

Teaching with Grief

An Exploration of Politics, Pain, and Power in *Monsieur Lazhar*

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'We are all refugees from our childhoods. And so we turn, among other things, to stories. To write a story, to read a story, is to be a refugee from the state of refugees.'
(Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*)

On an ordinary day, on an ordinary school's ordinary courtyard, students play their ordinary games during recess. Simon, one of the pupils, rushes inside the building when his friend Alice reminds him that it is his turn to bring the milk into class on that particular day. Simon picks up the crate of milk and heads towards the classroom but stops short; through the glass panel of the classroom's door he sees the lifeless body of his teacher, Martine Lachance, hanging from the ceiling. In shock Simon drops the crate, the cartons split open, spilling milk on the floor. From that moment on, nothing is ordinary and, like the milk on the floor, the violence and unpredictability of life seeps into the cracks of even the most ordinary lives. The impact of the opening scene of *Monsieur Lazhar* does not derive from the tragic incident it depicts, but rather stems from the juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary. The image of the lifeless body of Martine Lachance is followed by the image of spilt milk on the floor. This opening scene sets the tone for the rest of the film as it powerfully conveys the ways in which the ordinary may be interrupted by the most unexpected turn of events. The film, while telling the story of an asylum seeker from Algeria, thus precludes a reading that is limited to a particular geography or identity but rather invites awareness of a common human ground from which pain, joy, and grief are shared.

Directed by Philippe Falardeau, *Monsieur Lazhar* is a 2011 French-Canadian film that tells the story of Bashir Lazhar, an Algerian asylum seeker who is trying to build a new life in Montréal. When a position teaching French opens up mid-semester

at a local elementary school, Bashir applies for the job, appropriating his late wife's résumé as his own. The class to which he is assigned has been struck by tragedy: it was their teacher, Martine Lachance, who committed suicide by hanging herself in the classroom. Brought together under these traumatic circumstances, Bashir, a foreigner still awaiting asylum, with a tragic story of his own, and his students embark on an unanticipated journey of healing, a collective catharsis that will eventually provide an avenue for Bashir and for the students to regain a sense of belonging and self.

Monsieur Lazhar is adapted from Évelyne de la Chenelière's 2002 play *Bashir Lazhar*, a one-act solo performance. The heteroglossia that the film creates by introducing multiple characters allows for new and unexpected connections to be made. One such connection, between the main character, Bashir Lazhar, and his student Simon, based on their shared experiences of trauma and guilt, establishes an intriguing parallel between the displaced asylum seeker and his guilt-ridden student. Simon, as is revealed later in the film, had expressed his irritation with his late teacher Martine Lachance when she had kissed him while she was helping him with his studies. It is insinuated that this incident made public by Simon may have prompted Martine Lachance's suicide, which clearly resulted in Simon feeling guilty.

Bashir's feelings of guilt, on the other hand, stem from the death of his wife and two children, who were victims of an arson attack the day before they were scheduled to escape Algeria to join him in Canada. The parallel established in *Monsieur Lazhar* between Bashir and Simon through the shared feelings of guilt invites viewers to reconsider the power dynamics that exist within the classroom between teacher and student. It is through this reconsideration that the film suggests an analogy between the child and the asylum seeker. This essay will discuss how the film's use of visual and textual language prompts a reconsideration of power structures. By focusing on the power dynamics within the classroom, the essay will explore both the broader political implications of subverting power dynamics and the healing and liberating potential of teaching with vulnerability.

Bashir & Simon & Other Ghosts

The title of the play, *Bashir Lazhar*, underwent a name change when de la Chenelière's work was adapted for the big screen, becoming *Monsieur Lazhar* in Falardeau's film. This re-naming echoes an important aspect of the refugee experience by mimicking a migratory move along with a redefinition of identities. The experience of displacement strips the refugee of previously held titles and identities that were meaningful predominantly with respect to their social communities. One of the few determinants that the refugee might hold on to is their proper name. Once

in a new country with a distinct culture and language, the refugee's name, while being the only familiar component of their identity, might end up being a source of alienation within the context of the new social community.

The play's title, *Bashir Lazhar*, captures the experience of displacement by presenting only a proper name, without any additional determinants. The title 'Monsieur Lazhar', on the other hand, indicates formality and context with the addition of the French form of address. The film title's omission of the given name has implications beyond being a merely aesthetic choice. Appearing on its own, the name Bashir Lazhar might not be immediately registered within a social context. As a form of address, the word 'monsieur' introduces Bashir Lazhar into the social structure as an active member. It allows Bashir Lazhar to be addressed in formal contexts, including his workplace and the courtroom. While the inclusion of the formal 'monsieur' hints that the undocumented asylum seeker is recognized as a member of society, it also adds distance and formality. Bashir Lazhar's interactions in Canada are limited to the official settings and formal contexts in which he is addressed as 'monsieur'; he does not have any intimate relationships in which he would be addressed simply by name. He has no close friendships, no family members who would call him by his name. There is the possibility of an exception later in the film when his colleague Claire, who shows a romantic interest in Bashir, invites him over for dinner. Claire insists they drop the formal French form of address 'vous' and adopt instead the informal 'tu'. In the ensuing scenes Bashir reverts to 'vous' by accident, constantly making his discomfort visible. His resistance towards using the informal 'tu' is indicative of a lack of intimacy. While Claire is trying to establish familiarity and a connection with her colleague, Bashir, aware of the absence of any real intimacy, prefers to keep a distance. This is also partly due to the fact that he is hiding a truth that would compromise his position at the school were it to become known.

The significance of the name is made evident in the first scene of the film where we encounter the protagonist. Following the teacher's suicide, Bashir decides to present himself at the director's office as a possible replacement for the remainder of the semester. As he introduces himself to the school's director, Madame Vaillancourt, Bashir is forced to deny multiple identities and claim many more. The director makes an immediate assumption regarding Bashir's profession when he first enters her office, believing him to be a journalist interested in the details of the suicide. Given the circumstances, the director's assumption is plausible. For Bashir, however, this marks the beginning of a process of multiple negations. Without letting Bashir explain, the director makes yet another assumption, asserting that he must be a parent of one of the students. Given the tragic event, we understand that there have been frequent visits from parents to the director's office. When she enquires, 'You are the father of...?', Bashir explains that he is 'not anyone's father'. The original French – 'je suis père de personne' – could alternatively be translated

'I am the father of no one'. The text of the play has a slightly different version: 'Non, je ne suis le parent d'aucun élève. Je ne suis pas un parent d'élève' (de la Chenelière, 2011, p. 16). The English translation would be 'No, I am not the parent of any student. I am not a parent of a student.' The double entendre is evident in both versions. Bashir's response is factually correct within the context in which it is uttered, but it also contains a poignant reference to the loss of his children and the redefinition of his identity as a father through this loss.

Bashir eventually manages to explain the reason for his visit: he introduces himself as a schoolteacher with nineteen years of experience at a school in Algeria. It is revealed later in the film that it was Bashir's late wife who was a schoolteacher, while Bashir was a former public servant who ran a restaurant, most likely because he had been forced to leave public service during the Algerian Civil War. In order to overcome bureaucratic hurdles, Bashir lies, saying that he is a Canadian permanent resident, a status that would allow him to legally work as a teacher. Bashir thus adopts the fake identity of a teacher and a permanent resident in order to be accepted into the social structure of his host country and to gain a legitimate status. The only identity that is actually accurate within the context of this exchange, his fatherhood, is defined by the absence of his children. As is the case for many forcibly displaced people, Bashir reinvents himself with these new identities to fill the void that is left in the wake of all the loss that he has experienced.

When the director finally addresses him, she confuses his first and family names, calling him 'Monsieur Bashir'. Familiar with the Biblical homonym 'Lazare', Madame Vaillancourt misidentifies 'Lazhar' as his first name, converting Bashir to his family name. When Bashir corrects her, stating that the correct form is Monsieur Lazhar, he baptizes himself with a new identity. The scene in which Bashir and the director first meet is more than an exchange of names, given the asymmetrical power relation between the two. The next scene in which Bashir is introduced involves the students and is governed by an entirely different set of power dynamics. As Bashir enters the classroom to meet his students, he introduces himself by writing his name – Bashir Lazhar – on the blackboard. Before he has a chance to utter it out loud, one of the students, Alice, raises her hand to ask about the origins of the name. Unlike the director, who was interested in other aspects of Bashir's identity, such as his relationship to the school's students and his profession, the students are more curious about his origins. Bashir's explanation of what his first and last name mean – Bashir means bearer of good news – is followed by a repartee among the students, who sarcastically start calling him 'Bashir Bazaar'. The spontaneous reaction of the students stands in contrast to the tense response by the director, who, while trying to hide her confusion, prevented Bashir from revealing who he really is. In his encounter with the students, however, Bashir is able to make known his Algerian origins. He is

thus able to present an identity that does not need to be concealed with social attributes.

Having introduced himself, Bashir moves on to take attendance. We are presented with an extended scene in which the students say their names in turn and Bashir writes each down, making sure that he has the correct spelling. Bashir's meticulous recording of the names echoes the students' own interest in his name. The encounter between the students and Bashir is devoid of other distinctive categories of identity as it merely relies on the exchange of names. While Bashir is the teacher who occupies a position of power, in this initial encounter where names are exchanged, he appears to be on equal terms with his students. Visually this analogy is highlighted by the depiction of Bashir sitting at his desk with his name on the blackboard behind him. This image of him foregrounds a parallel between Bashir, a refugee who has been removed from other social relations that previously defined his identity, and the students: all have been reduced to their names alone. His posture at his desk and his notetaking make him barely distinguishable from the students. Without the protection that titles offer, Bashir exposes his own child-like vulnerability.

Figure 8.1. Bashir taking attendance.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

The following scene draws a narrower parallel between Bashir and one specific student, Simon. Simon's name, which means 'listen', further emphasizes the connection between the two characters, since Simon is the one who needs to listen to the 'good news' brought by Bashir. Their initial encounter however, is marked

by tension. While Bashir is busy taking attendance, Simon snaps a picture of him with his camera. Bashir asks Simon not to take his picture without permission, but his sudden angry outburst exceeds what would be expected of a teacher under the circumstances. Bashir's reaction may be explained by the fact that, as an asylum seeker, he fears any evidence that might compromise his position at the school. While photographs represent a potential threat to Bashir, they represent an emotional outlet for Simon, since the camera was a gift from the late Martine Lachance. While this initial encounter causes friction, photographs later become the common thread linking Simon and Bashir by virtue of their connection to death.

In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes establishes a link between photography and death, identifying death as photography's 'eidos' (Barthes, 1981, p. 15). Drawing on this insight, literary scholars Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortés-Rocca point out the ghostly constitution of the photograph, both for its subject and its object:

What survives in a photograph, what returns in it, is therefore always also the survival of the dead, the appearance of a ghost or phantom. This is why, within the space of the photograph, the dead always are alive, and the alive always are dead without being dead. (Cadava and Cortés-Rocca, 2006, p. 23)

For both Bashir and Simon, the spectral presence emanating from the photographs of his family and of the late Martine Lachance, respectively, constitutes a source of ambiguity and uncertainty. Unable to leave the ghostly presence of the dead behind, they exist in a state of troubling limbo. It is in that state of displacement that Simon and Bashir find a common ground.

The photograph Simon took of his teacher, Martine Lachance, becomes an uncanny object following her suicide. The photograph shows Martine Lachance standing in front of her classroom desk, suggesting that Simon must have taken it without warning, just as he later would to Bashir. She is wearing a blue dress and is looking at the book in her hands; she has a calm and content expression. The complexity of Simon's connection to the photograph *qua* object becomes evident by his evolving reaction to it throughout the film. Immediately following her death, we see Simon trying to get rid of this photograph by offering it to Alice as a gift. Troubled by its uncanny quality, Simon wants to dispose of the ghostly presence that is embodied in the photograph. His attachment to the photograph, however, reappears later in the film. When a fellow student tries to steal the photograph, Simon retaliates by physically attacking him. Simon's changing attitude is also reflected in the photograph, which has been altered to show Martine Lachance with angel wings and a rope drawn above her head. This manipulation reflects Simon's struggle to make sense of his teacher's suicide. The angel wings reveal an attempt to alleviate the crude reality of death through the more serene image of an angel.

The photograph that he once wanted to get rid of becomes an object of emotional value for Simon once he manually alters it. The change can be explained

Figure 8.2. Photograph of Martine Lachance with hand-drawn wings and rope above her head.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

by the difference between the stillness of the photograph and the movement that is introduced by Simon's drawings. Simon's drawings subvert the uncertain space between life and death by introducing movement, life from the present. Barthes explains, '[T]he photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive' (Barthes, 1981, p. 79). The movement of Simon's pen aims to suspend the confusion that the image generates by invoking the spectral presence of the late Martine Lachance. It is by drawing on the photograph that Simon gains control over this ghostly presence that keeps haunting him.

Bashir's feelings of guilt are similarly communicated through photographs, reinforcing the parallel between Simon and Bashir. In the box sent from Algeria containing his late wife's belongings, Bashir finds a framed photograph of his wife and his two children. The subjects' pose and the size of the photograph are almost identical to that of Martine Lachance, only this time the subjects are looking straight at the camera, aware of the fact that they are being photographed. We can even see that Bashir's wife is smiling.

In this instance the immobility of the photograph is conveyed through the frame, which implies that the photograph was meant to occupy a specific place

Figure 8.3. Bashir looking at the framed photograph of his wife and children.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

in a specific household. It denotes a stable life in which this photograph could be exhibited at a fixed location and would be relevant to the people looking at it. Referring to a time when all of the family members were alive, happy, and together, the photograph itself stands in stark contrast to Bashir's new reality marked by instability. As a refugee who has lost his home, family, and identities, Bashir is unsettled by the photograph's reference to a time of order and stability. In order to eliminate the discrepancy between his own experience at the present moment and the memories conveyed by the photograph, he removes the photograph from its frame, thereby allowing it to exist in a new reality where it will be exposed to the effects of passing time.

It is by removing the frame that Bashir allows the photograph to mimic an experience of displacement. Without the protection of the frame, the photograph becomes vulnerable, like Bashir, to the degrading effects of being uprooted. It now has creases from being folded and will most likely soon show other signs of wear and tear. It conveys the impact grief and displacement have on Bashir.

The significance of the stillness of photographs becomes even more evident when it is presented in juxtaposition with the moving images of film. In one elaborate scene, Falardeau depicts the students having their class photographs taken. This not only reinforces the analogy between the students and Bashir as subjects of authority, but it also confronts the viewer with a contrast between the stillness

Figure 8.4. Bashir holding the photograph, this time without the frame.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

of photographs and the moving images of film. The scene opens with students' headshots being captured, with each student standing in front of the camera and looking straight ahead.

This sequence of headshots disrupts the dynamics of the film as it presents still images of the students posing in front of the camera. The film's viewers assume the position of the person behind the camera taking the photographs. By having the students look straight at the camera to create a moment of immobility, Falardeau transforms the moving images of the film into still photographs. Until this point, the viewer has occupied the role of passive observer. Once the actors in the film start looking into the camera, however, the viewer is no longer able to uphold the position of onlooker, becoming instead an active agent. By positioning the viewer behind the camera that takes the photographs, Falardeau invites the viewer to experience the uncanny and ghostly feelings that Simon and Bashir experienced while looking at the photographs. The viewers are implicated in the experience of the ghostly immobility produced by these still images. Comparing cinema and photography, Roland Barthes describes the difference between the impact of the screen and the frame as follows:

Yet the cinema has a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have: the screen (as Bazin has remarked) is not a frame but a hideout; the man or woman who emerges from it continues living. (Barthes, 1981, p. 55)

Figure 8.5. *Headshot of Simon.*



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

While the moving image of cinema creates a sense of reality in which figures are not fixed but have a life beyond the scene, the photograph offers a more limited experience of life. The unsettling impact of the consecutive still images derives mainly from this shift from cinema to photography. The illusion of a continuous life is disrupted with the introduction of photography, with this disruption taking the viewer from the comforts of an illusion into the sphere of unsettling and raw reality. Thus death ceases to be a *theme* of the film and becomes a stark reality that confronts the viewer.

Following the sequence of individual shots, the viewer is presented with the class photograph. It invites the viewer back into the realm of moving images as the viewer is no longer behind the camera, but looking from a vantage point next to the photographer. The scene's two cameras are joined by a third, Simon's camera, with which he takes a photograph of the photographer.

The subversive visual impact of this scene derives from its self-reflexivity and is evocative of Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656). The painting depicts several royal members of the Spanish court, with Velázquez working on a painting while looking directly at the viewer. Behind Velázquez is a mirror that reflects the king and queen as if they were standing behind the viewer of the Velázquez painting. This painting, the epitome of the politics of representation, illustrates the undermining of a singular sovereign power as the ultimate creator, instead display-

Figure 8.6. Class photo with Bashir.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

ing the numerous facets and processes of representation. Rather than a singular artist who holds authorial power, there are multiple agents, including the viewer, who contribute to the production of meaning. In *Monsieur Lazhar* the figures who contribute to the creation of multiple representations and meanings include, in addition to the film's director Philippe Falardeau, the photographer taking the class photograph, Simon creating his own photograph of the experience, and the viewer observing these different creative processes.

Literary critics Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer highlight the crucial ideological role school photographs play, especially during times of uncertainty:

School photographs thus do more than certify a step in the trajectory of ideological incorporation. They also instantiate the institutional process that interpolates the individual into a group identity. As such, the instrument that creates them – the camera with which they are taken – both documents and participates in the process of socialization that integrates children into the dominant worldview. (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2014, p. 257)

While the school photograph promotes a group identity that brings Bashir and the students together, it also invites the viewer to assume a different position from that of a distant observer. The scene therefore operates in two opposing directions, very much like *Las Meninas*, blurring the line that separates the viewer from the

scene that is being depicted. The upheaval that the students experience following the death of their teacher and the uncertainty that Bashir experiences as an asylum seeker are momentarily reversed by this group photograph, which allows them to find certainty and belonging. Hirsh and Spitzer suggest that ‘the group sameness and the uniformity of pose desired in class photos – features consciously shaped during the photography’s preliminary setup – tend to impede but not altogether eliminate the possibilities of subversion by individuals in the class. Subjects may try to fool around before or even while the photos are being taken’ (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2014, p. 257). As this class photograph is being taken, the students decide that rather than uttering the conventional phrase ‘cheese’, they will say ‘Bashir’ in defiance of the school administration’s authority and in celebration of their new teacher. Although the photograph does not capture this sound, the film’s viewers are granted access to this auditory dimension. Cadava and Cortés-Rocca note that the photograph occupies a liminal space in which it ‘exists between life and death, the past and the present, interiority and exteriority, body and image, and subject and image. It opens onto a future whose lineaments are not yet known, even if what can be known enables us to delineate the contours of the horizon and limit of death’ (2006, p. 27). Viewers of *Monsieur Lazhar* are called to this threshold between the moving image and the stillness of the photographs by this unusual utterance. The photographic capture of the enunciation of Bashir’s name, like the mirror reflection of the king and queen in *Las Meninas*, allows for a subversion of authorial power.

Stories of Pain, Pleasure, and Power

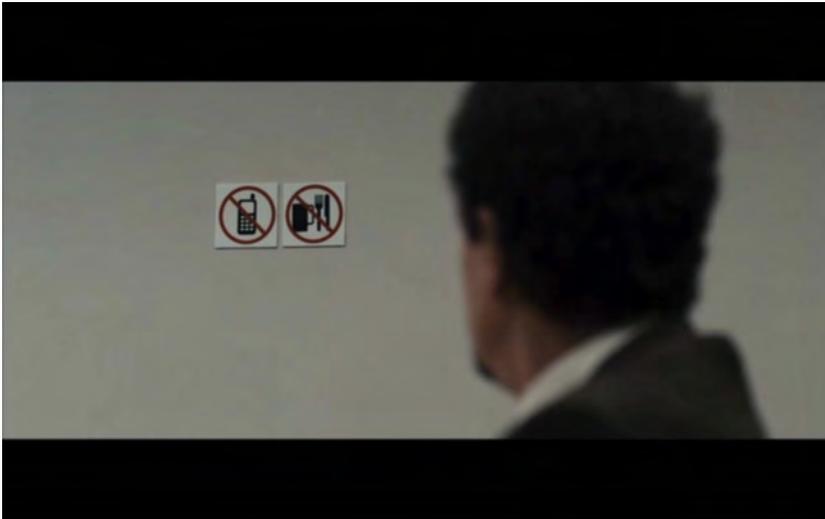
The analogy between Bashir and the students is also maintained through their embrace of the liberational power of language. Right at the beginning of the film a striking difference becomes apparent regarding how people refer to the teacher’s death. At a meeting with the students and their parents, the school’s director emphasizes the importance of expressing emotions yet refers to the suicide in a vague manner herself. She states that they ‘will go through this together’, without articulating what ‘this’ is. She announces that Julie, the school psychologist, will help them ‘talk about what happened last Thursday’. Her persistent avoidance is contrasted with the raw and straightforward language used by the students. Seeing that one of the students in the class stares at a specific point on the ceiling, Bashir demands an explanation, to which another student offers a disturbingly candid response: ‘That’s where Martine hanged herself.’ The school director’s unwillingness to use unsettling words like ‘death’ or ‘suicide’ upholds the pretence of protecting the students from trauma, yet it is precisely her refusal that prevents the students from freely expressing their sorrow, pain, shock, and anger.

The students' desire to talk about the incident becomes more apparent when Alice, as part of her homework, writes an essay about the violence of Martine Lachance's death and her own struggle in making sense of this violence. Impressed by the force of her words, Bashir takes the essay to the director and asks for permission to distribute it to the other students in the school so that they can start a conversation about their shared experience. As someone suffering from trauma himself, Bashir identifies the potential impact of telling stories, implicitly recognizing that storytelling 'sutures the psychic wounds caused by ... traumatic event[s]' (Kabir, 2014, p. 65). The school director, however, refuses his request and claims that the text is too violent. She is apparently intimidated by the subversive quality of Alice's text and the unpredictable outcome were it to reach a wider audience. For Bashir, in contrast, the text mirrors his own experience of displacement and insecurity. He appreciates it not only for its content, but also for the uncertain potential that it holds. Although the director claims to be in favour of dialogue and healing, she is apprehensive about any potential threats to the status quo and consents only to a conversation in which she is in control.

This attitude is also adopted by figures of authority in the courtroom where Bashir's asylum case is heard. The use of language within the legal context aims to minimize any unwanted dissemination of meaning and operates within a highly structured and predetermined process, so much so that in preparing Bashir for his appearance, his lawyer provides him with the specific words he needs to use in order to win the case. The spatial layout of the courtroom scene is reminiscent of a classroom, only in this instance Bashir is seated like a student and is subject to the authority of the judge. The scene opens with Bashir staring at signs on the wall which indicate that eating and using a phone are not allowed in the room. While the signs themselves are not unusual in such a context, they are significant in the film since they invite a semiotic reading of the scene. As Bashir tries to present his case – which ought to be as straightforward as the courtroom signs – he finds it increasingly difficult to communicate his life experience. The metaphorical signs he uses to narrate his experience do not deliver the message as simply as the signs on the wall deliver theirs.

The judge interrogating Bashir remains unconvinced by Bashir's assertion that he experienced threats to his life. Bashir concedes that there is no documentation proving that the death threats in Algeria were directed at him specifically – the legal criterion for being granted asylum – and the fire that killed his family is dismissed by the judge on the grounds that the entire building was set on fire. Noting that Bashir fled the country when it was his wife who had received threats, the judge demands to know why he 'abandoned' his family. The use of the word 'abandon' takes Bashir by surprise, as he never conceived of his departure for Canada in such terms, believing instead that he was coming in advance to prepare for the eventual arrival of his family. In shock, Bashir responds: 'I didn't abandon them.' The

Figure 8.7. Bashir looking at the signs inside the room where his asylum case is heard.



Source: Still from *Monsieur Lazhar*.

word 'abandon' thus conveys different meanings for the two people using the word whereas the signs on the wall convey a meaning that is unambiguous. The image of a phone crossed out – the signifier – refers to a signified that communicates a uniform meaning, whereas the verb 'to abandon' signifies different experiences for the judge and for Bashir. In other words, Bashir's experience might be described by others with the word 'abandon', whereas for Bashir his departure to Canada to prepare for the arrival of his family, was anything but abandoning.

In an attempt to understand what happened, the judge asks Bashir to tell him 'the facts', indicating his belief in a language that corresponds perfectly to experience. Bashir sets out the events in a factual manner, in chronological order. The narrative he is asked to share in this space of sovereign power requires that he not depart from the predetermined system of signification. Bashir is required to use certain words and expressions in order to provide legitimacy to his experience within the legal context. In the classroom on the other hand, there is an opportunity for a more creative narrative to emerge.

For both Bashir and his pupil Simon a narrative that promotes healing becomes possible, as they are able to create their own narratives. In Simon's case, the cathartic moment arrives as the result of a series of unpredictable occurrences. While Bashir is reading aloud from a text, Abdelmalek, another student in the class, is instead reading a magazine. Coming across an unfamiliar word, Abdelmalek asks

what it means. While Bashir is annoyed by this interruption to the flow of his class, he responds and explains that the word 'défenestrer' means to be thrown out of the window. This digression allows for a moment of spontaneity that invites vulnerability. A conversation on death and suicide ensues, eventually culminating in Simon's outburst. Simon finally speaks up about his motives behind his behaviour towards Martine Lachance and enquires in tears, 'It's not my fault?' When Bashir hugs him, repeating that it is not his fault, it is both Simon and himself that he is consoling and reassuring.

The closing scene of the film presents a healing narrative for Bashir when he reads out his own fable, inspired by those of Jean de la Fontaine. The fable tells of the tragic death of Bashir's family through an allegorical story about butterflies. While both the fable and the narrative presented in court depict the same events, it is the fable that allows for an exploration of feelings regarding the nature of the experience and thus for the possibility of healing. Similar to the photographs, the fable provides a haunting experience of temporality in which it becomes impossible to distinguish between life and death, past and present, truth and fiction. And it is by moving into that liminal space that both the students and Bashir find comfort in the embrace of Simon and Bashir.

Conclusion

Monsieur Lazhar presents the tension between stability and movement in visual, linguistic, and political contexts through the figure of the refugee. The film explores the aesthetic, pedagogical, political, and psychological implications of the tension that emerges in the juxtaposition of the ambiguity and potential inherent in the experience of liminality with the sovereign determination to achieve certainty and stability. Both the figure of the child and the figure of the refugee, coming up against distinct forms of authority, are deprived of their agency and are required to restrict their narratives to predetermined forms. It is the integration of the figure of the refugee into that of the teacher that makes *Monsieur Lazhar* innovative. By bringing together these two figures, the film explores how the classroom may be a space for exploring uncertainty.

In departing from the curriculum, Bashir does not emphasize the teaching of facts but rather exhibits the stamina and courage needed to tread uncharted territory. As a refugee who has lost many of the attributes that previously constituted his identity, Bashir, with his students, discovers the potential held by storytelling. Like bodies that migrate and young children who grow, language has the potential to move in unpredictable ways, to defy authority, and to experience vulnerability. The traumas experienced by Bashir and his students make them open to change and to the possibility of change. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain, "There is

a parallel between this kind of teaching (in its reliance on the testimonial process) and psychoanalysis (in its reliance on the psychoanalytic process), insofar as both this teaching and psychoanalysis have, in fact, to *live through a crisis*. Both are called upon to be *performative*. ... Both this kind of teaching and psychoanalysis are interested ... in the capacity of their recipients to *transform themselves* in function of the newness of that information' (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 53).

Monsieur Lazhar shows how, even under the most unusual circumstances, only teaching that transcends the straightforward transmission of knowledge can become a tool for the transformation of the individual. Bashir's experience of displacement translates itself into a willingness to explore the potential inherent in the displacement of meaning through language. As images, stories, words, and other forms of signification are allowed to go beyond the boundaries of stability, there develops a potential for meaning that flows in unpredictable ways. Bashir's experience of displacement and the loss of identities transforms itself into an infinite potential for new meanings.

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