A Magical Thing
Leslie A. Adelson, Jacob Gould Schurman Professor of German Studies

I like to pay attention to small things that make a big difference. And I would like to share with you a small story that has given me goose skin, as the Germans say, ever since it first looked at me, when I was young and in my twenties. Numbers play a role in this German story from the 1970s called “Plugging Up a Child’s Brain,” but they alone are not the liberating kind. To understand the hold this tale of a child’s brain had on me, just ten years after I had begun learning German as a foreign language during my sophomore year in college, for reasons that had nothing to do with literature (which I always loved in a vague way but never intended to study), you have to understand that I was a child too once: shy, observant, and lonely. If I bumped into an inanimate object, like a table, I would apologize to it, just in case it had feelings, like me. Stories in literature are also inanimate things—words, letters, bumps, or waves depending on the medium of transmission—and yet the naturalized conventions of writing and reading so often make us feel that a story actually speaks to us. This is because the inanimate objects we encounter as literary texts are in fact magical things, precisely because they animate us, as readers. The furniture I bumped into as a child never did speak back to me, but the German story by Alexander Kluge that I would like to share with you now, I swear, looked right at me—in a way that made me come alive by taking my breath away. This story has never let me go. Although I could not have understood the reasons for this then, I was so taken by this tale of a child’s education that I took great secret pains—for myself alone—to translate this very small work of literary art into my own language, with my sensate hands. Both versions, the published German text from 1977 and my
typewritten English translation on bleached white paper from 1981, have been hidden
talismons for me ever since, inspiring me to pursue an academic career in German literary
studies and the humanities. They have also en-couraged me to imagine that what I might
grasp with the aid of the humanities could matter to others too. I share this, for me, high-
stakes translation from postwar German literature with a broader audience for the first
time only now. Kluge’s German story is still looking right at me, and I hope it will speak
to you.

**Plugging Up a Child’s Brain**

*by Alexander Kluge*

*Gerhard, six years old, very broad head, blond skull—up until two years ago he
was cross-eyed. The farmer’s wife (mother) denied it: The child is only pretending.*

*Gerhard groaned over his homework. According to the textbook for set theory for
beginners, he was supposed to make little crosses where things were the same (little men,
triangles, etc.). If they weren’t the same: a minus sign, that is, a dash. He would have
preferred to decorate the little boxes meant for his crosses and dashes in the paintable
book. So he acknowledged uniform smallness, say of two triangles, by painting a similar
triangle into one of the little boxes instead of making an uncertain little cross or dash.
After all, equally large triangles weren’t all equal, and same-sized little men weren’t all
the same either. For when Gerhard looked at them long enough, added his personal*

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1 This English translation of Alexander Kluge’s “Zustöpseln eines Kinderhirns” by Leslie
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For the original, see Alexander Kluge, *Neue Geschichten, Heftie 1-18, ‘Unheimlichkeit
der Zeit’* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 14-15.
touch, they kept changing all the time. But he had to follow the instructions in the
textbook with a lot of groaning. After two hours the little crosses were already better.

First they looked like this: \( \times \), now like this: \( \bullet \).

The mother/farmer’s wife always scorned Gerhard when he was older; she
preferred Martin, who was a year younger: prettier, smooth limbs. Above all, Martin’s
head has a daintier shape. Gerhard, on the other hand, has a thick skull. This disdain
weighs heavily on Gerhard’s brain. Drawn as little men, he and Martin were certainly
comparable, since little men are, after all, abstractions like crosses and dashes. He is
not willing to grasp set theory, to work out the common denominators in the pictures,
because he knows with certainty how everything that is equal (or with only one year’s
age difference) is treated unequally in practice. He resists the ideological pressure of the
school, an abstract form of humane thought, which the farmer’s wife doesn’t really share
but which tries to blur Gerhard’s perceptions.

And yet, Gerhard is, more than anything, willing. When a veterinarian says to
him: Hold the tail tightly—the doctor wants to reach into the cow’s anus—, Gerhard
grabs the cow’s tail very tightly and holds on. The doctor has been done for a long time,
he is driving his car in the direction of another village, but G. continues to strain all of
his energy to hold the cow’s tail in a half-way horizontal position for a long time.

Because he was deemed worthy of a direct glance. The doctor looked at him briefly.
That is something Gerhard understands. Actually, he understands everything.

The child at the center of Kluge’s story would not have fared well under the racist
eugenics of Nazi rule, and neither would I. That much I surely understood in my
twenties. Born in 1932, Kluge as a young boy experienced both the Third Reich and the
Allied bombing of his home town, which destroyed his family home. That his adult contributions to a postwar world—his experimental filmmaking, creative writing, and social theories of public life—have all been dedicated to countering forces of destruction, in ways both large and small, that too was palpable to me in the West German Zeitgeist of the 1970s. But to grasp the extraordinary subtleties and human stakes of what Kluge does with German words, syntax, and narrative perspective on abstract thinking, I have had to bring fine-grained attention to language that was at first, literally and figuratively, foreign to me. Paradoxically enough, German language, literature, and critical theory have given me a language of hope. I have Kluge’s many small bits of creative writing largely to thank for that. This is transformative humanities at work in me and my classrooms. Transforming abstract sameness into vibrant life, Gerhard is a constant reminder to honor the differences that bring life to what education at its best can do.

Today I am completing a book on Kluge’s vital storytelling for the endangered 21st century, a book that has been forty years in the making. There is an untimely strangeness to this claim, since “Plugging Up a Child’s Brain” will not figure in my book but started me on the path to write it. Kluge’s friend and mentor, Theodor W. Adorno from the Frankfurt School of German critical thought, once longed for a “future without life’s miseries.” Kluge’s ongoing storytelling investment in the production of hope under conditions of despair takes up this sizeable legacy, as do I in my own small way. Uniform standardization exacts a high price the humanities can never afford to pay. I like to think Gerhard would have understood that, because after all, I first learned it, without knowing it, from him.

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