

Ruth Y. Hsu

**Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*:  
Homo Sapiens' Posthuman Future?**

Epigrams:

“I propose to consider the margin as a community of those who have nothing in common: a coalition of subjects brought together not by a shared attribute or essence, nor even by a common social position, but rather by a desire to resist oppression, in all its forms. The purpose of such a coalition would not be to form a third identity position between black and white, nor to claim that race doesn't matter, but rather to foster relations of solidarity that cross the tracks of identity in order to both analyze the systematic patterns of domination and privilege that structure subjectivity, and also to build upon those exceptional moments that rupture the totality of domination or testify to its incompleteness” (Lisa Guenther, “The Ethics and Politics of Otherness: Negotiating Alterity and Racial Difference,” *philoSOPHIA*, 2011: 199)

“I repeat: there is not, behind the face, a secret self governing our acts or receiving our impressions; we are only the series of those imaginary acts and those errant impressions” (Jorge Luis Borges, *A New Refutation of Time*, 1944-1946: )

Vilém Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is a strange book that blends the linguistic genres of scientific treatise, of reportage, of a homage not to a human entity but to a reclusive cephalopod of the ocean depths, and of the narrative genre of speculative fiction, of a philosophical broadside, and of a socio-cultural anthropological study.<sup>1</sup> The diegesis defies simple literary taxonomy: its paratext includes the subtitle, “A Treatise, with a report to the Institute Scientifique”; on the other hand, chapter titles suggest that scientific reportage – indicated by the summative words, “Octopod” and “Genealogy” – will stray or progress to descriptions of culture perhaps, even, civilization -- “The Vampyroteuthis World” and “Vampyroteuthis Culture.” The latter two chapters evoke the image of a cultural anthropologist

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Dickey's “On The Trail of the Vampire Squid from Hell” in the Los Angeles Review of Books October 12, 2012, is an insightful review of Flusser's provocations in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-the-trail-of-the-elusive-vampire-squid-from-hell/>

or an ethnographer writing about some “primitive,” lost tribe, recently unearthed from the deepest reaches of a jungle and dragged into the modern world of smartphones and t-shirts emblazoned with “Just Do It.” Can a squid hail from hell? Can the vampire squid from hell be understood by homo sapiens’ intellect? Is Flusser the hellish squid’s Milton? In a move in the section, “The Treatise,” the author further blurs disciplinary borders and discursive registers by writing, “What will be presented here is, accordingly, not a scientific treatise but a fable” (Flusser & Bec 2012[1987]: 10). Is Flusser this mythical creature’s Aesop? If yes, then what moral does this animal tale hold for modern readers?

*Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is an assemblage of prose genres and narrative voices: an admiring homage to the vampire squid from hell, and a mock scientific treatise of a creature that throughout this fable-treatise-homage narrative steadfastly evades getting pinned down by homo sapiens as if it is like a specimen of some sort, primitive or ancient – are not all species more ancient than homo sapiens. The creature constructed from the lyrical and, at times, objective, documentary prose appears to be of such ancient origin that geological and mythical scales of time inadequately represent its nature. Flusser announces that this book is a fable in which “[t]he human and its vertebrate *Dasein* are to be criticized from the perspective of a mollusk. Like most fables, this one is ostensibly concerned with animals. *De te fabula narratur*” (10).<sup>2</sup> Paola Bozzi, in *Flusseriana*, writes, “Flusser thus inverted the perspective between human being and animal by describing how an animal looks at a human being. A small phylogenetic relict thus becomes the master of the fiction, the model of a fabulist, creative epistemology and at the same time the symbol of the human condition under postmodernism” (Zielinski et al. 2015: 430). Dickey writes in his LARB review that Flusser’s vampire squid from hell calls into question a host of western epistemologies, including Martin Heidegger’s assertion that the non-human animal does not possess *Dasein*; the non-human animal is *weltarm*, “poor-in-the-world” (Dickey 2012).

This narration’s blurring of generic convention and notions of truth derives partially from the author having written different language versions: the anonymous blogger writes in “Vilém Flusser’s Brazilian Vampyroteuthis Infernalis”, “each language [German and Portuguese] has different contents, since Flusser was not able to only translate but to create different versions of his own work. And in the Brazilian *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, we find a fable about an abyssal mollusk that, still under its particular conditions, is so close to man and his issues (. . .) the author [Flusser] will show to the reader how this animal appears as an alter and as a self to the humankind”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Story is about you.

<sup>3</sup> For those who work in more than a single language, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is a rich site of translation studies –in what ways do the different translations and rewritings (by Flusser) differ? In what ways does Flusser’s multi-lingual fluency (German, Czech, Portuguese, French) inform the different versions? Additionally, Flusser’s intellectual interests include

I use in this paper the 2012 English translation from the German version by Valentine A. Pakis, and I am interested in analyzing the English translation in terms of how and, more important, why Flusser wrote this blended parody. The strangeness of this book is an effect of his use of paratext, of focalization, and narrative voices, and, of Louis Bec's anatomical sketches of a fictional squid which are evocative of drawings garnered from a dissection.

Peter Godfrey-Smith in his 2016 book describes octopuses and squids as “an island of mental complexity in the sea of invertebrate animals (. . .) This is probably the closest we will come to meeting an intelligent alien” (9). He continues, “If we want to understand other minds, the minds of cephalopods are the most other of all” (10). Cephalopods and vertebrates and, eventually, homo sapiens branched away from each other possibly 600 million years ago; it is as if our (cephalopod and homo sapiens) brains and nervous systems were invented twice over. Notably, Godfrey-Smith centers his book on the search not so much for the evolution of intelligence or bipedalism in animals as on the evolution of consciousness. He hypothesizes that cephalopods have consciousness; how it compares to human's is a subject of speculation. Strictly, the vampire squid from hell is a genus distinct from octopuses and squids and “like homo sapiens, it is the only species within its genus” (Dickey).<sup>4</sup> This creature lives in the ocean depths, possesses 75,000 teeth, and a nervous system in each tentacle; Flusser seems to delight in imagining vampyroteuthis infernalis' sex life (it has three penises).<sup>5</sup> Dickey writes that relatives of the vampyroteuthis infernalis when in captivity have been observed eating its own tentacles. On the other hand, we have news reports of the exploits of celebrity octopuses, each anthropomorphized with human names, such as Paul, Oxy, or Camouflage Master, who display behavior that humans code as intelligent, and who do not devour their own tentacles—humans believe that devouring one's own limbs signify animalistic and, therefore, unenlightened behavior.<sup>6</sup>

More recent textual representations of this very distant kin of primates and, hence, of humanoids, aim to draw the cephalopod nearer to us by assigning them human names – a signifier of person-

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cultural criticism, media theory, and political theory, further complicating the ways of reading and understanding the different versions of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* refers to Flusser's book; vampyroteuthis infernalis or vampire squid or vampire squid from hell refers to the animal.

<sup>5</sup> Video of a vampyroteuthis infernalis at Discovery channel, circa December, 2020-- <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=vampyroteuthis+infernalis&&view=de-tail&mid=FE74EFA73D49E6B081F4FE74EFA73D49E6B081F4&&FORM=VDRVSR>

<sup>6</sup> One of many recent stories in popular media about octopuses learning to use tools, escaping their confines, and otherwise displaying intelligent behavior: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/octopus-chronicles/8-famous-octopuses-to-celebrate-octopus-awareness-day/>; *My Octopus Teacher*, a Netflix show chronicling the year that Craig Foster, a marine biologist and founder of the Sea Change Project, spent with an octopus, was very popular with subscribers.

hood – by favorably comparing the intelligence of this species to ours, by imagining its phenomenology. These representations blur the strict Chain-of-Being demarcation between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, a gradual ontological change that has become congruent with our present heightened awareness of the varied ways that human actions can account for what Elizabeth Gilbert calls the sixth extinction. Our means of drawing closer to and of lessening the hierarchical distance between us and the rest of the animal kingdom is to humanize these creatures, to represent some species in human terms, such as intelligence, the capacity for play, the possession of consciousness, and the ability to construct theory of mind. We take this route because we are incapable of truly understanding them, of thinking like they do, or of donning their awareness through their bodies.<sup>7</sup> These attempts to draw closer, in other words, are solely on our terms: we accord them consciousness, intelligence, logic, and a range of emotions; we have a theory of mind about cephalopods and other animals we believe possess “higher intelligence” (than all other animals, but not us). Notably, we are capable of only using the human evolutionary template to measure non-human creatures.

Flusser’s technique in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* humanizes this diegetic entity and also makes it strange. His narration draws his human readers closer to it and, at the same time, foregrounds and takes aim at humans’ inability to traverse the emotional and ethical distance between us and them. *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* defamiliarizes to us our human-being: our subterranean drives, our ideations, our sensory perceptions. His vampyroteuthis infernalis is a textual fiction and an ambitious reflection and refraction of human-being; this diegetic entity is an invitation to measure the distance between us and it as incommensurate space and time.

Ultimately, however, Flusser’s fable can only intimate this distance, for the narration recursively demonstrates the paucity of human language, of disciplinary regimes, and of our worldview in measuring and categorizing the other. And, on the last page of this book, we confront not the “real” vampyroteuthis infernalis but the Imaginary that we create. This paper examines how Flusser composed the diegesis of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*; it further argues that the narration by confronting its readers with our epistemological re/constructions – of language and human-being – the author also desires readers to make the leap between us and them, in the manner best encapsulated in Martin Buber’s notion of I and Thou.

Defamiliarization enables a productive reading of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. Associated with the Russian Formalists, defamiliarization is a “literary device whereby language is used in such a way that

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<sup>7</sup> Naming animals and inanimate objects, such as a toy or a car, answers a human need, largely in the realm of affect, to infantilize, to humanize, to own, to effect a relationship with the object solely on human terms. A recent example of such an attempt to attach to an octopus is found in the video documentary, *My Octopus Teacher*, shown on Netflix.

ordinary and familiar objects are made to look different.”<sup>8</sup> Not only is the represented subject made to seem strange to most readers, the linguistic medium is foregrounded. It is a critical lens situated within a post-structuralist epistemology in which language is the subject of analysis; it is not a mirror of reality nor a tool that unveils a transcendental reality. Flusser’s vampyroteuthis infernalis cannot be scientifically dissected and displayed for absolute human knowing and through that knowing, domination. Scientific discourse is a constructed way of making sense of reality; Flusser’s vampire squid is mediated and constituted by this discourse as well as other mediating registers-- registers of literature, of sociology, of history, of drawing can only construct a vampire squid in their own linguistic image. Flusser’s *Language and Reality* is an absent presence in, or a transtextual interlocutor with, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*.

At this juncture, before I briefly go into the resonances between *Language and Reality* and *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, as a way-station to analyzing Flusser’s use of focalization and narrative voices, I would like to expand on Flusser’s so-called vampire squid that is not a squid in taxonomic terms -- It is a creature of hell, a hell – Flusser shows us -- of our own making: it resists our flattery; it resists our attempts to possess it through knowing it; it unapologetically lives its “primitive” and elemental everyday, unconcerned with homo sapiens’ evolutionary innovations called culture and civilization; it is unconcerned with our labels and, so, is free from our attempts to colonize it in a variety of disciplinary regimes.<sup>9</sup> The vampire squid from hell is our other because we have embedded our deepest fears in this figuration. Our deepest fears have to do with not being supremely unique among animals and, in terms of western humanism, the fear is that western ontology is not the apex of homo sapiens civilizations.

Flusser writes in *Language and Reality* (L&R) that “[s]cience, far from being valid for all languages, is itself a language to be translated to the other languages in order to be realized in them” (Flusser 2018[1963]: 24); and, “there is no reality beyond language” (172); or, especially germane to *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, are these sentences, “[T]he intellect has a collection of eyeglasses, for the different languages, to observe the data. Every time I change my eyeglasses, reality seems to be differ-

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<sup>8</sup> <https://literariness.org/2016/03/17/defamiliarization/>

<sup>9</sup> My use of “everyday” is an allusion to Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that “We are caught in a hybrid compromise between aesthetic spectacle and knowledge. When the flight of a bird catches our attention . . . we think we are being very clever and very concrete. But we are unable to seize the human facts. We fail to see them where they are, namely in humble, familiar, everyday objects: the shape of fields, of ploughs.” (132) Lefebvre continues, “And yet, where is genuine reality to be found? . . . In the unmysterious depths of everyday life!” (137) The connection that I am making in this note between Lefebvre’s concept of everyday life and Flusser’s diegetic entity is that Flusser’s fable about this remarkable alien being is at the same time about its quotidian existence foraging for food, procreating, and “walking” about in its neighborhood. This point was not included in my presentation at the Flusser 2020 conference and, due to the need to be succinct in this present, paper format; this point will not be further developed here but will be reserved for a lengthier paper.

ent (. . .) raw data are only realized when articulated in words. Thus, they are not reality, only potentiality . . .” (22-24). Humans mistakenly think of phenomena – nature, Man, society – as existing outside of the human mind, of predating us. Flusser argues that “[t]he climate that prevails in the layer of the conversation is of intellects realized through contact with others. The intellects are open to each other; they are real not because they are here (*Dasein*) but because they are together (*Mitsein*) . . .” (109). Further, “[n]ature emerges in the course of conversation, at the moment of the formulation of concepts and phrases (. . .) nature is the condition of civilization and that civilization is nature transformed.” (161) The previous two quotes will be particularly meaningful later in this paper when I discuss the efficacy of Buber’s idea of I-Thou as a counter to humans’ inability to apprehend beyond the binary relation of subject-object, that is, to truly behold another.

How does Flusser accomplish a unique blending of disciplinary registers and at the same time, deconstructing language as a “collection of eyeglasses” (22)?

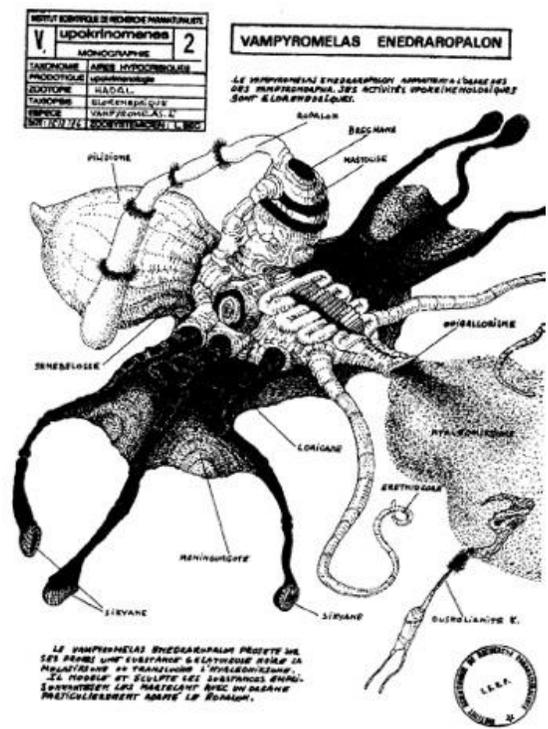
First, the Table of Contents of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* promises a mixture of epistemological loci – biological sciences; sociology; and cultural studies.

Second, the mix of epistemological loci is constructed through a varied tonal palette that most readers of a book like *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* have been educated to identify as appropriate to specific disciplinary discourses: some paragraphs evince a neutral tone of reportage; other passages use metaphors to express marvel at the vampire squid’s anatomy and, more tellingly, what its anatomy means in sociological and cultural terms; yet, other passages launch into affective signifiers of horrified envy at the squid’s supposed sexual licentiousness and its imagined guiltless jouissance in coitus and orgasm (“Its concepts are generated by orgasms, and its philosophy is synonymous with copulation” (Flusser & Bec 2012[1987]: 48)). The philosopher-anthropologist narrator writes that “[f]rom the perspective of Reich’s model, the vampyroteuthis conflation of mouth and anus, along with its extraordinarily sophisticated sex life (three penises), should represent the zenith of life’s development: the triumph of love over death—permanent orgasm . . . In the end, its sexualized mouth and its cerebralized sex incite cannibalism and suicide” (29).

While some passages use an awestruck tone towards the vampyroteuthis infernalis-being, other passages depict it in gothic or disgusting words, such as this section, “[t]he eggs have an unusually abundant yolk, and they cleave according to a spiral axis that resembles the Taoist symbol of yin and yang” (14). The yin and yang allusion suggest that vampyroteuthis infernalis contains both male and female essences; further, the narrator asserts also in anthropomorphic words that this squid’s essence resides in “violence and bloodlust” (21); “the animals are predisposed to suicide and cannibalism” (23);

“it is not concerned with feeling the third dimension, as we are, but rather with feeling multidimensionality. Both of us resist our exile, our ‘constraints’” (25). Notably, these are speculative assertions that cannot be verified independently of the narrator; and, these assertions are made from culturally-specific and historically-located metaphor and figures of speech.

Third, Louis Bec’s drawings of *vampyroteuthis infernalis* recall illustrations found in biology textbooks of the innards of the creature flayed open and displayed under emotionless scientists’ microscope -- this lifeless creatural body, sightless, limp appendages, we believe signifies superior human intellect and analytical ability. Bec’s drawings are of a gothic, frightening, and monstrous creature consisting of vessels, filaments, folds, black holes, confusing flaps that are utterly alien to and incomprehensible to our human mind. Bec’s report consists of a cover letter addressed to a non-existent Immatrix Publications (n.p.). He identifies himself as the President of the fictional Institute Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste. The drawings fill 15 pages of the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* “fable” (10).



(above) The *Vampyromelas enedraropalon* belongs to the order Vampyromorpha. Its hypocriminological activities are elementaric.

(below) The *Vampyromelas enedraropalon* projects a dark and gelatinous substance on its prey, the metallocone or translucent hyalocicone. It sculps and models this insipid substance and strikes at its prey with an organ, the ropalon, that is particularly adapted for such a function.

Caption 1: Louis Bec drawing: *Vampyromelas Enedraropalon*

Louis Bec revealed that the images were inspired by aspects of Flusser's personality that were the most Vampyroteuthian (Louis Bec in Rainer Guldin's "Vampyroteuthis infernalis. Postscriptum" *Flusser Studies*. Issue 4, May 2007). Anne Popiel, in "The Art of the Vampyroteuthis" writes, "If Flusser's fable is successful, we, too, will see our own likeness in the art of the *Vampyroteuthis*" (*Flusser Studies* 09, 2).

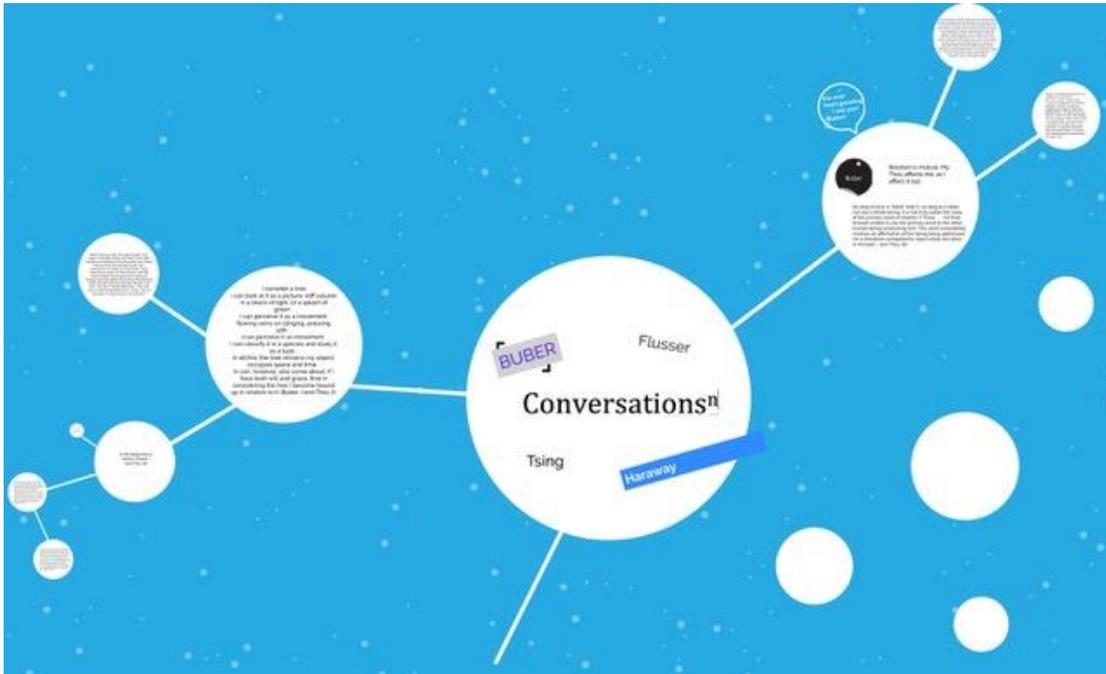
Vampyroteuthis, in this book, is both un-represented and over-determined as a radical alterity, an alterity that is not produced as difference, that is, the lesser of a pair of terms with the lesser word produced by being tethered to the anthropocentric norm. Flusser's vampyroteuthis cannot be reduced to the irredeemable other, the essentialized, degraded lesser of a binary episteme. It radically refuses our rescue, for it is not lost or exilic; our intellect and our senses fail to penetrate its being, and it, in turn, refuses to rescue us from our own lack, for lack is a measure of the eyeglasses that we don, as with egocentrism and anthropocentrism.

Flusser's fable enters the larger conversation called Animal Studies, which has gained prominence in the past ten years along with the older literature and scholarship on climate change and global warming and related fields to do with the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. Flusser's contribution to this urgent conversation lies in this vampire squid's uncompromising and guiltless jouissance. It is the vampire squid from hell's presumed worldview that pushes us to see ourselves in the other, to ironically lessen the divide between I and thou. The future of the planet and its life-forms require this leap.

Martin Buber writes: "If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I-Thou to him, he is not thing among things, and does not consist of things. This human being is not He or She, bounded from every other He and She, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is Thou and fills the heavens (. . .) all else lives in his light. I do not experience the man to whom I say Thou. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it do I experience him once more. In the act of experience, Thou is far away." (Buber 1970: 8-9)

In the Berlin conference of 2020, as a gesture towards Flusser's assertions that "intellects [are] realized through contact with others" (Flusser 2018[1963]: 109) and that "[n]ature emerges in the course of conversation" (161), I concluded my presentation and now I conclude this paper with several slides representing what I called the larger conversation, consisting of excerpts from the writings of Martin Buber, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and others. The nodes of conversationalists/intellects

represented in the diagram below can be imagined to extend outward to connect to other conversationalists/intellec[t]s from other locations and temporality. Flusser's words conclude this paper, "the conversation is of intellects realized through contact with others. The intellects are open to each other; they are real not because they are here (*Dasein*) but because they are together (*Mitsein*) . . ." (109).



Caption 2: Conversation to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  dimension

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