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Figures of Nihilism
in Vilém Flusser's Philosophy¹

“I am the Spirit that Denies! And justly so: for all things, from the Void
Called forth, deserve to be destroyed: ’Twere better, then, were naught created.
Thus, all which you as Sin have rated, — Destruction, — aught with Evil blent,
— That is my proper element.

Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy, Part 1*

Flusser was forced into exile when he was 19 years old. He left Prague for Brazil where he arrived in 1940. His whole family was killed by the Nazis in the German concentration camps. The world he knew collapsed completely. He was left with nothing to hold on to or to believe in. In such a desperate and hopeless situation absolute nihilism would have been an understandable way to react. This was the reaction of Alex Bloch a close friend and intellectual sparring partner of Flusser's who had also been born in Prague and forced into exile.

Nihilism, from Latin *nihil*, nothing, rejects generally accepted or fundamental aspects of human existence. It affirms that human values are baseless, life absurd, and knowledge impossible, or that some entities do not exist or are meaningless or pointless. Nihilism embodies, thus, a general principle of negation, denial, and destruction, of *annihilation*. However, very much like Nietzsche, Flusser never simply denied and rejected nihilism but adapted its negative thrust to his own purposes. He used the principle of negation as the very starting point of his thinking. In this sense, Flusser's existential nihilism is a form of tamed nihilism. His philosophy shows that the principle of negativity can be turned against itself and constitute the basis of another more hopeful view of the world. Flusser negates absolute nihilism and turns negativity into a constructive force. To think is to step back from the things that surround us, from our circumstance, it means to say no to the world and to one's existential situation, to death and forgetting. Saying no to the world and accepting at the same time the absurdity of human existence leads to an active stance that is, however, always well aware of the ultimate futility of human endeavour.

¹ This essay is based on a speech I held at the international conference *Nihilism Across Boundaries* held at the Faculdade de Letras of the University of Porto, Portugal (June 26-27, 2023).

The notion of nihilism does not take center stage in Flusser's philosophy as other concepts, like existentialism, phenomenology, communication, translation, telematics or technical images, but it plays a major role at the beginning of his intellectual adventure and persistently keeps resurfacing in various guises at different stages of his intellectual development. This is a consequence of its role as an intellectual midwife in Flusser's formative years, the 1940s and 1950s.²

Figures of Thought

In Flusser's thinking, nihilism functions as a figure of thought. Christopher Watkin (2020: 22-26) used this term to characterize the thinking of the French philosopher Michel Serres. He listed eight key features. Three of them are also relevant for Flusser's philosophy.

Figures of thought are first of all inventions. 'Figure' comes from Latin *figura*, shape, form, and is related to *ingere*, to plot, to contrive. This stresses the constructivist fictional side of philosophical thinking. In this sense, figures of thought are both concepts and metaphors, a mixture of the two, as there is no clear-cut terminological border to separate the two. Their double nature is the very basis of the flexibility and inventiveness of Flusser's thinking. Secondly, figures of thought can take the form of specific characters, which are alive like literary figures. In this sense, they are metaphorical embodiments of ideas. The best example is perhaps the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, but there are others like the *Bibliophagus convictus*.³ For Serres and Flusser, there is no well-defined border between philosophy and literature. Thirdly, figures of thought are synthetic and as such help establishing thematic continuity between different texts over long stretches of time. To this I would add the figure of the writer himself, whose fictional *dramatis personae* ties in with the other invented characters. These four figures of thought play a determining role in Flusser's understanding of nihilism. At the same time, they show the complexity and ambivalence, as well as the vitality and productiveness of this philosophical notion.

In Vilém Flusser's life and philosophy nihilism is first of all linked to certain people: his Mephistophelian friend Alex Bloch in São Paulo, as well as Albert Camus, Vicente Ferreira da Silva, and Friedrich Nietzsche, even if only implicitly. Secondly, nihilism makes its appearance in a series of texts: in the 1950s it appears in his first book *Das XX. Jahrhundert* (The 20th Century), in the 1960ies in the last chapter of *Die Geschichte des Teufels* (The History of the Devil) (Flusser 1993a) and in the 1970ies in his autobiography *Bodenlos* (Flusser 1992). In these texts, it is mainly connected with Buddhism. In the 1980ies, nihilism reappears in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (Flusser 1987), this

² For a Brazilian interpretation of Flusser's view of nihilism see Feitosa 2006.

³ See "Bibliophagus", in Flusser Studies 36, November 2023, <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/bibliophagus-english.pdf> (accessed July 11 2024).

time in the shape of a devilish octopus from the bottom of the sea. Thirdly, nihilism is thematically connected with other forces of denial, darkness, and destruction: the absurdity and the groundlessness of human existence, the meaninglessness of life and the temptation of suicide, the concept of nothingness in Jewish thinking and the void in Oriental philosophy, death and the principle of entropy, and the zero-dimensionality of pixels. And finally, Flusser repeatedly spoke of himself in Mephistophelian terms. He called his groundless life in Brazil a diabolical existence.⁴ Two of his most intimate friends, the French-Brazilian artist, and founder of the Brazilian abstract art Samson Flexor and the French zoosystematician and researcher of artificial life Louis Bec emphasized in their work the Mephistophelian side of Flusser as a person and philosopher.

In describing these different figures of nihilism in Flusser's philosophy, I will not follow a linear path but jump back and forth between the different instances and moments in time to show how these figures keep reappearing in different guises and contexts creating continuity on different levels of his work.

Mephisto

On his escape from Prague, Flusser took only two books with him: a Hebrew prayer book (fig. 1), and Goethe's *Faust*. As he writes in his autobiography *Bodenlos*, „nicht wegen Faust, sondern wegen Mephisto“, not because of Faust, but because of Mephisto (Flusser 1992: 28²). Interestingly enough, as Flusser himself asserted, the prayer book had been lost over time. However, this is not quite true as the little book has been preserved by Edith Flusser. The prayer book was displayed at the exhibition *Globale: Bodenlos – Vilém Flusser und die Künste* at the ZMK (Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe) in Karlsruhe (August 15 to October 10, 2015). In the accompanying note, she wrote: “Dad received this prayerbook in 1939 for his trip. At the border a German civil servant forced me to translate a passage from it.”

What the story tells us, is that this part of his life was lost or abandoned over time. Faith was lost to him and together with it the possibility of prayer. In his letters to his cousin David Flusser, he writes about his loss of faith and the inability to pray and in the programmatical autobiographical essay “In Search of Meaning” written in Portuguese in the late 1960s he comes back to this notion. “I considered suicide for years and survived only with this ever-present possibility.

⁴ For the notion of the diabolical and its role in Flusser's thinking see Guldin 2011.

I devoured Kafka, Camus the art of the absurd. This was when I painfully learned that faith cannot be provoked and that if God had died, he is dead.” (Flusser 2002: 201)

In Goethe’s *Faust*, Mephisto is not the classical embodiment of the devil but Faust’s antagonist, his alter-ego, he is the spirit of negation out of which new life constantly grows, a cosmic principle of negation and destruction, ensuring constant renewal. However, despite his continuous efforts at complete destruction nature keeps growing back. Mephistopheles is, thus, at the same time a destroyer and the involuntary creator of new life. This points to an essential element in Flusser’s understanding of nihilism: denial is the presupposition for renewal. Creativity is based on destruction. However, in his vision death and entropy always prevail in the end.

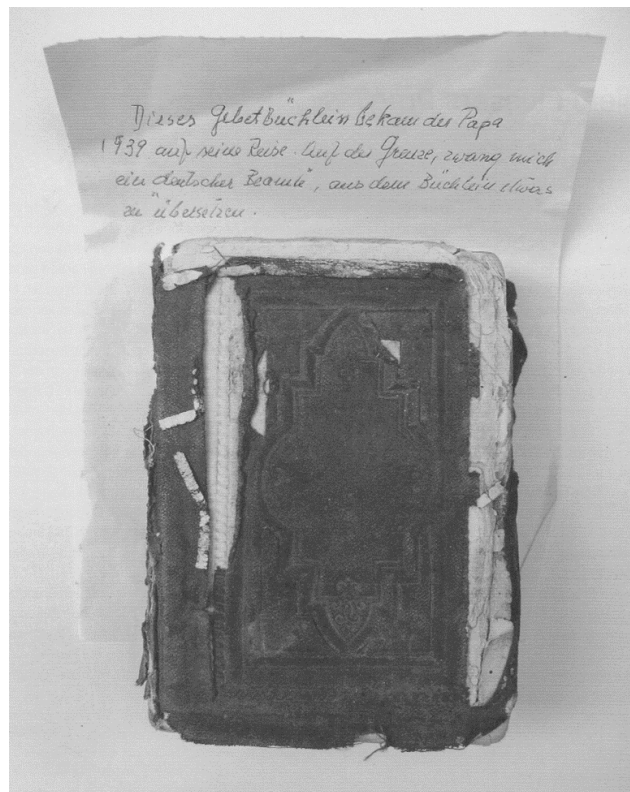


Figure 1: The Jewish Prayer book

Negentropy and Death

In Flusser’s view, death is linked to the absurdity of human life. Everything we do is destined to dissolve and disappear. Individual death is connected to the cosmic principle of entropy, a state of disorder, randomness and uncertainty. The term is used in diverse fields, from classical thermodynamics to the microscopic description of nature in statistical physics, and the principles of

information theory. In his book *What is Life?*⁵ Erwin Schrödinger (2014), first published in 1944, introduced the concept of ‘negative entropy’. This was later shortened by the French physicist Léon Brillouin to ‘negentropy’.⁶ Flusser starts using the notion of ‘negentropy’ in the course of the 1970s which means that he most probably came across the concept after his return to Europe in 1972. Negentropy negates disorder, it negates negation. Negentropy is a negativity of the second degree, turning negation to positive ends, and in this sense is a figure of thought perfectly suited to express Flusser’s ambivalent understanding of nihilism.

In “Was ist Kommunikation?” (What is Communication) written in the 1970s, Flusser defines individual and collective human communication as “a trick whose intention is to make us forget the brutal meaninglessness of a life sentenced to death.” (Flusser 1996: 10) Dialogue makes us forget our predicaments as human beings and works against forgetting. The other side of any individual death is the end of the universe. Human communication as an accumulation of information is a process that is taking place on the back of the far broader process of entropy which moves in the direction of information loss. Flusser describes negentropy as a smaller epicycle riding on the back of the bigger cycle of entropy but moving in the contrary direction. This image shows that all human efforts go against the general tendency of the universe but are ultimately doomed to turn into ash. Individual death corresponds thus to the end of the universe.

Flusser’s philosophy asks us to go against the general tendency of entropy, both on the individual and cosmic level, even if we know that ultimately both are going to disappear. He uses the notion of failure as a stimulus for further attempts. An example of this principle can be found in connection with Pilpul, a Jewish game of interpretation aimed at understanding the true meaning of the name and the word of God, that is, aimed at understanding the meaning of human life in general. Jewish thinking keeps running up against the borders of the conceivable not to abolish them but to recognize them and to determine their extension (Flusser 1995).

The myth of Sisyphus, to which I will come back in connection with the work of Albert Camus, takes up this notion. For cheating both Thanatos and Hades, Sisyphus, son of Aeolus, guardian of the winds, was condemned to roll an immense boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down every time it neared the top, repeating this action in eternity. It is not so much the rolling of the stone which causes him pain but the meaninglessness of this task. This apparently futile, circular, never-ending motion is reinterpreted by Flusser in new terms. Sisyphus becomes a player in the open-ended translational game of life. I will come back to this notion in one of the following sections.

⁵ There are some of Schrödinger’s book in the Reisebibliothek in the Archive in Berlin, but not this one.

⁶ Compare Leon Brillouin (1953) « Negentropy. Principle of Information », in *Journal of Applied Physics*, 24(9) : 1152–1163 and *La science et la théorie de l’information*, Masson, 1959.

Alex Bloch: Nihilism as Poison

One of the origins of Vilém Flusser's philosophy is his confrontation with the nihilism of his friend Alex Bloch. In the letter exchange that began in 1951 during a short stay in Rio de Janeiro with Edith Flusser and their two children, Bloch emerges as a Mephistophelian spirit of denial. Both Flusser and Bloch were Jews from Prague. However, as they frequented two different grammar schools, they did not meet there. When they arrived in Brazil, they were both still quite young: Flusser was twenty and Bloch 24. As in Flusser's case, Bloch's familiar world collapsed when he was forced to leave his native city. The exile turned him, as Flusser puts it, into a lonely Steppenwolf. Contrary to Flusser who escaped despair through study and writing, Bloch never wrote anything. His letters were full of whit, comments Flusser, perhaps pointing to a hidden talent that the friend did not allow to develop fully. He was inventive and amusing, writes Flusser in *Bodenlos*, but he had no interest in this side of himself whatsoever. In due time, he turned into a petty bourgeois interested only in inflation, corruption and the price of groceries. Bloch let himself be enveloped and absorbed by nihilism. Flusser used it as a poison to be consumed in small doses.

Bloch and Flusser first met in São Paulo in May 1941. At that time, Bloch was still living with his parents. The attraction must have been immediate and reciprocal. Bloch began visiting Flusser nearly every day. After the end of the war, he started working in a German bookshop and became Flusser's main provider of books, which were difficult to get hold of in Brazil at that time. Their relationship was one-sided from the beginning: Flusser talked endlessly. Bloch listened patiently. He provided the books Flusser read and wrote about. However, he criticized his friend's opinions and texts fiercely and pitilessly.

In the short portrait in *Bodenlos* dedicated to Bloch, Flusser speaks of what he calls a „Zersetzungselement“ (Flusser 1992: 106) in Bloch's thinking, an element of corrosion and decomposition. Nihilism acts like an acid. Flusser let himself be used by Bloch as an organ of perception, expecting the friend to reduce everything, he presented him with – his daily experiences, his thoughts, his reading experiences, and his early writing attempts – to their bare elements. In this way, he turned the friend's pleasure of destruction into a catalyst for his own reflections. Their relationship was a kind of symbiosis: Flusser is the feeder, the eye and the mouth. Bloch the digester, the teeth and the stomach.

By defending himself against the “negativism” (Flusser 2000: 44) of his friend, his continuous efforts to deny all meaning, and his tendency to attempt, what Flusser calls a “Zerschmetterung aller Systeme“ (Flusser 2000: 39), a shattering and smashing of all systems, Flusser succeeded in creating a first synthesis of his thought. Through these early formative dialogues, nihilism

became a creative principle, and a way to survive within an absurd life in a foreign country without one's family.

In his early letters to Bloch, Flusser describes his inner struggle in detail. In a letter dated May 30, 1951, he writes. "It is necessary for life to have a *Lebensanschauung*, a view of life, and philosophy does not offer us any. It is therefore necessary to find a method of arriving at a view of life that goes beyond philosophy [...]." (Flusser 2000: 51-52) To live is to be in constant search of meaning, to fight off the temptations of nihilism and to create something new out of decomposition like an alchemist. The first of the four stages of alchemy is called *nigredo*, or blackness, which means putrefaction or decomposition. Alchemists believed that as a first step in the search for the philosopher's stone, the different alchemical ingredients had to be cleansed and cooked into a uniform black matter. The term has also been used as a metaphor for the dark night of the soul, the moment an individual confronts his shadow within. In the context of Flusser's philosophy Bloch's absolute negativism plays the role of the destroyer, and the temptation of suicide provides the necessary emotional and intellectual terrain.

However, continues Flusser in his letter to Bloch, the search for meaning, of a *Lebensanschauung*, always implies a risk: one ends up between the Scylla of logic and the Charybdis of metaphysics. Flusser alludes here to his loss of faith which can no longer be a possible answer to nihilism. Something different is needed. "In its field, philosophy is bound by epistemology and in its method by logic. What lies beyond epistemology is forbidden metaphysics. The method to get there is to be found beyond logic in various other areas. These include faith, mysticism, love, goodness, beauty. When writing down these words the positivist in me is revolted and the empiricist in me feels sick. Nevertheless, it is a hurdle to overcome if you want to save yourself from absolute nihilism." (Flusser 2000: 51-52)

Albert Camus' Sisyphus

Nihilism is linked to the intellectual and existential temptation of suicide. In this connection, Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2000), in which he developed his philosophy of the absurd, is of central importance. The contrast between the fundamental human need to attribute meaning to life and the silence of the universe leads to a sense of the absurd. This does not justify suicide but calls for a revolt against the very conditions of human existence. Like Sisyphus we should engage in a struggle that we know will not be successful but fill our heart with happiness.

Very much along these lines, Flusser writes in the essay "O mito de Sísifo de Camus" (Flusser 2008): "If we want to follow Camus, we need to assume, with him, that there is only one real problem: why don't I kill myself? Intellectual and moral honesty forces me to recognize that

everything is meaningless, absurd, and rushing toward an absurd, meaningless death. All of humanity's individual and collective attempts, both theoretical and practical, to deny, hide, forget or postpone this basic truth are so many dishonesties. ... why not get rid of all this nonsense by killing myself? Why live *quand-même*? ... Suicide is, therefore, a kind of metaphysics, a kind of theological trick, in short: a dishonest attempt to escape the absurd. Consequently, suicide must be rejected, like any other kind of metaphysics.” One cannot and should not escape from the tedious repetitions of one's absurd life: “One must continue living with disgust, day after day, moment after moment, to live as best as possible, since one cannot live as well as possible. Only in this way, devouring quantity instead of quality, only like Don Juan, actor or conqueror, is the honest man.”⁷ One cannot and should not escape from the tedious repetitions of one's absurd life:⁸

To live is to play the game of absurdity like a translator who knows that his translation is never going to be complete and that he could continue his work indefinitely. Failure is the engine that drives creativity. Since everything is without meaning, absurd, and ultimately tending towards death and oblivion, the only honest human being is the absurd human being. His situation is that of a person poised to commit suicide, ready to jump into nothingness. Only this situation on the vertiginous edge, shortly before the fall, is truly honest. Because of this, one has to live everyday absurdity consciously, making the most of it, discovering, so to speak, the creative side of nihilism. In the following passage, Flusser describes the existence within an absurd world as an artistic endeavour, and endless game to played over and over again knowing one will lose it in the end. “To see the world as a set of games, and to see it as a player who knows he is playing, is to see aesthetically. But this is not a Kierkegaardian aesthetics, as it reveals not only the fortuitous and absurd, but also the meaningful. And it is not enough to see, the world must be experienced. It must be experienced that art is better than truth. That theory of translation is epistemology. That, as Camus knew, the actor being a translator, is the one who knows. In other words, it must be experienced that everything is art, language, including that utmost game: *ars moriendi*. [...] I threw myself into games. In the sense of the *Magister Ludi* of Hermann Hesse. The “Homo Ludens” became for me a synonymous with ‘the New Man’ in Marx, the ‘Superman’ in Nietzsche. The man who plays not

⁷ “Se queremos seguir Camus, precisamos supor, com ele, que existe somente um problema real: por que não me mato? A honestidade intelectual e moral me força a reconhecer que tudo carece de significado, é absurdo e se precipita na direção de uma morte absurda e sem sentido. Todas as tentativas individuais e coletivas da humanidade, tanto teóricas quanto práticas, de negar, de esconder, de esquecer ou de adiar essa verdade básica são outras tantas desonestidades. ... por que não livrar-me de toda essa absurdidade, matando-me a mim mesmo? Por que viver *quand-même*? ... O suicídio é, portanto, uma espécie de metafísica, uma espécie de truque teológico, em resumo: uma tentativa desonesta de escapar ao absurdo. Consequentemente, o suicídio deve ser repellido, como qualquer outra espécie de metafísica.”

⁸ “É preciso continuar vivendo com o nojo, dia após dia, momento após momento, para viver o mais possível, já que não se pode viver o melhor possível. Somente assim, devorando quantidade em vez de qualidade, somente como Don Juan, ator ou conquistador, é o homem honesto.”

to win but to play, fortuitously, and in this absurdity offers himself up to what is no game.” (Flusser 2002: 204-205).

Flusser is referring here to the protocols and procedures of a good death of the late Middle Ages, which explained how to die well according to Christian precepts. In Flusser’s view, translation is a transitional act akin to death. The translator is poised on the abyss like someone ready to commit suicide. He does not fall into the void but jumps across, only to find himself in front of another abyss which calls for further jumps. Translation as the art of constantly and repeatedly dying without actually being dead brings dynamics into the game of suicide. The figure of the translator that is aware of the endlessness of his task is a happy Sisyphus, *un Sisyphes heureux* in Albert Camus’ sense.



Figure 2: The Art of dying (*Ars moriendi*)

The sculpture “Sisyphus” (fig. 3) of the Swiss artist Bernhard Luginbühl best illustrates this connection between creativity and failure that is at the very basis of Flusser’s thinking and writing. In October 1977, the twelve meters long, four and a half meters wide and six meters high fire-red iron sculpture was placed on a viewing terrace of the airport of Kloten right in front of a restaurant where the passengers were waiting for their departure. A motor-driven mechanism tilted the construction and caused a spherical rock made of chrome-nickel steel, which was also interpreted as a globe, to roll towards the other end. As soon as it reached the highest point and thus the end of

the track, it rolled again in the opposite direction. The art object is an ironical comment on travelling as a form of death and on the repetitiveness of our endeavours which are all doomed to fail. However, as Flusser's own life and work prove, it manages to transcend the bottomless absurdity of our lives through its very existence and the perfection of its beauty. Each failure gives birth to a new attempt. Entropy calls for negentropy. Achieving perfection would end the process.

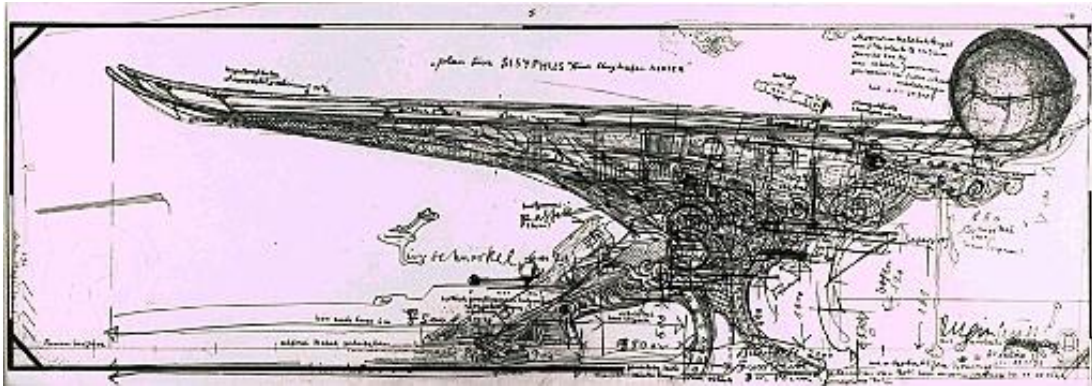


Figure 3: Bernhard Luginbühl, Plan for Sisyphus Kloten – ink (1977)

Friedrich Nietzsche: Nihilism and Meaning

Flusser does not mention Nietzsche explicitly in connection with nihilism. But the similarities are striking. Let me briefly point out some of the parallelisms. The answer to the question if Nietzsche was a nihilist is both yes and no. This is also true for Flusser. It is yes, if nihilism means the denial of belief systems imprisoning us, and no, if it means the denial of any possible value, meaning or truth in the world. In this sense, it is like in Flusser's case, a relative, rather than an absolute nihilism. As Lawrence J. Hatab puts it: "Nietzsche accepts a restricted form of nihilism that denies a realm of 'true being' apart from this world and a transcendently grounded system of values. [...] But Nietzsche sees complete nihilism [...] as decadent, dangerous, something to be overcome." Nietzsche has, thus, "a dual attitude toward nihilism: affirming it if it is a destructive transition to a new worldview; denying it if it is taken as an end in itself." (Hatab 1987: 92) Meaning and value are inseparable from negativity. Instead of certainty or absolute nihilism, Nietzsche advocates a principle of uncertainty, very much like Flusser himself. Nihilism is for Nietzsche a transitional stage, a passing away of tradition that opens up the possibility of a new vision of reality.

Another parallelism between Nietzsche's and Flusser's view of the world is the notion of art. "The phenomenon of art", writes Hatab, "displays features that are opposite to the traditional criterion of being and fixed standards of objective truth. Art involves creation, bringing-forth, process, an open-ended activity that can never be reduced to any fixed form. For Nietzsche, form and

meaning are never an objective presence that stands as a 'given.' They are continually brought forth in a creative process that displaces old forms and fashions new forms out of a prior formlessness – a process, therefore, that is constituted by a positive-negative interplay. Consequently, a creative individual is not repulsed by conditions of becoming, opposition, negativity and openness, but is rather excited by them since they are inseparable from the very nature of creativity.” (Hatab 1987: 97) This vision also implies that the traditional distinction between objective truth and the world of appearances has to be given up, something Flusser would agree with.

Vicente Ferreira da Silva

Vicente Ferreira da Silva, like Alex Bloch, is an alter ego of Flusser showing his other, nihilistic side. Flusser and Ferreira da Silva's friendship lasted only two years, but their relationship was intense and had a deep impact on Flusser's thinking. In *Bodenlos*, Ferreira da Silva is described as a Mephistophelian figure (Flusser 1992: 119-130). He is provocatively sitting with his legs apart leaning towards the back of the chair and looking at people with piercing black eyes.

Flusser describes his friend and discussion partner as a dark mirror in which one could find the same components but organized in a completely different way. “It is a nightmare to know that Vicente Ferreira da Silva lived so close during the terrible war and the years of torment that followed, without my having met him. If I had known Vicente in 1940, my whole path would have been different. Had he known me - I believe that with all my heart - he would have changed himself and Brazilian culture at least a little bit. The great misunderstanding of Vicente who projected his whole beauty and dignity on the disgusting indignity of the petty bourgeoisie of the frenzied European fascists would have been prevented.” (Flusser 1975) Ferreira da Silva's nihilism can be compared to that of Alex Bloch – “One can say that Vicente was an evil Bloch [...]” (Flusser 1992: 120) – who did not succeed in taming his negativity losing himself in a petty bourgeois universe of thought. In this sense, nihilism opens up the possibility of a transition to another world or turns out one's worst side. “For me it was the discovery of an alter ego, albeit certainly a larger one. I started fighting with him almost every day. [...] I learned, changed in a way that was difficult to describe, I opened myself up to him. At the same time, I felt a barrier woven out of tragic misunderstandings – all, in my view, emanated from him. I tried to break through, and I was beginning to succeed. Death intervened. But Vicente still challenges me in everything I do.” (Flusser 1975)

In 1963, Ferreira da Silva died in a car crash, Camus in 1960 and Flusser in 1991.

Nothingness

Another recurring figure of nihilism is the notion of the emptiness that appears already in the very first texts, especially in connection with Buddhism. Buddhism, as Flusser puts it, is a child of the Mephistophelian spirit, a mixture of philosophical nihilism with the most sublime mystical speculations and the most primitive pagan rites. Buddhism frees one from materiality and the shackles of things. It makes one recognize that everything one calls ego is ultimately not ego and that the innermost ego turns out to be nothing but a zero point. This radical dissolution of the self and of the world reappears in Flusser's late work, in a liberating, creative sense. In the introduction to his last book *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (From Subject to Project) (Flusser 1993), subject and object are described as comparable particle swarms that have the same numerical pointillistic structure. In this late version, nihilism and the forces of negation and dispersal emerge in a double form: on the one hand, in the groundlessness of human existence and the consequential dissolution of the world and the self into a swarm of particles from which new worlds can be projected, and on the other, in the notion of stepping back to exercise criticism, an idea that plays a central role in Flusser's theory of code evolution. Human life is fundamentally an ex-istence, based on the continual abandoning of old ideas and roles. The prefix "ex", out of, from, and hence utterly, thoroughly, stresses departure, separation, severance. In both cases, negativity is turned into a chance of reinventing oneself and the world.

In Flusser's view, negation is a driving force that animates human history. The different stages of code evolution lead from images to texts and from texts to technical images. This evolution is based on a principle of continuous rejection and subsequent reinvention, which could be described in terms of a translational act, comparable to the playful suicidal game of *ars moriendi* (Flusser 1962 and Guldin 2005: 182-202). Images originally helped man to understand the world but soon they blocked it from his view. So, linear writing was invented to pierce through the images keeping man imprisoned. Distancing is often a violent aggressive even destructive act. Flusser uses a pun to express this transition. *Vor-stellen*, re-present, and *ver-stellen*, dis-guise. But soon idolatry was superseded by textolatry which led to a further negation in the form of technical images whose aim was to pierce through the lines of the page in order to make the world of texts imaginable again. Flusser ironically described the different stages of code evolution as a countdown leading to zero-dimensionality. This new and final stage of emptiness is at the same time the very starting point for a new vision of the world. As with other figures of nihilism in his work, the other side of decomposition and dispersal is creativity.

Vampyroteuthis Infernalis

The figure of thought of the Vampyroteuthis Infernalis appears a long time before the first publication of the book in 1987. The diabolical octopus inhabiting the infernal abysses of the deep is one of the many embodiments of the Mephistophelian principle that pervades Flusser's thinking from the beginning to the end as a kind of basso continuo. In *The History of the Devil*, Flusser speaks of the deep sea of the senses and the tentacles of the self, highlighting the devilish side of human beings. In his letters to Alex Bloch, it is a constant presence. In a letter written on January 4, 1979, Flusser defines the octopus as a cunning, sharp witted and wise animal, comparable to the fox, the owl or the eagle. In another letter dated March 7, 1981, he mentions his intention "to focus again on the subject of the devil, this time in the form of the Vampyroteuthis Infernalis." Finally, in a letter dated June 27, 1983, he mentions Freud's relationship to Jewish mysticism which led him to reconsider his own interest in the abysmal and diabolical. Freud 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 *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This sentence, writes Flusser, kept turning around in my head "like the wheel of a mill" and fascinated me all over again, "on revient toujours à son premier amour, but from the opposite side." (Flusser 2000: 184)

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) They live like vampires cannibalizing their kin and inhabit an infernal abyss of eternal darkness. With regard to human beings, they 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 to fan food towards their greedy mouths. The Vampyroteuthes live in an upside-down world. We are like him because we also "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."

One of the most interesting characteristics of the Vampyroteuthis are his eyes that although being similar to those of a human being do not see "reflected sunlight, but the reflexion of the light that his own light-organs have generated." The link to Lucifer, the light-bearer, is evident. Human beings live in broad daylight, cephalopods, on the other hand, exist only in the flashes of their own bioluminescence. The philosophical fable of the Vampyroteuthis is a phenomenological fairy tale

about the creation of meaning, *Sinn-Gebung*, literally, the giving, the attributing of sense, and the way we participate in the creation of the world that surrounds us.

In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, written in the mid-1980s, technical images are conceived as projections 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* also means projectors of pretence, from the German *Schein* (appearance) and *werfen* (to throw). As the Vampyrotheuthis we throw illusionary, alluring images, diabolical phantasies onto an empty screen. The Vampyrotheuthis lives in a surprising world, a world that can no longer deceive him, as it is a world of self-induced deceit. This is one of the lessons he is teaching us. I would like to conclude this essay with Samson Flexor's and Louis Bec's representations of Flusser as a Mephistophelian figure.



Figure 4: Gustaf Gründgens in the role of Mephisto.

Samson Flexor's *Dialogue*

In 1968, Flexor painted a portrait of Flusser entitled "Dialogue", showing a mischievous, bald-headed figure, with a high forehead crisscrossed by deep lines and piercing, challenging eyes under angular raised eyebrows ironically and challengingly looking at us, remindful both of Vicente Ferreira da Silva's portrait in *Bodenlos* and the white Mephistophelian mask with the two longish diagonal black lines from Gustaf Gründgens' and István Szabó's Mephisto. Flusser the doubter, the troublemaker, but also the diabolical seducer. Flusser had a reputation for initiating the most violent discussions. The slightly arrogant way of appearing also reveals a person caught up in the fiercest struggle with himself and the world. It is probably for this reason that the figure of

Mephisto as an incessantly doubting and negating spirit was much closer to Flusser throughout his life than the eternally striving Faust.

In *Bodenlos*, Flusser describes the portrait and its geological technique. “A year before his death, Flexor made a portrait that he titled ‘Dialogue’. One appears on it in pink, on a white enamel background The forehead and the chin are crisscrossed by valleys, a question mark mountain range runs through the false symmetry of the face that disappears below in the whiteness, the eyes are valleys (one is an oval the other a triangle), and Flexor’s characteristic signature highlights the “FL” and “r” common to both names. Never has a more penetrating critique of one’s being-in-the-world itself been made ...”(Flusser 1992: 134) Flusser’s description of the portrait stresses, ambivalence, asymmetry (the two completely different eyes) and openness (the question mark). The unequal pair of eyes also recalls Faust’s dictum of the two souls housed within his breast wrestling for mastery. However, another interpretation is possible: Flexor’s portrait could be a representation of the Mephistophelian side of Flusser’s character.

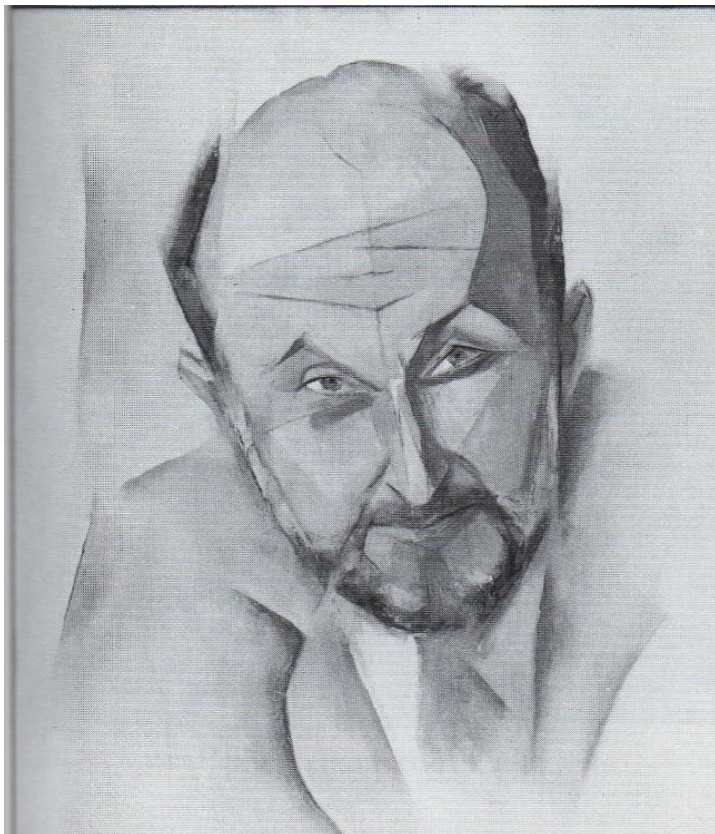


Figure 5: Samson Flexor, *Diálogo* (1968)

Strangely enough, Flusser himself, does not mention this possible interpretation at all. The slightly inclined head, the scarce hair suggesting devilish horns, the pointed ears of a nocturnal bat, the sharp crisscrossing lines, the overall angularity of the face, the sharp pointed nose, the poised, tense

attitude of someone ready to jump and attack, all this seems to point in the same direction. The portrait reminds one of certain descriptions of the devil in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, a text that Flusser knew well. The red-haired devil of this book is not fiery, but ice cold and passes for a man of destructive criticism. But perhaps the portrait with its oval right eye and its triangular left eye is a portrait of Flusser as a composite figure, Faust and Mephistopheles at the same time.

Vampyrotheuthis infernalis: The diabolical seducer

The connection between Flusser himself and Mephistopheles, highlighted by Flexor's painting, is even more evident in the plates that Bec added to the book *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis*. In an e-mail he sent me on May 22, 2007, he described different species of Vampyrotheuthis each representing a different side of Flusser's character. "Each of the plates [...] represents attitudes, forms of behaviour or traits of Vilém's vampyromorphic character. I offered him this series of paranaturalistic plates. But I never revealed to him that he had been the model. I hoped, perhaps secretly, that he would find out." (Bec 2007: 1)⁹ I have selected four plates in which the diabolical aspect is particularly evident.

Vampyrotheone Eukalampe (fig. 6) is the diabolical seducer and Lucifer, the light bearer. As already pointed out, in Flusser's view, meaning is not found in reality but projected both individually and collectively onto the world. In German: not *Sinnfindung* but *Sinngebung*. In *A dúvida*, a book written in the 1960s (Flusser 1999), Flusser described the grammatical subject in a sentence as a projector, and the predicate as an image projected onto a screen. This specific species of Vampyrotheuthis embodies the fascination of Flusser's fabulatory epistemology. Vampyrotheutes communicate with each other and interact with the world through bioluminescence thanks to their chromatophores. Their skins contain elastic pigment cells which allow them to change their color in an extremely short time. In the text accompanying the plate, Bec does not only speak of bioluminescence but also of a "lumière divine abyssale", a divine abyssal light. The Vampyrotheuthis is an inverted Lucifer of the deep seas.

⁹ "Chacune des planches représente donc des attitudes, des comportements ou des traits de caractères vampyromorphiques de Vilém. Je lui ai offert cette série de planches paranaturalistes. Mais je ne lui ai jamais révélé qu'il en avait été le modèle. J'espérais, peut-être secrètement qu'il le découvrirait. La lecture des différentes planches donne des clés et la terminologie employée est significative."

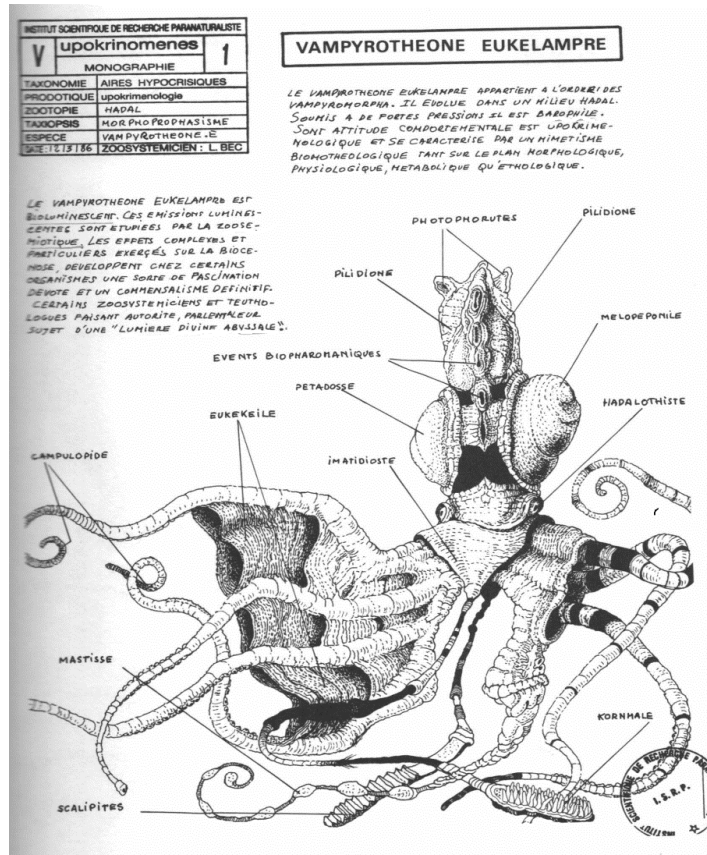


Figure 6: *Vampyrotheone Eukalampe*

This aspect also plays a role in plate two which shows a predator who projects a black or translucent gelatinous substance on his prey and hammers it with his Ropalon (Greek: stick). Bec might be alluding here to Flusser’s provocative way of interacting with others but also to an aggressive destructive nihilistic side of Flusser’s character, especially during discussions. Dialogue partners are prey to be subdued and convinced at all costs. The argumentative stick is used to pummel the adversary and to hammer in an opinion. Mephisto in its most aggressive role.

Plate four seems to be referring to Flusser’s observation on Freud’s self-identification with the devil and Virgil’s verse “If I cannot move heaven, I will raise hell”. Bec speaks in his email of Flusser’s cannibalistic ability to ingest and absorb everything (Bec 2007: 6). One of the traits of the Vampyrotheutes is also their anthropophagic nature. The Vampyrotheute is avidly and continually listening to the information coming from the world, he is a walk-man of the thoughts hidden in the depths. He endlessly feeds on the world and the people around him. He aggressively ingests, absorbs, and digests.

And finally, on plate 5 (fig. 7) we have the image of the destroyer, the smasher of all systems – a role Flusser had previously assigned to Alex Bloch – whose critical stance corrodes and decomposes all views of the world. It is an Attila from the bottom of the seas (Bec 2007: 5), as Bec calls him, a warrior that reminds one of other nihilistic figures like Vicente Ferreira da Silvas. On the

text accompanying the plate, Bec describes him as follows: “His behaviour manifests itself in the systematic destruction of all nutritionally unnecessary forms of life traversing his habitat.” Bec calls this species *Lumanter Phusagrion*. ‘Lumanter’, can be traced back to ‘lumante’ and ‘lumi’, which in Esperanto means ‘light’. The prefix ‘plus’ in ‘Phusagrion’ could be traced back to Ancient Greek *phōs*, light, light emitted by a lamp, a heavenly light such as surrounds angels when they appear on earth, pure, brilliant light. It also signifies a break in the darkness, a triumph of truth and knowledge over ignorance, and an orientation towards something greater. Jesus Christ asked those who believed in him to be the light in the world. ‘Agrion’ is from ancient Greek *ἀγριος*, *ágrios*, wild, fierce, living in open fields. Aggression and wildness are thus associated with change and truth.

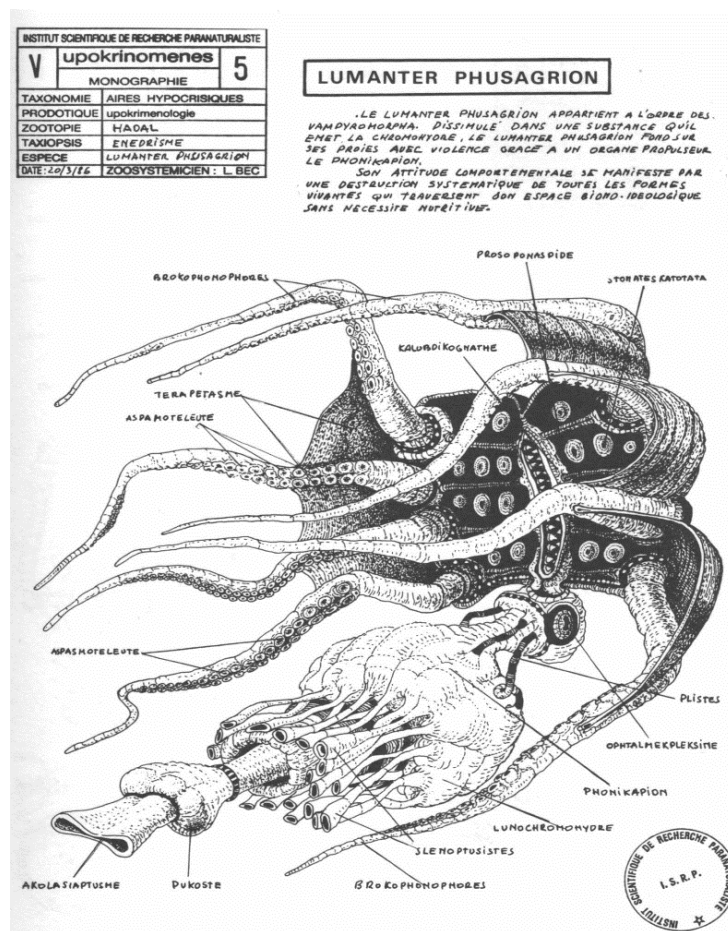


Figure 7: *Lumanter Phusagrion*

To conclude let me briefly sum up the main points of this essay. Flusser denies absolute nihilism. He uses a tamed form of nihilism that incorporates the forces of negativity and turns them into a creative force of permanent renewal. The absurdity of life is not abolished it remains primary both in its individual and collective sense: death and entropy. However, it becomes part of an endless liberating creative game, which Flusser associates with translation and self-translation, the art of

dying (*ars moriendi*) and life as a form of art that playfully transcends the fundamental absurdity of our existence.

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