

**Rainer Guldin**

**„Acheronta movebo“.**

**On the Diabolical Principle in Vilém Flusser's Writing**

„The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. And like that, poof. He's gone.“

Verbal, in the movie *The Usual Suspects* (1995)

“A dificuldade de distinguir entre inferno e ceu, entre demonio e anjo, caracteriza a atualidade.”

Vilém Flusser, *Inferno IV*

“In einem Nachwort stelle ich die Frage, ob nicht die westliche Kultur die einzige geschichtliche, die einzige Teufelskultur sei [...]”

Vilém Flusser (1983)

In this paper I would like to reconstruct and comment briefly some significant aspects of what might be called the diabolical principle in Flusser's work. This principle has been active within his writing from the very beginning and can be traced to his last texts. I am going to begin with some considerations about the etymological meaning of the word devil and its dialectical relationship to his antagonist, God. God is ineffable, beyond words. In this sense he is absolute nothingness. The devil, on the other hand, stands for the ultimate frailty and absurdity of all human endeavors, for language, and for our continuous attempts to create sense, to project meaning on the unfathomable nothingness surrounding us. Flusser uses this opposition in *A historia do diabo* first published in 1965 to write an evolutionary account of the history of our planet and of a mankind itself. The figure of the devil, the fallen angel inhabiting the dark abysses plays also a major role in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* published in 1987, 22 years later. This time it is the devil wearing the mask of Lucifer, the light-bearer.

The thematic bridge between the two texts, linking Flusser's early and his late work, the devil of *A historia do diabo* and the infernal octopus of *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* is to be

found in Flusser's letters to Alex Bloch. Here Flusser discussed at length his unflagging interest for the devil as a manifestation of human aspirations. There are, however, a few more elements to be considered. When Flusser was forced into exile he took a Hebrew prayer book which he later lost and Goethe's *Faust* with him. Not so much because of his interest in the figure of Faust but because of Mephistopheles, 'der Geist, der stets verneint', the spirit of constant denial. In his autobiography *Bodenlos* Flusser calls his new disoriented nomadic life a diabolical existence. From the 22<sup>nd</sup> January to the 12<sup>th</sup> April 1972, shortly before leaving definitely for Europe again, Flusser published in the *Folha de São Paulo* five small texts, *Inferno I to V* (Flusser 1972) in which he ironically reconsidered the relationship between heaven and hell, God and the devil probably also in view of his disappointment with the Brazilian multicultural project.

Finally, the devil is not only a recurring subject within Flusser's work, an ethical, ontological and epistemological principle, but also one of Flusser's favorite masks. Flusser appears as Mephistopheles, the destructive spirit of eternal denial, he plays the role of the devil, the spirit of confusion, separating what has been ordered and randomly but creatively mixing and jumbling different elements together, he is the devil in its incarnation of perplexing and destabilizing plurality, he is Lucifer the light-bearer, and he is Vampyroteuthis himself, in all its possible forms, as Louis Bec has pointed out. "Chacune des planches", he writes referring to the illustrations added at the end of the book, „représente [...] des attitudes des comportements ou des traits de caractères vampyromorphiques de Vilém. [...] le discours fascinateur [...] (profondeur, bioluminescence, attributs morphologiques et zoosémiotiques...), [...] [la] capacité de séduction, de souplesse et de survol du champ des savoirs [...], un Attila du fond des mers et de la pensée.“ (Bec 2007: 1)

In *Ensaio para um estudo do significado ontológico da lingua* published in 1962 Flusser reflects on the etymology of the word diabo: „se faço ressoar esta palavra dentro de mim, sinto que um dos centros vitais da lingua se põe a dobrar como um sino longínquo. [...] Tão criadora é esta palavra com seu poder poético, que me induziu incoscientemente, a formular as palavras 'dobrar', 'dúbio' e 'ditongo' [...] a sílaba primordial 'dev' deu origem, entre outras, às palavras 'diabo' e 'deus' [...] dentro desta palavra se esconde, e através dela se manifesta [...] tôda a dialéctica, 'diabo' provoca 'deus'." (Flusser 1962: 86)

In *Do diabo* written a year later Flusser develops this insight reconstructing the history of Western philosophical thinking in manicheistic terms, as the fight between God and the devil. Flusser begins quoting and commenting Kafka. “Kafka nota: ‘A fé no diabo é impossível. Mais diabo do que há não pode haver.’ É uma frase tipicamente diabólica. Reina nela uma confusão proposital e sistemática. [...] Esconde e revela a um tempo o tema principal da nossa consciência: a dificuldade de distinguir entre o diabo e o seu rival, tradicionalmente chamado ‘Deus’.” (Flusser 1963) For those who have faith and have eaten from the tree of knowledge the distinction between good and evil is still possible. But for those who live in doubt, that is, for the children of modernity, this distinction has become a tricky affair. There are still no authentic substitutes to the faith that was lost. The existential situation of those who believe is to choose freely between good and evil, to put it another way, to escape the devil. “Fugir do diabo e ‘procurar Deus’ são sinônimos no território da fé.” (ibidem) For all others endless diabolical confusion has taken over. “A confusão entre o Mal e o Bem representa, no entanto, a vitória do diabo.” (ibidem) But the fact that the distinction between good and evil has become difficult is, according to Flusser, also the starting point for a new authentic freedom of choice. Modern man is left without any orientation as to the right choice. The new terrifying freedom opening up in this context cannot be described or discussed adequately it can only be experienced in everyday life. It is the diabolical existence of living in exile, of being *bodenlos*, without ground on which to stand on, without signposts indicating the correct course of action. The subject of Flusser’s essay, however, is not the ethical dimension of the devil as a seducer of souls, but its ontological aspect, the devil as “horizonte do Ser”, “o diabo como príncipe das trevas e senhor do inferno.” (ibidem) It is the darkness and infernal abyss of all those without faith and stable territory to live on, the topsy-turvy liquid realm of the Vampyroteuthis.

According to Flusser, two main philosophical tendencies can be made out within Western culture: on the one hand the Jewish and Latin elements defending orthodoxy and fighting for God, that is, for the idea of transcendental truth and on the other the Germanic and Slavic elements defending heresy and fighting for the devil, that is, for the idea that the world of appearances is all we have. Cartesian modernity inaugurates an apparently manicheistic interpretation of reality as it seems to be dealing only with the world of appearances, of absolute contingency. But this impression is wrong. In fact, modern

sciences try to discover universal laws that transcend what our senses perceive. “Recordando a un paradoxo, podemos dizer que a ciencia é uma ortodoxia com metodos hereticos. E uma procura de Deus atraves da pesquisa do diabo.” (ibidem)

The two original tendencies that originate with the fall of the Roman Empire – “base inconsciente do ocidente” (ibidem) – still exert their influence if only subterraneously. As with the fluid border between good and evil, mentioned before, in modernity it has also become extremely difficult to separate the two main philosophical tendencies from each other. Furthermore, the relationship between them has been inverted. In fact, the orthodox position is in the defensive while the heretic tendency prevails. The Roman Empire is once more invaded by barbarous tribes. We will soon be living in a new Middle Age. “Consideramos a posição maniqueia da atualidade. Basicamente, ela assume duas formas: a do existencialismo e a do neopositivismo. O existencialismo [...] representa um humanismo curiosamente invertido. O homem foi jogado pelo [...] diabo, para dentro do mundo sem ser previamente consultado. [...] O neopositivismo [...] prega uma alienação total entre homem e mundo.” (ibidem) From the existentialist point of view the devil, nothingness awaits us at the end of our life whatever we do, that is, if we simply give up and decline towards death or if we fight back and project us against our origins. “O inferno é o horizonte do Ser em todas as direções e o proprio Ser não passa de uma especie de inferno transitorio pelo qual a existencia passa em seu caminho do inferno para inferno.” (ibidem) Within the neo-positivist position man and the world are two mirrors mirroring each other. As the language is the very field of human intellectual activity and devilish in its basic structure “o homem está encarcerado dentro do seu intelecto, num inferno particular.” (ibidem) In this no longer dialectical but basically immobile context, a truly infernal situation: there is no way out to be seen. The orthodox position that has complemented the heretic one from its very beginning has practically disappeared and lost all influence in the field. This is, so Flusser, what we normally call the crisis of Western culture.

The survival of occidental civilization depends on a reformulation of an authentic position of orthodoxy, which implies at the same time a redefinition of what we traditionally call the devil. “Se essa reformulação for conseguida, se conseguirmos incorporar no conceito ‘diabo’ os aspectos existenciais do ‘nada’ e os aspectos epistemologicos da ‘lingua’ surgirá automaticamente uma nova fé e uma nova e autentica escala de valores.” (ibidem) As it is impossible to have faith in the devil we have to turn away from it and confront its

adversary. Flusser's suggestions imply a new form of non-transcendent religiosity which would not destroy manicheism but move beyond it by reintroducing a new form of orthodoxy. In fact, we cannot destroy the devil because by doing so we would also annihilate God. Flusser is only suggesting what this new kind of faith beyond religious faith would amount to. It would arise automatically once the necessary conditions have been established. This idea of an automatic emergency of a new set of values will reappear within the more dialogical and technological context of a future telematic society as Flusser postulated it in the early 1980es.

In *A historia do diabo* Flusser uses the figure of the devil and the Christian doctrine of the seven deadly sins to interpret the history of mankind and investigate scientific progress, moving from biology and chemistry to psychology and sociology, ending up with philosophy and linguistics.

In a summary of *A historia do diabo* written on the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1983 for his Swiss friend Felix Philipp Ingold Flusser (1983) makes use of some of his concepts of communicology formulated in the late 1970es integrating them with his earlier notions of God and the devil. He no longer defines God as unfathomable nothingness, as he did in the earlier texts, but as the general circular tendency of nature towards entropy, that is, disinformation, disaggregation, probability, chaos. God is thus compared to nature and assimilated immanentistically to the cosmos and its evolution. The devil, on the other hand, is described as a negentropic epicycle sitting on top of the greater circle moving in the opposite direction. The devil is a fallen angel uselessly fighting against the general tendency leading to death and oblivion in chaotic darkness. In Flusser's view human history and all the efforts that went into the creation of meaning can be seen as a negentropic project. Information itself is fundamentally negentropic as it denies entropy by creating novelty, that is, the improbable. As in earlier texts, the human enterprise is again viewed as fundamentally diabolical. In this new sense – that can already be found in *A historia do diabo* but without the communicological background – the devil is no longer a Mephistophelic principle but a creative force, no longer denying and destroying everything but a synonym of history and progress. In this specific view the devil combines two opposing sides: on the one hand, Flusser's positive notion of information as the dialogical creation of new meaning (the negentropic side of human endeavor) and, on the other, Flusser's skeptical

interpretation of history and linear progress as a problematic and self-destructive enterprise. God is beyond history, the devil on the other hand has a double, promethean and sinful history.

Flusser defines the human capacity to project symbolic systems as fundamentally diabolical because it represents a mystery opposed to reality. The diabolical project of science opposes itself uselessly to the general entropic tendency of the universe. Its sinfulness consists in the fact that it is a hopeless rebellion against God. If one translates the concept of sin into a modern context it represents man's exaggerated self-esteem and the questionability of scientific models of explication in a world dominated by the second principle of thermodynamics. "Since the Catholic Church has thoroughly and extensively reflected about the 'devil'", writes Flusser, "I suggest to use its categories when writing the history of the devil. But since the church only perceived the negative side of the 'devil' [...] and repressed all positive aspects, the categories of the church must be neutralized before they can be used. For instance: instead of 'sin' one would have to say freedom of will. Therefore 'peccare posse = possible freedom of will', 'non peccare non posse = compulsion' and 'peccare non posse = overcoming freedom of will'. The seven deadly sins will be used as a guideline for a history of the devil, as sin and death (freedom and destruction in chaos) characterize all of history, that is, the 'devil.'" (Flusser 1983)<sup>1</sup> As in the short essay *Do diabo*, Flusser uses the seven deadly sins and the concepts of God and the devil to describe the different stages of the history of philosophy and science as well as its point of arrival. The stage we have reached at present is characterized by the sin of *accidia* – sloth – and the insight into the complete artificiality of our interpretations of the world. The devil has become a self-critical philosopher. With this, however, the devil, as Flusser puts it, "returns to 'God', matter and energy dissolve into fields, spirit dissolves into bits, system dissolves into chaos. The 'devil' dissolves into 'God', the probable swal-

---

<sup>1</sup> „Da die katholische Kirche lange und gründlich über den 'Teufel' nachgedacht hat, schlage ich vor, ihre Kategorien beim Schreiben der Teufelsgeschichte anzuwenden. Da aber die Kirche nur die negative Seite des 'Teufels' sieht [...] und alle positive Aspekte daran unterdrückt, müssen die kirchlichen Kategorien neutralisiert werden, bevor sie angewandt werden. Zum Beispiel statt 'Sünde' ist 'Willensfreiheit' zu sagen. Demnach 'peccare posse=mögliche Willensfreiheit', 'non peccare non posse = Bedingtheit' und 'peccare non posse = Überholung der Willensfreiheit'. Als Leitfaden nehme ich die sieben 'Todsünden', da ja Sünde und Tod (Freiheit und Vernichtung im Chaos), alle Geschichte überhaupt, das heisst den 'Teufel' kennzeichnen." [Translation RG]

lows the improbable, end of history.” (ibidem)<sup>2</sup> “In an afterword I ask myself, if the Western culture is perhaps the only historical, the only diabolical culture, and if the Far East, above all, is a premonition of the present return to ‘God’.” (ibidem)<sup>3</sup>

The next step of the multiple metamorphoses of the devil in Flusser’s work is the diabolical octopus inhabiting the infernal abysses of the deep sea. Already in *A historia do diabo* one can find a series of references to *Vampyroteuthis*. Flusser speaks of the deep sea of the senses and the tentacles of the I. One has to dive, in order to reach the ground of the devil. In connection with a reference to the relativity of different linguistic strata, Flusser mentions the point of view of the giant octopus of the deep sea, for whom the cephalopod and not man might be considered the most evolved species.<sup>4</sup> In the essay *Um mundo fabuloso*, published on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1964 in *Estado de São Paulo* (Flusser 1964), Flusser introduces an octopus who claims that most animal species reside in the sea and that man as a vertebrate in a way developed against the mainstream of natural evolution. The fabulous world of life which the essay is about is a diabolical world because it is situated beyond good and evil and therefore inaccessible to any moral concern. All essential elements that one comes across in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* are already there: the provocative change of perspective, the comparison with man, the abyss of the sea and the diabolical dimension of a groundless existence.

In the letters to Alex Bloch a growing interest in the subject can be discerned. In a letter written on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1979 Flusser defines the octopus as a cunning, sharp witted and wise animal, comparable to the fox, the owl or the eagle. The octopus is a complicated animal with countless terminations; he “spreads an artificial (techniké) night around himself, in which no one can find a way (poros). In this aporia, this irresolvable contradiction, the crafty octopus is the only way out. He is the minute opening, the pore that devours those that get caught, the infernal exit from a situation of aporia.” (Flusser 2000:

---

<sup>2</sup> „Damit kehrt der ‘Teufel’ in ‘Gott’ zurück, Materie und Energie zerfällt in Felder, Geist zerfällt in bits, System zerfällt in Chaos. Der ‘Teufel’ zerfällt in ‘Gott’, das Wahrscheinliche verschlingt das Unwahrscheinliche, Ende der Geschichte.“ [Translation RG]

<sup>3</sup> “In einem Nachwort stelle ich die Frage, ob nicht die westliche Kultur die einzige geschichtliche, die einzige Teufelskultur sei, und ob nicht vor allem der Ferne Osten den gegenwärtigen ‘Rückfall in Gott’ Vorwegnimmt.“ [Translation RG]

<sup>4</sup> Compare Flusser 1996: 49, 149f. and 173.

127)<sup>5</sup> Flusser makes use of a multilingual word-play on the Greek words *aporia* and *poros*<sup>6</sup> and the German *die Pore*, the pore: the unresolved contradiction, the passage, the pore.

In another letter of the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1981 Flusser mentions his intention “to focus again on the subject of the devil, this time in the form of the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.” (Flusser 2000: 141)<sup>7</sup> Apart from detailed information as to his habitat, size, age, body form and sexual life, Flusser mentions for the first time the projective, creative abilities of the animal. The *Vampyroteuthis* moves in an upright position as human beings do but with his erect belly and he possesses three different glands. One produces a secrete that paralyzes all life in his immediate environment, the second produces a mucus that makes him invisible and the third exudes ink, that forms dark clouds, which the animal can work upon with his tentacles so as to reproduce his own shape hiding behind it at the same time. But the most interesting aspect in a diabolical context is the fact that the *Vampyroteuthis*’ eyes although being similar to those of a human being do not see “reflected sunlight, but the reflexion of the light that his light-organs have generated.” (Flusser 2000: 142)<sup>8</sup> The link to Lucifer, the light-bearer, is evident.

In his last letter about this subject written on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1983 Flusser mentions Freud’s relationship to Jewish mysticism which leads him to reconsider his own interest in the abysmal and diabolical. Freud, so Flusser, had identified himself with the devil and chosen Virgil’s Latin verses ‚flectere si nequeo superos, acheronta movebo‘ – If I cannot move heaven, I will raise hell’ as a subtitle for *Die Traumdeutung*. This sentence, writes Flusser, kept turning around in his head “like the wheel of a mill and it fascinate[d] me all over again [...] The history of the devil is like Prague and Socialism: on revient toujours à son premier amour [French in the original], but from the opposite side.” (Flusser 2000: 184)<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> „breitet eine künstliche (techniké) Nacht um sich aus, in der niemand einen Weg (poros) findet. In dieser Aporie bildet aber listigerweise der Tintenfisch selbst den einzigen Ausweg. Er ist die Pore, die den Verstrickten verschlingt, der höllische Ausgang aus aporischen Lagen.“ [Translation RG]

<sup>6</sup> From ἀπορία, ἀπορος *aporos*, impassable: ἀ- (without) + πόρος *poros* (passage).

<sup>7</sup> „wieder einmal auf den Teufel zu konzentrieren. Diesmal in Form von *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.“ [Translation RG]

<sup>8</sup> „sieht er nicht reflektiertes Sonnenlicht, sondern die Reflexion des Lichts, das seine eigenen Lichtorgane senden.“ [Translation RG]

<sup>9</sup> „wie ein Mühlrad [...] und jetzt beschwört es mich wieder [...]. Mit der Teufelsgeschichte ist es wie mit Prag und dem Sozialismus: on revient toujours à son premier amour, allerdings von der umgekehrten Seite.“ [Translation RG]

Even if human beings can be compared to the Vampyroteuthis, they are fundamentally different. They are our mirror-image actually, the darker side of our being. In order to understand the Vampyroteuthis and with this ourselves, writes Flusser in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, we have to undertake a “trip to hell” (Flusser 1993: 39)<sup>10</sup> into the gloomy and sinister abyss where he lives. If we do this we will recognize that his hell is astonishingly similar to the heaven of our possible future.

This diabolical procedure of freely juggling with the notions of heaven and hell that dates back to the early 1960es can also be found in the already mentioned five *Inferno* texts from the satirical column *Posto Zero*. The provocative ironical multiplication of possible hells anticipates the general drift of the argumentation. In early modern times, after the destruction of medieval faith in a well-structured universe we can witness a general relativity of values. In modernity, however, one seems to find back to a certainty of the second degree.

Flusser’s five short portraits of hell, *Inferno I-V*, are an amusing ironical trip through western thinking the way *A historia do diabo* was. In early modern times, writes Flusser, in *Inferno I*, published on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 1972, “calculus acurados, feitos por Copernico, Kepler, Newton e outros calculistas de grande confiança, permitiram não apenas a reformulação, mas inclusive consideravel ampliação da estrutura do universo. [...] O resultado amplamente divulgado foi este: o ceu não está mais por cima da Terra mas a Terra está no ceu. Um resultado menos divulgado foi este: tambem o inferno foi integrado, e a Terra está agora no inferno.” By abolishing the clear cut difference between heaven and earth the notions of superior and inferior, good and bad lost their moorings. “O céu é superior, e o inferno é inferior [...] De maneira que todo mundo quer ir ao céu e não ao inferno. Já que ninguem pode ficar sempre na terra, coisa que alguns talvez prefeririam. Mas o problema não é este. O dificil atualmente é saber-se onde fica ‘em cima’, e onde ‘embaixo’. [...] De maneira que o céu de uns é o inferno de outros. [...] Dizem que a estrada que conduz ao inferno é larga e pavimentada de boas intenções, de maneira que deve ser estrada de primera categoria. E, no entanto, terá dificuldades em localizer tal estrada no mapa. Claro, pode engajar os servicios de Virgilio [...] Mas pode ter a seguinte surpresa: ao chegar, pode verificar que está na realidade no céu, pelo menos em céu para alguns guias tão autorizados quanto o é seu guia. A surpresa contrária é

---

<sup>10</sup> “Höllenfahrt.” [Translation RG]

ainda mais desagradável. Alguns podem crer que a vida tôda estão viajando em direção do céu. O seu Michelin o afirma [...] E ao chegar verifica que está no inferno [...]. Coisa extremamente chata.” (Flusser 1972)

As Flusser already pointed out in *Do diabo*, our diabolical problem is that we are no longer capable of distinguishing clearly between angel and demon, heaven and hell. The catholic hell is annihilation, but from a Buddhist point of view this is – with a few changes only – the heaven we have to strive for. Inversely, the Catholic heaven is a promise of eternal life, but from the Buddhist perspective of reincarnation this is absolute hell. In *Inferno IV*, published on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1972 he writes: “Quem se dirige portanto ao céu católico”, he writes pode perfeitamente acabar chegando no inferno budista. E quem tem medo de cair no inferno católico que se console: pode estar perfeitamente subindo ao céu budista. Curioso isto.” (Flusser 1972) Paradoxically, only those who are in hell can truly appreciate heaven, whereas only those in heaven are condemned to suffer the pains of hell. In the last of the five short texts, *Inferno V*, published on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1972, Flusser concludes his hopeless peregrination through the desert of absolute relativity with a surprising twist. After all we are capable of distinguishing between heaven and hell, good and evil, the same way we can separate reality from fiction. “[...] no fundo da nossa consciência ainda sabemos distinguir entre inferno e céu. As especulações elegantes quanto a relatividade dos valores não obstante: talvez não saibamos o que é o bem, mas sabemos perfeitamente o que é o mal quando o enfrentamos. [...] Nem tudo está perdido, desde que saibamos do mal, embora o bem nos escape.” (Flusser 1972)

The Vampyroteuthes are diabolical for several reasons. First of all, „their violent claws and sharp teeth, their muscular tentacles – arrayed with suckers – and their voracious expression lend them a diabolical appearance.“ (Flusser 1993: 9)<sup>11</sup> Secondly, they live like vampires cannibalizing their kin and thirdly they inhabit an infernal abyss of eternal darkness, a sort of upside down heaven. With regard to human beings they, furthermore, diabolically stand things on their heads in several respects. Their bellies are on top while their heads have sunk to the bottom of their bodies. They do not have any hands with which to grasp the objects around them but tentacles with which to fan food towards

---

<sup>11</sup> „Ihre gewaltigen Zangen, spitzen Zähne, muskulösen und mit Saugorganen versehenen Arme und ihr gieriger Ausdruck verleihen ihnen ein teuflisches Aussehen.“ [Translation RG]

their mouths. „Our perception is active – we travel through a static, an existing world. His perception is passive, passionate and impassioned: he absorbs a world that is rushing towards him. We comprehend what we come up against; he comprehends that which happens to him. We have ‘problems’, he has ‘impressions’. His perception is impressionistic.” (Flusser 1993: 36)<sup>12</sup> If compared with human beings Vampyroteuthes live in an upside-down world. “We, thus, both deny our situation of exiles, our condition. [...] If we deny something, we do this dialectically [...]. Since we deny our biological condition from opposed sides, we contradict each other. And it is exactly in this that lies our correspondence. We find each other as mirrors in that which we have denied. In this admittedly



somewhat diabolical sense (*diabolein* = to jumble something up), we are able to acknowledge one another and, what is more, to recognize in each other something of ourselves.” (Flusser 1993: 26)<sup>13</sup>

Vampire squid. Oral view<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> „Unsere Auffassungsform ist aktiv: – Wir bereisen eine stehende und bestehende Welt. Seine Auffassungsform ist passiv, passionell, leidenschaftlich. Er nimmt eine auf ihn zuströmende Welt auf. Wir fassen auf, worauf wir stoßen, er faßt auf, was auf ihn stößt. Wir haben ‘Probleme’, er hat ‘Eindrücke’. Seine Auffassungsform ist impressionistisch.” [Translation RG] The word-play that gets lost in translation – *stehende / bestehende* – refers to the fact that things exist for us (*bestehen*), because they stand in our way (*stehen*), because we come up against them. The second moment I would like to draw attention to is the double use of the German verb *stoßen auf* which literally means to bump into – *jemand stößt auf etwas / etwas stößt auf jemanden*. Flusser uses the verb in his double, literal and figural meaning of bumping into and meeting, encountering, to stress the difference between the active perception of human beings and the passive perception of the Vampyroteuthis. But he uses it also to stress the bodily dimension of any meeting between a being and its surrounding world. To meet is a mental *and* a physical experience. We walk through the world, bump into the things standing around us and manipulate them with our hands. The Vampyroteuthis, on the other hand, swims in deep-water and meets the world in liquid form, flowing towards him. He uses his tentacles to fan that which he meets towards his mouth. In German: *Wir stossen auf etwas* and *Etwas stößt auf ihn*.

<sup>13</sup> “Wir verneinen also beide unser Exil, unsere ‘Bedingung’. [...] Wenn wir verneinen, tun wir dies dialektisch. [...]. Da wir also beide unsere biologische Bedingung von entgegengesetzten Seiten as verneinen, widersprechen wir einander. Und gerade darin liegt unsere Entsprechung. Wir finden einander als Spiegel in dem von uns Verneinten. In diesem, allerdings etwas diabolischen Sinn (*diabolein* = durcheinanderwerfen) können wir einander anerkennen und uns im anderen erkennen.” [Translation RG] Flusser makes use of a word-play based on the two German prefixes *an-* and *er-*. The idea is, that we can perceive, understand and recognize each other (*erkennen*) only if we accept, that is, acknowledge each other (*anerkennen*) first. The ethical aspect, thus, precedes and determines the epistemological moment.

<sup>14</sup> Vampire squid. Oral view ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vampire\\_squid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vampire_squid)) [25.5.2011].

Despite the fact that the eyes of the Vampyroteuthis are identical to ours they have a completely different function. We live in broad daylight, cephalopods, on the other hand, exist only in the flashes of their own bioluminescence. In this way the philosophical fable of the Vampyroteuthis becomes a phenomenological fairy tale about the creation of meaning, *Sinn-Gebung*, literally, the *giving*, the attributing of sense. The cephalopod living in the abyss of the ocean is the word become flesh. Human beings meet a world that is ultimately a reflection of sunlight from the surrounding world of objects. Because of this they can be cheated and try to get behind the appearances of things, behind the misleading veil of light in order to grasp the real world. „The world of the Vampyroteuthis is not grasped with hands but with tentacles. It is not evident in itself (apparent), but the Vampyroteuthis makes it visible with its own lights. Both worlds are, thus, comprehensible and visible, but the methods of perceiving and conceiving it are different.“ (Flusser 1993: 36)<sup>15</sup>

In his *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (Flusser 1992: 54) Flusser translates this anthropological vision into a technological context. Techno-images are conceived as projections that are projected onto an empty surface, a screen or display. They act as light-towers or floodlights projecting luminosity onto a dark horizon. The German word Flusser makes use of bears an ambivalence that gets lost in translation. *Scheinwerfer*, are headlights, floodlights or searchlights, but literally the German *Schweinwerfer* means also projectors of pretence – *Schein-Werfer*, from the German *Schein* (appearance) and *werfen* (to throw) – throwing illusionary, alluring images, diabolical phantasies onto an empty screen. The Vampyroteuthis lives in a surprising world, a world that can no longer deceive him, as it is a world of self-induced deceit.

To conclude, let me sum up briefly the main points mentioned here. In Flusser's work the devil is an ambivalent, polyvalent symbol, wearing different masks and permanently

---

<sup>15</sup> „Die Welt des Vampyroteuthis wird nicht mit Händen, sondern mit Tentakeln begriffen. Sie ist nicht ersichtlich (scheinbar), sondern Vampyroteuthis selbst macht sie mit seinen Lichtern ersichtlich. Also sind beide Welten faßlich und sichtbar, aber die Methoden der Auffassung und der Ansicht sind verschiedene.“ [Translation RG] In order to point to the constant meeting and interpenetration of the physical (both visual and tactile) and the intellectual in mental processes Flusser uses in the German original a series of terms oscillating between the tactile, the visual and the mental: *greifen* (to grasp with your hands), *begreifen* (to grasp an idea), *der Begriff* (the concept); *faßlich* (comprehensible), *erfassen* (to capture, to seize), *eine Idee erfassen* (to understand, to seize an idea), *die Auffassung* (perception, conception); *ersichtlich* (obvious, evident, apparent), *sichtbar* (visible, apparent), *die Ansicht* (thinking, sight, believe), *scheinbar* (ostensible, imaginary, virtual, apparent).

changing form. As we can read in the Gospel of Mark (5.9.), the devil is not one but many. “And (Jesus) asked him, ‘What is thy name?’ And he answered saying, ‘My name is legion. For we are many.’ ” The devil represents a principle of irresolvable contradiction, an aporia for which he is at the same time the only solution. In this specific sense he is also profoundly human. Etymologically speaking the devil and God stem from the same word, dev. In this diabolical sense, heaven and hell freely exchange places depending on the point of view. We cannot have faith in the devil but if we try to destroy him we end up by destroying God: a topsy-turvy world, a diabolical world. The devil is a disruptive, destructive principle, negating everything and generating confusion. He is Mephistopheles, the spirit that always denies. He is, however, at the same time a negentropic principle, an epicycle moving against the general entropic tendency of the universe, negating individual and cosmic death as well as oblivion and nothingness. He does this by creating new information. And finally he is Lucifer the light-bearer, the abysmal Vampyreuthis infernalis, living at the bottom of the sea in a dark, gloomy hell, a cold Platonic cave which he illuminates with his light-organs. This bottomless abyss, this groundless diabolical existence, make of the Vampyreuthis a being very much akin to rootless migrants and nomadic exiles who have to invent a new existence by projecting themselves onto an unknown future.

## Bibliography

- Bec, Louis (2007), Vampyreuthis infernalis. Postscriptum,  
[http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/04/bec\\_vampyreuthis.pdf](http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/04/bec_vampyreuthis.pdf)
- Flusser, Vilém (1962), Ensaio para um estudo do significado ontológico da língua, Revista Brasileira de Filosofia, January-March, p. 69-90.
- Flusser, Vilém (1963), Do Diabo, Estado de São Paulo, Suplemento Literário (2.2.63).
- Flusser, Vilém (1964), Um mundo fabuloso in Estado de São Paulo, Suplemento Literário (28.11.64)
- Flusser, Vilém (1972), Posto Zero: Inferno I-V, 29.3-4.4., Fôlha de São Paulo.
- Flusser, Vilém (1983), Historia do diabo, in: Flusser Studies 11  
<http://www.flusserstudies.net/pag/11/flusser-historia.pdf>
- Flusser, Vilém (1992), Ins Universum der technischen Bilder, Göttingen.
- Flusser, Vilém (1993), Vampyreuthis infernalis, Göttingen.
- Flusser, Vilém (1996), Die Geschichte des Teufels, Göttingen.
- Flusser, Vilém (2000), Briefe an Alex Bloch, Göttingen.