Comparative Media Arts Journal
Original Paper

In Defence of Your Broken Rebellion: On Handke's Kaspar as Film Characters in *Happy as Lazzaro* and *Clara Sola*

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Published in print: December 4 2015; Published online: December 15 2015 © CMAJournal

Abstract

This paper distils from W.G. Sebald's essay, *Strangeness, Integration and Crisis - On Peter Handke's play Kaspar* an archetypal character, Kaspar, a foundling whose spiritual teething is interrupted by the arbitrary orders of societal assimilation inflicted by language. The study of Kaspar in the context of cinema brings together two films, Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) and Nathalie Álvarez Mesén's *Clara Sola* (2021). Through a Kasparian lens, the protagonists of these two films move together concordantly, as if doubly exposed. In understanding Kasparian characters as a cinematic model, the paper outlines Kaspar's predicament in two brush strokes: the first shows one whose wildness provokes social resentment; the second depicts someone whose local eccentricity conflicts with the modern definition of progress, resulting in their temporal displacement. Finally, it considers a strategy of rebellion specific to the Kasparian type in film: in utilizing memory and supernatural expressivity, Kasparian characters celebrate the right to speak in ciphers.

Keywords: Film Studies, W.G. Sebald, Supernatural Cinema, Alice Rohrwacher, Nathalie Álvarez Mesén.

It began with a protagonist unable to utter more than one complete sentence standing on stage. This was not the first instance of losing one's tongue in the history of theatre, yet rarely had the silence between the first sentence and the next grew with more demanding anxiety. The protagonist struggled; he spoke a few lines more with difficulty. Such was the fractured parole that inaugurated Peter Handke's 1968 play, *Kaspar,* from which emerged Kaspar Hauser, a German foundling who, in real life, appeared in Nuremberg in 1828 from years of being raised in

isolation, repeating but one sentence: “A söchener Reiter möcht I wärn, wie mei Voter aner gween is,” translated by June Schlueter as, “I want to become a horseman like my father once was” (Schlueter 1981, 14). Handke’s play departed from Hauser’s lack of verbal outpour, further abstracting the sentence into: "I want to be someone like somebody else was once" (Knapp 1990, 241), thus making *Kaspar* a play that reveals the law of language through its merciless reshaping of an individual—that is, “how someone can be made to speak by speaking” (Hanke 1969, 59). Handke’s story of Kaspar is one of destruction and loss, an annihilation of a poor speaker, for which language emerged as the cruellest weapon drawn by modern society.

Surrounding Peter Handke’s theatrical adaptation of Kaspar Hauser’s story is a constellation of intellectual readings, most of which deal with linguistic theories in the context of literature and theatre. A central theme at play is the subjectivity-making tendency language carries with itself: to use Handke’s lexicon— “speech-torture” (Schlueter 1981, 59)—which refers to the phenomenon whereby the more one uses language, the more difficult it is for one to resist being stained by conventions, perceptions, and ideologies that speech produces. Through linguistic application, these derivatives of speech previously unbeknownst to oneself adhere and establish permanent residency, whipping out an individual against their will, forceful and inconspicuous in equal measure. Kaspar, abandoned by society only to come back from the unfathomable depth of oblivion to haunt it, did so less with his unruly social demeanour and more so with his harmful transformation through the constitution of language, a process to which Handke unrelentingly exposed his audience.

In lifting the image of Kaspar from pages of Handke’s play and rerooting it within the framework of film analysis, Kaspar can be seen as a key to understand, situated more broadly within the tradition of intellectual indoctrination through discursive practice, what constitutes meaningful articulation. To complete the transition from theatre to film, Handke’s Kaspar must first be understood as a model durable enough to withstand cross-media translation. Indeed, it has been noted that Handke intended for Kaspar to be considered not only as an individual or psychological entity but, as literary critic Ulf Olsson suggests (2013), a kind of linguistic mythos[1] that shows through the iteration of various media, what is *possible* with an individual

[1] Olsson considers mythos as an apparatus into which Kaspar is installed, which can be further specified as that of theatre and that of language. With “the general linguistic apparatus works on us through specialized media” (149), he considers theatre to be one of the mediating structures. Following this vein, I consider film as another such structure.

(149). At the heart of this essay, then, is an attempt at establishing a cinematic possibility that pays tribute to a way of speaking that does away with speech torture. In so doing, how one can become a tongue-tied mythos is analysed.

Amongst the many scholars that have traced Kaspar's wobbling footsteps, I walk most trustingly alongside W.G. Sebald, through whose lyrical contemplation the relationship between language and selfhood is examined with most generous flexibility. I hope to, in the following paragraphs, with two film characters—one of Alice Rohrwacher's Lazzaro and one of Nathalie Álvarez Mesén's Clara—recontextualize Kaspar in film to further contribute to what Rohrwacher proposed as: "a form of gentle revolution" (2019). With such an intention, this paper first identifies the Kasparian type by analysing a set of circumstances under which Kaspar is produced. Further, in comparing Clara and Lazzaro as modern-day Kaspars that do away with speech torture, I wish to highlight a strategy of cinematic resistance that defends a particular form of communication that privileges the workings of memory and myths. In an age where grandiloquence and the volume with which one speaks have become metonymic of one's triumph, I consider the emergence of the Kasparian type to be indicative of the existence of what I call, the blemishes of language: a network of ciphers delivered in a state of soft-spokenness that counters official accounts and mainstream narratives. In film, Kasparian characters can embody such blemishes: taciturn figures full to the brim with the turbulence of memories, who, although struggle with articulation themselves, nonetheless signify a greater yearning at play. The blemishes exist because there are rearrangements to be made and unfinished stories in need of better endings.

Two sets of circumstances produce a Kasparian character, first of which puts wildness vis-à-vis civilization. Handke's play, as Sebald interprets (2006), is "the inner and inward-looking story of the taming of a wild human being" that turns "an individual who by ordinary standards is uncivilised into a respectable citizen" (56). Kaspar is notably an outcast, an untameable wild being who stands in opposition to the conformity of civilization. Similarly, Clara and Lazzaro are wild in spirit, protruding as a sore oddity from their social structures for their idiosyncratic behaviours. Lazzaro is a voyant of his surroundings who lets, seeming willingly and never with a word of protest, his innocent be exploited by an anachronistic marchioness; he does this without changing his nature. Meanwhile Clara, albeit in possession of supernatural powers, suffers from physical impairments which render her incapable of

expressing herself fluently using language. She is, on the other hand, close to nature and can speak to animals in their tongues. Kaspars are an antithesis of a conventionally well-behaved citizen, symbolized by the image of a clown—noteworthy here as it is also the etymological beginning of Kaspar—an object of ridicule. By refusing to be coerced into social conformity, Clara and Lazzaro are rendered Frankensteinian creatures with a failed language setting, who look like the other members of society, but not quite.

The original play *Kaspar* tells us a clown cannot live long enough and still be a clown; one way or the other the clown must be absorbed back into civilization—a ceaseless naturalization at play. Through this process one catches a glimpse of society's insatiable hunger for taming. To tame is to perform domestication, to first mark the boundary where interior ends and exterior begins. Figuratively, wilderness besieges the villages wherein the film characters live. The boundary between inside and outside is marked most explicitly in *Clara Sola* by the purple-ribbon-tied wooden fences set up by Clara's family in the name of her protection, keeping at bay her nocturnal wandering into the wild. As well, Lazzaro can be seen straddling the line between the village and the surrounding landscape with which he is well acquainted. As figure 1 shows, Lazzaro can be seen staring into "the void" (Rohrwacher 2018), a space that exists in contradistinction to the warm domesticity of the village life. By just gazing into it, Lazzaro induces much suspicion and worry from the villagers. He is to be brought back indoors, where the villagers get to play doctor, tauntingly diagnosing that he is "ready to drop" (2018).

Figure 1. Film still from *Happy as Lazzaro*. (Directed by Alice Rohrwacher, Netflix, 2018).

The Kasparian struggle can be further carried into the fabric of the nature-culture divide, pertaining more specifically to enlightened modern men's desire to dominate nature. The locales of the two films bear marks of such dichotomous fissure. Though geographically remote from urban dwellings, these landscapes (a secluded Italian village in the case of Lazzaro and a rural Costa Rican community in the case of Clara) do not seem immune to "the formation and augmentation" (Marx and Engels 2014, 4) of modern, capitalistic society. The idea of profit seems to trouble anyone else but Lazzaro and Clara, whose existences are free from any monetary entanglement. In turn, the presence of capital looms low like an ominous tale of oppression. Throughout the film, the audience sees Clara bonding with a white horse in most affectionate manners. Seeing the significance of the animal to her daughter, Clara's mother threatens to sell it, making it disappear into the market, a place clearly well beyond Clara's comprehension. Similarly, Lazzaro, in the final scene of the film, walks into a bank and asks, earnestly, for some money to help the Marchioness's son. For is it not how money works? Is it not a tool disposable to whomever that needs it? Mistaken as an amateur heister, Lazzaro dies by beating.

Should Kaspar crack under pressure and lose his wildness to learned social behaviour, Sebald points out certain symptoms. For one, "you become sensitive to dirt" (Sebald 2006, 65). Dirt, as poet Anne Carson reminds us (2020), is not inert: "Use this spatial hygiene to explain certain neo-liberal neuroses. Because the spooking about dirt, if you are a neo-liberal, is that dirt is not passive. Dirt is coming to get you" (39). Dirt is at the ground level but clings onto the soles of walking and running feet. Dirt is the word used to describe the poor. There is dirt on nameless graves, from which crawl out things that are meant to be buried but come back to life.

Kaspar is nature personified—swaying unsteadily by the edge of civilization he threatens a comeback from the other side. He is the ghost that "congregate[s] around the enemies of free-market capitalism" (Batuman 2016), whose off-beat, off-sync temperament of slowness upsets those driven by profit, in a system of rapid commodification. Kaspar breaks boundaries and creates points of tension between wildness and civilization. A Kasparian character in film may even see the existence of these points of pressure— "the void" that Lazzaro stares into being one. It is only when accepted conformity fails to imagine other modes of existence outside of its own

being there, other ways of communication outside of its own system of signification, that these ghostly figures become frightening for a society. The foundation of societal docility is challenged when a common subject of antagonization appears, in a Kasparian context, a clown, a buffoon, a holy fool.

The clown speaks bad language, using words though obsolete, still hang like a distant truth. If one were to trace back to the first time Kaspar spoke on stage, he was then as much of a stranger to his surroundings as to himself, stirring from within his spectators a faint sense of recognition. Having caught a glimpse of an innocence once was, a past self that is now on the verge of oblivion, it is then on society's mind to cut open the facade of quietude to reveal the tender, juicy yolk of thoughts flowing inside, with a mixture of fascination and self-disgust, to try to transform *them* into *us*.

Having established Kaspar as a lost chance of innocence in the nature-civilization divide, I will now elbow aside that landscape, turning instead to a matter of temporal displacement symptomatic to modernity, colouring the Kasparian type a shade further. The second circumstance under which a creature of poor speech is created allude to the sensation of being dispelled by time. In revealing such a temporal aberrance, I first follow a metaphorical death taking place halfway through *Happy as Lazzaro*. Lazzaro, in an effort to find the son of the Marchioness, falls off a tall cliff. Using the voice of Lazzaro's acquaintance and protector Antonia, Lazzaro's return is foreshadowed with the story of an old wolf, whom "the villagers tried to kill...but...couldn't succeed" (Rohrwacher 2018). Resurrected, as the tale tells, an unaged Lazzaro goes back to an already abandoned village 20 years later. He learns that the whole village was living under a lie told by the Marchioness, with the intention to exploit the villagers as free labourers. Inviolata (derived from Italian, meaning free from violation or immune from impurity), the once unspoiled village, is now spoiled with abandonment. What was once present becomes past in a blink, exposing an old-world structure whose decay is sped up and spat out, via the mediation of cinematic rearrangement, looking now grossly obsolete. Lazzaro's return echos that of Kaspar Hauser, who came back to a human village after years of involuntary exile, only to find out a time to which he belonged is now nullified. Also being retired is his language—no longer can anyone claim to understand the things he said.

Curiously enough, Lazzaro who came back from death is completely oblivious to a drastic shift in time. This strange ability to stay in place by becoming timelessly out of place is

reminiscent of Kaspar's ability to be, here Sebald quotes Nietzsche, "totally unhistorical" (Nietzsche 2011, 91). While for the rest of modern society, "the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core" (Boym 2001, xvi), Kaspar, in his state of out-of-timeness, seems to grasp the knowledge of being unfettered in time—wandering hither and thither he is able to move through time yet not be tainted by it, preserving a relative permanence in a time of great unrest. Lazzaro does not belong in a time that is his own, nor does he belong faithfully to the past in good Proustian fashion. In like manner, Clara does not register time well. Hers coming-of-age liberation comes far too late; her desire seems primordial, with no regard for the actual body she occupies.

Lazzaro and Clara's temporal dysfunction gestures towards a great yearning at play—the yearning of finding belonging by undoing time. In this sense Kaspar expands beyond one person, becoming instead a community, even an entire generation. His loss in time attests to a collective longing of overcoming the modern condition of "transcendental homelessness" (Lukács 1971, 24) by finding a permanent dwelling, through which process the fear of the seismic shift in time may be administrated an antidote. The modern generation craves not only a paradisal bliss already lost, but a happiness not yet happened, for being happy "is a matter of good timing, when two people meet at a right time, in a right place and somehow manage to arrest the moment" (Boym 2001, 21). The condition of losing oneself to time is a difficult one to grapple with; for how can one begin to lament the past when it is eclipsed by the present, the latter already adept at dreaming in the future tense? 50 years from Handke's play, ours is a time that endorses progress. The present moment infested with technology fetichism tends to be anti-nostalgic; it prefers those who invent fast and invent inexhaustibly. By blinding the modern citizens with rapid changes, it forbids various forms of backwardness—why tinker when we can make anew? Why bother thinking about damages done to the past when we might go to Mars tomorrow?

Kaspars are the ones who have been denied a place to reside, both in their own body and in the shapeless body of the collective, present moment. Rohrwacher thinks not the villagers want to return to Iviolata, for "there isn't a sense of community anymore" (Rohrwacher 2021). The lost time and present time march disjointedly together, disorienting and debilitating whomever that gets caught in gaps of their discrepancy. The old world of quasi-feudal exploitation and the new world of capitalistic dehumanization sandwich everything else in

between, leaving one with no home to which they can return nor a real chance of building a better one. From the ruin of these unspeakable losses grow creatures like Kaspar.

A lack of clear-cut renunciation results in Kaspar's close connection with myths and the supernatural. On the genesis of myths, Sebald's states (2006): "Anthropological theory assumes that exposure in a treeless situation where all escape upwards are cut off led to the invention of myths" (57). I understand the treeless situation here as the literal banning of the wild, the homogeneity of meaning-making through a single language, the hegemony of a global time measured by progress, and the destitute of living in a demystifying, spearheaded modern society. Unable to go upwards, Kasparian characters travel through a lateral line in zigzag manner,[2] looking over their shoulders.

Towards the end of the play, Handke showed a Kaspar who felt ashamed for whom he had become. The shame started with his first sentence but was unauthenticated by the second, a process that reveals, once again, the speech's all-encompassing power of indoctrination. Yet the very fact that Kaspar still remembers reveals something innate and stubborn, irreducible by language. The key to undoing harmful education and transformation, Sebald suggests (2006), is *memory*. "He remembers, but too well" (65). In acts of remembering Kaspar does away with speech torture. Scene by scene stories of his beginning were rebuilt. By virtue of his remembrance, Kaspar renders his present reality to become unreliable, loose, shedding gradually until a state of pre-existence is regained.

In contemplating the state of pre-existence in cinema, I turn to Erin Manning's thinking in her essay, *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (2009), in which she points out that since "words...cannot fully express experience's complexity...language must be called forth as a layering-with of the affective tonality of expression" (215). Manning's school of thought recognizes the impossibility of translating one's experiences using any one form of language and problematizes singular expressivity, favouring instead the murky water of prearticulation, whereby significance is given to incipient thoughts that are constantly budding yet lacks definitive texture. The suspended space between thoughts and their linguistic formation is crucial to a Kasparian analysis. Within it, lives a Kasparian type who is resistant towards assimilation,

[2] I owe much to Svetlana Boym and her idea of off-modern. Hers off-modernism denotes a version of modernity that exists between modernism and postmodernism, which, through putting an emphasis on the adverb *off*, celebrates the off-key, off-beat eccentricity that leads to a critical reexamination of modernity. This paper aims to situate Kaspar in such a space.

who prefers the unintelligible half-speech to the clearly articulated reasons—the blemishes of language.

Cinema may contemplate the state of prearticulation in the form of supernatural expressivity. Just as Kaspar is able to hear "wood rotting over long distances" and could "make out colours in the dark" (Sebald 2006, 57), Lazzaro and Clara's mystical abilities emphasize heightened sensory connections. Take for example the scene in which Lazzaro and the villagers are being shooed out of a cathedral for looking homeless, in which the music being produced by the pipe organ suddenly gains its own cognition and leaves the instrument. Floating away from the cathedral, the music follows the group all the way into the streets. In the case of *Clara Sola*, not only does Mesén describe her script as "sound-driven" (Quinzaine des Réalisateurs 2021), but Clara as a character is sensitive to all sensorial experiences. Mensén chose to collaborate Wendy Chinchilla Araya, asking Araya to use her knowledge as a dancer to portray Clara, who, though "inside-her-shell...very still...[but] has a lot of movement inside her" (Wise 2021). A scene that illustrates this inner movement would be, standing side by side next to her love interest, Clara teaches him to press his ear against the body of her white horse, and just *listen* (figure 2).

Figure 2. Film still from *Clara Sola*. (Directed by Nathalie Álvarez Mesén, 2021).

As blemishes of language, a Kasparian character may substitute outward expression with the inward movements of memory. In Handke's play, arriving in fragments, Kaspar's memory sequence reads as if it were a roll of half-exposed film; upon recalling his past, Kaspar remembers "the snow that stung his hand, the 'brightly coloured window shutter...a gloomy legacy of candles and bloodsuckers; ice and mosquitos; horse and pus...'" (Handke 1969, 140). These memory-images, according to Sebald (2006), "escape that paralytic confrontation they feature, being impenetrable ciphers, like myths, they distort" (67). Cinema being the medium that makes meaning by folding time can offer enough emptiness and nonaction for memories to grow with ease.

While memory can be animating, cinema further allows for a collective relation-making to take place through its construction—as Stéphane Symons and Matthias De Groof remind us (2015): "it is this constructive and creative relation to the past that we call memory" (148). The Kasparian characters, whom I consider here as the lingering conscience of society and signifiers of a greater yearning at play, may continue to be regarded as a reflective device for reconstructing the past—a "being thought" and "in action" (150) at the same time. In film, the Kasparian type shows its viewers that the past can exist as a myriad of possibilities, through each collective breath of recollection they ebb and flow, then flourish. To remember is to reimagine. Rohrwacher reveals the efficacy of memory at work: "[p]erhaps the memory of Lazzaro's innocence is both painful and pleasant because it's an original yearning, something from which we've been separated but which we remember" (Rohrwacher 2019). Kasparian characters stand at the edge of a collective past, an unforthcoming reminder, reluctant to be forgotten.

Kaspars' local resistance only appears mystical compared to an arbitrary global narrative; their rebellion broken, for most often than not, their way of communication remains encrypted. Their language is that of burgeoning becoming—a susurrating thought, not quite pronounced. It is through the study of memory and the supernatural that Kaspar may be translated as a form of rebellion in film. As Sebald notes (2006), impenetrable ciphers are "examples of broken rebellion"—literature, for example, can transcend the dilemma of having symbolism obscure what it seeks to reveal by "keeping faith with unsocial, banned language, and by learning to use the opaque images of broken rebellion as a means of communication" (67). Cinema may keep faith by contemplating and existing in images of impenetrable ciphers: dialects of cultural

minorities, half-remembered homes of the geopolitically displaced, fragmented sentences of new immigrants, and movements of the differently abled.

Language being the house of Being which man dwells (Heidegger 1977, 191), the Kasparian type points to the existence of hidden rooms and secret gardens accessible not by speaking thunderously over each other but by paying attention to the murmurs of thoughts in the making. The study of Kasparian characters aims to honour those reluctant speakers, guardians of secret realms, practitioners of traditional knowledge, and all the untameable "wild" beings. As for our responsibilities as an audience to such characters, we may as well, as historian Inga Clendinnen suggests (1991), "resign ourselves to a heroic act of renunciation" (71)—to give ourselves up and, for a moment, allow ciphers to chase us into humble abandonment.

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