



# Is *Kasper* dead? Domestication and indoctrination of *Kaspertheater* during National-Socialism

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**ABSTRACT – Is *Kasper* dead? Domestication and indoctrination of *Kaspertheater* during National-Socialism** – The text presents preliminary results of research on the strategies employed in the appropriation of *Kaspertheater* for propaganda purposes under National-Socialism. This popular form of German puppet theater was adapted into Nazi ideological plays, and performed on various circuits, including war fronts. The article examines the relationship between art and politics in this context and discusses the ambiguities of the use of comicality linked to right-wing extremist programs, as a counterpoint to contemporary performances of *Kaspertheater*. It investigates the relations between popular culture and the legitimization of national identity projects, with the intention of contributing to this debate in Brazil.

Keywords: *Kaspertheater*. Art and Politics. Far-Right. Popular Culture. Theatre in Animated Forms.

**RÉSUMÉ – *Kasper* est-ilmort? Domestication et endoctrinement du *Kaspertheater* pendant le National-Socialisme** – Ce texte présente les résultats préliminaires de la recherche sur les stratégies utilisées dans l'appropriation du *Kaspertheater* à des fins de propagande dans le National-Socialisme. Cette forme populaire de théâtre de marionnettes allemande a été adaptée pour des pièces de l'idéologienazie, jouées sur divers circuits, y compris les fronts de guerre. L'article place la relation entre l'art et la politique dans ce contexte et discute des ambiguïtés de dans les usages du comique liées aux programmes d'extrême-droite. Il apporte, en contrepoint, des mises en scène contemporaines du *Kaspertheater*. Il étudie les relations entre la culture populaire et la légitimation des projets d'identité nationale, dans le but de contribuer à ce débat au Brésil.

Mots-clés: *Kaspertheater*. Art et Politique. Extrême-Droite. Culture Populaire. Théâtre de Formes Animées.

**RESUMO – O *Kasper* está morto? Domesticação e doutrinação do *Kaspertheater* durante o Nacional-Socialismo** – O texto apresenta resultados preliminares de pesquisa sobre as estratégias empregadas na apropriação do *Kaspertheater* para fins de propaganda no Nacional-Socialismo. Essa forma popular de teatro de bonecos alemã foi adaptada para peças de ideologia nazista, apresentadas em diversos circuitos, incluindo *fronts* de guerra. O artigo situa as relações entre arte e política nesse contexto e discute as ambiguidades dos usos da comicidade atrelados a programas de extrema-direita. Traz, como contraponto, encenações contemporâneas do *Kaspertheater*. Investiga as relações entre a cultura popular e a legitimação de projetos de identidade nacional, com o intuito de contribuir para esse debate no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: *Kaspertheater*. Arte e Política. Extrema-Direita. Cultura Popular. Teatro de Formas Animadas.

It is not easy for a person to distance him or herself from these events. One often has the impression that the Hitler boil has not yet burst. It throbs, but the pus hasn't come out (Norbert Elias, 1997, p. 31).

This research<sup>1</sup> is based on the fields of knowledge within the Arts, Politics, Anthropology and History. It addresses the relationship between art and politics, through the strategic uses of artistic devices for broader socio-political projects. It also observes the transitions between modes of production and creation; in addition to circumscribing the historical and historiographical debates on studies of fascism<sup>2</sup>, extreme right-wing nationalist movements and their connections with identity issues. The object under discussion is *Kaspertheater*<sup>3</sup>, a popular form of German puppet theater, and its links to political-educational programs during National-Socialism in Germany. This study included the examination of archives and puppet theater collections in Dresden, Munich, Lübeck, Bochum, and Bad Kreuznach, in Germany, as well as the Collection of Theater Studies at the University of Cologne (*Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung – Universität Köln*)<sup>4</sup>. It also included a research residency at the documentation center of the International Puppet Institute (*Institut International de la Marionnette*)<sup>5</sup>, in Charleville-Mézières, France, and a visit to the puppet exposition *Loutky na frontě / Puppets on the Front*, about the Czech Republic's puppet theater on the front during World War I (Matula, 2018), in the *Muzeum-loutkářských kultur v Chrudimi / Chrudim Puppetry Museum*.<sup>6</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the visits I made to important puppet theater training schools in Europe, where I was able to gain access to their curricula and attend some classes, for example, the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, of DAMU (The Academy of Performing Arts and Theatre Faculty), in Prague<sup>7</sup>; ESNAM (*Ecole Nationale de la Marionnette*), in Charleville-Mézières; and the Department of Contemporary Puppet Theater Studies at the Academy of Dramatic Arts - Ernst Busch, (*Studiengang Zeitgenössische Puppenspielkunst – Hochschule für Schauspielkunst - Ernst Busch*)<sup>8</sup>, in Berlin. I mention these collections and schools to highlight the network that has formed the research base for this work, and to contrast it with the usual subaltern status of puppet theater as an object of study.

The experience of having *Kaspertheater* as a case study has often surprised me because of its reception, sometimes ironic and suspicious, among certain intellectual and artistic fields, which still insist on not ascribing formal artistic value to this theatrical language. *Kasper* is said to have emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Austria, apparently as a derivation of an older character named *Hanswurst*, or *Jack Sausage*. Cruel, naive and funny, *Kasper* has one weakness: his wife *Gretel's* apple pies. In terms of formal characteristics and game elements, one may say that there are correspondences between the German *Kasper* and other similar popular characters such as *Kasperek* (Czech), *Guignol* (French), *Petrushka* (Russian), *Karagöz* (Turkish), *Punch* (English), *Dom Roberto* (Portuguese), among others. It is worth remembering that all of them are comic characters and use glove techniques, except for *Karagöz*, who is a shadow theater figure.

In the current context, in general terms, *Kasper* or *Kasperl* is commonly perceived as a form of puppet theater for children, used in an amateur way in schools as an educational tool to teach children how to brush their teeth, or cross the street and is often pejoratively called *Verkehrskasper* (the Traffic *Kasper*). There is also a strong derogatory image of this type of theater, because it is related to nationalist ideas and movements, which are frowned upon in Germany today. Since it has been associated with Nazi and then Communist propaganda, *Kasper* is constantly the target of negative criticism.

Gerd Bohlmeier's doctoral thesis *Das Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Figurentheaters (The Reich Institute for Puppetry: A Contribution to the History of Puppet Theater)* (1993) is a relevant reference on the professionalization of puppeteers, the institutionalization of this form of theater and its use as a propaganda strategy during National-Socialism. The hypothesis raised in the thesis, that the use of puppet theater by the Third Reich was strategically planned as a mass media outlet, is one contribution to the various studies on Nazi propaganda, the main prop for the rapid ideological propagation and the wide popular adherence to the tragic racist and genocidal project. The issue is disconcerting because it contrasts the efficacy of puppet theater, its ingenuous language, simple technical apparatus, and modest production and circulation costs with the grandiose spectacles, parades, and rituals for the masses that were widely

used in that context. Critical research on such propaganda devices is mostly focused on the use of more standard media, such as film and radio, as well as civic spectacles and theatrical forms for the masses, such as *Thingspiel* (Niven, 2000). Puppet theater is generally not mentioned.

However, the sources reveal the widespread presence of puppet theater, especially *Kaspertheater*, on the frontlines of World War II, staged as entertainment for soldiers in combat, as well as in hospitals for the therapeutic relief of wounded soldiers. There are also records of activities by soldier puppeteers on the front, and in prisoner-of-war camps in England, France and the United States, as shown by documents found in the Theater Studies Collection – University of Cologne (*Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung - Universität Köln*). This information is also found in Silke Technau's (1992; 1997) published works about Walter Büttner, a puppeteer who served as a soldier, captured in 1944 by the Americans. Büttner became known for his performances for soldiers on the front and later as a prisoner of war in Aliceville, Alabama. The movement of puppet theater to the frontlines during World War II and its importance as an instrument of propaganda and information was not unique to Germany. The phenomenon occurred in other countries in Europe (Kolland; Puppentheater-Museum..., 1997; Fleury; Sermon, 2019), also including some documentation on World War I, such as Gaston Cony and the *Guignol de la Guerre*, in France (Plassard, 1990; 2017)<sup>9</sup>, and also the material found in the above-mentioned Chrudim exposition, in the Czech Republic.

Bohlmeier's work (1993) is relevant because it analyzes the institutional apparatus of the Third Reich and the political and educational strategies for the creation of the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel*) in 1938. The creation of the institute was meant to coordinate, control and promote amateur and professional puppeteers, guiding the content and aesthetics for performances by publishing manuals and distributing small collections of puppets. An example is the catalog Games and Heads (Characters) for the *Kaspertheater* show - *Spiele und Köpfe für das Kaspertheater*, published circa 1940, with texts by Siegfried Raack<sup>10</sup>, Dr. Hermann Schülze<sup>11</sup> and Harro Siegel<sup>12</sup>, all of them artists. The elements of *Kaspertheater*, its structure and presentation devices, were key to the project. The appropriation of *Kasper* for ideological propaganda made it the central

character in a series of anti-Semitic and pro-expansionist plays for the German Empire. I had access to ten original copies, in booklet form, of these dramaturgies for puppet theater, mostly for *Kaspertheater*, organized by the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Reichinstitut für Puppenspiel*). The plays are still being analyzed and will probably result in more data for this research. These and other documents were found in the collection of the Puppet Theater Collection, part of the Dresden Public Arts Collection (*Puppentheatersammlung der Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden*)<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to note that some organizations geared toward developing state policies for German workers' vacations and leisure, such as 'Strength through Joy' (*Kraft durch Freude* - KdF), founded in November 1933, were part of this project. The community camps and ships for tourist excursions, promoted by KdF, were stages for the circulation of amateur and professional puppet theater groups, making it possible for artists to work during the war. The institute's project also promoted the spread of puppet theater presented in amateur form among youth associations, such as the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*), which participated actively. The phenomenon was not a one-off movement. On the contrary, some figures, even allowing for overestimation, indicate puppet theater events and also include performances in the occupied territories by Nazi Germany (Buchholz, 1976, p. 318 apud Bohlmeier, 1997, p. 126-127)<sup>14</sup>:

The National-Socialist propaganda apparatus, which accorded great importance to extensive entertainment programs in order to provide psychological support to troops, enabled puppet theater to become a welcome medium in conjunction with theatrical and variety shows, concerts, and vocal performances. The dimensions of such events are reflected in the following figures, albeit taking into account a probable propagandistic exaggeration: 'From September to the end of December 1939, about 12,400 events took place in the German Reich and the occupied territories with about 7 million soldiers. In 1940, there were 137,802 performances with 51,530,000 soldiers participating. In 1941, the numbers at the events increased to 187,198 with 67,789,569 soldiers accounted for'.

*Kaspertheater* may be considered the 'typical German folk puppet theater'. In this sense, legitimizing *Kasper* is also about contributing to the construction of an image of Germany. National identity projects rely on elements and matrices defined as belonging to popular culture; expressions

such as *Kaspertheater* are often evoked from an idealization, and not as verified in their historical and contextual processes. The notion of popular culture that supports the constitution of such projects is a homogenizing idea, which prevents us from seeing the phenomena within their own processual dynamics, from recognizing who their social actors really are, and how they act. There is a notion of culture (Eagleton, 2011) in dispute, which needs to be problematized, especially in the development of its meanings in German social processes. There is a genealogical lineage of the concept of 'culture' that relates it to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the Romantic movement in Germany.

In his book *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, the sociologist Norbert Elias (1997) offers a kind of social biography of the Germans. Through selected facts from everyday life, Elias demonstrates the unfolding of a produced national *self-image* among the middle layers of the population as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Notions like *civilization* and *culture*, fundamentally procedural, acquired an immutable meaning. Links to the symbols of collectivity became key elements for the legitimization of these concepts and notions. It is also at this moment that certain words, such as *homeland*, *people*, *nation*, *national*, etc., became verbal symbols and gained meanings that founded the geopolitics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by two world wars, and which still persist today in extreme right-wing political-ideological projects. The quote is long, but of great relevance (Elias, 1997, p. 140-141):

It is easy to see why this belief in the 'nation' as a sacrosanct 'we-ideal' arose in an era of highly differentiated mass societies, with compulsory military service and an increasing involvement of the entire population in conflict with other mass societies. In this situation, mere discipline and obedience to a prince or a military commander was not enough to guarantee a country's success in a power struggle with others. Under such conditions, it was necessary that all citizens, in addition to any external compulsion, were also compelled by their own conscience and ideals, or in other words, by a compulsion they exercised individually upon themselves, to subordinate their personal needs to those of the collectivity, the country or the nation, and lay down their lives for them if required. It was indispensable that the individual members of all these highly differentiated 20<sup>th</sup> century mass societies were motivated by an unquestioning belief in the value of the society they formed with each other, the 'nation'; for it was not always possible to explain in fac-

tual terms the merits of the society to those whose services or whose lives were requested.

Popular cultural productions, such as *Kaspertheater*, for example, are also symbols of national collectivity par excellence. These relations and ideas were widely developed by German intellectuals and artists from the pre-Romantic (*Sturm und Drang* – Storm and Stress) and Romantic movements, from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are referring to authors such as J.G. Herder (1744-1803), the brothers Ludwig Carl Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Carl Grimm (1786-1859), Goethe (1749-1832), Lessing (1729-1781), among others. Adherence to these ideas guided both the production of compilation works, collections of popular repertoires (songs, poetry, tales, stories, legends, etc.), and the emblematic authorial works of the period, based on the affirmation of a national consciousness, the liberation of art from the bonds of classicism, the reaction to the Enlightenment, etc.

Although the movement was significant in Germany, it was not exclusive to it, but rather an event in modern European history, as Peter Burke (1989) shows us. Often associated with nationalism, this impulse towards popular culture took place in several countries, curiously in regions that could be considered, at the time, as the cultural *periphery* of Europe itself, which was the case of Germany. Burke (1989) characterized this moment as the *discovery of the people*, in which the tradition of collecting phenomena that involved popular culture came into vogue, implying the birth of the science of folklore and theories that would bring art closer to a supposedly more *primitive, communitarian, wild, authentic* and *pure* nature, free from classicist rules and foreign influence. According to Burke (1989, p. 38-39), “[...] this movement was also a reaction against the Enlightenment as it was portrayed in Voltaire: against its elitism, against its abandonment of tradition, against its emphasis on reason.” These authors were also looking for a legitimately national art.

What is new in Herder, the Grimm and their followers is, firstly, the emphasis on the people, and, secondly, their belief that the ‘usages, customs, ceremonies, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc.’ were each part of a whole, expressing the spirit of a nation (Burke 1989, p. 36).

In this conception, popular culture would *naturally* evoke the precepts that were suited to the needs of the Romantics. Not by chance, also according to Burke (1989), the emergence of terms in the German language related to popular culture was noteworthy at that time, such as: *Volkskunde*, *Volkslied*, *Volksdichtung*, *Volksmärchen*, *Volksfest* (folklore, folk song, folk poetry, folk fable, and folk festival).

There is a clear ideology behind these definitions and constructions. In many cases there is a desire to build supposedly *original* cultural projects that explain national identity models. *Kaspertheater* also consists of such an idealized image, so it seems pertinent to me to understand why the evocation of these expressions is so effective as a justification for national identity projects. In this sense, analyzing the phenomenon of puppet theater during National-Socialism and World War II gives us the chance to look at history from another point of view, contributing to the construction of other historiographies that connect the relations between micro and macro politics in a more integrated way.

If there is no separation between art and politics, and this is what the vigorous contemporary debate demonstrates, research that relates these areas can contribute to the expansion and revision of historiographical procedures, for example. The fundamental field of action of artists and cultural agents, as well as of politics, is that of the imaginary, the ability to invent, legitimize, recognize, influence, and propose ways of life. In art, this dispute takes place from the inside, in the relationships between creators and their production field; between the works and the public; in the ability to affect not only through the theme, but through the provoked experience; in pursuit of a non-educational perspective, expanding communication channels, understanding that the devices and techniques are also political (Benjamin, 1994).

Certain phenomena in arts and culture, especially those forged through long-term processes, considered *traditional* or *popular* – rather problematic notions that will not be developed here – may reveal important aspects of social situations and patterns at specific historical junctures. In this way, *Kaspertheater*, as a matter of culture, can be regarded as a *total social fact* in the terms of Marcel Mauss (2003, p. 187), for, in it:



[...] the most diverse institutions are expressed all at once: religious, legal and moral – these being political and familial at the same time –; economic – these supposing particular forms of production and consumption, or rather of supply and distribution –; not to mention the aesthetic phenomena in which these facts result, and the morphological phenomena that these institutions manifest.

As such, the analysis of *Kasper* in this historical period can provide us with information about the operability of this theatrical language, but also about the social system in which it was immersed, perhaps permitting new contributions to the debate on the relationship between art and fascism, for example.

But why was *Kasper* effective at adaptations for didactic and propagandistic purposes? Even at the beginning of the Nazi ascension the central role of art as a propagator of ideals and as the basis for the constitution of an innovative propaganda project was evident. Adolf Hitler's biographers have profiled him as someone who was both close to and sensitive to the arts, even if resentful and frustrated that he did not become an artist. At the age of 18, he tried to enter the Vienna Academy of Arts, but failed his exams. In his evaluation, the Dean of the Academy said that Hitler did not have a vocation for painting, but for architecture (Kershaw, 2010, p. 48-49).

It is also worth mentioning Hitler's relationship with several artists and his constant presence in art circles, even during the war (Grosshans, 1983). In addition to the implementation of several architectural and artistic projects, including military parades, large rallies and exhibitions, which Hitler was keen to follow closely and influence decisions. Highlights include the *Great Exhibition of German Art (Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung)*, which took place annually from 1937 until 1944, even during Germany's initial defeat in the war. The exhibitions took place in the House of German Art (*Haus der Deutschen Kunst*) in Munich, a project developed by the architects of the Third Reich, directly supervised by Hitler. In the first edition, in July 1937, two parallel exhibitions were held: one of German art, mentioned above, whose curatorship was defined by Hitler himself; and the *Degenerate Art (Entartete Kunst)*, created as a contrast to the first, with a clearly anti-Semitic bias, aiming to condemn and ridicule the notion of modern art, whose artists and their productions were vehemently rejected

by him and, consequently, by the regime. Hitler's opening speech revealed the inextricable relationship between art and politics and the centrality of artistic production to the ideals of the Third Reich. I would like to underscore the following excerpt<sup>15</sup>

But the House is not enough: it must house an Exhibition, and if now I venture to speak of art I can claim a title to do so from the contribution which I myself have made to the restoration of German art. For our modern German state that I with my associates have created has alone brought into existence the conditions for a new, vigorous flowering of art. It is not Bolshevik art collectors or their henchmen who have laid the foundations: we have provided vast sums for the encouragement of art, we have set before itself great, new tasks. As in politics, so in German art-life: we are determined to make a clean sweep of phrases. Ability is the necessary qualification if an artist wishes his work to be exhibited here. People have attempted to recommend modern art by saying that it is the expression of a new age: but art does not create a new age, it is the general life of peoples which fashions itself anew and therefore often seeks after a new expression. A new epoch is not created by littérateurs but by fighters, those who really fashion and lead peoples, who thus make history.

Between September 5 and 10, 1934, the Sixth Congress of the Nazi Party (*Reichsparteitag*) took place in Nuremberg. The congress was organized by Joseph Goebbels, who had already assumed command of the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*), created on March 13, 1933, a month and a half after Hitler was appointed German Chancellor. The event was documented by Leni Riefenstahl, a young filmmaker, who had at her disposal the most advanced cinematographic technical apparatus possible at the time, imagistically amplifying Nazi heroicization and spectacularity. The documentary film *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*) was released on March 28, 1935 and prepared, through its monumental speeches and images, the basis for the war that was to come. Here is an excerpt from Goebbels' speech that was highlighted by the filmmaker in the film<sup>16</sup>:

*May the bright flame of our enthusiasm never be extinguished. It alone gives the creative art of modern political propaganda its light and warmth. From the depths of the people it rose aloft, and into the depths of the people it must descend to find its strength there. It is good to have power based on arms, but it is better and more joyful to win and to keep the hearts of the people.*

I am interested in this excerpt for a couple of reasons. Goebbels' speech corroborates what I wish to argue about the effectiveness of the uses of popular puppet theater as an ideological propaganda device by the Third Reich. *Kasper* is a charismatic character who has been familiar to all Germans for many generations. His trickster personality, his ambiguous character who does not respect hierarchies, his irreverence and cynicism, give him the freedom to do whatever he wants. *Kasper* is a free, anarchic character, a versatility that enables him to occupy any function in a dramaturgical device, which in turn has spaces open to improvisation. This agility provides an easy adherence to propaganda projects for or against something. By articulating collective symbolic meanings, therefore identitarian, it has great affective efficacy, creating a direct emotional connection with the audience. These *emotions* provoked by *Kasper* awaken the senses without necessarily operating on an intellectual or rationalized logic. This affective apparatus also encompasses feelings of social and communitarian solidarity, especially those that legitimize self-consciousness, the self-image of *being German*.

My hypothesis is that *Kasper*, as a comic character par excellence, the comic resources employed in this theatrical form and the very comicality produced are the basis for establishing this instant empathy with the audience. I dare say that the comicality guarantees the effectiveness of the moral, ethical and ideological effects that are desired through the criticism, which tends to be softened by the playful aspects and a supposed naivety.

There is a difference between the forms of comic production in terms of the laughter effect one wishes to obtain. In this sense, *laughing at oneself*, *laughing at something or someone*, and *laughing with people* suggest different modes of comedy operation. In general, comic production evokes ethics and political meanings, since it is different to laugh at someone in a position of power compared to someone in a position of subalternity, even if, in both cases, the production of stereotypes is evident. It is different to laugh at the one who oppresses than to laugh at the one who is oppressed. It is worth noting that the subversion contained in comic production, for example, when the target is people or spheres of political power, is usually construed as politically progressive.

There is a common sense idea, which I also shared for many years, that laughter is liberating and produces social awareness. But not always. In

the case at hand, comic production lent itself appropriately to the goals of the political-ideological apparatus of National-Socialism. In *Kaspertheater*, within this institutional framework of the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel*), comic resources were used to ridicule the enemy, for example through caricatured puppets of Winston Churchill<sup>17</sup>, jokingly called *Mr. Lügenmaul*, Mr. Liar, and Neville Chamberlain<sup>18</sup>, *Mr. Regenschirm*, Mr. Umbrella (Reichsinstitut..., 1940, p. 29), or in representations of the Jewish figure, absorbing the whole anti-Semitic ideological apparatus (Kolland; Puppentheater-Museum..., 1997, p. 67).

The phenomenon can also be observed in the current rise of extreme right-wing ideologies in the global geopolitical context, putting conservative governments back in power by democratic vote. The contemporary stage of capitalism is also prone to the strategic management of comical resources, which can be seen in its use in advertising, in the self-irony of politicians and celebrities, in television parodies, the emptying of the ritualistic meaning of parties, the immediate and uninterrupted production of *memes* on social networks, etc. The use of cynical humor by instances of power, which are supposed to be the comic targets, drains, in my opinion, the subversive and transformative power of laughter. Safatle (2008, p. 1-2) discusses this issue by analyzing how comic resources have been internally updated in capitalistic devices: "The strength of capitalism comes from the fact that it no longer takes itself seriously, since it constantly undermines the value of the law it enunciates." And he continues: "That is, we could all distance ourselves from the normative contents of the capitalist ideological universe because the very discourse of power already laughs at itself". So the analysis of popular comicality, taken in a generalist way as being subversive, needs to be complexified because, after all, *popular* camps do not exclusively operate progressive agendas. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, even with different purposes and political projects, the ways of using comical resources are practically the same.

This "[...] 'carnavalesque' character of fascist ideology, a parody character that absorbs, at the same time, apparently contradictory ideological contents," as Safatle (2008, p. 5) says, urges us to reposition our conceptions about the relations between comicality and politics. If the *memetization* of politics on social networks, for example, by producing humorous

political content, popularizes the critical narrative, disrupting its usual elitism, it does not solve, and also does not propose to solve, the impasse of how to resume the pragmatic consequence of the struggles.

*Kasper* also has an insoluble contradiction. He cannot lose his anarchic character or he would no longer have any meaning, he would be dead. In his ideological domestication in National-Socialism, even if reconfigured for a doctrinal purpose, he did not abandon his anarchic character. So *Kasper*, adapted to the Nazi ideological device, was both anarchic and domesticated. In an interview granted to me and researcher Mareike Gaubitz<sup>19</sup>, the researcher Gerd Bohlmeier reflects on this question<sup>20</sup>:

Domesticating the figure of *Kasper* is a contradiction in itself. It is his presentation and the form of his outward appearance. The figure of *Kasper* has always been, and is to this day, the one that deep down is not domesticable. If *Kasper* kills the crocodile, he commits manslaughter: he kills an animal. If he is very bad, *Kasper* kills Jews in National-Socialism, so he is a murderer. He is even in charge of traffic, but still, somewhere, he is an anarchist who doesn't follow the usual rules. If he, according to my thesis, did comply with the usual rules, the *Kasper* figure would be dead. And the causes are really much earlier. You have to understand *Kasper* as the one who is always a positive identification figure, whether for children or adults, in the fairs of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: they are always on the *Kaspers'* side. The reasons for this are that the *Kasper* figure has always been the voice of the people.

Among puppeteers and researchers, it is common to find this debate about the possible death of *Kasper*. During my research in Germany, I did several interviews with puppeteers<sup>21</sup> who still present *Kasper* and with puppet theater researchers<sup>22</sup>, and this question has come up in almost every conversation. The concern has been to figure out whether it still makes sense to present *Kasper* today. The amateurish character and the generalization that *Kasper's* shows are aimed at children's audiences are also provocative. It is as if *Kasper* had, *at first*, in his *authentic* sense a subversive character, and then, by becoming *docile*, he lost his *essence*. It is interesting to note that the perception of *Kasper* is still framed in issues related to romanticism, when the notion of *originality* and the invention of the *typical German* was initiated and legitimized, as mentioned above in this text.

It is also relevant to highlight that the puppeteers who present *Kasper* know how to identify the virtuous puppeteers, who know the *Kasper* game

thoroughly, from those who are amateurs, or even from those who are just good actors. One could say, then, that there is a universe of techniques, elements, ways of playing, etc., that are identifiable and, therefore, likely to be transmitted and shared. In my opinion, these data point to a process to legitimize a specific type of knowledge, which has lasted for a considerable time in history, and which could justify the ballast of *tradition* that *Kasper* possesses, or that one wishes *Kasper* to possess. This shared knowledge involves the artists, expert viewers, and researchers. I addressed these legitimization processes in my doctoral thesis on the Mamulengos theater (Alcure, 2007), a traditional popular form of puppet theater from Pernambuco. The *Teatro de Bonecos Popular do Nordeste* (Popular Puppet Theater of the Northeast) was registered as a Cultural Heritage asset, listed in the Forms of Expression Register by the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* (Institute of National Historical and Artistic Heritage - IPHAN), in March 2015.

This debate has served as a foundation and inspiration for the creation of contemporary dramaturgies focused on *Kasper*, which attempt to bring him up to date by reflecting on his history and on those moments in which he was used for ideological and pedagogical purposes. A distinction is also made between the *original popular Kasper*, known as the *Jahrmarkt* (*amusement park*), presented *as it was 100 years ago*, that is, in fairs, markets, squares, etc., and the *Kasper* presented by theater artists, or those who studied theater. This is also contradictory, because there are almost no *Jahrmarkt*-style puppeteers, or, when there are, they are considered more amateurish, in a pejorative sense. On the other hand, the puppeteers who are considered good *Kasper* players are professionals who mostly attended puppet theater schools, especially in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany (DDR - *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*), where the figure of *Kasper* continued to be presented with political vigor during the Cold War. The researcher and puppeteer Silke Technau (1992) has made interesting comments on the subject.

In 2007, the puppeteer Lutz Großmann<sup>23</sup> performed the show *Kasper tot. Schluß mit lustig?* (*Kasper dead. The end of the fun?*), directed by Hans-Jochen Menzel, also a puppeteer and professor at the Department of Contemporary Puppet Theater Studies at the Academy of Dramatic Arts - Ernst

Busch (Studiengang Zeitgenössische Puppenspielkunst – Hochschule für Schauspielkunst - Ernst Busch), in Berlin. In the show for adults, *Kasper* suffers from depression and enters into a philosophical confrontation with the characters of Death and the Devil, trying to find meaning for his survival.<sup>24</sup> The figure of the puppet is nothing like the standard aesthetic form of the laughing *Kasper* with his red cap, a form enshrined by Max Jacob and his *Hohnsteiner Kasper*, whose performance during National-Socialism was one of compliance, but which we will not address in this text for the time being. In Lutz Großmann's *Kasper*, by contrast, his human features, those of an ordinary person, are highlighted, as are the figures of death and the devil, which are humanized.

In October 2017, *Kasper unser*<sup>25</sup> (*Our Kasper*) premiered, acting and text by Anna Menzel and Hans-Jochen Menzel, with direction by Astrid Griesbach, which I had the chance to see in 2018 at *Schaubude Berlin*, a theater specializing in theatre in Animated Forms shows. In the play, *Gretel*, *Kasper's* girlfriend, is dead. He is depressed, obese, mired in debt and German bureaucracy, immersed in an immense emotional and financial crisis, attempts suicide, but cannot die. *Kasper* appears here as a fragile, melancholic, tragicomic figure. Here, too, the aesthetics of the puppet is far from the classical figure of *Hohnsteiner Kasper*, as it depicts an aged, battered *Kasper*, a kind of buffoon.

Hans-Jochen Menzel has worked since 1981 as a puppeteer, director, author and teacher, having developed his work in East Germany. In a recent interview for a newspaper<sup>26</sup>, Menzel spoke of the problems he had with censorship and the rules of the institutional apparatus regulating cultural production in East Germany, which was subordinated to the Stasi, short for Ministry for State Security (*Stasi – Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*). Astrid Griesbach also constituted her education and her work in East Germany. In an interview, Astrid Griesbach told me about the choices for the show, the ideological clash evident in *Kasper's* trajectory and the context in East Germany.<sup>27</sup>

We didn't want a *Kaspertrallala*. We really thought a lot about where he is today. Where is he? And he has become slow and old. He's also been carrying a lot of stuff, because he's been through a lot. He is already a few centuries old, yet he is somehow resigned. He also has no idea, but then again, *Kasper* should have no idea, no ideology. That is exactly the point. We think in the medium, it is getting

darker, but it has a lot to do with us, with our ideology. Regarding our biography, Jochen and I are from the GDR (East Germany). He is from the Erzgebirge and I am from the Thuringian Forest, not so far from each other. We both have the feeling that *Kasper* is really a very nice figure, but today, where you can say anything, it really has no effect. If you can do anything, you can't do nothing. That's the problem.

The *Kaspers* by Lutz Großmann and Hans-Jochen Menzel are, in my opinion, gripping and forceful. They introduce a temporal contradiction. They depart from the stereotypical image of *Kasper*, cemented during his institutionalization in National-Socialism, whose form, paradoxically, claims a place in tradition. By abandoning this tradition, they rediscover *Kasper* not in an essential way, but by capturing the meanings that underlie the comic figure, archaic par excellence, but perhaps, for this very reason, he has the capacity for contextual and conjunctural actualization.

The expanded context and historical issues of these artworks will be further explored in the follow-up stages of this research. It is framed in the ideological and institutional development of the *Kaspertheater* in East Germany. The phenomenon has many variants, which encompass the promotion and governmental incentives for the training of actors in the language of puppet theater, through the creation of schools, for example. As can be seen, puppet theater developed very energetically in Eastern Europe during the Cold War period, and Germany played an important role in this. Another aspect is the presence of this language in a young counter-culture art scene that challenged the limits imposed by official control and censorship, precisely the context of the contemporary artists cited here. For this analysis, it will be necessary to expand the sources and return to another stage of fieldwork.

The partial results of the research presented here in this text reveal that the relations between *Kaspertheater* and National-Socialism are complex, little explored, and very controversial. The topic points to the existence of various modes of approach and focus, which still need to be explored in this research. The next step consists in analyzing the original copies of the dramaturgical texts for puppet theater, organized by the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Reichinstitut für Puppenspiel*) and disseminated among amateur and professional groups during that period in Germany. It seems important to me to analyze the textual strategies and comical resources used,



as well as to observe the matrixes that originated the adaptations, the character compositions, the parody mechanisms and the improvisation spaces.

Another strand of research is to work on the personal letters and documents from the circulation of puppeteers on the fronts and in the occupied territories. Equally pertinent is the analysis of documents about the performances of puppeteer soldiers in military prisons. This documentation is still little explored. The same goes for the presence of puppet theater in the concentration and extermination camps. In Alain Resnais' important 1955 documentary *Night and Fog* there is a passage that mentions, in seconds, a glove puppet as one among other objects belonging to those deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex in Poland. One would have to revisit these specific archives and look for such sources, which are not indexed for this topic.

It also seems important to discover more about the life and work of some German puppeteers who joined the regime and became key figures in the language of puppet theater. This is a controversial subject, because, as we know, there was an explicit and violent constraint towards the generalized affiliation to the National-Socialist German Workers Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* - NSDAP), known as the Nazi Party. Many puppeteers were affiliated, and to this day it is debated to what extent they were actually supporters of the regime, whether they were opportunists, or if they were afraid of the consequences of non-membership. The puppeteer Max Jacob and his *Hohnsteiner Kasper*, for example, is one such controversial case. His work was very successful during the regime and became a symbol of the typical German *Kaspertheater*. Later, he became popular in movies and in the first television programs featuring the use of puppets (Jacob, 1981). In 1957, with the revival after World War II, Max Jacob was president of the *Union Internationale de la Marionnette* (UNIMA, International Union of Puppetry). Founded in 1929, in Prague, UNIMA is a non-governmental organization linked to UNESCO<sup>28</sup>, and is very active in the promotion and development of theater in animated form worldwide.

Finally, one of the main goals of this research is, in my view, the prospect of drawing closer to and dialoguing with similar phenomena in our midst, especially in the field of popular puppet theater studies. There are specialized *Kasperltheater* puppeteers in some cities in the southern region of

Brazil, including a version of the *Hohnsteiner Kasper* in Pomerode, a town in the state of Santa Catarina (Emmel, 2007). Unfortunately, I have not yet found references that problematize the relationship with National-Socialism. But in the current political conjuncture, in which there is a visible growth of neo-Nazi groups in Brazil, I consider it relevant to observe the ways in which *Kaspertheater* arrived in the country, its aesthetic choices, influences and lineages.

For now, it seems to me that we can agree that *Kasper* is not dead. His comic, anarchic function is being updated as a political power. Insofar as *Kasper* is the very expression of *voxpopoli*, nonconformity, heterogeneity, and diversity, he embodies, therefore, the antithesis of the characteristics that make up the fascist *ethos*. However, because he is the voice of the people, the boundary separating *Kasper* from his populist manifestation is tenuous, almost blurred. The awareness of this boundary is provided by the one who brings the puppet to life. Hence, the power of *Kasper*, in my opinion, lies less in the tradition that is claimed in his name and more in the sensibility of the puppeteer who recreates him, in the aesthetic, ethical, and political choices he makes in his work. Finding *Kasper* is perhaps a non-temporal procedure, as if the archaic manifested itself in the now and not in its search for an ideal past. In this current context, with the rise of the ultra-right in several countries, choices matter more than ever. And, perhaps, *Kasper*, through his processes, procedures and techniques, and also other comic figures, with similar archaic and historical ballasts, can teach us to see beyond.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This text was composed in the context of the post-doctoral research project *Estratégias artísticas, políticas e pedagógicas dos usos das formas populares de teatro de bonecos: o caso do Kaspertheater*, (Artistic, political and pedagogical strategies of the uses of popular forms of puppet theater: the case of Kaspertheater) conducted at University of Bonn (*Universität Bonn*), in Germany, with supervision by Prof. Dr. Karoline Noack, between 2018 and October 2019, through the *Programa Bolsas para Pesquisa Capes/Humboldt para Pesquisador Experiente* (*Capes-Humboldt Forschungsstipendium für erfahrene Wissenschaftler / Capes-Humboldt Research Fellowships for experienced researchers*).

- <sup>2</sup> Thanks to lecturers Tatiana Poggi and Demian Melo for the dialogue, bibliographic suggestions and the debates held on the course *Fascismo: História e Historiografia* (Facism: History and Historiography), on the Graduate Program in History, at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), which I attended.
- <sup>3</sup> Other possible terms are *Kasperltheater* or *Kasperletheater*. However, as certain puppeteers commented when the matter arose, those names tend to refer to the version aimed at a children's audience. For this reason, I chose *Kaspertheater*, which is more suited to this discussion.
- <sup>4</sup> Thanks to Prof. Dr. Peter Marx for the institutional support given to the research.
- <sup>5</sup> Thanks to Raphaële Fleury for the institutional support given to the research.
- <sup>6</sup> Thanks to Christina Schenck for the support on this journey.
- <sup>7</sup> Thanks to Prof. Katerina Dolenska for the institutional support given to the research.
- <sup>8</sup> Thanks to Prof. Susanna Poldauf for the institutional support given to the research.
- <sup>9</sup> Thanks to Prof. Dr. Didier Plassard, for the dialogue and references provided. Also to Prof. Arianna Berenice De Sanctis for the mediation, interlocution and invitation to visit her in Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Deputy Head of the Culture Department of the Reich Youth Leadership and also Director of the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Oberbannführer und stellvertretender Chef des Kulturamts der Reichsjugendführung, Leiter des Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel*). *Oberbannführer* is a rank in the military hierarchy used during Nazism to classify members of the Hitler Youth.
- <sup>11</sup> Dramaturg at the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Dramaturg des Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel*).
- <sup>12</sup> Deputy Director of the Reich Institute for Puppet Theater (*Stellv. Leiter des Reichsinstitut für Puppenspiel*).
- <sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Mr. Lars Rebehn, researcher and archivist of this collection, for his welcome and for sharing his vast knowledge about the archive and the subject. Most of the documents are not digitized, so Rebehn's collaboration was fundamental to this research.
- <sup>14</sup> In the original German: "Die grosse Relevanz, die der nationalsozialistische Propagandaapparat durch umfangreiche Unterhaltungsprogramme der psy-

chologischen Truppenbetreuung einräumte, liess das Puppenspiel gemeinsam mit Theater- und Varietéaufführungen, mit Konzerten und Gesangsdarbietungen zum willkommenen Medium werden. Die Ausmasse solcher Veranstaltungen spiegeln sich – selbst unter Berücksichtigung einer wahrscheinlichen propagandistischen überzogenheit – in den folgenden Zahlenangaben wider: ‘Im Deutschen Reich wie in den okkupierten Ländern fanden von September bis Ende Dezember 1939 ungefähr 12 400 Veranstaltungen mit ca. 7 Millionen Soldaten statt. Im Jahre 1940 waren es 137802 Darbietungen mit 51 530 000 teilnehmenden Soldaten. 1941 stiegen die Zahlen im Veranstaltungsbereich auf 187 198, wobei 67 789 569 Soldaten gezählt wurden’ (zit. N. Buchholz, 1976, S. 318; vgl. Kolland und Bach in diesem Buch).

- <sup>15</sup> Hitler apud Mosse, 1966, p. 14.
- <sup>16</sup> In the original German: “Möge die helle Flamme unserer Begeisterung niemals zum Erlöschen kommen. Sie allein gibt auch der schöpferischen Kunst einer modernen politischen Propaganda Licht und Wärme. Auf den Tiefen des Volkes stiege sie empor und zu den Tiefen des Volkes muss sie immer wieder hernieder steigen, um dort ihre Wurzeln zu suchen und ihre Kraft zu finden. Es mag gut sein, Macht zu besitzen, die auf Gewehren ruht, besser aber und beglückender ist es, das Herz eines Volkes zu gewinnen und es auch zu behalten”.
- <sup>17</sup> Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the Second World War.
- <sup>18</sup> Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between May 1937 and May 1940.
- <sup>19</sup> Thanks to the researcher Mareike Gaubitz and Managing Director Annette Dabs, for her hospitality during my research residency in Deutsches Forum für Figurentheater und Puppenspielkunst e.V., in Bochum.
- <sup>20</sup> In the original German: “Es ist ein Widerspruch in sich, die Figur des Kaspers zu domestizieren. Es ist das Auftreten und die äußere Erscheinungsform, die Kasper Figur war immer, und ist es bis heute, diejenige, die eigentlich nicht domestiziert ist. Wenn der Kasper das Krokodil erschlägt, begeht er Totschlag: er schlägt ein Tier tot. Wenn, das ist ganz schlimm, im Nationalsozialismus der Kasper den Juden erschlägt, ist er ein Mörder. Er ist, bis hin zum Verkehrskasper, immer irgendwo Anarchist, der nicht den gängigen Regeln entspricht. Würde er, laut meiner These, die gängigen Regeln einhalten, wäre die Kasperfigur tot. Und die Ursachen dafür liegen eigentlich lang vorher. Man muss Kasper verstehen als denjenigen, der immer eine positive Identifika-

tionsfigur ist, ob Kinder, ob Erwachsene, auf den Jahrmärkten des 17., 18., 19. Jahrhunderts: sie stehen immer auf der Seite des Kaspers. Die Ursachen dafür liegen darin, dass die Kasper Figur immer die Stimme des Volkes war” (Interview transcribed by Rut-Lina Gonçalves Schenck).

- <sup>21</sup> Interviews with the artists: Hans-Jochen Menzel (in Berlin), Astrid Griesbach (in Berlin), Markus Dorner (in Bad Kreuznach), Jens Hellwig (in Dresden), Silke Technau (in Lübeck), Stephan Schlafke (in Lübeck).
- <sup>22</sup> Interviews carried out with the researchers: Manfred Wegner (in Munich), Didier Plassard (in Montpellier, France), Lars Rebehn (in Dresden), Gerd Bohlmeier (in Bochum), Annika Schulte (in Lübeck), Antonia Napp (in Lübeck), Sonja Riehn (in Lübeck), Peter Marx (in Cologne).
- <sup>23</sup> See: <http://lutzgrossmann.net/Stuecke/Kasper/> Accessed on: July 28, 2021.
- <sup>24</sup> You can watch a clip on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zi-PqiV-s>. Accessed on: July 28, 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> The title is a wordplay on the prayer *The Our Father*.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview available to subscribers at: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/hans-jochen-menzel-war-freier-puppenspieler-in-der-ddr-16462039.html> Accessed on: July 28, 2021.
- <sup>27</sup> In the original German: “Wir wollten keinen *trallala* Kasper. Wir haben wirklich viel darüber nachgedacht, wo er heute ist. Wo ist der? Und der ist schon behäbig geworden, er ist alt geworden. Er hat auch viel zu schleppen, denn er hat einiges mitgemacht. Er ist ja auch schon ein paar Jahrhunderte alt, aber trotzdem ist er irgendwie resigniert. Er hat auch keine Idee, aber ein Kasper muss keine Idee haben und keine Ideologie. Das ist genau der Punkt gewesen. Wir dachten zwischendurch, es wird immer düsterer, aber das hat auch ganz viel mit uns, mit unserer Ideologie zu tun. Mit unserer Biographie, Jochen und ich sind beide aus der DDR. Er ist aus dem Erzgebirge und ich bin aus dem Thüringer Wald, also gar nicht so weit voneinander entfernt. Wir haben beide das Gefühl, dass der Kasper eigentlich so eine geile Figur ist, aber heute, wo du alles sagen kannst, hast du ja eigentlich keine Wirkung mehr. Wenn du alles machen kannst, kannst du nichts machen. Das ist ja das Problem” (Interview transcribed by Rut-Lina Gonçalves Schenck).
- <sup>28</sup> Information on the institution at: <https://www.unima.org/> Accessed on: January 24, 2022.

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