

CHAPTER 2

Utopia Becomes Dystopia: *Imperium* by Christian Kracht

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ABSTRACT

In ironic and often scandalous formulations, Christian Kracht's novel *Imperium* describes the attempt to realise the religious and social revolutionary ideal of August Engelhardt's nudist and vegan utopia in a 'new world', namely on the island of Kabakon in the German colony of Neupommern (today New Britain, Papua New Guinea). Particularly noteworthy is the sharply ironic portrayal of alterity, which, although based on prejudice and incorporating the usual colonial practices, does not show the conventional division between 'us' and 'them', between Europeans and natives. On the contrary, the protagonist, who has fled the technological modernity of Europe to create his own alternative society, despises both the 'loutish' meat-eating Europeans and the 'primitive' natives. Nevertheless, August Engelhardt's actions prove to be a genuine colonial act based on the asymmetric distribution of power, as Engelhardt appropriates the land of the natives without their consent. The main distinction between him and the other colonisers is his objective: while the latter try to create a representation of Europe in the South Seas (for example, the choice of place names such as 'New Pomerania'), Engelhardt tries to find an alternative to both European and indigenous societies, but tragically fails with his community, creating a small form of society whose failure will give rise to a dystopia from which he will himself escape. The chapter aims to describe the transition from an idea of utopia aimed at the betterment of humanity to the actual realisation of a dystopia, with often macabre details and frequent but veiled parallels between the figures of August Engelhardt and the never directly mentioned but clearly recognisable Adolf Hitler.

Keywords: August Engelhardt, Coconut, Nudism, Colonialism, Postmodernism

1. Scandalise – criticise – entertain

In the early 2010s, the historical figure of August Engelhardt (1875-1919) and his search for a utopian paradise in the South Seas attracted the attention of the German-language literature. The German outcast, ‘cocovorism’ preacher and nudist inspired in fact novels such as *Das Paradies des August Engelhardt* (2011) by Marc Buhl and *Imperium* (2012) by Christian Kracht. In the latter novel in particular, the Swiss author chooses ironic and often scandalising formulations to describe the attempt to create the religious, social, and revolutionary ideal of August Engelhardt’s vegan, nature-loving utopia in a ‘new world’, namely on the island of Kabakon near the German Neupommern (‘New Pomerania’, nowadays New Britain) in the Bismarck Archipelago. In this book, the depiction of alterity is particularly sharp and incisive. This alterity is based on prejudices and the usual colonial practices: the protagonist buys land without the consent of the natives and sets up a plantation, just as any other German, French or British colonialist of the time would have done, albeit with an aesthetic veneer of eccentricity and individualism. But the novel does not simply present the canonical division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between Europeans and natives; on the contrary, its protagonist, who has fled the technological modernity of Europe to create his own alternative society, despises both the ‘loutish’ meat-eating Europeans and the ‘primitive’ natives.

In *Imperium*, the reference to utopia as an ambitious and mostly unrealisable hope is very clear. Most of the characters, even if they are only mentioned in Kracht’s very long intertextual and interdiscursive sequence, are victims of unfulfilled hopes in very different ways: from August Engelhardt and his followers to Gustav Schlickeysen, Adolf Hitler, Hermann Hesse, Albert Einstein, the Kellogg brothers, the nudist Richard Ungewitter or Sigmund Freud, to name but a few (Birgfeld, 2018, pp. 243-244). In this chapter, which contains also basic assumptions I already expressed (Esposito, 2024), I will focus on three main points that are particularly relevant for understanding the close connection between utopia and colonialism in this novel and its subsequent degeneration into dystopia. First, I will focus on the description of the protagonist’s type of utopia and the ways in which it is represented; second, I will refer to the historiographical sources of this representation; third, I will show the ambivalence of the book, which, through its narrator and especially its protagonist, shows a marked ambivalence in proposing both colonialist and postcolonialist positions. It is in this ambivalence that lies much of the novel’s capability to scandalise with a vocabulary used especially by the narrator that is, of course, not politically correct today, while at the same time exposing the absurdity of racism and colonialism. The narrator draws the reader purely linguistically into this ‘wrong’ colonialist and racist consciousness. The reader must therefore ‘resist’, because indignation

(or ridicule of this past ideology) is intended by the text and if s/he fails to do so, s/he can become accomplice to the world view presented (Lorenz, 2014b, p. 67). Scandalisation is after all not something uncommon for Kracht. It seems in fact that Kracht always responded to certain criticisms of one of his novels in the respective subsequent novel as part of his literary strategy, as Lorenz and Riniker claim. For example, Kracht was accused that *Faserland* (1995) was a homophobic book, *1979* (2001) was orientalist and *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008) was anti-Semitic. Each of the subsequent novels attempted to respond to these critical claims. In *1979*, the first-person narrator is homosexual, and this fact is the least interesting thing about the whole book: it does not have the slightest significance because it is normalised as completely self-evident without irony; *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* is the story of a ‘subaltern’, an African of black colour who recognises himself as the product of a colonialist educational programme and escapes from it (Lorenz & Riniker, 2021, p. 242). Anti-Semitism is also mentioned in *Imperium*, although it is not discussed in detail, especially due to the South Sea-setting of the novel, but remains an object observed from a distance by the narrator and Engelhardt, just like the entire (primarily European) history of the first half of the 20th century.

In the end, this utopian project by Engelhardt far away from Europe leads to a disaster and to the acknowledgement of the impossibility of realising utopias, which, when they move from theory to practice, become nothing more than dystopias and this recognition is expressed in the novel by the return of the main character to Western society, as it will be shown in this chapter. This story is narrated with a very particular irony that makes reading very entertaining and it so also explains the commercial success of the novel.

2. The Utopia of August Engelhardt

The longing for utopia in the novel is closely linked to colonialism, which is described as a socio-political structure, but also as a perspective through which the characters perceive the world and through which the narrator observes the characters. In the case of Engelhardt, who is often portrayed as a missionary, the theme of colonialism is closely linked to the theme of religion, which is an essential component of his utopian quest. The portrayal of Engelhardt as a coloniser is made explicit in the description of his arrival on the island of Kabakon, which the narrator sees as similar to that of the conquistador Hernán Cortés (see also Dürbeck, 2014, pp. 117-119):

[...] und für die schwarzen Männer im Boot und die paar Eingeborenen, die sich mit einer gewissen phlegmatischen Neugier am Strand eingefunden hatten (einer von ihnen trug gar, als parodierte er sich und seine Rasse, einen Knochensplitter in der Unterlippe), sah es aus, als sei es ein frommer Gottesmann, der dort vor ihnen betete, während es uns Zivilisierte vielleicht an eine Darstellung der Landung des Konquistadoren Hernán Cortés am jungfräulichen Strande von San Juan de Ulúa erinnert, allerdings gemalt, falls dies denn möglich wäre, abwechselnd von El Greco und Gauguin, die mit expressivem, schartigem Pinselstrich dem knienden Eroberer Engelhardt abermals die asketischen Züge Jesu Christi verleihen. (Kracht, 2012, pp. 65-66)

The figure of August Engelhardt is associated with white supremacy through the colonialist parallel between Cortés and Engelhardt, as well as through the politically incorrect language by today's standards, which the author deliberately uses to scandalise the reader and articulate a certain world view of the time, but at the same time to ridicule the coloniser's point of view through the alienation effect (see Esposito, 2022). Furthermore, according to the narrator, the scene gives the impression of having been painted jointly by El Greco (1541-1614) and Gauguin (1848-1903). While the former refers to the religious motif and thus to the artistic work of Doménikos Theotokópoulos, the painter of Greek origin and great master of Spanish Mannerism during the *Siglo de Oro*, an epoch characterised by, among other things, intense Spanish missionary activity in the 'New World', the latter refers to the depictions of Pacific peoples during the French painter's stay in Tahiti, in which a clearly Western European view of the natives is expressed. Moreover, Engelhardt is later compared in the text itself to Gauguin on his way to Fiji (Kracht, 2012, p. 134).

The religious drive of Engelhardt's journey is not limited to its colonial characterisation, but also develops strong ridiculous and comic elements that give the novel an aura of parody (see Baßler, 2018, pp. 147-149).

Engelhardt war, nachdem er durch einen Eliminierungsprozeß alle anderen Nahrungsmittel für unrein befunden hatte, unvermittelt auf die Frucht der Kokospalme gestoßen. Es gab gar keine andere Möglichkeit; *cocos nucifera* war, so hatte Engelhardt für sich erkannt, die sprichwörtliche Krone der Schöpfung, sie war die Frucht des Weltenbaumes Yggdrasil. [...] Wer sich ausschließlich von ihr ernährte, würde gottgleich, würde unsterblich werden. August Engelhardts sehnlichster Wunsch, ja seine Bestimmung war es, eine Kolonie der Kokovoren zu erschaffen, als Prophet sah er sich und als Missionar zugleich. Aus diesem Grunde fuhr er in die Südsee, die schon

unendlich viele Träumer gelockt hatte mit dem Sirenenruf des Paradieses. (Kracht, 2012, pp. 19-20)

In addition to the theological aspect, the colonial and social implications are also directly addressed. Religion is presented in the novel as nothing more than another attempt at colonisation. Engelhardt does not simply seek to establish a religious community, but explicitly speaks of ‘colony’, thus linking the religious-missionary and colonial discourses, even to the point of referring to the place reached as ‘Zion’ (Kracht, 2012, p. 28), which implies a connection to a strong religious tradition, but also the subjugation and occupation of territories for political purposes. Such an image of religion shows how it has been stripped of any ideal and ‘high’ inspiration. This is reinforced by the constant indirect mockery of this theme in the novel. If the idea of a religion that elevates coconut to the status of a deity is bizarre and hard for the average reader to believe, then the narrator’s characteristically ironic and parodic style of its descriptions contributes to enhance the irony of the novel. For instance:

Dennoch wollte er es nicht unversucht lassen; mit einiger Mühe paraphrasierte er den in seiner Schrift befindlichen Grundgedanken, daß der Mensch das tierische Abbild Gottes sei und wiederum die Kokosfrucht, die von allen Pflanzen dem Kopf des Menschen am meisten ähnelte (er verwies auf Form und Haare der Nuß), das pflanzliche Abbild Gottes sei. Auch wuchs sie ja, wohlgemerkt, dem Himmel und der Sonne am nächsten, hoch droben am Gipfel der Palme. Govindarajan nickte zustimmend und hob an, während ein kleiner Landbahnhof ohne Halt durchfahren wurde, aus der Bhagavata Purana eine entsprechende Stelle zu zitieren (nicht nur diese heilige Schrift hatte er in jungen Jahren, an der ehrwürdigen Universität von Madras, vollständig auswendig lernen müssen), besann sich dann aber darauf, einfach weiter zu nicken und sein Gegenüber erst ausreden zu lassen, um dann mit einer gewissen, ihm nun angebracht erscheinenden Gravitas anzumerken, daß der Mensch, ernähre er sich ausschließlich von der göttlichen Kokosnuß, nicht nur Kokovore wäre, sondern eben per definitionem Theophage, Gottesser. Er ließ dies einen Augenblick sacken und wiederholte dann den Ausdruck, in die nur vom Klicken der Schienen rhythmisierte Stille des Vormittags hinein: *God-eater. Devourer of God*. (Kracht, 2012, pp. 40-41)

The idea of such an image of God, and especially the way in which this image is presented, namely the transformation into a ‘theophage’ by eating the ‘divine coconut’, is somewhat bizarre and can hardly be taken seriously when described in this way. As Robert Hermann notes, Kracht’s novels generally have an ambivalent connection to spirituality (2019, pp.

97-106). On the one hand, the desire for spirituality is expressed; on the other, it is met with irony and mockery. The desire for a form of spirituality does not lead to a concrete realisation. The juxtaposition of ideological apathy and the lack of a contemporary longing for utopia is accompanied by a desire for the sublime, for the higher, and this seems to be an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to counter the ‘stop making sense’ of postmodernism. The figure accepts the resignation of the end of the *grand récits* or *métarécits* in Lyotard’s sense (1979, p. 7), such as religion, and hopes and longs in a ‘romantic’ way, according to Hermann, for something that it is unlikely to achieve, as in the case of Engelhardt’s religious utopia.

This aspect and the characterisation of utopia are strongly influenced by the portrayal of the novel’s protagonist. In general, literature of almost all periods seeks to create a bond between the protagonist or certain characters and the reader. This bond can be created through simple identification or, for example, sympathy (as in G.E. Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy). In the case of *Imperium*, it is clear from the first reading that the protagonist, August Engelhardt, cannot be empathised with, let alone sympathised with. The basic characteristics of the character, his capriciousness, and his inability to form any kind of human relationship make it very difficult to establish a bond between the protagonist and the reader. As always with Kracht, this peculiarity is explicitly intended and sought after by the author, as he has explained in an interview with Denis Scheck: “In all my books, I’ve always tried to include at least one character that I can’t stand at all” (in Scheck, 2016). If Kracht’s characters can be described as antiheroes (Stauffer & Weyand, 2017, pp. 54-57), they reveal different attributes from the usual modern anti-heroes. Whereas with modernist anti-heroes, such as the prototypical Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* (1912), the reader is often led to develop a sense of empathy, with Kracht’s characters – and August Engelhardt is no exception – this is not the case; rather, the reader is led to keep a distance from this irritating figure.

The first description of Engelhardt can be found in the very first pages. Despite the predominant point of view of a very present authorial narrator commenting on the events, the first description of Engelhardt is not offered from the point of view of the narrator or the protagonist, but from the viewpoint of the German colonialists on board the ship *Prinz Waldemar* (Kracht, 2012, pp. 13-14). This first physical and behavioural characterisation of August Engelhardt already hints at the protagonist’s ‘eccentric’ traits. Weakened by a precarious diet and with the attitude of a religious preacher, Engelhardt is not integrated into reality and the society around him. A few pages later, the peculiarity that prevents Engelhardt from interacting with his own social environment becomes apparent: utopia.

An Bord der Prinz Waldemar befand sich also der junge August Engelhardt aus

Nürnberg, Bartträger, Vegetarier, Nudist. Er hatte vor einiger Zeit in Deutschland ein Buch mit dem schwärmerischen Titel *Eine sorgenfreie Zukunft* veröffentlicht, nun reiste er nach Neupommern, um Land zu kaufen für eine Kokosplantage, wieviel genau, und wo, das wußte er noch nicht. Er würde Pflanze werden, doch nicht aus Profitgier, sondern aus zutiefst empfundenem Glauben, er könne kraft seiner großen Idee die Welt, die ihm feindlich, dumm und grausam dünkte, für immer verändern. (Kracht, 2012, p. 19)

As if they were programmatic lines, although it is pointed out with the usual irony that there is no real plan yet, the novel highlights themes and motifs that will be developed later, namely Engelhardt's physical precariousness, his controversial relationship to religion, and his 'outsiderness' with its consistent search for utopia. Engelhardt's religiousness is evident in all the contexts in which he appears. Among the German settlers he is regarded as a preacher, among the natives as a possessor of the mystical power 'Mana' (Kracht, 2012, p. 72), in East Prussia he is described as a 'Molokan' (Kracht, 2012, p. 84), i.e. as a member of an early Christian-oriented sect in Eastern Europe.

The second part of the novel begins with the sentence "Let us now speak about love" (Kracht, 2015, p. 81) and introduces the narration of Engelhardt's attempts to have relationships with other people, all of which will prove unsuccessful, especially with Aueckens, Mittenzwey and later Lützow (see Moll, 2017, p. 150). One of the elements that make an equal relationship with Engelhardt impossible can be seen in Engelhardt's claim to want to be a kind of 'guru' and to behave as such. The few temporarily successful relationships of August Engelhardt in the novel are based on the principle of his superiority and the subordination of the other people, in order to preserve his inaccessible sphere of intimacy. This is the case of the connection to Makeli, a native of the island of Kabakon and 'non-European', which is in fact based on a clear respect for hierarchies and the 'master-pupil' role. This bond then dissolves when the young man no longer accepts and respects the cultural and moral authority of the 'master' Engelhardt. As the story continues, Engelhardt's solipsistic trait will intensify until, due to his inability to relate to people, he finally rejects even the role of spiritual leader that had led him to the South Seas (Kracht, 2012, pp. 166-167).

Engelhardt's contradictory nature is evident in this constant tension between his desire to be a leader and establish a new utopian society of people and his emotional inability to relate to others. It is no coincidence that he is later referred to as "Rex solus" (Kracht, 2012, pp. 229), a language game with the earlier use of the expression "solus rex" in reference to the game of chess, which is also mentioned during the first acquaintance with Slütter

(Kracht, 2012, pp. 54 and p. 217). The contradictory nature of the character is also evident in the ‘politics’ he implements on Kabakon. The gradual rejection of Western customs and traditions does not lead to the integration or at least acceptance of another culture, namely that of the Kabakonian natives, whose traditions and customs are systematically ignored by him. In Engelhardt’s behaviour, we see the depiction of an immanent colonialism, which mostly manifests itself not as practical action but as a world view. In addition to Engelhardt’s behavioural deficiencies, the main reason for the failure of his *Lebensreformprojekt* (‘life reform project’) is the fact that his values scale is unconsciously shaped by a Eurocentric and imperialist perspective.

3. The depiction of the South Sea colonial era: between historical facts and literary fiction

Alongside the personal story of August Engelhardt, History seems to be the other protagonist. The catastrophic and revolutionary historical events that occurred during the years in which the novel is set permeate the entire narrative, not only creating a connection to the reader’s present in the 21st century, but also potentially presenting an “unpleasant, dark melody” (Diez, 2013, p. 31), albeit softened by an ironic style. The novel is set in the historical context of the *Lebensreformbewegung* (‘Life-reform movement’). Historically, the German colonies in the South Seas were a favoured destination for these critics of civilisation, who sought to establish new forms of civilisation in the overseas territories as a counterpoint to the industrial modernity of the homeland (Conrad, 2008, pp. 92-93). It should be therefore emphasised that it is not only the historical context that provides the setting for the novel, but that the plot itself has its origins in the historical facts ascertained by historiography. Historically, in the first decade of the 20th century, a small group of Germans who called themselves the *Sonnenorden* (‘Order of the Sun’) settled in German New Guinea, on the small island of Kabakon, north of the island of New Pomerania, now known as New Britain. They lived there as nudists and vegetarians, worshipping the sun. Later described as a kind of precursors to the hippies (Hiery, 1995, p. 58), they responded to the call of August Engelhardt (1875-1919), the group’s founder and spiritual leader, who settled in the South Seas in 1902 (Mönter, 2008, p. 6) and claimed to have found a way to live a pious and natural life. By worshipping the sun and eating only coconuts, he claimed, one could not only find salvation from the dissolute and corrupt life of Europe, but also live in harmony with God. The tropics, a favourable place where sunshine and coconuts were plentiful, were the main pillars of his theosophical concept. However, this lifestyle and tropical environment proved fatal for some members of the Order of the Sun. After Engelhardt himself fell seriously ill, the group began

to disperse. By 1913, before the outbreak of World War I, he was the last remaining member. He firmly affirmed his theosophical concepts at Kabakon until his death, shortly after the end of World War I (Mönter, 2008, p. 1).

In terms of historical sources, August Engelhardt's stay in Kabakon is densely documented due to the *Lebensreform* movement's interest in alternative nutritional concepts (Doll, 2017, p. 447), while information about his childhood and youth (Mönter, 2008, p. 3) as well as the circumstances of his death in 1919 (Mönter, 2008, p. 21) remain sparse and fragmentary. It is precisely with regard to his death that the first striking difference between biography and fictional narration becomes apparent. In the novel, Engelhardt's death occurs after the Second World War, and this authorial choice reflects the symbolic and prototypical function of the literary figure. Because he can be seen in the novel as a kind of symbol of the fate of the German people, the story of his life represents the transition from Wilhelmine and then National Socialist Germany to contemporary Germany, the result of the changes that have taken place since World War II (Hauenstein, 2017, pp. 125-126). The historical Engelhardt died as a result of his illness, caused by his extreme lifestyle and diet, which are discussed in detail in the novel. In the novel, however, Engelhardt's 'representational function' (Hauenstein, 2017, p. 150) enables his miraculous healing from leprosy, which can be read as the German people's catharsis from imperialism and National Socialism (Doll, 2017, p. 467).

It is precisely this link to imperialist and colonial discourse that is one of the permeating features of Kracht's fictional Engelhardt, although not merely fictional since it is based on historical sources. The historical Engelhardt, in fact, attracted potential followers with the promise of vertical social mobility that would enable the 'new man' emerging from the conversion to establish himself as ruler in Kabakon. In a letter to Hermann Arnz, the strategic position of the historical Engelhardt and his fellow August Bethmann becomes very clear (Doll, 2017, p. 459): "We are well accommodated here as barons and large landowners" (Mönter, 2008, p. 98). This was a position Engelhardt reaffirmed years later when he argued that the future of the Order of the Sun lay in further expansion through the founding of more "colonies", culminating in the establishment of an "international tropical colonial empire" (Mönter, 2008, p. 15; see also Schwarz, 2014, p. 134). Since Benedict Anderson (1983) analyses 'imagined communities' as groups of individuals united by shared values and parameters such as language, religion, natural boundaries, and a common epic opposed to other communities with different values, a similar parallel can be drawn in the case of Engelhardt's failed attempt. Engelhardt attempted to create a colonial 'empire' in the South

Seas, based on shared values and beliefs such as cocovorism, sun worship, nudism and veganism, which would provide a social alternative to both ‘old’ Europe and ‘indigenous’ society.

It is clear from Engelhardt’s writings that he was a child of his time and therefore essentially racist, although both historically and fictionally Engelhardt wanted to distance himself from Europe, where racism was rampant at the time. In the historical sources, we read how Engelhardt clearly distinguishes himself from the local population in one of his writings: “A black man is by no means a European” (Doll, 2017, p. 459). In the novel, the character of August Engelhardt implies, albeit less drastically, the existence of this cultural background. For example, the character of Queen Emma is defined in the novel as a ‘half-caste’, as she was historically of Samoan descent on her mother’s side and American on her father’s side, and then married to a Prussian officer (Mönter, 2008, p. 131-132): “Mrs. Forsayth, though a half-caste, spoke excellent, one might even say overly perfect, German” (Kracht, 2015, p. 38), referring to the nationalist theme of language as a parameter of belonging to a particular national community.

Historically, this colonial cultural background led to a complete disregard for the customs, traditions and will of the indigenous population (see Doll, 2017, pp. 159-162), whose viewpoints were completely irrelevant to Engelhardt’s *Sonnenorden*-policy, and this aspect is also evident in the novel. Engelhardt’s community was not too different from the colonial quest of Wilhelmine politics for a ‘Platz an der Sonne’, a ‘place in the sun’, as the then foreign minister Bernhard von Bülow proclaimed in 1897 (Schwarz, 2014, p. 136). Even the name of his order, the ‘Order of the Sun’, contains the essence of colonialism and imperialism, as the official name was the “Sonnenorden – Äquatoriale Siedlungsgesellschaft” (‘Order of the Sun – Equatorial Settlement Society’). This ‘settlement’ was made possible by an inherited sum (Mönter, 2008, p. 5), an element that is also mentioned in the novel (Kracht, 2012, p. 50). Historically, Engelhardt’s project was officially registered in Berlin as a ‘planting and trading enterprise’ in the protectorate of German New Guinea. This enterprise relied on connections to the global markets of the German Empire, and this makes it clear that despite the civilisation-critical appeal, without Western colonialism there would have been no attempt to seek an alternative to European ways of life on Kabakon (Schwarz, 2014, p. 123).

One of the novel’s recurring features is the large number of quotations and literary references of various kinds, which acquire a tangible form of their own through the numerous books that Kracht’s August Engelhardt stores in Kabakon. This element can also be found in the historical sources. The historical Engelhardt actually established a rich library in Kabakon

(Schwarz, 2014, p. 129), which allows Kracht to recover this detail in order to give physical form to his continuous flow of literary quotations. They can be seen as an anchor to the European West and its thinking in Kracht's book, and this was not much different in the case of the historical Engelhardt, so that these volumes are described by Sven Mönter as a "remnant", a trace, a residue of Europe and life in the West (Mönter, 2008, pp. 5-6).

4. Somewhere between colonial and postcolonial representation

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, and especially as explained below, the novel displays a marked ambiguity between colonial and postcolonial representation through the distanced position of the main character, August Engelhardt, from both. This is also clearly reflected in the stylistic devices used through a "mischievous" (Pordzik, 2013, p. 589) narrator, which can evoke discomfort (Kreknin, 2012, pp. 37-43). The novel is set in a time of "masters and servants, whites and blacks" (Diez, 2013, p. 32), and elements that function to represent alterity in the context of the colonial canon and exoticism within the novel have already been carefully highlighted by Max Doll (2017, pp. 365-378). For example, the cliché of the 'noble savage' clearly emerges in an ironic way. This is notoriously linked to European perceptions of the naivety of indigenous peoples, but also of their spiritual purity, as Govindarajan's description at the beginning of chapter two of the novel suggests. But it is precisely in the case of the Tamil impostor that the reader is disillusioned by the parodic style: this is not the usual colonial portrayal of the 'natives'. The expectation of finding better and purer people in the South Seas is already shattered in the second chapter by the deception that the gullible Character Engelhardt experiences (Kracht, 2012, pp. 37-50).

At the same time, the characterisation of the colonialist changes. From the beginning, Engelhardt is portrayed in opposition to the Germans on board the *Prinz Waldemar*, but in many instances his behaviour is in clear continuity with that of the colonialists he so despises. Colonialism is thus presented as a system of values to be followed, but also as a system of values to be criticised. This is also evident in the use of narrative devices, which often transform colonialism from an observed object to a perspective to observe through (see Ajouri, 2019, pp. 204-205). Despite the preliminary critique that can already be read in the opening pages, Engelhardt's perspective, albeit unintentionally, and certainly that of the narrators are influenced by colonialist discourse, which at first glance appears to be at the antipodes of Engelhardt's values and viewpoints. The explicit emphasis on the fact that time in Kabakon was not told according to the Time Statute of the Empire (Kracht, 2012, pp. 93-94), as if to draw a line between Prussian and European imperialism and life in the colonies and therefore Kabakon community, hardly plays a role; instead, Engelhardt presents himself as a

de facto coloniser, albeit in a remarkably atypical form. Although Engelhardt fails in his goal and is portrayed as a ridiculous and not very credible coloniser (e.g. Kracht, 2012, pp. 70-71), he pursues a similar goal as any other settler: the expropriation of land from the locals for his own purposes. Against this background, the distinction between a colonialist like Hartmut Otto, a bird hunter for money, and August Engelhardt seems less clear: both want to exploit territories and their resources for their own purposes, which, although different, do not take into account the interests of the indigenous population.

From the very first pages of the novel, a clear distinction is made between the 19th and 20th centuries, which is expressed, for example, by the character of Hartmut Otto in the first chapter. After describing his activity as a hunter of valuable birds in macabre tones, which evoke a feeling of disgust or at least condemnation in the reader, the narrator makes a surprisingly positive judgement about the character (Kracht, 2012, pp. 23-24). The novel deals with different hermeneutic horizons. Ideally, Hartmut Otto represents the 19th century, an era of colonialism and social exploitation, which is theoretically replaced by a supposedly better era epitomised by people like August Engelhardt. In reality, however, both historically and in the fiction of the novel, bloody and macabre events take place in the subsequent decades in which the novel is set, making it seem as if the narrator is mocking Engelhardt's utopian and progressive intentions. While defending Hartmut Otto by highlighting the different horizons of the new and old century, he simultaneously mocks the 'newness' of people like Engelhardt and the belief that the future would be better thanks to such people. The fact that the first half of the 20th century was a time of terrible events and not at all the age of justice and progress that Kracht's protagonist imagines is clear from the very beginning of the novel to the reader, who relies on his basic text-external historical knowledge, which can only be confirmed by reading the novel.

The atypicality of Engelhardt, his eccentricity and his peculiar nature do not make the portrayal of colonialism credible from the reader's point of view, because this representation differs significantly from the usual serious and brutal expression of colonial power. As a result, the characteristics of colonial literature, which includes conquest, subjugation and white supremacy, and postcolonial literature, which counteracts these characteristics, are present in the same work. This is made possible by irony, which allows Kracht to point out the abuses of colonialism and at the same time to have his characters act within this worldview, without of course depicting an anachronistic and unacceptable praise of it. The distance from the disapproving tones that sometimes characterise postcolonial literature makes it clear that here something else is happening. While, for example, Sten Nadolny's novel *Die Entdeckung*

der Langsamkeit ('The Discovery of Slowness', 1983) already exhibits an early and explicit critique of colonialist and supremacist elements in the 1980s (see Nadolny, 2017, especially pp. 89-95 and 217-244), *Imperium*, despite its changed cultural context and heightened sensitivity to postcolonial issues among readers, lacks such clarity, which repeatedly leads to alienation effect.

It is noteworthy that Kracht's August Engelhardt, although openly opposing the colonialists of the nineteenth century, takes up some peculiar traits of their 'modus operandi'. As Max Doll points out, Engelhardt attempts to impose his Eurocentric ideas on another culture and to apply them to a foreign cultural space without considering it as something independently foreign: the foreign must bow to his ideas of foreignness (Doll, 2017, p. 375). It is true that Engelhardt subjugates, or tries to subjugate, the natives to his worldview, but this is in fact not is not always and completely Eurocentric. Engelhardt distances himself from Europe because he is disgusted by it, but he also regards the culture of the indigenous population as inferior. Typical of the colonisers, he thus imposes his worldview on the natives, although it is by no means Eurocentric, since the aim is not to recreate Europe in the overseas settlements, i.e. to pursue the usual '*mission civilisatrice*'. What the character actually expresses, however, is an unintentional ambiguity between Eurocentrism and primitivism, thus filling the gap in this common, albeit simplistic, dichotomy. Engelhardt represents neither the traditional colonial idea of the subjugation of the indigenous population, nor the acceptance of alterity and the mutual recognition of customs and knowledge, as found in postcolonial literature.

Engelhardt follows a traditional colonial perception, but he also opposes a purely Eurocentric view, because he is disgusted not only by his homeland, Germany, but also by its colonial version in Herbertshöhe and Rabaul. He can therefore be categorised neither in a Eurocentric perspective, as represented in the novel by Germany, France and the United Kingdom, nor in their colonial versions in the South Seas. Engelhardt, with his oddities and contradictions, seems to represent something else. He does not seem to be an archetypal representative of his original culture, so that despite his ownership of the island, a real form of colonialism never occurs, as he never manages to establish himself as a credible authority for the locals but is rather tolerated by them because of his ridiculousness (e.g. Kracht, 2012, pp. 70-71). In this respect, Kracht's Engelhardt is incapable of colonisation, even to the extent that his initial intention to feed only on coconuts is not well accepted by the natives of Kabakon. On the contrary, it is the indigenous population that will influence Engelhardt to abandon his convictions and turn to the cannibalism practised by the tribe in the form of auto-anthropophagy (Kracht, 2012, pp. 216-221).

For these reasons, Engelhardt is positioned somewhere between a rejection of European culture and a longing for it, the latter expressed, for example, in his desire to preserve his collection of Western literary classics and to teach the young Makeli the German language. Engelhardt rejects Europe and, more generally, the European lifestyle and culture, but he does not manage to abandon it, since he does not recognise Kabakon culture, while his social project, based on the principles of the *Lebensreform* movement, is also failing. This ambiguity, this oscillation between criticism of Europe and nostalgia for it, permeates the entire novel. A latent, albeit ambivalent, nostalgia, which is expressed most clearly at the end, when the man who used to loathe everything that was not coconut (especially meat) eats and drinks the most Western of all foods, namely hot dogs and cola (Kracht, 2012, pp. 242-244). Engelhardt's colonisation of the island of Kabakon represents a renunciation of the homeland, of highly industrialised Europe and its customs and traditions, in the name of a utopia of primitivist progress and improvement that does not actually materialise in the destructive and self-destructive chaos of the new order proposed by Engelhardt and his ilk (parallels between the characters of Engelhardt and Adolf Hitler and their projects can be found almost everywhere in the novel, and the outcome of both reform projects culminates in catastrophe)¹.

1 The novel establishes connections between the character August Engelhardt and Adolf Hitler. It is important to note that Hitler never actually emerges as a character in the narrative; rather, he is embedded in the multitude of historical situations and figures that Kracht mentions in his work. The first allusion to the Nazi dictator can be found in the first chapter of the novel:

“Nun, in diese Zeit fällt diese Chronik, und will man sie erzählen, so muß auch die Zukunft im Auge behalten werden, denn dieser Bericht spielt ganz am Anfang des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, welches ja bis zur knappen Hälfte seiner Laufzeit so aussah, als würde es das Jahrhundert der Deutschen werden, das Jahrhundert, in dem Deutschland seinen rechtmäßigen Ehren- und Vorsitzplatz an der Weltentischrunde einnehmen würde, und es wiederum aus der Warte des nur wenige Menschenjahre alten, neuen Jahrhunderts durchaus auch so erschien. So wird nun stellvertretend die Geschichte nur eines Deutschen erzählt werden, eines Romantikers, der wie so viele dieser Spezies veränderter Künstler war, und wenn dabei manchmal Parallelen zu einem späteren deutschen Romantiker und Vegetarier ins Bewußtsein dringen, der vielleicht lieber bei seiner Staffelei geblieben wäre, so ist dies durchaus beabsichtigt und sinnigerweise, Verzeihung, in nuce auch kohärent. Nur ist letzterer im Augenblick noch ein pickliger, verschrobener Bub, der sich zahllose väterliche Watschen einfängt. Aber wartet nur: er wächst, er wächst”. (Kracht, 2012, pp. 18-19)

Considering the attributes outlined (vegetarian, born after Engelhardt, ‘failed’ artist), it is evident that the ‘later German romantic and vegetarian’ is none other than Adolf Hitler. The allusion to Hitler is deliberate (Doll, 2017, 353-356), and the characteristics attributed to Engelhardt, which are repeatedly emphasised in the novel, are indirectly reminiscent of the figure of the Nazi dictator. In an interview with the literary critic Denis Scheck, Kracht himself highlighted parallels between his character August Engelhardt and Adolf Hitler. These characteristics are rooted in the late Wilhelmine period: “I just believe that both Engelhardt and Hitler definitely drew on the overall esoteric panorama of this time” (Scheck, 2012). This ‘esoteric panorama’ also concerns the depiction of the ‘German essence’ in the novel. In general, the text contains numerous such allusions, which are sometimes more explicit and sometimes more subtle, that suggest the presence of an uncomfortable figure like Adolf Hitler in the background. These minor allusions are characteristic of Kracht’s somewhat ‘irritating’ style. Nevertheless, the parallel between Engelhardt and Hitler does not take the form of an ideal representation, a serious search for a connection between the two figures, or at the very least, the establishment of a reflection or comparison in order to communicate something specific, for example, a denunciation. As with other quotations that appear in the novel, the mention of Hitler is not developed, but remains present without any significant impact on the narrative and is essentially a linguistic game.

The failed attempts to realise utopian alternatives bear witness to the impossibility of this path (see Repussard, 2012). Of course, Engelhardt fled from a different West than the one he rediscovers half a century later, but what he greedily devours in the form of a hot dog is the evolution of what he had abandoned: from disgust at the pork served aboard the Prinz Waldemar in the first chapter of the novel (Kracht, 2012, p. 24) to biting into a hot dog with relish:

Der bärtige, langhaarige Greis wird auf eine unübersichtlich große Militärbasis auf der den Japanern abgerungenen Insel Guadalcanal verbracht und herumgeführt. Er sieht staunend allerorten sympathische schwarze GIs, deren Zähne, im Gegensatz zu seinem eigenen, ruinös verfaulten Trümmerhaufen eines Gebisses, mit einer unwirklichen Leuchtkraft strahlen; alle erscheinen so außergewöhnlich sauber, gescheitelt und gebügelt; man gibt ihm aus einer hübschen, sich in der Mitte leicht verjüngenden Glasflasche eine dunkelbraune, zuckrige, überaus wohlschmeckende Flüssigkeit zu trinken; [...] dies ist nun das Imperium; man serviert ihm ein mit quietschbunten Soßen bestrichenes Würstchen, welches in einem daunenkissenweichen, länglichen Brotbett liegt, infolgedessen Engelhardt zum ersten Mal seit weit über einem halben Jahrhundert ein Stück tierisches Fleisch zu sich nimmt; ein anderer Soldat, der deutschstämmige (schon seine Eltern waren ihrer Herkunftssprache nicht mehr mächtig – sie ist im E Pluribus Unum assimiliert worden) Leutnant Kinnboot, der sich hemdsärmelig und überaus freundlich anschickt, ihm für eine Zeitung gleich Dutzende von Fragen zu stellen [...]. (Kracht, 2012, pp. 243-244)

Having begun by distancing himself culturally and geographically from Europe, the novel ends by celebrating an ironic triumph of the once-hated West. Engelhardt looks miserable, his health is poor, while the Westerners from whom he has fled appear in excellent form. The connection and continuity between his West, the German-Prussian one, and the new West, the American-influenced one, is demonstrated by the American soldier of German origin Kinnboot (who is also another intertextual element and refers to the unreliable narrator Dr Charles Kinbote from *Pale Fire*, 1962, by Vladimir Nabokov; see Birgfeld, 2012, p. 468).

In conclusion, however, it should be noted that Kracht's characters are unreliable and therefore do not represent absolute values or perspectives, let alone the author's value judgements and preferences. Also because of the ambivalence and ambiguity shown above, it is not possible to identify a clear position of the novel in terms of a message it wants to convey; rather, it is a story that fits into the ludic structure of Kracht's narrative and is therefore not subject to any intention of political commitment à la Günter Grass (Lorenz,

2014a, pp. 9-10), which the author has always avoided (see also Nover, 2017, p. 31). August Engelhardt's project is utopian insofar as it remains unrealisable and unrealised. To make it even worse, this project, had it been realised, would have been more the macabre realisation of a dystopia than the impossible fulfilment of a utopia. The colonial background on which the novel is based, as well as the hidden parallels between August Engelhardt and Adolf Hitler, who is never explicitly mentioned in the text – characters linked by their vegetarianism and the 'renewal' sought by their generation – mean that the failure of this reform movement can even be seen as reassuring.

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