācis' proletarian children's theatre. Taking her post-First World War encounter with Russian street children as a starting point for my inquiry, I argue that Lācis regards the theatre as a rehearsal space for life. Here, children are to be absorbed into the craft of theatre, with the aim of honing their moral and aesthetic sense as a (self-guided) reorientation of their attention and desire towards (the possibilities of) the Good. Demarcating a porous educational theatre space that provides practical artistic opportunities for this education of attention, Lācis hopes to structure children's aesthetic, social, material and sensory engagement with their surroundings, whilst also ensuring their individual freedom as moral agents. Respecting children's ways of engaging in the world, Lācis posits theatrical improvisation as the key activity. Here, children create their own stories and metaphors about how life might be lived, thereby practising attention to, 'testing' and reflecting upon, the (possible) Good Life. The educator's pedagogical gesture is hereby that of observation: She pays attention to the social-artistic tensions that occur, as potential heralds of the child's unique way of embodying (and conceptualising) the Good Life. Theatre is here

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understood as a (negative) dialectical site of education, one that acknowledges the dark and uncertain relation between the child's commitment to the Good, and its (uncertain) coming into being in daily life. The student–teacher relationship can indeed become a pedagogical conduit for this search for (and embodiment of) wisdom, but cannot provide a blueprint as to how the journey might be conducted, or predict how the Good will manifest. It is in the 'loving' non-action of the educator, who honours the unpredictability of the arrival of virtue, and the unexpected form that it might take, that children's theatre is considered 'truly revolutionary': becoming a witness to Eros's (strange) presence in the child's unique gesture as a result.

KEYWORDS

Asja Lācis, children's theatre, moral–aesthetic education, porosity, theatre pedagogy, Walter Benjamin

INTRODUCTION

Latvian actress, director and teacher Asja Lācis' educational ideas about her theatre with Russian street children have been mainly mediated through Walter Benjamin's (1999) theorisations of her work in his *Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre*—at least in countries (like Germany and the UK), where her writings (in Russian, German and Latvian) have not been fully translated. Beata Paškevica's (2006) detailed biographical study in German (which draws on a wealth of multilingual material) is an exception here, although *In der Stadt der Parolen* (In the City of Slogans) focuses on Lācis' theatre aesthetic rather than her educational philosophy. In the German-speaking world, Karin Burk's *Kindertheater als Möglichkeitsraum* reads Benjamin's *Programme* through the motif of the street in his work—and conceptualises children's theatre as an educational space for play and rehearsal that is devoid of hierarchy and authority (Burk, 2015). In the Anglophone world, Tyson E. Lewis' recent (2020) *Walter Benjamin's Anti-Fascist Education* explores children's theatre in Benjamin's *Programme* as one of his (many) educational forms (e.g., in addition to his radio pedagogy), that is, as an educational aesthetic that seeks to mimetically disrupt reified habitual relations to the world and the self (in thought, action and feelings)—'to awaken the body to alternative, indeterminate gestures without predetermined destinations or use' (p. 19). Rather than reading Asja Lācis' theatre education solely through a Benjaminian lens, I wish to start from her own biographical recollections in this paper (albeit limited by my German/English bilingualism). This is not to imply that I will simply ignore Benjamin's writings (far from it) or to claim that a reading of Lācis' theatre education without a consideration of their mutual influence is actually possible (I don't think it is). My aim is simply to turn the spotlight and set the scene for this paper slightly differently—to start with Lācis' own narration of her educational theatre practice and ensuing educational philosophy. Let us begin then with the moment that Lācis' points to as the key moment, which placed the Latvian theatre maker in the pedagogical relationships that resulted in her experimental educational theatre project with Russian war orphans.

THE PEDAGOGICAL CALL

I arrived in Orel in 1918. I was meant to work as a director at the local theatre, a straightforward career path. But things turned out differently. In the streets of Orel, in the market places, in the cemeteries, in basements, in destroyed buildings, I saw bands of neglected children: the *Besprizorniki*. There were boys with black faces that had not been washed for months, jackets in rags, the lining hanging out in wisps; wide, long cotton pants tied together with a rope, armed with sticks and iron bars. They always moved in groups, had a headman, stole, robbed, beat down. In summary, they were robber bands—victims of WWI and the civil wars... (Lācis, 1971, pp. 21–22; my translation from German)

This short descriptive sketch from Lācis' biographical recollections sets the scene for what phenomenologist of educational practice Max van Manen (2012) theorises as the emergence of a pedagogical moment. It is the key moment that will lead to her experimental educational theatre project with Russian war orphans—the *Besprizorniki*—in 1918 in Orel (Oryol), a Russian city located on the Oka River, about 230 miles south-southwest of Moscow. Asja Lācis¹ has recently graduated from Theodore Komisarjevsky's (Meyerhold-influenced) avant-garde Theatre Studio in Moscow and is sent to take on a position as director at the local theatre in the Russian city of Orel. 'But things turned out differently', as Lācis puts it, in her characteristically concise writing style (Lācis, 1971, p. 21). Her observation of this post-First World War street scene and her encounter with (the not uncommon phenomena of) groups of begging, homeless children, who had fallen victim to the turmoils of the First World War, the October Revolution in 1917 and the ensuing Russian Civil War, interrupts the more conventional career path of the theatre director that lay ahead of her. As an enthusiastic supporter of the 1917 October Revolution and the newly formed revolutionary Soviet Republic, Lācis visits the dedicated educational institutions and workshops, set up by the Soviet government to look after the *Besprizorniki* as part of their newly established, post-revolutionary welfare programmes (Lācis, 1971, 21ff). The street children, she notes, continuously break out and escape the institutions' enforced routines and relationships. She observes that the orphans that *are* sheltered in the local children's homes seem traumatised. They do not roam the streets in violent gangs. They are fed, housed and cleanly dressed, but Lācis observes in these children a certain absence of an 'inner life'. Apathetic to their surroundings, the orphans seem to her to look at life through tired and sad eyes 'like old men' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21).

Her encounter with the two groups of orphans—the gangs of violent, homeless street children and the apathetic children in the welfare institutions—leads Lācis into ethical reflection: on how she is to act, personally and responsibly, in the face of these 'children without childhood' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21)—beyond the Soviet government's well-meaning state programmes: 'These were' children without childhood... I could not stay indifferent and had to do something, and I understood that young children's songs and round dance is not sufficient ...' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21; my translation from German). Lācis formulates her response to the children's lived experience as a concrete pedagogical demand on her. This 'call of pedagogy' (Van Manen, 2012), framed in Lācis' writing, is narrated by her as a sudden realisation, an ethical (and subsequently artistic) demand that places her (seemingly not entirely of her own choosing) into a pedagogical relationship with the war orphans. '[Pedagogy] ... is a phenomenon that issues a complex imperative in the manner that we see, feel, sense, reflect, and respond to the call of the child [person] before us' (Van Manen, 2012, p. 10). Lācis' response to the encounter with the orphans 'without childhood' is hereby not framed through a romantic, Rousseauian (1762/1979) notion of childhood as a natural category. She does not aim to restore a lost state of innocence in the children; one that is set in opposition to the corrupting nature of (adult) civil society.

Doubting instead the appropriateness of those bourgeois educational methods like 'round dance' and 'wee children's songs' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21) that assume such a separate and (fully) protective space of childhood, Lācis acknowledges the undeniable reality of social inequality (and its associated horrors) evident in the children's lives. She is aware of the impossibility of treating children as (or turning them back into) a *tabula rasa* that can be (freshly)

inscribed from a (restored) state of childhood purity. This is, however, not to imply that Lācis assumes that the Good, and with that the Good Life for the street children, might just come about accidentally, or that her theatre approach is not underpinned by a concept of education that seeks to improve children's lives. What ideas about education do we encounter in her theatre approach?

THEATRE AS A REHEARSAL OF ATTENTION TO LIFE

She writes about her educational aims in her biographical recollections:

In order to haul the children out of their lethargy, a task was required that could *fully* seize them and liberate their traumatised capacities. I knew the tremendous power that resides in theatrical play [...] I wanted to develop the children where their eye sees more clearly and their ear listens in a more refined manner and their hands create useful things out of unformed material. (Lācis, 1971, pp. 21–22, my translation)

For Lācis, it seems to be the complete immersion into theatrical play (and its associated production processes) that holds the potential to release the children's personal productivity and their dormant strengths (Lācis, 1971, p. 23). By seizing the children's desire to attend to (and get good at) the craft of theatre, Lācis seeks to awaken their full (inner) cognitive, sensory, moral and imaginative capacities. Painting a somewhat Kantian (see Kant, 2004) picture, she evokes the ideal of a unity of the moral life, where what is beautiful is also the symbol for what is morally good. For Lācis, the hope is that the children learn to 'see clearly' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21) and that they develop their own moral intuition. In other words, their seeing, hearing and creating as to what is good and beautiful will be tested and refined within the children's practical engagement with theatre, each other, and of course their own self. Lācis embraces the hope that the Good, whatever form it might take in the end, will ultimately crystallise out of the children's ordinary but committed, that is attentive, everyday engagement with the world around them.

For Lācis, it is in the world of the theatre—as a demarcated educational space—that this attentiveness to life (this seeing more clearly, listening in a more refined manner, the creation of useful and beautiful things) can be best practised. Where does this assumed power of theatre reside exactly? Walter Benjamin, who theorised Lācis' approach in his *Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre* about 10 years later in 1928/29, gives us a hint as to theatre's presumed power: 'It is only in the theatre that the whole of life can appear as a defined space, framed in all its plenitude; and this is why proletarian children's theatre [Lācis' theatre] is the dialectical site of education' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 202). The theatre makes human relationships, the complex relationship with ourselves, others and the world, and with that the question of how the Good Life might be lived, its social and artistic subject. In the mimesis of theatre, and as producers and audiences of their own performances, the children are invited to look at, experience, reflect on and, most importantly, work hands-on, on reality, that is 'the whole of life in all its plenitude' (ibid.). Alongside the artistic, technical and sensory training (which I will detail below), Lācis facilitates improvisational experimentations that aim to combine different artistic sections (painting, drawing, prop building, music, dance and recitation) into a collective, artistically ambitious performance.

Although Lācis draws on written play texts for these improvisations, such as the children's play *Alinur* by Vsevolod Meyerhold (based on Oscar Wilde's book *The Star-Child*), they serve as a hop-off point for the children's own creative acts. They provide a certain structure and content, in terms of possibilities for an overall theme, plot structure, placement of scenes and, of course, a variety of character types to draw on. But the texts are not staged as a fixed entity, one in which the children simply realise (e.g., in acting, *mise-en-scène* etc.) a preconceived and closed meaning that is conceived by the author or the director alone. Instead, the children are led to approach the plays in a practical, interpretive and improvisational mode. In the process, they practise their attention as audiences of stories about strange humans living together in a strange world. As producers, the children develop their attention to the materials at hand

and each other, when having to negotiate the work process, and work through the arising (social, artistic) tensions, so that they can, together, create and test their own strange stories about the Good Life:

...The improvised play was full of happiness and adventure for the children. They understood a lot and their interest was stirred. There was serious commitment to the work, cutting, gluing, dancing, singing, texts were rehearsed. This is how the character of the evil Tartarian boy Alinur [based on Meyerhold's play] came about, who insulted his mother and terrorised other children. (Lācis, 1971, p. 25; my translation)

Through the process of attending to the creation of their own stories and metaphors about the Good Life (without of course knowing exactly that this is what they are doing), the children are hoped to sharpen their sense of reality, so that they can see the diversity of people and things around them more clearly and experience a decrease in egoism. The educational theatre that Lācis invokes in her recollections is hereby marked by the provision of practical (poly-technical/artistic) opportunities for individual and collective, playful but not unserious training and engagement in those structured work processes necessitated by the requirements of theatrical production processes.

In order to provide these practical opportunities, Lācis demarcates an educational theatre space where this attentive discipline can be practised. Helped by the head of the education section of the Orel city council, she turns her own living quarters (where she lives with her then husband Jūlijs and young daughter Daga)—a beautiful aristocratic house in Orel, rumoured to have housed the aristocratic protagonists of Turgenev's 1858 novel *A Nobleman's Nest* (p. 22)—into the space for her children's theatre. The rooms feature large gothic windows and flaunt beautiful long views that lead the eye through old acacia trees all the way down to a river plain. 'These rooms were meant for children's theatre' (ibid.). With the council's assistance, the walls are knocked through, and the rooms are united into a hall that is decorated with frescoes to mark their dedicated theatre space. The Turgenev house does not simply serve here as a random physical location that houses the children's theatre. The aesthetic arrangement of the theatrical space and its location instead makes tangible a notion of pedagogy that seeks to structure the children's ways of encountering the material world (nature, each other, the artistic activities, and themselves of course) in a holistic way, where beauty/the good 'might appear to him [the child, holistically] as one idea or one kind of knowledge' (Symposium, Plato, 2012, 211b).

A PEDAGOGY OF POROSITY

The connection between the aesthetic arrangement of public spaces and its embodiments of theory and pedagogy is a recurring motif in both Lācis' and Benjamin's work. They first met on the island of Capri, in Italy's Bay of Naples, in the summer of 1924, where they developed a long-standing friendship and love affair. Here, Lācis tells Benjamin about her Orel children's theatre for the first time, and they bond over their shared love of theatre and interest in pedagogy. Lācis recalls Benjamin's extraordinary interest in her theatre with children (Lācis, 1971, pp. 25–26) at a time when he is writing his post-doctoral work (in German *Habilitation*) on German baroque tragedy. Benjamin had been exploring pedagogical questions since his own involvement in the German youth movement as a young man, writing essays for the movement's progressive educational journal *Der Anfang* (*The Beginning*). As a result of their Naples encounter, Benjamin and Lācis jointly pen an article about the porous city aesthetic, and theory of life in Naples, published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1925. In their Naples essay, Benjamin and Lācis vividly describe the way that (Neapolitan) architecture and street life come into being through the interaction between the natural features of the Naples landscape, the built environment and people's ways of improvising life within its interstices—using the emerging city space as a theatrical stage:

Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theatres. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes. ...

Everybody participates in the theatre of Neapolitan street life. Even street decorations are related to those of the theatre ... Porosity is the inexhaustible law in this city. (Benjamin & Lācis, 1925, pp. 417–418)

In Naples, a deeply Catholic city, where the 'festival penetrates each and every working day' (p. 418), street altars and street vendors' stalls are erected impromptu; gestures of worship and financial transaction mix and meet; children (from large Catholic families) can be seen to roam the streets at night and sleep outdoors during the day; private and public gestures intermingle and are on public display. This is the 'porosity' of Naples 'living' architecture, a porous city aesthetic that only comes to life through the participation of its residents.

For her Orel theatre experiment, Lācis makes tangible this pedagogical concept by arranging her educational space for porosity and inviting the children's participation and inhabitation of the various pedagogical stages that emerge. The large hall, festively decorated, with the light streaming into the large windows becomes an invitation to dance and run, build and create sets, to engage in, and play with, collective public gestures, and to develop a communal rhythm. The space by the window that frames the beautiful views acts as an invitation for the child to break from the busy activities, to stand by the window and think, contemplate nature and perhaps go for a walk. Beyond my speculation as to what kind of participation might have been envisioned on these different pedagogical stages, Lācis gives us a concrete idea as to how the Turgenev studio space was employed to further structure the children's artistic, social and sensory engagement with their material surroundings. She organises the children's theatre into different specialised artistic sections. In order to educate the children's visual perception, they are taught painting and drawing by stage designer Viktor Chestakov; their musical sensibilities are trained by a pianist who leads on the music lessons; and the technical skills development consists of the building of props, buildings, animals and figures—for use in their own theatre performances (Lācis, 1971, p. 22). Rhythm, gymnastics and diction are also part of this new curriculum.

Lācis' pedagogy as porosity sees a close relationship between the aesthetic arrangement of space, the (educator's) structuring of the children's aesthetic, social and sensory engagement with the world, and the emergence of the Good Life for the street children. Although Lācis' children's theatre can be indeed said to provide a high-quality (poly-technical/artistic) education for the children, their performances are not the final aim and culmination of the theatre's collective-creative activities. They 'come about incidentally, as an oversight, almost as a children's prank ...', as Benjamin puts it in his *Programme* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 203). Lācis' porous pedagogy, when arranging the Turgenev house and the artistic sections, focuses on structuring processes that act as invitations for aesthetic, social, material and sensory engagement. Her practice is underpinned by (integral) moral-aesthetic educational aims, which take into account the children's freedom to develop their ability to self-guide their will, desire and attention—in their own time and style.

THE PEDAGOGICAL CONDITIONS FOR FREEDOM

Lācis and Benjamin acknowledge the need to carve out an educational space that acknowledges that children cannot simply be moulded to fit an abstract idea of morality—or of what it means to live a Good Life. This is in fact where Benjamin locates the key difference between bourgeois and (Lācis') proletarian education: 'Proletarian education needs first and foremost a framework, an objective space *within* which education can be located. The bourgeoisie, in contrast, requires an idea *toward* which education leads' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 202). The proletarian children's theatre seeks to provide practical opportunities to develop the children's self-activity, in contrast to a bourgeois education that seeks to mould children towards a preconceived idea. It can be, of course, argued that the Besprizorniki are already very self-active and free indeed. They certainly set their own moral standards and guide their own desires and attention. They might not be keen on engaging in theatre, but they have become good at stealing, beating up people and have a knack for organising themselves in hierarchical street gangs, so as to make their looting as efficient as possible.

The proletarian theatre, as a framework (a location for education), respects the children's freedom and their existing material entanglements. But in setting apart a pedagogical space, Lācis also hopes to reorient their attention, for example, from their desire to inflict harm, towards a desire to build affective attachments to adults and other children. In the case of the Besprizorniki, this education of attention then must include an honouring of their independence, which is manifested in their actual ways of engaging in the world, e.g., their gestures of presenting themselves, greeting and treating adults (I will give an example towards the end of the article). 'Round dance' and 'wee children's songs' (Lācis, 1971, p. 21) would indeed not respect the children as, and where, they are, but infantilise them.

The development of the children's (self-guided) ability to see clearly (to desire the good and the beautiful) is considered to be intimately connected to the porosity of the educational space; one that invites the children (indirectly—by engaging them in the craft of theatre) to develop their aesthetic and moral sense. In Lācis' theatre, improvisation is the central activity, because it is the place where the child's 'signifying gestures' (the gestures that signify the child's embodiment of the Good) might emerge: '... they [the signifying gestures] alone have the unexpected uniqueness that enable the child's gesture to stand in its own authentic space' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204). As each child responds differently (with different levels of attention) to the various tasks that are offered in the children's theatre, the nature of their gestures and the moment of their arrival (as Benjamin would emphasise) are of course unique as well.

AN ANTI-PROGRAMMATIC PROGRAMME

In his *Programme*, Benjamin details, reversely, how both, bourgeois and socialist pedagogy, can potentially undermine this freedom of the individual child. His critique is aimed at those educational approaches that he terms either 'unsystematic' or falsely 'systematic' (1999, p. 202) given their assumption that virtue is either a natural state in children or that morality can simply be taught to children in the form of instruction. On the one hand, bourgeois education is deemed unsystematic by Benjamin because it presumes the former, and ends up ever running after the latest methodology 'with its "latest psychological refinements"', one that can supply—and mould the children towards—the supposed universally applicable 'idea towards which education leads' (ibid.). On the other hand, the proletarian movement, with its tendency towards the 'self-confidence of parliamentary tedium' (p. 201), is equally reprimanded by Benjamin as being systematic in the wrong way—conflating the difference between the educational mode of *lehren* (teaching, instructing) and *erziehen* (upbringing). Education as instruction, Benjamin tells us, falsely presumes that the valuable elements of Marxist ideology can simply be taught to young children as a complete (and abstract) theory—in the way that one may teach academic curriculum content to young people or adults, but in a pedagogically reduced format to suit the child's stage of development. Benjamin concedes that it is indeed conceivable that children can be instructed to simply regurgitate ideological slogans. The lack of personal freedom, and with that the lack of meaning attached to the memorised catchphrases, can however by no means guarantee that the Communist Party programme will result in the child's (and later adult's) self-guided enactment of its underlying moral theory.

The question about moral education, that is, how to bring up children as moral agents (as opposed to instructing them into ideological content), calls instead for the abandonment of fixed programmes. Pointing towards the tensions within the German youth movement during the First World War years, Benjamin critiques bourgeois society for exploiting young people's malleability and 'draining their energy' for a direct political (e.g., militaristic) aim, under the guise of an idealist, romantic rhetoric (p. 205). Benjamin likely refers here to his break in intellectual kinship with the key theorist of the youth movement Gustav Wyneken, who, in a public lecture in 1914, endorsed the German war effort as an ethical opportunity for the young. For Benjamin, the (properly) systematic nature of Lācis' proletarian theatre approach is neither constituted through its adherence to a theoretical totality nor in making claims on children's or young people's energies for political agendas. Theatre's educational systemacity is manifested for Benjamin in its carving out of an objective educational space 'within which education can be located'—without simply becoming the means to an end to an idea (p. 202). Benjamin and Lācis respond to the paradoxical task—of expounding an anti-programmatic system of proletarian education—by proposing the theatre as the dialectic site of education.

This educational site then aims to acknowledge that moral formation cannot be directly manufactured as an automated process. Theatre education does not expect a causal relationship between its ideas about the Good and their direct translation into educational practice, but holds that the Good Life can still be hoped for as a possible outcome of a planned educational strategy; one that orients the children towards the Good. In other words, Lācis' approach to proletarian education cannot be framed by a positive Hegelian dialectic and pedagogy driven to implement the Communist Party programme at the cost of undermining the children's individual freedom (e.g., by exploiting their youthful energies). According to Benjamin, a proletarian education (à la Lācis) instead seeks to 'guarantee to children the fulfilment of their childhood' (p. 205), whilst also pursuing the overall educational aim of developing the children's ability to self-guide their attention and desire. And although Benjamin concedes that ideological class education has its place (but not before the age of fourteen), 'the proletariat must not pass on its class interest to the next generation with the tainted methods of an [bourgeois] ideology that is destined to subjugate the child's suggestible mind' (ibid.).

To summarise, Lācis and Benjamin do not advocate the realisation of a rationalist, ideological totality through the means of proletarian theatre education. They also reject the method of tapping into children's energies and malleability in the name of idealist, romantic rhetoric (and likely for hidden agendas). Both approaches ultimately demoralise the child as an individual moral agent, by rendering the truth of their contingent, everyday experience and actions, and with that their freedom, worthless. Theatre, they are concerned, serves here either as a vessel for the realisation of a self-contained theory and the preconceived needs, moral state and predetermined destiny of an abstract theoretical category (the collective, the class, the proletariat, society); or theatre is falsely regarded as a proxy to realise bourgeois, political aims (e.g. to secure the war effort). In both cases, the individual and their truth as mediated by their conscious everyday experience, is erased. If not busily driven by a Hegelian Geist, how can we conceptualise the kind of dialectics and spirit at work in a theatre that firstly seeks to delineate a pedagogical space instead?

THEATRE AS THE DIALECTICAL SITE OF EDUCATION

A look at one of Benjamin's early essays on the German new education (Reformpädagogik) will help to shine a light on the pedagogical relationships (and the spirit) envisioned in Lācis' theatre. Before I get into his writings on moral education (1911, 1913), I would like to first insert a short note on the formation process of Lācis' (1971) biographical recollections *Revolutionär im Beruf* (*Revolutionary by Vocation*), from which I have quoted so far. My aim is to further contextualise the relationship between Lācis and Benjamin and their work (although there is no room for all the details), so that the reason why I am drawing on Benjamin's early essays is clear to the reader. Lācis' account of her Orel theatre was first published in German as an essay for the new left German literary journal *Alternative* (1968), with the title *Das Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters: Erinnerungen beim Wiederlesen* (The Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre: recollections when re-reading). Lācis' original essay was sparked by re-reading Walter Benjamin's theorisation of her work (which he wrote around 1928 or early 1929), as much as his *Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre* (1999) was, of course, influenced by Lācis' recollections of her Orel theatre practice.

After meeting in Capri, Benjamin and Lācis see each other later that same year of 1924 in Berlin, where they discuss Marxist materialism and Lācis' pro-Communist, anti-state activism in Riga (over which she has to immigrate to the Soviet Union in 1925–1926). After her immigration, Benjamin also travels to see her and Bernhard Reich (her second husband, the Austrian Jewish director and theatre theorist) in the Soviet Union in two consecutive years (1925–1926). In 1928, when Lācis returns to Berlin, as an official consultant of the film department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment to the Soviet trade mission in Berlin, she introduces the German left-leaning literati (e.g., Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Fritz Lang) to the most notable Soviet playwrights and directors, like Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Tretyakov, serving as the intelligentsia's main source of information on the new political and artistic developments in the Soviet Union (Lācis, 1971, pp. 37ff). It is here in Berlin's post-First World War's revolutionary 1928 arts scene, where Lācis' children's theatre approach garners the interest of Johannes Becher and Gerhart Eisler (both affiliated with the German and Austrian Communist party), who wish to set up a similar model for aesthetic edu-

cation at the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus—then the headquarters of the German Communist Party in Berlin and it is here where Benjamin volunteers to theorise her work for this purpose.

Lācis' (1968) essay in response to Benjamin's 1928–1929 *Programme* (arranged by *Alternative* editor Brenner, who was part of the Brecht circle), some of her additional letters and a range of interviews with her, also published in *Alternative*, together with a partial reprint of her Russian publication on German revolutionary theatre from 1935 (Brinkmanis, 2020), were later edited (by Lācis and Brenner) into the German publication *Revolutionär im Beruf* (1971). Translated from German as *Revolutionary by Vocation*, *vocation* preserves the double meaning of the German word *Beruf* as profession and (higher) calling, giving a nod to both Benjamin's *Programme for Proletarian Children's Theatre* and his earlier metaphysical writings on the religious aspects of the German new education (Reformpädagogik)—to which we will now turn.

THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF EDUCATION

Benjamin's essays on moral education (1913), published in the radical youth movement's journal *Der Anfang* (*The Beginning*), edited by Gustav Wyneken (Benjamin's early intellectual mentor), ponder the impossibility of an exact science of moral education, that disregards the freedom of the student. Here, Benjamin emphasises the religious aspects of awakening moral formation, as a negative dialectical relationship between an individual's striving towards the Good (e.g., in the commitment to a moral norm) and its coming into being within the unpredictability of lived experience and communal practices. Benjamin draws on Kant's (1959) distinction between morality and legality to explain the necessary irrationality that underpins such education. The (Kantian, pure) moral will of a person, he argues, cannot be accessed empirically, because it is not a psychological entity as such (Benjamin, 1913, p. 108). Although Kantian rational concepts cannot be empirically proven to be true, they can however be verified in everyday action (Kant, 2004, p. 178f). As a result, Benjamin concludes, moral education has to work within a paradox.

In the children's theatre, this paradox emerges from Lācis' stated pedagogical aim—the formation of the children's moral will (Lācis, 1971, p. 22)—which is, however, located in a spiritual realm (the relationship between the 'I' and the moral law), one that cannot be directly empirically accessed and thus influenced by the educator—or only by unscrupulous methods, e.g., psychological inducements, as Benjamin (1999, p. 111) warns. A mode of instruction in a self-contained moral theory as a positive (Hegelian) dialectics is then not only pedagogically useless but also undermines the very pedagogical conditions that *might* allow the moral will to be formed in the first place: the freedom of the person. Benjamin writes: '... the gravest danger of moral education is the motivating and legalizing of the pure will or, in other words, the suppression of freedom. If moral education really has as its goal the ethical formation of students, then it is faced with an impossible task' (Benjamin, 1913, p. 110). As a result, the 'crystallising of morality' (p. 109) takes place within a negative dialectical relationship: between the person's relationship to the (unchanging) moral law (or the 'pure forms', to say it with Plato) and the ways that the Good might come into being, and is thus verified, within the contingency of the individual's everyday actions in the world. In other words, there is no way of predicting what (object, person and action) might startle us into the search for wisdom, exactly how the journey might manifest or what form the Good may take in the context of our everyday life experience. The relation to the sacred 'remains dark and uncertain' and the 'holy and unholy must [always] be newly created ... there is no well-travelled path for the spiritual life' (Benjamin, 1914, pp. 169–170). Describing this uncertain path towards virtue (here, by the new youth of the new education), Benjamin explains how, ultimately, every person or object in one's surroundings could potentially become an (unexpected) herald of the sacred, even if they do not necessarily adhere to familiar (societal) norms of the Good:

But meanwhile it [the new youth] lives a scarcely comprehensible life, full of devotion and mistrust, admiration and scepticism, self-sacrifice and self-interest. This life is its virtue. It may dismiss no object, no person, for in each (in the advertising kiosk and in the criminal) the symbol or the sacred can arise. (Benjamin, 1914, p. 169)

In relation to Lācis' children's theatre, there is, then, no way of telling how and when the children's (moral–aesthetic) gestures, honed in the different artistic sections, synthesise into a theatre performance that embodies the Good Life: 'For no pedagogic wisdom can foresee how children will fuse the various gestures and skills into a theatrical totality, but with a thousand unexpected variations' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 204).

The manifestation of virtue is always out of the educator's full control. Such impossible moral education—one that cannot be a direct form of instruction in moral theory or a direct intervention into the relationship of the moral will with the universal moral law (or the pure forms)—then requires both. It needs the child's (or any other person's) free commitment to a general, universal norm 'in the consciousness of communal obligation' (Benjamin, 1913, p. 109), but one that is first driven by an experience of the Good, and thus its validity, in the lived experience of community itself. It is only within the person's actual experience of 'sympathy' and 'fellow feeling' that the 'specific energy' of the moral sense (p. 111) can be increased, and, with that, the truth of the moral law in everyday life (not the other way around) can be verified. An overemphasis on moral content (e.g., the propaganda of ideas) and a deterministic view of the nature of the Good and how it manifests regardless of context, Benjamin notes, run the danger of numbing any moral sensitivity.

THE PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONSHIP

In an essay written for *Der Anfang* in 1911, Benjamin takes Gustav Wyneken's School Community in the village of Wickersdorf as an example of such a (negatively) dialectical, porous site of education: '... what is essential to the institution [of the Free School Community] is not to be defined in narrow pedagogic terms. A philosophical, metaphysical thought is at its centre—a thought that, of course, is not dependent on the cosmological metaphysics of any party' (Benjamin, 1911, p. 40). Benjamin insists that the new education should be regarded as (moral) philosophy and not a science per se, because it is to resist the generalising tendencies of science and the temptations of power with which it is associated. The case of Wickersdorf exemplifies for Benjamin how an anti-programmatic education, when it is independent of the metaphysics of any party (and its agendas), might foster the mutual respect and voluntary, free exchange between educator and student. Such education for mutuality is distinct from a pedagogical relationship whose dynamic of exchange is regulated by abstract, institutional authority and a closed science of pedagogy that denies the student's freedom and expects causal effects (ibid.). In Lācis' children's theatre, the pedagogical relationship is of course hoped to form within the various porous pedagogical stages arranged by the educator. 'There is no process of moral influence here. There is no direct influence either. ... What counts is simply and solely the indirect influence of the director on the children as mediated by subject matter, tasks and performances' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 203).

And although the educator does not directly instruct as a 'moral personality' (p. 202), Lācis seeks to support the child's relationship to the artistic and technical tasks, set by the mode of storytelling and theatre's processes of production. Paying attention to the social and artistic tensions brought forth in the process, the director-educator observes the ways in which children relate to and improvise within these tensions but (it seems, rarely) directly intervenes in the solving of problems for children. Lācis rejects the idea that children should act as a vehicle for the director's aesthetic ideas and suggests that a sole emphasis on the productive labour of a preconceived, result-oriented performance for an audience (as is common in the professional theatre) educates children into a disposition of unquestioned obedience and acceptance. Undermining the children's development towards self-activity (i.e., learning to self-guide their attention and desire), the professional (children's) theatre ultimately teaches them to succumb unquestioningly to an external will (in this case of the director-educator), who guides and imposes her ideas (Lācis, 1971, p. 22). Freed from having to act as a moral (or professional) guide in the proletarian children's theatre, the educator is, according to Benjamin, free to unleash the 'vast energies for the true genius of education'—namely, the power of observation, which sits at the heart of an 'unsentimental pedagogic love' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 202).

The hope is that the children learn how to attend to, and get absorbed into, the task of theatre, with the aim of honing their ability to observe and to see clearly (and justly) the people and things around them. Similarly, it is hoped that the educator learns how to see the individual child for what they are (in all their material entanglements and style

of engaging in the world), and for what they can perhaps become. Benjamin draws on the messianic metaphor of 'the secret signal of what is to come, that speaks from the gesture of the child' (p. 206) to describe the hope associated with the educator's stepping back from intervention and instruction. Here, the non-action of observation is conceived as a stance of non-coercion, but also as a hopeful awaiting for a change in attachment. The love between teacher and student, or what the Reformpädagogik (e.g., Wyneken, 1922) termed pedagogical eros (harking back to Plato's definition of love in the *Symposium*), is hereby not based on the teacher's recognition (and replication) of herself in the student, or of her approval of a preconceived image of what the child should be, and has now finally become.

Following Plato's *Symposium* (2012, 184,d,e; 200a), it is the voluntary commitment to a pedagogical relationship, that is marked by the teacher's desire to help the child on their way to find truth, and the student's recognition of their lack of wisdom and desire to find it, that defines pedagogical eros as the 'right attitude/conduct' towards the love of, and search for, wisdom. It must be noted, however, that for Plato (but not for the Reformpädagogik, or the children's theatre), sexual and pedagogical eros were more or less than one (for details, see Kenklies, 2019). In Lācis' theatre, then, the love between educator and child might become a conduit for startling both into 'becoming lovers' of the Good (*Symposium*, Plato, 2012, 404c); and thus a starting point for the overcoming of the ego. The exact relation to the sacred (the holy and unholy), as Benjamin would add, is however dark and uncertain. In other words, there is neither a blueprint as to how to identify the Good in the context of one's everyday actions nor an instruction leaflet as to how one is to act well, even when the journey is conducted as part of a well-meaning pedagogical relationship (Benjamin, 1914, pp. 169–170). The 'lover of wisdom' has to try and test her notions of the Good, with the hope that the nature of the sacred will reveal itself in the context of the (continuous) struggle towards its potential realisation.

PEDAGOGICAL EROS

In the *Symposium*, Eros is described as a spirit but not as a god. He is neither mortal nor immortal but something in-between. Eros is born from questionable parentage (a mother who is *not* wise and a father who *is*), always poor and living with need and far from the handsome spirit we imagine him to be. Instead, he is described as streetwise, 'tough, shrivelled, homeless and shoeless, always lying in the dirt without a bed' (Plato, 2012, 203d). As a sort of messenger spirit, Eros is busy shuttling back and forth between the gods and the mortals, bringing back commands from the gods and sacrifices from the mortals (202e).

Although Eros himself is clearly not an embodiment of the Good, he recognises his lack and desires the Good—struggling and sometimes failing and making a mess on his search—but always 'resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions and clever pleadings' (203d). Eros is a lover of wisdom but not love itself. The teacher in the children's theatre is conversely not the embodiment of the Good either. By being *other* to the child, the educator embodies her own unique, non-generalisable gestures, as a signal of her personal moral agency, that is her striving and struggling towards the Good (and its conceptualisation) in the context of her own everyday life actions. As a result, the teacher's gesture might act as an invitation to the child to improvise herself; to test and try and struggle on the stage of life—towards her own unique embodiment (and notion) of the Good Life.

SLOW CHANGES, BUMPY RIDES AND UNEXPECTED GIFTS

It is in the very uniqueness of the child that the hope for the Good might be realised, although the child's gesture will not likely take the expected form, and can only be anticipated as a 'secret signal of what is to come' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 206). In his *Meno*, a dialogue about this somewhat puzzling nature of virtue, Plato tells us that, as a form of wisdom, virtue is neither a natural occurrence in people, nor can it be taught directly (as it is no knowledge as such; and no virtuous person can simply turn another person into one). Virtue instead arrives indeed as a somewhat mysterious,

divine gift—'...[it] comes to be present by divine dispensation, without understanding, in those to whom it does come to be present ...' (Plato, 2012, 100a), but is not devoid of context either. Although virtue might arrive unexpectedly, and without an instruction leaflet, it occurs in the context of trying to become a lover of wisdom (like Eros), of trying to figure out and work hands-on on one's image of what the Good might look, feel and sound like in everyday practice. In her own biographical recollection, Lācis tells a compelling story as to this open, and necessarily messy, process of pedagogy (as the honing of the right conduct towards the search for wisdom/love). She recalls the story of how the Besprizorniki came to join the children's theatre.

Lācis tell us that when the Turgenev house theatre space is ready, it is the orphans from the welfare institutions that turn up. It seems almost impossible to attract street children to join the theatre. She describes her encounter with the Besprizorniki in the marketplace, where they laugh and ridicule her attempts to invite them to the Turgenev studio (Lācis, 1971, p. 24). They even threaten her with sticks. Although she returns regularly to win them over, and the Besprizorniki seem to somewhat get used to the to-and-fro of their lively street disputes, they do not accept her as a moral personality to succumb to. The street children have their own way of expressing respect, surrounding and greeting her with howling 'like an old friend' when she stays away for too long (*ibid.*). And one day, the Besprizorniki just show up. During the rehearsal of the children's play *Alinur* by Meyerhold (mentioned above) at the Turgenev space with the orphans from the welfare institutions, the Besprizorniki make a scary entrance. The orphans are improvising the scene of a robber band sitting around a campfire boasting about their dark doings, when the Besprizorniki crash into the middle of the scene. Wearing self-made armour and helmets fitted with sheet metal and sticks, carrying pikes and sticks as weapons (*ibid.*), they frighten the well-behaved orphans from the welfare institutions who, naturally, want to escape. Lācis recalls in her biography that she was able to convince them to continue with the improvisation, and it does not take long until the Besprizorniki stop the scene and step into the theatre space—to teach the orphans 'a lesson', as to how real robbers act. The street children are boasting and competing (in role), wild and unembarrassedly, as Lācis points out about who enacted the most damage through their murderous deeds, arson and robberies. Instead of interrupting the wild play, Lācis recalls observing the children and decides to let the scene (in real life and the fictional scenario) play out, as she wants 'to gain influence on the children' (*ibid.*). And she does; the Besprizorniki return and become the driving force of the theatre.

The story that Lācis tells about these slow reorientations of attention, desires and attachments in the street children does not describe an evident leap of freedom into becoming model citizens. They are slow changes and bumpy rides and unexpected arrivals of virtue—e.g., when the street children accept her invitation to come to the studio space and take on the responsibility of teaching the other children how to be robbers, thus showing their investment in the collective task and respect for the other children (but in their own style and gestures). Of course, Lācis' story is itself a didactic mythologisation of her practice for the purpose of educating the reader about her concept of proletarian children's theatre education. The metaphor of this lesson—which constitutes the somewhat scary ritual of the Besprizorniki's joining of the children's theatre—however also aptly illustrates the necessarily open and messy nature of pedagogical processes. Proletarian children's theatre is concerned with an education of attention that does not act as a direct instruction into a set ideology, which undermines children's freedom. Its aim to develop children's ability to self-direct their attention and desire, however, still involves a hope that the Good (even if its arrival cannot be preplanned) will manifest within the children's attentive commitment to their everyday relationships within the material world that surrounds them. Lācis' educational philosophy is underpinned by the hope that Plato's divine gift of virtue might make an (even if momentary) entrance in the context of the children's and educator's attending to the theatrical tasks, and each other—on the porous pedagogical stages laid out by her. This gift of virtue, as Lācis' story seeks to teach its readers, will likely manifest in an unexpected way and time. In fact, without the educator's own pedagogical reorientation of their attention—towards the street children's unique gestures—streetwise, poor, tough, resourceful, enchanting in their play—this 'secret signal' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 206) might not even be recognised by the educator as a 'truly revolutionary' pedagogical phenomenon: the manifestation of the spirit of love.

ENDNOTE

¹ *Latvian*: Anna Lāce; *Russian*: Анна 'Ася' Эрнестовна Ладис, Anna 'Asya' Ernestovna Latsis; *German*: Asja Lazis/ Lācis.

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