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Reality Denied? – On Multicultiphobia, Just Government, and Textual Authority in Zac Thompson's *Relay* (2019)

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In Zac Thompsons Graphic Novel *Relay* (2018) sendet das scheinbar aufgeklärte galaktische Imperium der Menschheit das Angebot, sich durch die Einpflanzung eines gigantischen Monolithen, der homogenisierend auf Kulturen einwirkt, an neu entdeckte Planeten anzuschließen. Planeten, die ablehnen, werden zerstört. Die Konformität, die dieses System erzeugt, schafft oberflächlich betrachtet eine stabile Welt für die, die sich unterwerfen, zum Preis der gewaltsamen Auslöschung derer, die sich der Monokultur verweigern.

Der Artikel untersucht Thompsons Text und die ethischen Fragen, die er stellt, aus der Perspektive des *Empire* nach Michael Hardt und Antonio Negri, Nick Dyer-Witheford, sowie Greig de Peuter, postkolonialer Theorien, wie Phil Ryans *Multicultiphobia*, und kantianischer Ethik. Dabei wird klar, wie *Relay* das Konzept des Fortschritts hinterfragt, die Komplexitäten von Identität und Zugehörigkeit, Einheit und universaler Werte auslotet, die Ethik gerechten Regierens und die soziopolitische Balance zwischen Stabilität und Dynamik problematisiert, und schließlich sogar die Stabilität und Autorität von Texten an sich dekonstruiert.



Relay, Thompson, and the Shape of Things to Come

»Reality denied comes back to haunt« (Thompson et al. 28); this quote by Philip K. Dick is the first in a series of emblematic textual references that comic book author Zac Thompson uses as *de facto* titles to the individual issues of his science fiction comics series *Relay* (2019). Together with the reference to Dick, quotations from works by Ursula K. LeGuin (51), Ray Bradbury (73), Frank Herbert (95), and Plato (117) establish the generic, discursive, theoretical, and ideological framework for this intriguing artefact of sequential art (cf. Eisner) and, hence, its analysis. All of the modern authors of speculative fiction on this list – and within certain limits also Plato – critically engage with questions of identity and otherness, political and individual ethics, knowledge and belief, individual as well as collective authority. What unites them is their interest in the power of discourse and those who wield and shape it, an interest that Thompson shares.

Born and raised on Prince Edward Island in the traditionally liberal Maritime provinces, Thompson took his first steps in the comics medium in 2017, before sub-cultural success catapulted him into the comics major league in 2019 when he became showrunner and writer for several high-profile Marvel lines. *Relay* is based on a concept story co-authored by Thompson, Donny Cates, and Eric Bromberg. It was initially published as an original six-issue series with AfterShock Comics, and ultimately collected into the graphic novel *Relay: Reality Denied* (Volume 1) in June 2019. In his introduction to the collected volume, Eric Bromberg argues that Thompson »questions the core of our shared humanity« (4) in *Relay*, asking: »Does unity eventually lead to uniformity? What is the best way to govern [...]? What is the path to happiness [...]?« (4). Thompson's graphic novel taps into the inherent strength of science fiction as a speculative genre, Bromberg suggests, as »oftentimes, a potential scenario can tell us more about humanity than an actual one« (4). Bromberg concludes: »I only hope we keep asking the big questions about tomorrow, so that we can make better decisions – our own decisions, channelling our own humanity – today« (4). The questions about ethics, responsibility, and how we govern ourselves raised here serve as a focus for the present reading of Thompson's text.

Relay is set in an unspecified future: there are no other known sentient species in the universe, and Earth is at the centre of a seemingly enlightened and benevolent human empire that encompasses multiple planets. On every planet of that empire, a colossal black monolith is implanted – a Relay. The monolith not only symbolises a specific, i.e. »monolithic« notion of culture, in reference to both Stanley Kubrick's film and Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the networked system of Relays also manifests the conceptual struggle between structure and chaos that Thompson's comic

evokes on many levels. Hank Donaldson, the semi-mythical founder of the empire and initiator of the Relay system, vanished three hundred years ago, leaving only the network behind and his image that has been turned into a propaganda tool. What the Relay offers its citizen-subjects by exerting symbolic, cultural, and political pressure to conform, is a reality defined by clarity, stability, and certainty, ensuring everyone that humanity's colonising efforts are ostensibly driven by a progressive motivation. Yet, worlds that refuse to join the empire and install Relays are destroyed, as variation and noise must be erased according to the dominant ideology.

Over the course of the six-issue narrative, the reader-viewer follows Relay agent Jad on his journey from blind belief in the messages of the Relay and submission to the powers ruling the galactic human empire to autonomous agency. As Donaldson's legends unravel in the comic, which follows a *Bildungsroman* structure, Jad eventually emerges as a sceptic and self-directed thinker. His fellow agents, William Burns and Victoria Burgess, are the main supporting characters. For Burns, »[m]ost truths are a matter of opinion« (Thompson et al. 34). His radical relativism is also why he openly questions and secretly undermines the Relay by saving objects from doomed cultures until he is finally crushed by the system (77). Burgess, by contrast, pragmatically executes the edicts of the Relay, even killing Burns for »[h]arboring erased culture from a variable planet« (77). She is ultimately revealed to have been a biomechanical extension of the Relay, her very nature questioning the repressive violence of the empire's system of governance and the restraints this system puts on notions of free will.

The first panels of the graphic novel set the tone for its critique of the notions of purity and textual authority:

Every relayed message distorts over time. It's passed down, perverted and manipulated into something that serves a purpose. Every story has **many masters**. This one, previous to the cause, was no different. Now, this isn't the truth, but it's the **best version** of the story we have. (7)¹

As a Canadian author, Thompson is embedded in a national culture officially defined by multiculturalism ever since the introduction of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982). At the core of the present reading of his work stands Phil Ryan's notion of *multicultiphobia* (4), a reactionary response to the perceived loss of meaning and identity caused by a shift towards an appreciation of diversity and otherness.

¹ All bold passages in direct quotations are original emphases, as is habitual in comics texts.

In connection to the thematic areas of interest established as important for *Relay* by Thompson's above-mentioned intertextual references, i.e. identity and otherness, political and individual ethics, knowledge and belief, individual as well as collective authority, and the power of discourse, I first lay out the fundamental elements of multiculphobia, before further discussing questions of political as well as textual authority both in terms of the more abstract notion of ›empire‹ (cf. Hardt and Negri, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter) and concrete ideas for a ›just government‹ suggested by the early champion of modern republicanism, Kant (cf. Kant, Guyer). Throughout my discussions, I provide textual evidence from the graphic novel, interpreted in the respective theoretical categories. What eventually emerges from this contextualised reading of *Relay* is a creative deconstruction of the enticing promises of empire – purity, stability, clarity – in light of the multiculphobia and loss of confidence in republican institutions encroaching upon our societies. In contrast to the false promise of homogenisation, Thompson offers a procedural and dynamic model for identity, politics, and knowledge, driven by a continuous, discursive exchange between equal autonomous agents.

Multiculphobia

When contextualised in the Canadian culture of its origins, the homogenising *Relay* can be seen as a critical reaction to »*multiculphobia*« (Ryan 4, original emphasis), »a diffuse anxiety« (4) manifesting as a rejection of diversity that has become »very influential in our society and must be addressed« as it »does identify a range of issues about which we need to talk« (5), according to Ryan. After the (attempted) terror attacks in the early 2000s, »the claim that multiculturalism promotes ghettos and ›cultural isolation‹« (4) became the dominant understanding of multiculturalism, feeding incipient ›multiculphobia.‹ Symptoms of this shift identified by Ryan are the following:

- a) within the logic of multiculphobia, »wildly contradictory ills are laid at the feet of multiculturalism« (4): it allegedly stifles individualism *and* hypercharges it; it presumably promotes moral relativism *and* rigid moral absolutism
- b) multiculphobia produces »a suspension of clear cause-effect thinking, so that effects precede the alleged cause« (4): multiculturalism is frequently blamed for ills that predate it
- c) multiculphobia leads to »an over-the-top assessment of the ›threat‹ posed by multiculturalism, which is endowed with a near-mythical power to wreak havoc« (4)
- d) multiculphobia emphasizes »the ready transmission of ›truths‹ from one multiculphobic commentator to another« (4) with a total lack of evidence »giving the ›truths‹ of multiculphobia a viral quality« (5)

The complex symptoms of multiculphobia, Ryan suggests, result in a rejection of the notion of multiculturalism by many of its critics, reducing it to »a mix of relativism, rigid anti-racism, hatred for ›The West‹, and so on« (7). However, if looked at more closely, multiculturalism as a phenomenon is significantly more intricate since it functions on several intersecting levels at the same time: »descriptively (as a sociological fact), prescriptively (as ideology), from a political perspective (as policy), or as a set of intergroup dynamics (as process)« (6). Following Ryan's argument, it can also denote »a character attribute« (8), that is to say »a general inclination to welcome unfamiliar cultural practices, or at least not to judge them a priori« (8), which is in turn interpreted by critics as »a rigid, humourless character, fanatically and irrationally committed to the multiculturalist ›credo« (8).

Among the many ills of the perceived ›threat‹ of multiculturalism, two core issues are frequently raised. First, how minority groups supposedly develop unrealistic expectations towards society, reacting with resentment when those are then not met (Ryan 41). And second, that multiculturalism deconstructs any unifying, glorified understanding of history, ultimately leading to what is felt as »the loss of our ›centre« and separatism between cultural groups, until society crumbles under the strains of »divided loyalties« and »a weakened collective life« (42). On a conceptual level, two foundational assumptions underly multiculphobic discourse:

The first is primitive ontology, the assumption that to ›preserve‹ a culture is to maintain it entirely unchanged. The second is the belief that ›official multiculturalism‹ can be treated as a single static phenomenon, rather than an evolving set of policies with potentially contradictory effects. (53)

Elements of these assumptions and the mechanisms by which they are injected into public discourse are clearly evident in the ideological underpinnings of Relay culture. Jad fervently believes »that if reality differs from person to person, we can never speak of reality singular. Untouched worlds need to be synced until there are no plural realities. Until there is **one truth**. [...] It's the context we need to explain the universe. **The final truth**« (Thompson et al. 42). Later in the text, there is also a painting of Donaldson with the Relay in front of his face (46sq.), referencing René Magritte's famous Surrealist painting *The Son of Man* (1946). The painter himself once explained his painting thus:

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict,

one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.
(Magritte, »The Son of Man«, n. p.)

Following the dominant visual motif of the apple hiding the face of the man down the rabbit hole of cultural and art history, the painting immediately opens up a direct line of reference to the biblical story of the Tree of Knowledge and the Fall from Grace. This allows for an interpretation of it as suggesting that apparent knowledge can hide deeper meanings, like the reader-viewer following Jad on his revelatory journey to dismantle the illusions of the Relay. This understanding, in turn, also resounds in more jarring ways in the contemporary proliferation of conspiracy theories.

Obsessed with a deep fear of uncertainty, diversity, and dynamism, the Relay system offers the apparent clarity and purity of static monoculture, spread and enforced through colonisation as well as genocidal violence. »Reality's about to be augmented« (Thompson et al. 71), the reader is told before the destruction of Donaldson's World. Jad continues: »Another variable needs to be erased from the cosmos. Independent of any specific technical or environmental information we collect – a planet who refuses the Relay is wiped clean from the universe« (71). Eerily, the regular people aboard the colonisation vessel, who are about to commit genocide for the Relay, await the moment of destruction in joyful anticipation rather than reacting with terror or, at the very least, unease. They seem to look forward to the inhumane spectacle of planetary mass murder. As Jad muses while observing them: »They take pleasure in the peculiar defeated quality before them. I've never understood the vague and ragged lurch of excitement over death« (71). Reinforcing these disturbing aspects of Relay culture and extradiegetically turning multiculphobic discourse against itself, Thompson has his characters describe the Relay and its monocultural logic in the language of the impure and the marketplace. One such example is Donaldson's explanation that »[t]he Relay is a systematic illusion. A **virus** that eats cultures and people alive. [...] For some reason, the Relay's one commodity is the culture of humanity. The culture of Earth. A colonization engine erasing all known alien life ...« (126). Another occurs when he later confronts Victoria with the abhorrent reality of the machine she serves: »The Relay will reshape your perception. It pollutes thoughts, rewrites memories, erases history, art, culture. Creates new synthetic things. All right under your nose« (130). What is sold as a healing by the Relay, indeed follows the logic of an infection, a rapidly spreading psycho-social and cultural ›disease.«

Ryan's analysis of multiculphobia untangles its complex and at times openly contradictory intermingling of sociological, ideological, and political problematics, violating a supposed »censorship of political correctness« (42). Taking this strategy

to the extreme, the makers of *Relay* clearly situate their deconstruction of the false and inhumane ›unity‹ and ›safety‹ of ›Empire‹ in what Ryan defines as the »multi-cultural temperament [that] can help create [...] freedom, since learning from other cultures gives us a critical perspective on our own« (152). Such a shift in perspective facilitates a questioning of the hollow promises of homogeneity and security intended to keep the populace servile and content that come at the cost of systemic (and mostly male) violence exerted by both individuals and the state. A violence that is also mostly repressed in the awareness of the subject-consumer of empire.

Empire

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the nature and promise of Empire are »characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries« (xiv), a totalitarian subsumption of all attainable space/territory, time/history, and »all registers of the social order« in its unrelenting drive to »rule over human nature« (xv) and establish »a perpetual and universal peace outside of history« (xv). Empire in this reading is a structure, a system, a *concept* even, as it »presents its rule [...] outside of history or at the end of history« (xv). Hardt and Negri remind us of the constitutive power of this structure, system, and concept, emphasizing that »Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits« (xv). This is also why they end on Empire's inherently contradictory nature, suggesting that »although the practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always dedicated to peace – a perpetual and universal peace« (xv). They thus establish a connection to a Kantian conception of just government that indeed pursues the very same goals in radically different ways.

Hardt and Negri's basic framework is further extended and substantiated by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's »planetary, militarized hypercapitalism« (xv) of Empire as »an apparatus whose two pillars are the military and the market« carried by its »twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen« (xiv). As they elaborate further:

By Empire, we mean the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states [...]. This is a regime of biopower based on corporate exploitation of myriad types of labor, paid and unpaid, for the continuous enrichment of a planetary plutocracy. [...] This Empire is an order of extraordinary scope and depth. Yet it is also precarious. (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xxiii)

Unlike the monolithic, all-encompassing, and untouchable ›concept‹ of Empire in Hardt and Negri, their regime, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's ›machine‹ of »Empire is flush with power and wealth, yet close to chaos« (xxiv). It remains precarious, »a contested system dependent on social energies that it has to hold under control, but which incessantly depart from its discipline« (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 228). It is also not disconnected from the realities on the ground, but rather caught up in the deeply ambiguous developments of the twenty-first century that seem to point, as they suggest, not only »perhaps to an unprecedented intensification of Empire, but also possibly to exodus from it« (229). This inherent, irreducible, and ironically inescapable possibility of escape therefore ultimately makes Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's more recent notion of Empire resonate much more strongly with Thompson's *Relay* than Hardt and Negri's, which they reacted to with their observations.

Victoria and Jad are both well aware of the terror the Relay's imperialistic system spreads among those colonised: »They feel **paranoia**. A passive sense of fear like we're going to ruin their way of life,« Jad admits, only to immediately rationalise the disturbing insight and pushing it away: »I can empathize with it. That's enough to offer an enlightened way out of their maze« (Thompson et al. 55). When the Relay agents later see that, on Donaldson's World, autonomous communities of many historical periods and cultural backgrounds co-exist, they find this way of living »terribly disorganized« (58), and Victoria goes so far as to describe it as »the playground of a haunted ruler incapable of deciding a vision for his people« (59). It is inconceivable for Victoria that people can autonomously decide for themselves about their preferred way of life because the idea that a heteronomous authority is needed to decide peoples' lives is so deeply ingrained in the mindset of Relay culture. The inherently heteronomous logics of Empire lead to a willing self-disenfranchisement, turning potentially autonomous citizens into subjects.

It is Empire that has brought order and stability to Earth, Jad claims: »This is life before order. If you can't remember, if you won't remember, Earth was like this once« (Thompson et al. 59). He tries to convince Donaldson to join his world with the Relay system to save it from certain destruction, because the military power of the Relay cannot be resisted. The two worldviews jarringly collide, and a potential reading emerges where Thompson's novel can be said to establish a connection between the ›Empire‹ of the Relay and globalisation:

Jad: »The Relay streamlines your process. It makes for **reality singular**. Reduces the mess«.

Donaldson: »Is that freedom? [...] Imagine self-expression without any finite truth. Now, **that's** freedom«.

Jad: »Humans need something to refine that expression. We need a **beacon** to guide us«.

Donaldson: »No single thing can guide all of humanity. We're too fucked up. There's culture, socio-economic status, food, energy ... all variables which need to be accounted for«.

Jad: »The Relay has worked for hundreds of years. Birth rates are on the rise, the cosmos is getting smaller, food is plentiful. The Relay is – «

Donaldson: »A **master** like any other, with its own agenda«.

[...]

Jad: »Seclusion is weakness. This is globalization«.

Donaldson: »Call it what it is. **Colonization**«. (63sq.)

As Empire seeks to extend its homogenising dominion into all available space, and indeed *has* to do so if it wants to contain all potentially disruptive forces, colonisation and globalisation become essential vectors of its dissemination.

Only later in the narrative, after witnessing the genocidal erasure of Donaldson's World, Jad understands how Relay propaganda naturalises the consumerist monoculture of the Empire as progress, defining it as the inevitable *End of History*, in Fukuyama's original sense. The Relay take-over does not render colonized worlds perfect, or at least give them direction and order, as the Relay agents claim. Instead, it erases all alternative histories, disguising the violence of colonisation with a hollow contractual discourse of exchange:

[We are told that colonisation is] an offer to commit a planet's history to something greater. All their data in exchange for a lifetime of knowledge from the universe. For many primitive worlds this meant **progress**. Space travel, longer lifespans, organic vegetables ... the list goes on. The Relay is a technological evolution to fill any collective absence. The thing we're never told is **how** it's actually done. History books are rewritten whenever a planet joins the system. There's only one historical timeline now: the Relay's. (Thompson et al. 78)

Even Donaldson himself has been robbed of his voice: his individuality, his personality, and his history have been appropriated by the Relay and turned into unifying tools of Empire in consumerist advertisements and expansionist military propaganda. »Hank Donaldson is only **an idea**,« Jad reflects, »[a]n idea to keep us complacent and moving like guinea pigs in some big globalization experiment for another race. [...] A disembodied voice coming from a black tower, keeping us hooked to some semblance of order« (79). And he concludes: »Why is he part of every advertisement, piece of art,

music, and consumer product? Because he is a **narrative** we're being fed. Because he is the engine to which we push outward. Because we were never meant to find him« (79).

On a structural level, the Relay monoliths, with their dark, organic, almost Giger-esque biotechnological interiors (Thompson et al. 85) become ›embodiments‹ of the dehumanising biopower of Empire, its control and consumption of both bodies and lives. When Jad wanders the fleshy corridors of the Earth monolith, he describes its totalitarian, inhuman and inhumane nature and will:

This place [...] echoes with life that can't be real. Something that defies logic and understanding. This is not a vast database of knowledge. It is something that yearns to be human, but fails. An empty husk. A hive of ideas and nothing more. [...] It is all things and yet it is nothing. I can see years within its walls, memories, societies. Everything. All at once. (87)

Passing by walls made up of bodies, bodies distorted, grown together, overgrown with non-human organic matter, Jad recognises that the monolith consumes people and that »[b]eing exposed to it means being lost within it« (Thompson et al. 88). So eventually he comes to the following conclusions: »This is a miserable, sprawling empire of illusion... « (88).

Utterly helpless against the overwhelming power of the Relay on Earth, Jad flees into space, whose vastness – in a motif reminiscent of Frank Herbert's ideas expressed in his *Dune* saga (1965–1985) – is really the last hope for human liberty faced with the machinery of Empire. Distancing himself from the distorting discourses of Relay propaganda, he begins to dissect the dire reality of life under the Relay, echoing ideas established by Ryan, Hardt and Negri, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter:

Here among the silence I can see the truth. [...] The emptiness of its total power. It's a vast mill of nothing rising up from the ground on thousands of different planets. Unleashing everyone from their useless ideas of art, killing their machines, emptying their prose and poetry of meaning. Breaking them away from their history as a species. But the truth of a people oozes out from every object they produce. That's why we're instructed to get rid of the ›variables.‹ Since every culture's artifacts can tell us different stories about the people who made them. Until the monolith replaces them ... I now know why we erase variables ... because we can learn dangerous truths about our own race when we study how others create objects. (Thompson et al. 94)

Following Ryan's argument of how a multicultural temperament leads to self-awareness through an understanding of difference, Jad here lays open the violently homo-

genising, dehumanising, but at the same time eerily hollow and surprisingly precarious nature of Empire.

When Jad finally meets the real Donaldson, the original First Emissary of the Relay and not just the biotechnological construct posing as his descendant on Donaldson's World, it is the latter who manages to bridge the power of ›understanding‹ and the power to ›rule‹ in the system of Empire for both Jad and the reader-viewer:

The Relay rewrites our tools of understanding. It's a mechanism by which we define all culture. We don't think about what it is. We instinctively kneel to it, because it has conditioned us to bend our knees. The Relay is an autonomous control device. (Thompson et al. 126)

Rather than autonomous agents of their own lives, the citizen-subjects of the Relay internalize the heteronomous rule imposed on them: this ›Empire‹ is therefore fundamentally different from Kant's notions of ›just government‹ and ›perpetual peace‹ that we see shimmering through in those who dare to resist the Relay.

Government

Kantian notions of ethically justifiable government emerge as a potential focus for dissent in Zac Thompson's *Relay*. In opposition to Donaldson's policies and strategies, Kant categorically refuses a right to rebellion for citizens (Guyer 329), even under an unjust government, because according to him rebellion would mean they can no longer fulfil the moral duty of individuals to enter and maintain a state (333, 348). However, Kant also clearly identifies a duty of the state to constantly change and adapt to the circumstances, since »alteration is necessary, in order to keep constantly approaching the end (of the best constitution in accordance with laws of right)« (»Peace« 8:372).

In opposition to the inevitable violence of synthesis under the aegis of Empire, Kant described in »Toward Perpetual Peace« an egalitarian republicanism built on interdependence as the only just and stable form of government (Guyer 325). In this text, he proposed an all-encompassing, transnational human super-state built upon the pillars of republicanism on a micro-level (Kant, »Peace« 8:349), federalism between individual republics on a macro-level (8:354), as well as a cosmopolitan right of universal hospitality governing relations between members of the federation (8:358). Rather than seeking to colonise each other in imperialist conflicts, all republics in Kant's super-state would have to respect and welcome differences, while individuals would be expected to respect and work within the constitutional consensus of the respective republics they enter and/or inhabit. For this system to work, a constant (re-)negotiation of difference from a position of *mutual* respect would be necessary.

At the centre of Kant's ethics in general stands the rational autonomous agent. Kant defines autonomy as »the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the object of volition)« (Kant, *Fundamental Principles* 4:440; Guyer 234). Compensating for libertarian power fantasies and to curb excessive individualism, Kant's rational autonomous agent is also always bound by the categorical imperative: »act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law« (Kant, *Fundamental Principles* 4:420sq.; Guyer 211). While reason clearly stands at the forefront of Kant's deliberations on active ethics, he also acknowledges and accepts human beings as »finite, sensuously affected, rational agents« (Allison 39sq.). Kant thus views humans as hybrid beings of *both* the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds, which means that »purely« rational choices are impossible for us. For embodied agents, it takes affective motivation to behave according to rational principles of universal law, which is why just, republican governments also need to consider the emotional needs of their citizens, without falling into the trap of the cheap, pervasive affectivity of populism.

On Donaldson's World, the biotechnological Donaldson-construct paints a picture of the man he was modelled after as a champion of autonomy:

[Donaldson] gave the people of this world total autonomy to live in their own vision. [...] Autonomy is the secret to living in these bodies we hold. We value our own message and we respect that of others. Each may be different, but all are equally valid as truth. (Thompson et al. 62)

In contrast to these Kantian notions promoted by Donaldson and in contrast to Jad who believes in the quasi-religious importance of Donaldson's World for the workings of Relay propaganda, Victoria coldly and pragmatically justifies the destruction of Donaldson's World: »The Edict will keep going. The reflected light of the monolith will keep shining and we'll keep looking for **Donaldson's World**« (70). Instead of real autonomous agency, Victoria accepts that all it takes to secure stability in the Empire and to pacify the people of the Relay system is an *illusion* of agency, condemning them to a heteronomous life of ignorance.

Unlike Victoria, Jad eventually manages to break free from Relay indoctrination. He actively exerts his autonomous agency with a seemingly simple sentence, echoing the Philip K. Dick quote placed at the beginning of the chapter that tells his personal journey: »I'm denying my reality« (Thompson et al. 97). After his (self-)liberation, Jad no longer wishes to impose his ideas on others, respecting their autonomous agencies as he has come to value his own. So, when the rebel outcasts of the faultily colonised First

World find his collection of Donaldson's legends, he refuses to choose for them what to do with it: »Show it to your people. Tell your planet the truth of what we think. Use these stories to empower a separate truth and rise up against the Relay. Or don't« (106). Jad purges himself of the internalised influence of both Donaldson-the-myth and Relay propaganda and their heteronomous effects on his life, preparing himself for life in a republic of autonomous agents: »And yet I see him [i.e. the original Donaldson] in myself. In my mind's eye he's my youthful proclamation of better things. Is he a substitution for meaning in the universe? Or a distraction designed to hide something else?« (107). Jad ventures beyond the image of a singular man, reaching for a meta-level of understanding: »But the Relay is more. It's the ultimate symbolization of power« (111). The cover of Issue #5 (the final chapter of Volume 1) highlights this sentiment, showing one of the Indrix, the mysterious aliens behind the Relay system (117), in a pose that is clearly reminiscent of the Pale Man from Guillermo del Toro's *PAN'S LABYRINTH* (ES/MX 2006) who, in the director's words, »represents ›institutional evil feeding on the helpless‹« (del Toro). Thompson's constant nods to related genre texts in other media echo the leitmotif of interconnectedness established in his series on a conceptual level, in line with his republican and Kantian understanding of the ideal polity as a network of interdependent and responsible autonomous agents.

When Jad finally encounters the real Donaldson, his former prophet extolls his own virtues as an autonomous agent defining himself as »a titan who stole fire and stoked it to build something the Indrix could never conceive of« (Thompson et al. 125). Donaldson even ends on a note of pride that clearly hints towards a hyperinflated sense of a quasi-godlike self-importance: »I built a new reality. I built a world« (125). While Donaldson sees himself as inspiring and empowering humanity, like Prometheus (whose dark eventual fate is either discretely discarded here, or maybe foreshadows Donaldson's future), the Relay »saps a people of their will to resist. It redefines their world and becomes a dictator« (127). Despite the homogenizing effects of the Relay, Donaldson still champions personal responsibility, attributing a certain amount of guilt to the subjected themselves for the loss of their culture, since »culture doesn't just disappear because the Relay decrees it« (127). The citizen-subjects of the Relay *could* resist, Donaldson implies, like Burns who pays the ultimate price for his resistance, it is just that the vast majority *chooses* not to. In the end, Donaldson at least acknowledges how the pressure to conform exerted by the governmental system of the Relay and its utter control of discourse and meaning weigh heavily on people's shoulders and minds: »This is done for total assimilation, history can be rewritten in a day and no one would even be aware of it«. He concludes: »The Relay brings too much constructed order to conquered planets« (135).

Empowered and emboldened by his previous experiences, Jad openly challenges his former prophet's logic when the original Donaldson declares war on the Relay, pointing out a logical flaw in his project:

But your new rule will proliferate like a virus... thereby you'll become your enemies. If you want to free people from oppression you have to give them free reign. Even then, some who believe in liberation may not like seeing the truth. (Thompson et al. 136)

Faced with the inherently imperialistic nature of a war of aggression and seemingly baffled by this recognition, here, Donaldson's immediate reaction is intriguing: »Don't confuse what I'm doing for tyranny. I won't have it« (136). It is this authoritarian and deeply un-Kantian streak in the personality of its creator that might have contributed to the ruthless imperialist propagation of the Relay system. Donaldson's own political agenda is painted in very different strokes, when he posits creativity as the core of his motivation:

There is no central driving force behind individual creation. Music, art, film, design. It's hidden by the monolith's shadow. Every particle of creativity imbues life with meaning. The Relay is an artifact that's made humanity a sterile relic. (137)

In opposition to Kant's philosophy, Donaldson's way to remedy the heteronomous disenfranchisement humanity lives in is not gradual change and constructive reform but rather the utter and catastrophic destruction of the oppressive system of Empire. Thus, in spite of Donaldson's Kantian focus on personal autonomy, he violates Kant's ban on rebellion under a banner of creativity, freedom, and diversity: »Life is best under the guiding hand of chaos. Unpredictability is the reason we have the cosmos. I want to erase the homogeneity. I want to take everything back to beautiful freedom. To diversity« (137). Only briefly does the threat of chaos shine through Donaldson's verbosity intended to inspire here, showing how Thompson cleverly manages to undermine his messianic message.

On the surface, the rebels fighting the Relay champion a Kantian understanding of a functioning society as a dynamic foam of interdependent, autonomous agents rather than the brittle crystallised structure of subject-consumer monads under the Relay. Just government can here only emerge from the constant and respectful negotiations and re-negotiations between republican citizens equally participating in the shaping of their polity; it cannot be imposed by a violently homogenising imperial center. However, when the reader-viewer looks more closely at the comic, there are clear indications of a

crypto-authoritarian element to Donaldson's character and political ideology that are in radical opposition to these egalitarian and liberal republican idea(1)s of Kant.

Agency

Zac Thompson's *Relay*, likely owing to its Canadian creator, unashamedly displays an entanglement between a postcolonial mindset working through the echoes of history and what Ryan calls the ›multicultural temperament‹ of its artistic team in an engrossing and haunting cautionary tale, warning against the false temptations of Empire. Boldly writing and drawing against the encroaching multiculphobia that is poisoning contemporary western societies, the comic's creators provide a counter-mythopoetic text for our post-Cold War world that has now been dominated for decades by the self-proclaimed last remaining ›meta-narrative‹, in Lyotard's terms. Thompson acutely dissects both popular sentiment and convictions that are usually appealed to when multiculphobic elements are introduced in public discourse: the need for truth, stability, and peace, even if that peace is nothing but the desert that remains after the (metaphorically and oftentimes literally) genocidal extinction of the Other. These ideas have a viral quality; they unfortunately spread exponentially in times of crisis and anxiety. The inhumane and ultimately inhuman uniformity of Empire(s) suffocates dissent, creativity, life. Diversity and fruitful tension are reduced to sameness and barren stasis at the price of a continuous application of force to contain internal pressures and external threats. Like humanity's Empire in *Relay*, the system of Empire seems to suspend time and history, to extend and fill all available space, and, ultimately, to regulate the human condition itself.

Thompson offers the freedom of autonomous, responsible agents as an antidote, contrasting it to the passivity of consumer-subjects who abdicate both their agency and responsibility. Empire consumes the bodies and lives of its consumer-subjects. The only alternative is a creative exertion of, and dynamic (re-)negotiation of boundaries and responsibilities by human agency. On a political level, *Relay's* ideological underpinnings are therefore defined by a focus on the active individual within the systems it inhabits and an egalitarian notion of republicanism that can be traced back to Enlightenment political philosophy. Echoing the Canadian emphasis on diversity, iterative change, and collective solutions, *Relay* is not about breaking the system – which would result in destructive chaos – but about affecting gradual change.

Ultimately, Thompson and his team thus use *Relay* to critically question the very notion of ›progress;‹ they plumb the depths and complexities of identity, deconstructing the lure of unity and universal values; they problematise the ethics of ›just‹

government as well as the precarious and necessarily ever-shifting socio-political balance between the forces of stability and dynamism. On a conceptual level, *Relay* deconstructs all notions of textual authority and stability of meaning, undermining the very possibility of a stable meta-narrative. The Relay system emerges as the biotechnocratic embodiment of Derrida's ›différance,‹ making evident the indispensable necessity of the continuous (re-)negotiation of all meaning and value by Kantian autonomous agents in republican discourse.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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