

The terrible within the peaceful: Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara*

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Christoph Ransmayr. *Morbus Kitahara/The Dog King*. Declaration of peace. Memory. Post-apocalyptic. War. Atomic bomb. Visualization.

Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara* (1995; translated as *The Dog King*, 1997) tells the story of deconstruction, destruction, and despair in a world of eternal peace. The three protagonists Ambras, Bering, and Lily move through a post-apocalyptic landscape where they are constantly reminded of an unnamed past catastrophe and a past war. Despite their attempts to leave their generational guilt behind, the darkness of history catches up with them. This article analyzes how the novel addresses the protagonist's mental and corporeal struggle for survival alongside its gloomy outlook on the prospect of globally enforced eternal peace. However, eternal peace is an ambiguous concept and refers to a narrative of oppression in a post-apocalyptic world.

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The desire for eternal world peace in times of war is very urgent, especially today, and fought for by activists of the peace movement. But what if the actual implementation of peace results in anything other than a peaceful state? In his novel *Morbus Kitahara* (1995; Eng. trans. *The Dog King*, 1997), Christoph Ransmayr investigates this question and develops a postwar scenario in which all characters suffer from the ambiguity of peace which ends war but does not overcome the violent condition of life in the nuclear age.

The plot unfolds in a post-apocalyptic setting: After a long war, eternal peace has been attained but the protagonists struggle to survive in the harsh reality that knows neither forgiving nor forgetting. The novel portrays a society shaped by regression instead of progression as atonement. As a consequence, the authorities of Moor, a former spa town, destroy all traces of technical infrastructure and introduce violent practices of remembrance. The so-called “Stellamour’s peace plan” (Ransmayr 1997, 30) strives to transport them back in time: “Back! Back, all of you! Back to the Stone Age!” (32), as commanding officer Eliot orders. The three protagonists, Ambras, Bering and Lily, represent different perspectives on how the traumatizing past has influenced the lives of the individuals.

Instead of a historiographical perspective, the following analysis uses concepts of visualization to show how narrative structures of seeing vs. non-seeing are connected to terror, trauma and the post-apocalyptic. It focuses on the struggles of Ambras, Bering and Lily in a world of peace without hope for a better future.

POST-APOCALYPTIC PEACE

It can be argued that *The Dog King* negotiates the relation between fact and fiction by developing an alternative history of the 20th century. It discusses the question of what would have happened if, after World War II, the Morgenthau-Plan had been installed instead of the Marshall-Plan, aimed to destabilize Austria and Germany. Scholarship has drawn parallels between the catastrophe in the novel, one that is never mentioned in detail nor named, and the Holocaust, comparing Moor’s former labor camp, located near a quarry with the National Socialists’ concentration camp Ebensee in Upper Austria (Graml 2020, 155–158). Ian Foster uses the term “alternative history” for *The Dog King*. His definition relies on Darko Suvin’s account, according to which alternative history answers to the necessity for change of the overall history in the fictional world, especially when confronted with severe structural or social problems (Foster 1999, 111). The suggested proximity of the novel to science fiction opens up a new field of discussion in which *The Dog King* can be seen not only in reference to the historical past but also as a literary construct which borrows elements of speculative fiction. Thus, the historiographic background of the terrors of National Socialism provides a starting point for fictional debates on dealing with trauma and the inheritance of guilt. In the novel, memories of an insurmountable past are omnipresent. The impossibility to overcome the past is closely related to the topos of unrepresentability of the Holocaust, which according to Konrad Paul Liessmann is also the novel’s main subject (1997, 151). Daniela Henke discusses the novel’s use of the sublime in combination with the irrepresentability of the horrors of National

Socialism in the arts. In her study, Henke defines the sublime by reference to Immanuel Kant, Jean-François Lyotard, and Theodor W. Adorno, and detects that historic terror is reflected in Ransmayr's literary account of nature. According to Henke, the author uses narrative strategies to alienate space and time so that the novel fulfils the responsibility to thematize the Holocaust despite the impossibility of representation. The Holocaust is mediated through the counterfactual narrative told by Ambras, one of the protagonists, who was tortured by the past regime and whose background story is related to Jean Améry's concentration camp memoirs. At the same time, the novel does not claim historic accuracy and differentiates between "telling" and "informing", as Henke states (2023, 244, 257, 262–264, 287–289). I agree with Henke's aesthetic remarks but want to develop them further, showing how nature and the protagonists are put in dialogue to visualize the impact of trauma.

While the protagonists' lives demonstrate what could have happened if the course of history went in a different direction, as Klaus R. Scherpe argues, they are still confronted with the consequences of a past that affects both the real world and the fictional post-apocalyptic setting (2002, 165). Since the unnamed catastrophe remains a vague backdrop, the "apocalypse" itself cannot be described as a conclusive event in the past but continues into the present and the future. Christian Zolles, Martin Zolles, and Veronika Wieser define the apocalyptic as a process of relating to a final end (2013, 22). Following these arguments, the unnamed terror in *The Dog King* can be seen as a prototype of the apocalyptic, whereas the main storyline serves as a post-apocalyptic narration of the end of the world, a perpetual state that cannot be overcome. In view of the concept of peace, the post-apocalypse in *The Dog King* focuses on permanent destabilization of society. This is a slow process which is shown in the destruction of infrastructure, in the degeneration of people's values and in their inability to thrive as individuals as well as the concealing visual concept of the illness Morbus Kitahara itself. This term is archaic for *Retinopathia centralis serosa*, a disease that causes visual impairment, such as distorted, dimmed, or blacked-out central vision (Porter 2024).

PATHS THROUGH THE (POST-)APOCALYPTIC SPACE

The novel's main storyline is set in Moor, the hometown of Bering, Ambras and Lily. Moor is depicted as a post-apocalyptic place where the apocalyptic past is still present, as Bering and Ambras face the overlapping realms of their traumas, their physical bodies and the town Moor itself. Bering, who was born on the day of the final bombing of Moor, is described paradoxically as "a child of war [who] knew only peace" (Ransmayr 1997, 5). He represents the generation after the catastrophe and is constantly reminded by the guilt of his ancestors. Ambras, on the other hand, has experienced torture and hate towards his community on his own body. The relationship between him and Bering is more than just one between a boss and his bodyguard but stands for the relation between (the heir of) the perpetrator and the victim of the old regime.

My definition of trauma relies on Saima Nasar's and Gavin Schaffer's account of the term as a "double wound" affecting body and mind over time and space (2020,

1010). The trauma is visible not only in Ambras's body but also shows in the natural environment and politics of Moor:

Rising above the quarry, mightier than all else that could be seen of the world from Moor, were the mountains. Every rockslide that poured down out of those icy regions to be lost in its own dust, every gorge, every opening on a ravine with its swarm of jackdaws, led deeper into a labyrinth of stone where all light transformed itself into ash-gray shadows and blue shadows and polychrome shadows of inorganic nature. On the wall map at headquarters the name of these mountains, written across its peaks and meandering contour lines, was edged in red: *The Stoney Sea*. Forbidden, inaccessible, all its passes mined, this sea lay between zones of occupation, a bleak no-man's land buried under glaciers. (Ransmayr 1997, 23–24)

The description of Moor as no-man's-land brings colonial language to mind, in fact reversing the supposed laws of progress: instead of "discovering" spaces and filling out white spots, Moor is already marked on maps but is destined to be transformed back into wilderness. The hopelessness caused by the American occupation is mirrored by the landscape: the mountains and the lake, two natural boundaries, enclose Moor. The binary between firm stone on the one side and deep waters on the other side represents the desperation of the protagonists who can never escape the terror, even after leaving their hometown. Significantly, the stony landscape surrounding Moor also acts as backdrop to one of the memory ceremonies, "Stellamour's Party", in which Moor's inhabitants must re-enact scenes from the labor camp dressed up in prison uniforms, carrying papier-mâché stones across a staircase. The metaphor of the stone barrier reappears in various forms and marks a condition of despair: as it is almost impossible to cross "The Stoney Sea", it is also impossible to deal with the trauma, as there are constant reminders of a past that the protagonists are forced to relive. This makes it impossible to tackle issues of responsibility, leaving especially the future generations, Bering and Lily, in total desperation.

Even once they finally move out of Moor, the reference to stone and to stony materiality remains. Another reference to natural obstacles is also shown in the town's name itself, as Moor translates as "swamp", a reference to the possibility of sinking into quicksand. This characterization of the town solely by references to nature depicts a scenario of darkness and terror. The geography and geology of Moor is mirrored in the cultural practices of the harsh conditions of peace.

In this landscape of terror, the three protagonists, Ambras, Bering and Lily, attempt to move forward to find peace within. Ambras, the oldest, has experienced the past terrors and confides his experience to Bering:

I was in the quarry even when I was walking through the rubble of Vienna or Dresden or any of the other harrowed cities of the early Stellamour years. I just needed to hear the din of hammers and chisels somewhere or watch someone climb a staircase with some burden on his back, even just a sack of potatoes – and I was in the quarry. I did not come back. I never left. (Ransmayr 1997, 169)

Ambras's experiences in the camp disrupted his perception of time and space, as he is constantly reminded of what he suffered. Enduring physical pain combined with the surrounding natural and cultural landscape make it impossible for him

to leave the past behind. The materiality of the stony surroundings as well as Moor's gloomy ambiance take a toll on Ambras: while he is trying to leave the past and trauma behind, he gets drawn back to Moor, which has inevitably become a state of mind he can never escape. Time and place become obsolete due to his experiences. History as well as peace are eternally present.

After the war, Ambras is responsible for the town's quarry. Again, the space of stones becomes a central part of his life, although he is no longer an inmate but has control over the workers. Although there are some moments when Ambras does feel empowered, he remains withdrawn from public life for most of the time. Living in the Villa Flora with a pack of wild dogs, he is envied, even feared. The unusual, floral name of the house implies the possibility to thrive, contrasting strongly with the stony surrounding and materialization of the trauma that is manifest in the building's history: once inhabited by a Jewish family who was turned in, the villa was then used by an officer of the regime and later falls into decay. Ambras's decision to move in can therefore be read as a reappropriation of stolen possession of the old regime's victims. "Flora" refers to another side of the botanic, which is the wilderness. This aspect is also highlighted by the pack of dogs that lives with Ambras, the "Dog King", a motif that reappears later in the narrative, as the protagonists move to Patano, Brazil.

Bering's account of history differs from Ambras's since he did not experience those past terrors himself. He represents a new generation after the war but is unaware of what happened exactly. Ambras first introduces him to the camp's gruesome history:

It had taken a long time for Bering and those like him to realize that not all the unfortunates from the barracks had vanished into the earth or the great brick ovens by the gravel works, but that some of them had escaped to live in the same present, in the same world, as they themselves. Beside the same lake. On the same shore. But once the Dog King and other former zebras, who had exchanged their uniforms for army coats and bomber jackets, assumed positions of responsibility by order of the occupying army and under its protection – and not just at the quarry but also at sugar-beet factories, saltworks, and secretariats – then even those born after the war in the most remote village by the lake were forced to recognize that the past was not past by a long shot. (Ransmayr 1997, 142)

Bering realizes that the past is far from over, and his attempts to live a carefree life, such as his love for Lily, constantly fail. Moreover, he is painfully aware of his parents' psychological decline, for example his father's delusion that he is a soldier at war once again. It can be argued that Bering's trauma is transgenerational as he is confronted with the heritage of guilt and atonement. The prominent barracks are a central and visual reminder of his inherited guilt.

Similar to Ambras, Bering also experiences his trauma through his own body: "His vision, his world had a hole in it" (Ransmayr 1997, 149). His vision deteriorates until he is diagnosed with the retinal eye disease *Morbus Kitahara*. However, he takes great care that neither Ambras nor Lily find out about his struggle: "But he is – and he still guards this secret as if not just his staying on at the house of dogs but also his life is at stake – he is on the road to darkness" (Ransmayr 1997, 213). The in-

tertextual reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) suggests another connection to the (post-)colonial context. In his novel, Conrad thematizes colonial violence and raises the question of how cruelty can be justified vis-à-vis the concept of civilizational progress in the period of the Enlightenment. In a similar vein, Bering interprets his medical condition as a metaphor for Moor. The decaying town, the hostile environment and its traumatized inhabitants provide a path into darkness and despair – where once again terror keeps repeating itself. The spots in Bering's vision can therefore be read as Moor's stony landscape, blocking not only clear vision but a way out of trauma.

Attila Bombitz reads the eclipse of Ambras's vision as an ontological metaphor representing the blindness of both Moor's inhabitants and of the occupiers. According to Bombitz, this relates closely to the end of the world – also in a global sense (2009, 27). As Bering proceeds on his way into darkness, the novel's plot concentrates on vocabulary and themes of the end. The chapter "A Beginning of the End", about halfway through the novel, marks a climax: the post-apocalyptic proliferation of nature and the decay of human infrastructure accelerate. The eclipse of Bering's vision symbolizes the beginning of the end.

While Moor is depicted as a devastating place through the eyes of Ambras and Bering both in a literal and symbolic sense, Lily has a markedly different take on her hometown. She is an ambiguous character who cannot be grasped completely as she is constantly on the move. Even though she belongs to the same generation as Bering, Lily is the only one who is not paralyzed by history, even though her father was a perpetrator of the old regime. Her ability to cross impregnable borders is therefore closely linked to her idea of being able to leave the post-apocalyptic behind and imagine a better future. In contrast to Bering, Lily takes the current conditions for what they are, asserts her independence, and looks out for herself.

The chapter "A Beginning of the End" marks a turning point because the quarry is fully depleted, leaving Moor to become a mere military training camp. While this also opens up new pathways for the protagonists, the chapter addresses how terror condenses: first of all, the use of the indefinite German article *ein* suggests that there are more than just one beginning of the end. Arguably, as different narratives merge into one final ending, this points at the concept of circular time: the chapter is just another beginning of the inevitable end. Second, the chapter marks a period of deterioration in the narrative, which is linked to Bering's unbearable eye-condition. Just before the chapter "A Beginning of the End", the chapter "Eyes Open" informs the reader about the death of Bering's mother. This marks not only the end of Bering's troublesome childhood but initiates another phase of darkness as the protagonist is left alone in his mourning. When leaving the cemetery, Bering sees that "light was still burning in only a few of Moor's windows" (Ransmayr 1997, 211). The impression of darkening not only refers to the grey space of trauma, but also to Bering's eye condition that gets more severe during the novel. The light-dark-contrast is mirrored again in Bering's surroundings, and is brought up in the novel whenever the story reaches a turning point. In "A Beginning of the End", it is the transformation of Moor into a military camp. Third, the quarry's end also has an environmental dimension,

as the ongoing extraction of granite can be read as a tipping point in the barbaric violence against nature – with severe implication for living conditions. Finally, Lily rejects Ambras's proposal to move into "the lowlands" and aspires to leave everything behind: "If it's to be up and away, then let it be farther away. A lot farther" (220). Lily's use of the formula "up and away" which is translated from the German expression "auf und davon" (2017, 277) relates to other texts by Ransmayr that were published after *The Dog King*, for example the novel *Der fliegende Berg* (2006; Eng. trans. *The Flying Mountain*, 2018), or poetological texts like *Geständnisse eines Touristen* (Confessions of a tourist, 2004) as well as "Auf und davon" ("Up and away") in the anthology *Die Verbeugung des Riesen* (A giant takes a bow, 2003), which draw a connection between Ransmayr's enthusiasm for travel and storytelling. However, in *The Dog King* this formula refers to Lily's aspiration for a future beyond the harsh reality of Moor. "Up and away" becomes a perspective which allows the protagonists to imagine a different life far from the traumatizing past. Those expectations, however, remain unfulfilled.

BRAND – CITY OF LIGHTS

The first chance to leave Moor arrives when Bering's father develops mental health problems. Bering and Lily take him to one of Brand's military health institutions. Just as the political and environmental situation is escalating, the individuals' plight becomes unbearable. After a deadly encounter with a gang in the mountains, Bering is overwhelmed when they arrive in Brand:

Lights, countless lights: the beams of headlights slipping past or crossing one another; fingers of light grasping at the night, then dipping into it to re-emerge at some other point of darkness. Signal flares in red. Flashing lights. Rows, blocks, and floating patterns of illuminated windows. Swarms of sparks! Towers and palaces riddled with light – or were those high-rises? Army bases? Sample books of light, tracks of luminescence stretching to infinity along nocturnal streets and boulevards; runways embroidered with sparks, spiral nebulae. Flowing lights, leaping, flickering, softly glowing, and blue-beaming lights, tangled garlands of light and pulsing lights, barely discernible and as silent as the constellations glistening through the thermal currents and eddies of this summer night. The first thing the travellers to the lowlands saw of Brand was a chaos of light. (Ransmayr 1997, 253)

The chaos of electric light that welcomes Brand's visitors opposes the darkness of Moor as well as the eclipse of Bering's gaze. But the bright-dark-opposition is more than a mere marker of two colliding worlds: soon after arriving in Brand, the two protagonists learn of the nuclear bombing of Nagoya, a Japanese city on the island Honshu. According to Foster's analysis, this narrative anachronism links the alleged Stone Age that was proclaimed by an officer in Moor with the Nuclear Age in Brand by means of a journey through the mountains (Foster 1999, 123). The symbolical parallel between the joyful brightness of the electric lights in Brand and the deadly brightness of nuclear detonation point at global US-American dominance (Landa 1998, 140). There are inhumane costs tied to life in a supposed state of peace. The novel reads:

Stellamour's army, which for decades had fought alongside ever-changing allies on tangled fronts that crossed every longitude and latitude and had gained the victory and left behind a Peace of Oranienburg here, a Peace of Jerusalem there, a Peace of Mosul of Nha-trang or Kwangju, of Denpasar, Havana, Lubango, Panama, Santiago, and Antananarivo, peaces, peaces everywhere...and in Japan this army had forced even an emperor to his knees and in token of its invincibility had branded a mushroom on the sky above Nagoya. [...] And what, except a World Peace, could follow such a war? (Ransmayr 1997, 272–273)

The world in *The Dog King* is a world of eternal peace in which warlike conflicts have come to an end. However, eternal peace does not mean a peaceful environment. Here, peace is enforced by the United States while other forms of petty violence remain in place, which shows in Bering's reliance on a weapon to defend himself at any time. Peace means the dominance of a political regime. In Moor, politics of regression thwart people's self-development and enmesh them in a constant struggle for survival; meanwhile, life in Brand, where US forces live, appears convenient. Brand can be seen, as Bombitz argues, as a counter-world to Moor. While Moor represents defeat, darkness and terror, Brand symbolizes progress, but under its own rules (2009, 26).

The novel questions the ambiguity of peace. It doubts if the declaration of peace is possible without compromise. One could postulate that peace is introduced as an administrative instrument to proclaim the end of all evil and past terror; at the same time, it is also used as a political strategy to gain and extend control. The declaration of world peace appeals to everybody because who would indeed wish for war? Peace as an alternative to war gives hope, yet only testifies to the power of a new regime. As the above quote shows, the new regime defeats all former enemies – in the name of peace. I argue that the declaration of world peace in the novel refers to globalization under the influence of the post-world war USA. Thus, the world peace in *The Dog King* can be read as a critique of prevailing power structures and the desire to control as much territory as possible. However, the authorities remain almost invisible throughout the novel. Apart from Major Elliot, the voices of those responsible are consistently mediated, resembling the surveillance state portrayed in George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

The brutality of how global peace is installed is shown by the atomic bombing. Neglecting the violent act of war, people in Brand celebrate the nuclear cloud as a symbol of eternal peace, disregarding its horrors. Hereby, the idyllic concept of peace unravels, giving away its true function as an ambiguous strategy of power and domination. After all, the new regime is not primarily interested in introducing peace but in implementing control by consolidating a binary of good vs. evil. Brand's brightness offers a tempting promise to the people from Moor: to leave darkness, guilt and atonement behind. Such metaphorical and literal brightness, however, blinds people in order to cover up its ideology. What Bering sees is the chaos of light and brightness which stands in contrast to the common conception of peace.

Brand also seems to open up new opportunities for Bering regarding his impaired vision. The city of lights first seems to outshine his darkened spots providing another light-dark-contrast. Even his mood changes for the first time in the novel to enthu-

siasm, suggesting that light was missing from his life in Moor. This impression is supported by Bering's diagnosis of Morbus Kitahara as a temporary condition, as medical stuff assures him. His distorted vision is described as mushroom clouds reminiscent of Nagoya (Ransmayr 1997, 279–280). As Jutta Landa argues, the body-scape and landscape coalesce in the novel. She interprets that “the blinding light of the atomic explosion has healing potential, its artificial sun possibly burning away the disease” (1998, 141). Even though Bering's condition is getting better, he – and the people of Brand respectively Moor – are now exposed to a concept of peace which means the elimination of enemies in a very cruel way. The shadows of the past represented by Bering's spots are lifted – the brightness of Brand and the atomic bombs become dazzling, revealing the true meaning of peace in the novel. However, what now lies in the open, in the light, is the unbearable trauma that Bering also realizes while gaining his full vision back.

BRAZIL – A UTOPIAN APOCALYPSE

After Moor is transformed into a military training camp, Ambras, Bering, and Lily migrate to Brazil, where another quarry is to be opened with the help of Moor's relocated extraction infrastructure. This radical relocation promises that people can continue their lives and apply their skills in another space. At first, the move to another continent seems like a dream come true, especially for Lily. In her imagination, the name Brazil “was not just a word on the map in Lily's tower, not just the name of a longing, the name of a country beyond reach, but a goal, and that the trip there was also just a journey from one place to the next, no different from the trip across the lake to the Blind Shore, no different from a trip to Brand” (Ransmayr 1997, 316). Brazil appears to offer a way out of the circular time of terror.

After arriving in Rio de Janeiro, the group is greeted by Muyra who brings them to Ilha do Cão, which translates as “dog island”, referring to the Villa Flora, the “house of dogs” of the “dog king” in Moor. The uncanny return of the past is also mirrored in the name of the town where the Brazilian quarry is located: it turns out to be “Pantano”, which translates to German as “Moor”. Moor and Pantano, two swamps, provide analogous settings in which the protagonists sink into their own past, causing the beginning and the end of the novel to coincide, as Liessmann observes (1997, 157). Muyra explains that the island's name is derived from bloodhounds which used to guard the island's prison. Lily is the only one who can voice the similarities between Pantano and Moor: “What is this here? The lakeside resort at Moor? [...] She wants to go to Santos, and is standing in the middle of Moor!” (Ransmayr 1997, 349) As the only protagonist who makes a self-determined decision, she decides to leave for Santos, a pseudo-utopian place that her family wanted to emigrate to.

Toward the end of the novel, the light-dark-correlation becomes especially interesting as its opposition dissolves. During the last chapter, words that imply fire as much as smoke become more frequent. The “pennant of smoke” (346) or “the columns of smoke” (353) seem to shape the atmosphere of Pantano leaving the impression of an unclear and ambiguous mood. However, what makes the ending most gripping is the different semantical conceptions of the smoke. While Ambras is re-

mindful of his past as a prison camp inmate, Bering's vision is impaired again. This time it is not his eye condition that keeps him from having a clear view, but the jungle or "Nebelwald" in the German original (Ransmayr 2017, 439), that culminates with another "pennant of smoke" (1997, 354). He projects his impaired vision onto Lily: "Where Lily is, there are always spots. Camouflage spots, blind spots, there is always something to remind him of Moor, of what he has survived" (351). By comparing Lily with the symptoms of his retinal illness, Bering accuses her of blocking his way into a brighter future. This not only refers to Bering's individual relationship struggles as his love for Lily remains unrequited but also to Lily's family history. As the daughter of a perpetrator, she personifies guilt and the impossibility to separate political responsibility from her mourning of a family member – which again leaves an impression of darkness. In a desperate state of mind, Bering tries to shoot Lily to finally leave the dark spots behind and to liberate himself from the past, but he kills Murya accidentally. Without realizing that he hit the wrong person, he convinces himself that it was just an accident: "He didn't pull the trigger. The rifle kicked at him and bruised his forehead. He doesn't even have to drop the weapon. It leaps from his hands. He didn't do anything" (352). The last sentence represents his generation's attitude toward the past, namely the pretense of innocence and not being responsible for any catastrophic event. It would seem that this narrative repeats the new regime's concept of peace, justifying violence to establish the alleged good. The murder of Murya (in place of Lily) was an attempt to finally overcome his illness.

After realizing that he murdered a defenseless person, Bering seeks solace with Ambras, who is caught by his past once more. At the "dog island", a former prison, he relives the memories of the labor camp:

He can smell the ovens. The corpses. [...] Anyone who does not shout his number loud enough at roll call can be burning by the evening. – can be smoke dispersed into the night and trickling back down over the camp in the cold of the next morning, falling as soot, black dust, onto columns of workers moving toward the quarry, filling their noses with stench, creeping into their lungs, their eyes, ears, and dreams. [...] Are they shooting yet? The shot he hears – is that shot meant for him? He is not afraid. For he is searching for his love, for everything he has missed for so long now – searching where so many lost things get caught. He walks into the fence. (348)

Ambras cannot differentiate between the fog caused by the tropical climate (or the smoke of a nearby bush fire) and the smoke of the concentration camp of his past. His misconception renews his trauma, causing him to commit suicide as the only way out of his misery. Regarding the light-dark-correlation, the fog is a state between total darkness and light which prevents Ambras and Bering from seeing clearly, leading them to a fatal decision. The perimeter of light and dark that were very clear in Brand start to merge and finally resolve in their final fatal fall.

Unaware of Ambras's imagination, Bering takes him to climb up a rocky path to look for Murya. In his delusion, Ambras does not recognize Bering and carries on with his plan. He steps into the supposedly electrified fence, but "[h]e simply steps into emptiness" (355). Since both men are tied to a connecting rope, Bering's dead-

ly plunge drags Ambras with him. While Bering feels as if realizing his childhood dream to fly like a bird, Ambras also seems to be finally free, since he becomes lighter and his trauma disappears.

This ending connects the darkness of the storyline with a conciliatory solution, thereby creating a highly aestheticized finale. In the final scene, in which both beginning and end come together, spatial and temporal peculiarities start to merge. The last chapter directly connects with the novel's opening:

Two bodies lay blackened in the Brazilian January. A fire that for days now had leapt through an island's wilderness, leaving charred corridors behind, had freed the corpses from a tangle of blossoming lianas and also burned the clothes from their wounds – two men in the shade of an overhanging rock. They lay a few yards apart wrenched to inhuman poses among stumps of ferns. A red rope that bound them together guttered in the embers" (3).

Such circularity not only suggests that history is bound to repeat itself without mercy but goes beyond that. The rope between Ambras and Bering – which should secure them in the rocky areas – turns fatal. It is a symbol of their relationship not only between friends or between a boss and his bodyguard but of the victim and the perpetrator. As Ambras and Bering both die, the binary between guilt and atonement and of past and present/future are dissolved. Furthermore, the rope is described as red – referencing the red thread of fate. The thread, as a common symbol representing various cosmological, biological or social connections, stands for orientation but also affiliation. Furthermore, it symbolizes fate and time – a narrative that is rooted in mythology (Greber 2021, 220). In *The Dog King* the red thread can stand for the close relation between Ambras and Bering, but at the same time, the red stands out from the grey stony surroundings.

The red thread can also be read as a structural or narrative device referring to the "visual" effects of the novel as signal lights: the bright embers at the beginning and the fire at the end of the novel form a frame suggesting a concept of circular time. The novel itself approaches an interesting way of the bright-dark correlation: while Moor depicts a state of despair, where there is no hope for progression, Brand seems to provide possibilities for a carefree future. However, Brand's lights, which translate as "fire", are ambiguous: Beside the artificial lights, the brightness of the bomb of Nagoya represents the devastating results of progression and peace. The fire ("Brand") appears again in Pantano, which can be read as a blend of Moor and Brand as it takes up motifs of both places. Pantano's fire and its different conceptions result in an ambiguous state, where darkness and light cannot be separated anymore. Both Ambras and Bering, are captured by the smoke and fog, making both of them unable to see clearly and to act rationally.

CONCLUSION

Christoph Ransmayr constructs a very complex world which is certainly influenced by history and a reflection on alternative narratives. His highly poetic novel includes reflections on nature, trauma, and coexistence in a postwar society, while at the same time, it criticizes globalization and the disguise of power structures

through the promise of eternal peace. Eternal peace, however, differs quite drastically from utopian or idyllic concepts: As shown in Moor, Brand, and Brazil, peace has a devastating aftertaste. In a great struggle, the authorities install a binary system of good vs. evil, but the novel's aesthetic and stylistic strategies deconstruct those efforts by making the brutality beneath the alleged peace visible. The inevitability of the past links the novel to an apocalyptic narrative: firstly, on a structural level as the end is connected to the beginning; and secondly, time and space keep repeating themselves, as the "house of dogs" reappears as "dog island" and temporal distances dissolve in circular time. Finally, even though the novel oscillates between darkness and brightness, despair dominates: death offers the only way out of the circular time of terror.

The concept of peace is also realized in Ransmayr's aesthetic language of light and darkness: as much as Bering's Morbus Kitahara prevents him from having a clear vision of the vocabulary of smoke, clouds and fire also stand for ambiguity between revealing and concealing the past and the ongoing terror of the present. The terror cannot be overcome as the end and the beginning of the novel coincide. The bodies in the beginning are darkened by the fire, suggesting that if they would not have died before, they might have become victims of the fire, resulting in an ultimate deadly end. The burnt bodies take up the language of brightness and darkness, symbolizing the fatal end that waits inevitably for the protagonists – and, possibly, all civilization in the Nuclear Age. Eternal peace, one could argue, is only achieved and experienced in the final ending, when the loads and clouds of Ambras's and Bering's lives are lifted in their fatal fall.

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