



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* is a story with a beginning and an end; or at least, being based on a historical case, it feels as if it ought to have a clear beginning and end. In reality, *Kaspar Hauser* is an unfinished story – indeed, a story about unfinished stories. It is, as the English title suggests, an unanswered question; the German title actually means ‘every man for himself and God against all’, but still the connotations of scattered disunity support the sense of enigma. No unifying answer can be achieved in a world where only God knows the answers and where humans can only cling to their own provisional, partial guesses. In a key scene, the mysterious foundling Kaspar (Bruno S.) is sitting with Käthe (Brigitte Mira), housekeeper to his tutor Professor Daumer (Walter Ladengast). He proposes to tell her a story about the desert, but admits he doesn’t know the ending.

Käthe reminds him that Daumer believes that stories should be told from start to finish, so Kaspar gives up the attempt. It is only on his deathbed, following his stabbing by an unknown assailant, that he tells the tale, illustrated by what looks like rough, flickering found footage. A caravan loses its way crossing the Sahara. Its leader, an old blind Berber, tastes the sand and tells his people that the mountains they see are imaginary. The caravan goes on, reaches the city – and then, says Kaspar, the story begins. But what happens next he does not know. Then he dies.

The town authorities try to provide a satisfactory ending to Kaspar’s own incomplete story. They perform an autopsy, discover irregularities in his liver and brain, and close the case. The town registrar (the diminutive, gnome-like Clemens Scheitz) struts off into the distance, eager to prepare his latest report (‘Protokol’). But in real history, the Kaspar Hauser story only begins here: already a *cause célèbre* of 1830s Europe, it developed into a fully fledged cultural myth, referred to by Herman Melville, inspiring a poem by Verlaine and becoming the basis of (among others) a novel by Jakob Wassermann, a 1967 play by Peter Handke and most recently a 1993 film by German director Peter Sehr.

Sehr’s conspiracy theory account examines the widely credited theory that Kaspar was the secret child of Stéphanie de Beauharnais, adopted daughter of Napoleon, and therefore heir to the throne of Baden. This theory is briefly and dismissively alluded to in Herzog’s film, which otherwise adheres largely to a selection of known facts. Herzog’s key source is a contemporary record by the judge, Anselm Ritter von Feuerbach. The facts, roughly, are these: in 1828, in Nuremberg (referred to in Herzog’s opening intertitle as ‘N.’), a youth of approximately 16 was found standing, holding a letter to the local light cavalry. He spoke only a few words, notably ‘ross’ (horse) and the phrase ‘I want to be a gallant rider, just like my father’ (‘Ich mocht ein solcher Reiter

werden wie mein Vater einer war') and signed the name 'Kaspar Hauser'. He was initially imprisoned, then given into the care of Georg Friedrich Daumer, tutor to Hegel's children. When Kaspar had learned enough German to narrate his experiences, he testified that he had spent all his life in a cellar, deprived of human communication. Belatedly reborn, he did not enjoy his new existence for long. He suffered two attacks by parties unknown: one a beating, the other a stabbing which proved fatal. (In Herzog's film, the first, if not the second, is administered by Kaspar's original jailer.) He died in 1832, origins still unknown.

Two notable factors contribute to the myth. One is the remarkable speed with which Kaspar acquired fluency in spoken and written language. The other is the way that, despite his wild, unworldly aspect, he always gave evidence of a gentle disposition – an attribute which, in an age influenced by Rousseau's archetype of the 'noble savage', led observers to view him as naturally more civilised than the literate world around him. Feuerbach called Kaspar 'the living refutation of the doctrine of original sin, with his pure innocence and the goodness of his heart.' Herzog himself, in a 1975 *Sight and Sound* interview, shifted the emphasis to an 'innocence' of language: 'Kaspar was in the purest sense a person without concepts, without language, an uncivilised person, a yet to be studied human.' He later commented, '*Kaspar Hauser* is almost an anthropological film. It tries to define what we are as human beings untouched by any environment, untouched by education as if a pure human being had fallen from outer space to this planet and come into existence here fully grown up.'

Herzog's most controversial gesture in *Kaspar Hauser* was his casting of Bruno S. – a Berlin street-singer, painter and steel worker then in his mid-forties, who had spent some 20 years in children's homes, mental hospitals and prisons. Like Kaspar, Bruno had to acquire language: speaking only Berlin dialect, he had to learn conventional German for the film. Kaspar's halting, emphatic diction appears to be Bruno's own, as are his jerky movements and singularly expressive facial looks: the sudden engrossed absences and amused, inquisitive flickers of attention. We see much the same Bruno in his other Herzog film, *Stroszek* (1977), in which he plays released jailbird Bruno Stroszek (the surname is from Herzog's 1968 film, *Signs of Life*). Accused of exploiting Bruno, Herzog presented his choice almost as a defence of the contemporary Kaspars still being made to suffer. Bruno, he said, 'has been so harmed by the world, like Kaspar, that he will never be whole. Yet he has still not been corrupted. And certainly not by me.'

What seems to fascinate Herzog about both Kaspar and Bruno is precisely this sense of incompleteness. Like the stories he tells, Kaspar is a fragment. His being consists of words, gestures, phrases, a signature, scraps of stories and music. Even the memoir he is writing is incomplete because, he complains, his vocabulary is not sufficient to the task. Kaspar can never master the script society wants him to learn because he has already been the subject of a more terrible, secret drama. Consequently he can never be known by society and must remain an enigma – even though what we see is in every sense what we get. Along with the inspired yet altogether conventional comedy of Kaspar's showing up society's preconceptions (the japing with flustered logicians and

the benign, battled Daumer), Herzog also addresses a more abstract question: the problem of knowing people, of gauging their interiority. Normally, words, looks and social gestures suffice to make a person a person rather than an enigma. But Kaspar's exterior deflects inspection, as if his appearance kept him hidden rather than visible. Nothing reveals Kaspar; in fact, he denies there is anything knowable within that can be revealed. When asked to say whatever comes into his 'natural young head', Kaspar replies, 'Nothing lives in me except my life' – a tautology that suggests that everything is in him, and nothing.

If Kaspar does have a secret subjectivity, the film suggests, it is not in him but elsewhere – up with the spheres. At several points Herzog shows us the dreams Kaspar reports, the dreamlike stories he tells, as well as some ambivalent sequences that could be read as objective landscapes or as Kaspar's imaginings. What, for instance, is the status of the soft-focus opening sequence (shot by Klaus Wyborny) in which a man rows down a river, a young woman gazes enigmatically through reeds, a tower glides into view and a laundress stops to glare into the camera? Is this a prologue to the story, or an Outside world dreamed by Kaspar in his cell? And what about the other landscapes he envisages – the Caucasus, with its strange towers; the hordes struggling up a hill in deep mist; the Sahara with its caravan? What can Kaspar know of the Caucasus, the Sahara, or Berbers?

Herzog's Kaspar, in fact, seems in no uncertain fashion to be a visionary, an inspired poet in the properly Romantic sense, receiving his visions from beyond or above; 'Mich hat getraumt' (it dreamed to me), he tells Daumer and looks up at the sky. He is a blank screen on to which cinematic visions are projected like travelogue footage beamed from beyond. But if Kaspar is a screen for dream pictures, by implication his entire brief existence in the light of day is also a dream, projected for Herzog's viewers, and just as ephemeral and insubstantial. We don't know Kaspar as a living man with a living subjectivity but only a vaporous image of him: don't look for a 'soul' in celluloid, the film cautions us, for we get only a moving flicker that resembles it.

**Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, October 2000**

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**THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER****(JEDER FÜR SICH UND GOTT GEGEN ALLE)**

*Director:* Werner Herzog

*Production Companies:* Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Süddeutscher Rundfunk

*Producer:* Werner Herzog

*Production Manager:* Christian Weisenborn

*Production Supervisor:* Walter Saxer

*Assistant Director:* Benedikt Kuby

*Screenplay:* Werner Herzog

*Director of Photography:* Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein

*Dream Sequence Photography:* Klaus Wyborny

*Editor:* Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

*Art Director:* Henning von Gierke

*Costume Designers:* Gisela Storch, Ann Poppel

*Music:* Johann Pachelbel, Tommaso Albinoni, Orlando Di Lasso,

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

*Sound:* Haymo H. Heyder

**Cast**

Bruno S. (*Kaspar Hauser*)

Walter Ladengast (*Professor Daumer*)

Brigitte Mira (*Käthe*)

Willy Semmelrogge (*circus director*)

Gloria Dör (*Frau Hiltel*)

Volker Prechtel (*Hiltel, prison guard*)

Henry van Lyck (*cavalry captain*)

Florian Fricke (*Florian*)

Hans Musäus (*unknown man*)

Michael Kroecher (*Lord Stanhope*)

Enno Patalas (*Pastor Fuhrmann*)

Elis Pilgrim (*2nd pastor*)

Helmut Döring (*little King*)

Kidlat Tahimik (*hombrecito*)

Andi Gottwald (*young Mozart*)

Herbert Achternbusch, Wolfgang Bauer, Walter Steiner (*young peasants*)

Clemens Scheitz (*scribe*)

Johannes Buzalski (*registrar*)

Willy Meyer-Fürst (*doctor*)

Alfred Edel (*professor of logic*)

Franz Brumbach (*showman with bear*)

Herbert Fritsch (*mayor*)

Wilhelm Bayer (*household cavalry captain*)

Peter Gebhart (*cobbler who finds Kaspar*)

Otto Heinzle (*old priest*)

Dorothea Kraft (*little girl*)

Reinhard Hauff

West Germany 1974

110 mins

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Thu 1 Sep 18:30; Thu 15 Sep 20:55; Sun 18 Sep 15:50; Wed 21 Sep 21:00; Tue 27 Sep 21:00

**Do the Right Thing**

Fri 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 24 Sep 20:40; Wed 28 Sep 18:00 + intro by freelance writer and producer Kaleem Aftab

**Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)**

Sat 3 Sep 16:00; Fri 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 13 Sep 18:10; Sat 17 Sep 12:30

**Psycho**

Sat 3 Sep 20:45; Sun 11 Sep 15:40; Thu 15 Sep 14:30; Tue 4 Oct 18:30

**The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle)**

Sun 4 Sep 13:20; Fri 9 Sep 20:45; Tue 13 Sep 20:30

**In a Lonely Place**

Sun 4 Sep 16:00; Wed 14 Sep 18:15 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large; Fri 23 Sep 18:00; Wed 28 Sep 20:50

**The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)**

Mon 5 Sep 20:50; Fri 30 Sep 18:10; Mon 3 Oct 17:50

**Accident**

Tue 6 Sep 20:40; Sun 11 Sep 13:10; Tue 20 Sep 17:50

**Ratcatcher**

Wed 7 Sep 18:15 + intro by Catharine Des Forges, Director of the Independent Cinema Office; Sat 17 Sep 18:00; Thu 29 Sep 21:00

**The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)**

Thu 8 Sep 20:45; Mon 12 Sep 14:30; Mon 19 Sep 20:45; Sun 25 Sep 15:30

**Letter from an Unknown Woman**

Sat 10 Sep 12:30; Wed 14 Sep 14:30; Wed 21 Sep 18:00 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large

**The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de motocicleta)**

Sat 10 Sep 18:00; Sat 17 Sep 14:45

**Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)**

Tue 13 Sep 14:30; Fri 16 Sep 18:00; Tue 20 Sep 20:50; Sat 1 Oct 12:30

**Fargo**

Thu 22 Sep 20:55; Sat 1 Oct 18:00

**Last Year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)**

Mon 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 2 Oct 12:45; Tue 4 Oct 20:40

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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