CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Thomas Gunzig

Kuru

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Kuru by Thomas Gunzig explores the contemporary world of the early twenty-first century through an original political lens. Rather than adhering to the conventional model of the political novel, the text does not primarily focus on the direct representation of institutions or the explicit articulation of ideological discourse. Instead, Gunzig approaches the political as a set of diffuse mechanisms – social norms, relations of domination, and symbolic constraints – that structure individual lives, bodies, and imaginaries. The novel thus can be read as staging a form of diffuse politics embedded in everyday practices and subjectivities, suggesting the difficulty individuals encounter when attempting to distance themselves from the very structures of domination they seek to contest.

The narrative adopts a fragmentary and polyphonic structure, following several characters whose marginal or dysfunctional trajectories intersect by chance within an unstable social environment marked by persistent tensions. Episodes alternate between burlesque scenes, violent situations and improbable moments, producing a fragmented and drifting perception of reality that resists the construction of a unified meaning. The utilisation of the absurd and the grotesque, with its tendency to border on surrealism, enables the text to interrogate contemporary forms of domination that operate across multiple spheres of social life, including the social, relational, economic, media-driven, and cultural domains. More significantly, the grotesque functions as a strategy of desacralising power: by exposing the absurd dimension of social and political situations, the novel highlights the arbitrary nature of the norms and structures that organise collective life.

Thomas Gunzig, a notable figure in contemporary Belgian Francophone literature, develops this critical engagement with the social and cultural dynamics of the contemporary world in several of his works. In texts such as *Assortiment pour une vie meilleure*, *Manuel de survie à l'usage des incapables*, *Mort d'un parfait bilingue* and *La vie sauvage*, he explores, often through irony and dark humour, the logics of social domination, the effects of contemporary social transformations, and the underlying absurdity of the economic and cultural systems that shape individual trajectories.

The plot of *Kuru* follows several contrasting protagonists: Fred, passive and prone to migraines; Kristine, an activist involved in various collectives; Paul, a radical revolutionary; Pierre, fragile and pessimistic; and Katerine, an enigmatic *femme fatale*. The plurality of these characters enables Gunzig to construct a fragmented representation of the social world, with each protagonist embodying a particular mode of relation to authority, political engagement, or political impotence. Their everyday lives, marked by routine and boredom, shift abruptly when they are drawn into an action organised on the margins of a G8 summit in Berlin. Pierre, a member of a far-left organisation, invites them to take part and gradually draws them into the preparations and events surrounding the summit.

Within this framework unfold a series of situations that combine interpersonal relationships, romantic failures, guru-like figures, fantastical elements, alter-globalisation protests and mechanisms of police repression, creating an atmosphere that oscillates between the burlesque

and the unreal. The characters appear as products of a constraining social system, defined by their frustrations, their failures, and their conflictual relationship with authority. Their bodily singularities, often extreme or absurd, serve as narrative indicators of social dysfunctions: the body becomes a privileged site where symbolic violence and arbitrary norms are inscribed. These anomalies do not simply belong to the realm of fantasy; rather, they participate in a metaphorical logic that renders visible the concrete effects of social order upon intimate experience. The title of the novel, which refers to transmissible spongiform encephalopathy, plays a structuring symbolic role. This fatal disease – kuru – only briefly evoked in the narrative, suggests an internal and irreversible contamination that is not biological but social and political. Gunzig's fictional world thus appears permeated by invisible logics of domination that spread without explicit coercion. Attempts at revolt or transformation paradoxically rely on the very tools they claim to oppose, revealing a circularity of violence and authority. The novel subverts the clichés of political activism, theories of global manipulation and conspiratorial imaginaries in order to highlight the banality of power. Power here operates less through grand ideological narratives than through everyday practices, implicit norms and the silent organisation of behaviour. The pervasive presence of references to popular and media culture also contributes to this critical approach, reflecting the symbolic saturation and fragmentation characteristic of the contemporary world.

Kuru ultimately refuses any definitive solution or utopian projection. The novel offers neither a political programme nor a promise of salvation but instead suggests that attempts at individual emancipation inevitably encounter the limits imposed by a closed social order. The political dimension of the text lies in its capacity to unsettle certainties and to render contemporary contradictions visible through the use of the absurd. The conclusion of the novel does not offer a clear political resolution but rather suggests a form of lucid disillusionment: faced with the impossibility of radically transforming the social order, the characters seem to adopt a fragile posture of acceptance, one that replaces ideological confrontation with a recognition of the limits of political action within a world structured by persistent mechanisms of domination.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing