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The Art of the *Vampyroteuthis*

In this excerpt from his hybrid text of philosophical fiction, Vilém Flusser examines the history and future of human art and communication from the perspective of a giant deep-sea squid, the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. Fictionalizing some of the accepted biological details about the extant species of squid, Flusser's text oscillates between an encyclopedic description of the animal's anatomical and behavioral characteristics and a cultural history of human art making. He proposes the world of the *Vampyroteuthis* as a model for human communication in the age of television, film, and digital images. With his skill for de-familiarizing everyday aspects of human life, Flusser holds the molluscan creature up to his reader as a mirror in which human behavior can or should be considered from an opposing, almost inhuman perspective.

This section on the art of the *Vampyroteuthis*, which occupies a mere seven pages out of the entire seventy-one, follows a lengthy treatment of the animal's taxonomy and evolution considered not from an anthropocentric point of view, but from the premise that the *V. infernalis* presents the most highly evolved of all species. Flusser explains the creature's mental, social and cultural life in terms of its biology in an effort to reach the impossible goal of an objective analysis of humans by humans since, according to Flusser, they possess, at bottom, a bit of the Vampyroteuthian spirit. Biology, he explains later, is useful as a model for unrealized human potential—but at the same time “inhuman” in its objectivity. He therefore extends his examination beyond the springboard of science to approach his study of human beings through the aesthetics of the fable, based on his view that science is a fiction like any other.¹

Understanding human artistic expression as the attempt to communicate information from one person to another, Flusser explains in the passage translated and published here that our previous media of communication, whether stone, wood, cloth, paint or language, have proven to be inefficient and impermanent forms of information preservation and transmission. Artists should now seek to overcome the disadvantages of their traditional media and create immaterial art that can be more directly transmitted to the brains of receivers. Analogous to the color-changing glands on the skin of the *Vampyroteuthis*, we can now communicate our life experiences via the color code of pixels on a television or computer screen. This art can be manipulated by artists not physically as in the case of

¹ Paola Bozzi examines fiction as reality in the context of this text in the first issue of *Flusser Studies*, “Rhapsody in Blue. Vilém Flusser und der *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.”

sculpture, painting or even computer hardware, but immaterially in the form of programs or software. “In this context,” Flusser reminds us, “‘soft’ unquestionably refers to mollusks.”

His deliberately chosen zoological analogy affords an implied comparison between two methods of information transmission: the color code of pixels or chromatophores and the inherited genetic code. Flusser sexualizes the animal’s glandular form of communication, describing Vampyroteuthian skin-art as the seduction and rape of the receiver of information by the sender. As a product of an orgasmic interaction between two subjects, this color-coded art appears to resemble the process of copulation whereby genetic information is synthesized and passed along to another individual. This similarity reaffirms Flusser’s belief that humans are in search of artistic media that can preserve and convey acquired information with the same enduring profundity as gametes, the carriers of inherited genetic information. The added advantage to passing on information by means of a color code in contrast to the genetic code is the potential for the information to be actively manipulated by its senders before being transmitted, instead of passively mutating by means of chance alone.

The reader is then left to wonder what directions our art can take if it is to acquire both the durability of genes and the malleability of pixels. The *Vampyroteuthis*’s artistic media are, after all, simply its dermal glands, which it inherited as part of its genetic code. If taken more literally, Flusser’s model justifies genetic engineering on aesthetic grounds; with a less literal interpretation it will suffice to view computer and television screens as an extension of our own skin. It is we who will determine the place for biology in art.

Everything looks strange when illuminated by the underwater monstrosity. Readers already familiar with Flusser’s work will recognize slightly different versions of some of his common themes even in this short passage; his three-part history of human culture detailed elsewhere in his writings is here interpreted as the process of Vampyroteuthization. Our cultural struggle against entropy is familiar as well, only in this text it aspires to sexual reproduction. The hybridized fictional-scientific-philosophical text itself is a product of concepts that evolved in conversation between Flusser and Louis Bec, who describes the written work as “la concrétion céphalopodique d’un dialogue.”² First published in German in 1987, it was originally written in French and presented to Bec with a request for illustrations. The artist revealed later that the resulting images were inspired by aspects of Flusser’s personality that were the most Vampyroteuthian.³ If Flusser’s fable is successful, we, too, will see our own likeness in the art of the *Vampyroteuthis*.

² Bec, Louis. “Vilém Flusser 1920/1991.” *Flusser Studies*. Issue 4, May 2007. p.10.

³ Bec’s illustrations and commentary can be found in his correspondence with Guldin Rainer published as “Vampyroteuthis infernalis. Postscriptum.” *Flusser Studies*. Issue 4, May 2007.