

Isolation in German Society:

Examining F.W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* and Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Kaspar*

*Hauser* shared ideology on social isolation.

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FILM 2200A

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Thursday December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Werner Herzog emerged unscathed by the madness of New German Cinema as “Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre [and] Kaspar Hauser” have in their Wagnerian quests, no matter their “fragile, tiny figure” against “the vast expanses of landscape” they journeyed. Before Herzog came a giant in life and cinema, F.W. Murnau, to whom “Herzog is perhaps [the] most appropriate heir” (Corrigan 123). Though explicitly linked by Herzog’s 1979 remake of Murnau’s gothic classic, *Nosferatu*, one can best understand Corrigan’s sentiment by analyzing Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1924) and Herzog’s *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), especially by the likeness of their protagonists and their plight. The directors’ visions have a shared ideology, understood by Oxford Dictionary as “a system of ideas and ideals” (Oxford 1989), in identifying the root of social isolation as being identity, most directly in its presentation in society. Upon examining the ideological kinship between Murnau’s *Laugh* and Herzog’s *Hauser* as portraits of social integration, reflections of Germanic social values and ironic evaluations of what constitutes respectable identity in such society, one can understand how Germany’s illustrated social norms keep those without identity isolated from its society. In the context of this essay, Germany is to be understood by the German social and cultural norms that permeated over the past two centuries that are covered hereinafter. “The only real, the only physical link between New German Cinema and [...] Murnau, existed in the person of Lotte Eisner” (Corrigan 26) to whom *Hauser* was dedicated. Eisner wrote that Murnau’s film “could only be a German story. For it could only happen in a country where the uniform [...] was more than God” (Eisner 154). Just as the doorman is left impetuous and humiliated when stripped of his uniform, Kaspar cannot relate to society because he yearns for a return to “Präexistenz”, which is “a state of identification with all things, like that of Kaspar with his toy horse” (Corrigan 110) because in this state of dormancy, Kaspar had nothing to be isolated from.

It is important to note the doorman's relationship with his uniform and Kaspar's relationship with his toy horse because these relationships are as close as either film comes to fulfilling romantic counterparts for their protagonists. These partners are, however, antithetical in purpose because uniform draws the doorman to an obsession with social rank while the toy horse represents Kaspar's longing for a return to hermetic existence. While Kaspar is "not in a subject-object relation, but in a state of animalistic identification" (Corrigan 108), the doorman is, "he believes, nothing without the uniform" (Collier 118). Both are object-oriented relationships in lieu of romantic representation, yet they are reflexive of the romantic norms of cinema in their respective times. Murnau's films often presented romantic portraits in German Expressionist style. His films came to embrace Hollywood tropes, culminating in *Sunrise*, but *The Last Laugh* is a German film caught in the middle of Murnau's transition from UFA to Hollywood, with Emil Jannings no less. The UFA studio, which produced *The Last Laugh*, "limited the chance of the German cinema experiencing a cultural rebirth in the West after the war" (Knight 11) because its continuity with past 'closed shop' norms was at odds with the New Wave trend in Herzog's time that already defined contemporary French cinema. With auteurs such as Fassbinder, von Trotta and Wenders finding audiences in the art house circuit, the West and its studios took notice of the burgeoning New German Cinema and eventually financed some its stars' greatest projects. This afforded Herzog his modern-day freedoms which are comparable to Murnau and Jannings' UFA and American studio support insofar as the directors' command of vision. Herzog's cinematography recalls "the naïve delight with which the German directors of the 1920s indulged in protracted shots of [...] city lights – as in [...] *The Last Laugh*" (Corrigan 108) since the opening sequence of *Hauser* employs soft focus photography. Subsequent corporeal sequences follow suit and cast a faint flickering light across the frame. "Kaspar's dreams awaken the viewer of Herzog's films to the knowledge that cultural innocence is only

the product of cultural longings” (Corrigan 197). This is congruous to the doorman’s drunken visions in which frayed perspectives capture the public’s adoration for his feats of strength and the honour his uniform presents. Such sequences play into Murnau’s *Kammerspiel-Stimmung* that accentuates “a kind of anxiety floating around the characters” (Eisner 155). Herzog uses *Kammerspiel* to contrast visions of expansive landscapes, inflected with nebulous *Stimmung*, against Bruno S.’s anxiously wide eyes. The discordance between Kaspar’s internal simplicity and external posterity is framed perfectly by these elegant visions of nature amidst the costumed men and women who have accepted Kaspar into their society as a fraught underling.

“They exist only around him, anonymous and abstract” writes Eisner of the characters perceived in the doorman’s visions and, to an extent, the people he passes in and out of work. “By means of camera angles, the man in his glory, splendid and bemedalled seems always bigger than the people he meets on his way to the hotel” (Eisner 155). Adoration and respect define the doorman’s character, yet when he is stripped of his uniform, he is petty and small; his existence reduced to nothing. Emboldening the doorman’s deluded fantasies of “vague spectres which try vainly to lift an enormous trunk” to whom the doorman is a Herculean saviour, *The Last Laugh*’s ‘happy’ ending exhibits “the authentic tasteless glossiness of the Ufa style”. The irony is drowned in decadence with the appropriated ending taking the place of the “more appropriate ending, of the poor weary old man gently wrapped in the coat of his friend, the nightwatchman” (Eisner 158). This much is reflected in the final minutes of *The Last Laugh* as the doorman gives a poor man a place in his carriage. In his heart, the doorman is a considerate man; given the nature of his line of work, this is not surprising. William Van Wert writes for Corrigan, in summation on Herzog’s remarks on isolated characters, that “the purest of the pure figures, then, must be the entirely silent ones” (Corrigan 55). The

protagonists' silence accentuates their manner of expression. Kaspar "speaks, when he speaks at all, in his own logic and syntax" (Corrigan 58) that he delivers in deadpan stiltedness.

Brad Prager assesses the chief issue addressed in *Kaspar Hauser* as being that of "the violence that accompanies the process of socialisation. It asserts that one might not want to develop into such a world" (Prager 62). Both the doorman and Kaspar are interested in expressing who they are to the world insofar as the doorman wants to be perceived as prestigious while Kaspar wants to express himself through writing. At the beginning of the film, Kaspar's "writing is merely tracing for him, even though the words he learns to trace are those of his own name" (Corrigan 108). Kaspar develops into a competent writer and presents his creative desires in their fullest when he plants a patch of flowers that spell out his name. Kaspar was heartbroken when someone stepped on his flowers, and this relatively small loss lends credible insight into what holds meaning to Kaspar. Like the doorman and his uniform, Kaspar was proud of his flower patch. "The lack of affect in Bruno S.'s speech and movement [...] function[s] to noticeably repress conventionally psychologized behavioural expressiveness. Such a strategy, of course, appropriately suits Herzog's interest in representing individuals whose consciousness is unconventional and, hence, cannot be expressed "normally"" (Corrigan 91). Kaspar's ability to express himself beautifully through flowers stands in stark contrast to his inability to speak 'normally' to circles within higher German society. Even his piano playing is coarse, yet his desire to learn how to play gives credence to his want to be an effective communicator; "a gallant rider like my father was before me" (Herzog 1974). Kaspar, however, never fully integrates into society because his fortunes are cut short when he is stabbed and succumbs to a slow return into *Präexistenz*. The doorman suffers the loss of his uniform and "would have little to look forward to but death" (Murnau 1924). Kaspar's death comes at the end of Herzog's film and it is a peaceful exit for Kaspar from the society that nourished, but never truly accepted Kaspar as himself. No one

accepted the doorman as himself and thus as he lost his status not long into Murnau's film, he died in society with hardly a trace of him left.

"I can't believe that God created everything out of nothing as you say" says Kaspar to his 'family' over their incapacity to comprehend his disbelief in God. When the Logician deems Kaspar's answer to his riddle as not "proper" by "the laws of logic" (Herzog 1974) in spite of it being logically sound, the ideologically isolation Kaspar faces in society becomes wholly clear. No matter how intelligent of a man Kaspar can potentially be, his late development would cast any non-institutional or culturally unacceptable thought as being symptomatic of his perceived stupidity. He does not understand their religion. Regardless, he will be made to appreciate it because of their strongly held belief that they are born to serve God. Murnau's film presents the doorman's existence as hovering between the grandiose hotel and the paltry apartment square. His status around both properties is established by his uniform. Therefore, when the hotel manager demotes the doorman to a bathroom attendant, he is stripped of his rank, which "is defined by status, or social honor, and its accompanying style of life". The lavishly adorned doorman was bestowed rank "by means such as tradition" (Loader 44) and therefore by the whim of the same tradition that later took it back. Because the uniform defines the doorman, he is in total submission to whomever granted him his rank. Kaspar is groomed to be a well-standing, respectable citizen of his society, like a feral beast nurtured into obedience. They are both but subjects to a greater master.

"The Doorman's crisis [...] revolves around the question of self-knowledge and [...] this is signalled by mirrors. Although an old man, he is quite vain about his appearance" (Collier 117), going as far as preening with a pocket mirror. The bathroom attendant position is hell for the doorman because he is constantly faced with his own disgraced appearance by the presence of the wide mirror over the faucets he services. Curiously, "Kaspar first learns that words signify when a child uses a mirror to help him identify the parts of his own body

thus he falls into self-consciousness and learns the concept of meaning at one and the same time” (Corrigan 109). The difference is that the doorman was so proud of his uniform that to see himself without it is a fearful image because he only ever saw himself in his uniform. Kaspar, however, did not see himself as anything and so as soon as he became conscious of himself, he began to understand his surroundings and society. Although their perceptions of self-worth are diametrically opposite, Kaspar and the doorman find themselves similarly isolated in society.

Upon understanding how the protagonists of *The Last Laugh* and *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* are isolated from German society by the social norms that keep the doorman and Kaspar compartmentalized subjects in society. The doorman is a faceless guard of honour standing by the grand hotel, while Kaspar is put on display alongside silent human sideshow attractions. The township decided this was an effective means to earn income in order to finance their efforts in nurturing Kaspar. Though their stories took place a century apart and their films were made half a century apart, the doorman and Kaspar are both victim to social compartmentalization that aims at defining one’s role as a subject in society. The doorman no longer had society’s interest after he lost his uniform while Kaspar was not interested in society. Kaspar was most at peace in the state that the doorman suffered in – isolation.

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