

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser 1974

Werner Herzog (1942-)

OVERVIEW

In the literature of the twentieth century, that era of two world wars, apocalyptic seeming conflicts between great powers, and at the same time vast leaps in mankind's self-understanding, there was a florid literature devoted to the existential smallness of the little man, the man self-aware enough to realize that he had no idea what had hit him. (Examples, Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942), Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* (1943), Peter Handke, *A Moment of True Feeling* (1975)).

Werner Herzog addresses this same theme of existential confusion in his cinematic work. In Herzog we look at the theme of such isolation as it is generated by history and social reality themselves. (Not to say that the literary works, referenced above, were not 'reality based,' but that they passed through an imaginative process that filtered away raw source, while Herzog clung to raw source as part of his way of presenting.

In the film before us we will see Herzog clinging to raw source in two ways. He deals with a documented historical event—concerning the life and death of an 'enigmatic' young man about whom we know only a few puzzling details. That is the 'historical event.' He reconstructs that event with a real person, not an actor, whom he builds into the guiding lead of his film. (How different this procedure is even from that of realistic 19th century fiction writers, like the Goncourt brothers, who acquaint themselves with specific individuals in specific working situations, and attempt to write a direct squeeze of social reality).

In the present case Herzog might be said to have written his film script around an individual of whom he was to say, in the last years of his life, that he was the best actor he had had the privilege to use. Nonetheless, Bruno Schleinsteiner was not only no actor, but was in fact a 'simple man,' with the minimum of that self-consciousness we normally consider essential to acting. Herzog found Bruno Schleinsteiner on the streets, working as a forklift operator, and as a professional street entertainer. At that time the man was forty one years old—that is more than twenty years older than the Kaspar of our film—and had spent more than twenty three years in a mental institution. Son of a prostitute, Bruno would seem to have had none of the credentials needed for brilliant success in the present film. It is a matter of dispute whether Bruno enjoyed the acting act, or in fact whether he took it as an act at all. (Interestingly, he would re-act in Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977), where once again Bruno makes us wonder whether perhaps we are his fools, and he is the abuser of us through his 'acting' act.)

Worth noting: for the present film Herzog won the Grand Jury Prize, the Critic's Prize, and the Ecumenical Prize at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival.

STORY

Setting In early nineteenth century Germany a young man, sixteen years old, was discovered in his city's town square. He was fully but carelessly clothed, and was standing upright and rigid, with his eyes staring expressionlessly ahead, and no evident capacity to take steps and walk. He was holding a letter from an anonymous caretaker, who explains that the young man is the child of an impoverished father of ten, who had kept the youth chained and imprisoned for the first sixteen years of his life. With existential nakedness this piece of humanity is thus thrown into the world. The rest of the film will introduce us to the consequences, for this human being—is he the outcast of a noble family, or the love child of an aristocrat?—of his sudden exposure to a world which is in no way prepared for him.

Prisoner As it happens, the town functionaries are appropriately bewildered by the irregular status of the newcomer in their district. Comedic—but saddening—scenes follow, which depict the efforts of the judicial bureaucracy to document and then house the inexplicable young man. He is finally placed as a prisoner in the City's Prison Tower, though only after general agreement is reached, that the young man is guilty of no crime, and that in fact he is perplexingly gentle and vulnerable. Due to the latter consensus, the jailer himself brings Kaspar Hauser into his own family, where for some time he is raised and treated almost as a plaything. The jailer's children delight in the simplicity and naivete of the young man, whom they teach to read and write, up to a point, and in general socialize, as in handing the family infant to Hans, who holds it delightedly, and with a simplistic grin of pleasure on his face. The family are amazed and understanding, when Kaspar holds his finger to the fascination of a lighted candle, which he senses the heat from, and then jumps back in shock from the fire itself.

Pupil From the judicial system, and from the curious and loving family of the jailer, Kaspar passes into the care of a benevolent schoolteacher gentleman, who has admired Kaspar's ability to learn. Kaspar makes progress, under this tutelage, until, in 1829, when he was attacked and wounded by an intruder in Daumer's house. (This is the first of two attacks on Kaspar, the second of which will be fatal; neither of which was successfully explained. True to his documentary intention, Herzog simply builds his narrative around history, rather than 'creating a narrative,' in the fashion of classical fiction.)

Stanhope Not long after this brutal episode, Kaspar's growing intellect, and sterterous mastery of language, catches the attention of another benefactor, the effete British Lord Stanhope. By this time Kaspar has learned to express himself carefully, and has begun to learn the principles of logic and social discourse. His master in philosophy tests him out on logical conundrums, but in return receives pragmatic answers, which spring from the commonsense of a person educated only by life, and that under totally unfavorable circumstances. Kaspar judges spatial extent by his personal experience of the room in which he was imprisoned, which seems to him to have been huge; he wonders why women are the ones who do the work in the society he observes? He wonders how God could have created the universe out of nothing. Despite the educational advantages he derives, from his stay with Lord Stanhope, Kaspar is delivered from further understanding by a second, and this time fatal, stab wound. As in the previous case, there is no determining who the malefactor is.

Dreams Kaspar has two extensive dreams—filmically depicted for us, according to his narrative—in the course of his brief life. Both dreams—the second of which is given him on his deathbed, after the fatal attack—and both dreams express that sense of existential bewilderment mentioned earlier. This sense, which arguably haunts us all, is exaggerated in Kaspar, whose personal life is simply laid on him, unexplained, and never given a place in history. He has no setting in which to understand himself. The first dream, accordingly, displays a ragged bunch of pilgrims struggling up a mountain, at the top of which is death. In his second dream Kaspar sees a crowd of nomads passing across the Sahara, led by a blind man. In each case, Kaspar is working through his own life process.

CHARACTERS

Kaspar Hauser, the central figure, is a young man who was incarcerated by his father, In early nineteenth century Germany. At the age of sixteen he was released from his cell, and left in the town square at Nurnberg, with a letter in his hand indicating the barest facts about his early childhood. From that point on, he passes into a world which is both indifferent and benign toward him, until his early death from an anonymous stabbing attack.

The Jailer, in whose prison Hauser was placed, immediately upon being discovered, realizes that he is an exceptional prisoner, and takes him into his own home and family. He is treated there with appropriate gentleness and sensitivity.

Mr. Daumer, becomes aware of Hauser through the jailer, and respects the young man's growing intelligence. He is the most conscious, of the several people who relate to Hauser, of the young man's unique handicaps and potentials.

Lord Stanhope is the effete, elegant British nobleman, who lets it be known that he would like to help Kaspar further his education, and further his experience of fine society. His style of benevolence, however, turns Kaspar off big time, and at Stanhope's big introduction party Kaspar simply sits in the corner, bewildered.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

KASPAR

Character Kaspar Hauser is an historical figure, who emerged into history in the early nineteenth century. He was sixteen at the time the world saw him, but for the previous years of his life, apparently, he had been kept imprisoned in a small dark room, where he was chained so that he had very limited motion, and from which he had virtually no impression of the outside world. He was under the control of a man in a black coat, who periodically entered his room to bring him food or otherwise to tend to him. From what we later learn, the man in question was an impoverished father of many children, and chose the above fashion to deal with one child too many. In any case he exposed Kaspar to the world, leaving him in a public park, and disappeared. Could he have been one of the suspects in the subsequent attacks on Kaspar? Whatever the answer to that question, we can track Kaspar's whole public life history, rejections, mockery, some support, from that moment in which his guardian exposed him to the world. Herzog seems to be saying, by the end, that Kaspar is an emblem of us all, lost, confused, searching, in a world into which we have been 'thrown.'

Illustrative moments

Playful. Kaspar's master (father?) gives him a toy horse for amusement, in his dark cell. This is the only gift the youngster receives from civilization, and in appearance he is not quite sure how to 'play' with it.

Simple. Kaspar is not complex. (This kind of example helps us understand that complexity is a learned quality, in which the effort to process our experience over time obliges us to make the personal discovery of the complex.) For the first period of exit from his cell, he takes everything for face value—or sees it without surrounding values. To be exposed as a curiosity, so that villagers can contribute to the moneys that go into his upkeep, is OK with Kaspar, neither bad nor good.

Gentle. One thinks here of Kaspar playing with a small bird, in a windowsill. Like Saint Francis of Assisi in gentleness. A better example might be this: the jailer's wife is not hesitant to hand her infant to Kaspar to hold; he holds it gently, though he seems perplexed by it, and does the job with a distant half-smile.

Dependent. In his childhood, and early teens, Kaspar was literally dependent for everything—food, water, clothing—on others, that is the man in the black coat. Later, out in the world, he is dependent on people like the jailor to teach him kindness, Mr. Daumer to give him some self-confidence, and Lord Stanhope to teach him manners—which Kaspar has no interest in.

THEMES

Innocence The film before us comes at a time, in modern western history, when civilization had effectively marginalized the primitive—wiped out indigenous folks, like the Native Americans, and consigned the truly primitive to students of anthropology in distant parts of the world. Kaspar Hauser, like the main figure in Truffaut's *Wild Child* (1970), hold the naïve and innocent up to our inspection. Kaspar meets every new experience as though it was the first time that such an event had ever happened—cf. the candle scene, in the jailer's house.

Vulnerability Thanks to his innocence, Kaspar is vulnerable to the unkind world he is born into. From the outset he is treated as an object for bureaucratic filing, not as a human being. He is put on display, as an object of curiosity to attract money for the prison where he is being housed. Naughty schoolboys pass him and mock him, for his total alienation from their 'sophisticated' pranks. Two anonymous assaults, one ending his life, are the ultimate proofs of his vulnerability.

Intelligence Kaspar displays considerable native intelligence, by the end of the film. He can speak thoughtfully—though in a stilted formal fashion—with the intellectuals of his milieu. His bearing, though, never recovers from the bitter mistreatment of his childhood, and from the loss of any control over his own life. His intellect has to express itself through the impeded vehicle of his body.

Pride While Kaspar is willing to be displayed, as a human curiosity to his community, he refuses to be an object of pity and bad conscience to the fine gentlewomen and men in the suite of Lord Stanhope. What is the difference? It is that Kaspar is proud of being just what he is, shows no shame even when discovering the heat of a candle by putting his finger in it.