Hybrid

Revue des arts et médiations humaines

3 | 2016

Cultures numériques : alternatives

Navigation or filtration: Vilém Flusser and the vampiric alternative of the digital imaginary

Yves Citton

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/937>

DOI: 10.4000/hybrid.937

ISSN: 2276-3538

This article is a translation of:

Naviguer ou filtrer - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/931> [fr]

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

Electronic reference

Yves Citton, "Navigation or filtration: Vilém Flusser and the vampiric alternative of the digital imaginary", *Hybrid* [Online], 3 | 2016, Online since 01 December 2016, connection on 15 April 2022.

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hybrid/937> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/hybrid.937>

This text was automatically generated on 13 April 2022.

Revue Hybrid

Navigation or filtration: Vilém Flusser and the vampiric alternative of the digital imaginary

Yves Citton

- 1 Over the last decades, what was sometimes referred to as the “cyberspace” has often been thought to provide some (“virtual”) alternative to today’s world. On Earth, in our social space marked out by proper nouns, passports, price labels, as well as physical, economic and administrative forces, each and every movement is demanding and tiring, since one often stumbles over insurmountable obstacles. The digital alternative—free, with its avatars, algorithmic inventiveness, its ninjas jumping from roof to roof and its miracles of networking—lured one with the hope for the being-online and its thrilling lightness. Everything seemed possible: the equality of status between disidentified conscious entities, free movement across the frontiers of nations, genders, races and classes, the worldwide fraternity between all of the network contributors. At the forefront of the anthropological issues resulting from the evolution of digital technologies, thinkers such as Félix Guattari mentioned the prospect of a “reshuffle of the mass media power crushing the contemporary subjectivity and of an entry into a post-media era consisting in a collective individual re-appropriation and interactive use of the information, communication, intelligence, art and culture mechanisms”¹.
- 2 Over the last decade, discourses suggesting that we scale down these hopes have increased. The digital alternative would have been long-lived. The GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), soon followed by the NATU (Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla, and Uber), once again got hooks into the capitalist marketability of cyberspace. The NSA and general intelligence services collect any trace of our “free” digital movements, so as to better target the subversive elements to imprison, under the pretext of emergency laws or state of emergency. Our beautiful surges of contributive generosity end up crushing us under heaps of unmanageable e-mails. What used to shine beyond the promises of the “virtual,” like an alternative to the alienating state capitalism, would “in fact” only strengthen its hold. And everyone is complaining all together—about the end of

utopias, reigning conformism and unconditional surrender of the digital to the deadly appeal of witch TINA (*There Is No Alternative*).

From a world of data to a world of prehensions

- 3 One may laugh—for good reason—at the claim that “another reality is still possible,” for the current issue is not so much about abstractly stating vague possibilities, as it is about concretely defending areas from a capitalistic plunder (ZAD), developing other forms of collaboration and putting them into practice, and starting to learn how to live among the ruins of capitalism². However, this task implies a disconcerting reversal of the perspectives through which we have learned to situate ourselves in this world. It is at this level—in order to negotiate this reversal of perspective and make it seem first acceptable and eventually intuitive—that one needs what Cornélius Castoriadis called “instituting imagination”³. One has to learn to see the same things differently, from another perspective, so as to spot other points to potentially cling to.
- 4 To define that work of collaborative imagination, two terms inspired by two great 20th-century English-speaking thinkers may prove useful. The first one is the notion of *prehension*, as formulated by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead⁴. Our attention to the world and practical behaviors determine what we make of this world. In the digital field especially, what we call “data” deserve to be systematically translated into “prehensions”: they do not constitute a “given,” something that we would be offered for free and lavishly, rather they have been extracted through generally costly, hence interested, calculation operations. As Bruno Latour stated numerous times, the supposedly “objective facts” of science have indeed been “made up” through processes which were overly determined by necessarily one-sided human interests. In the same way, isn’t our whole digital universe made up of necessarily one-sided prehensions and regarded as “data” only through a dangerously simplifying leap.
- 5 The second term, a counterpart to the first one, is that of *affordance* developed by psychologist James J. Gibson in his ecology of visual perception, in order to refer to what, in our environment, “allows” or *affords* a human action⁵. The handle of a pan is designed so that one can lift it without getting burned; the branches of a tree allow for one to climb, unlike the smooth surface of a metal pole, which provides no grip for one to climb it. Like the material world into which it fits and on which it feeds, the digital world develops through a complex interplay using certain affordances in the context of prehensions. Like our material world, and even to a greater extent, it pertains to a dynamic plasticity that leads the prehension requirements to induce new affordances.
- 6 The reversal of perspective that is required for one to better comprehend the current deployment of digital possibilities, invites one to seek other imaginary models, bringing out (more clearly) *other* affordances that are likely to be subjected to *other* prehensions. The alternative worlds of the digital must be sought for in the digital itself, in the possibilities that it provides without our knowing them yet—or in other words in what Pierre Lévy would precisely define as the “virtual,” as early as 1995⁶. To understand the “virtues” of the digital that are yet to be discovered, use solutions provided by the digital, so as to raise other issues induced by these very solutions, design alternative representation models that would be more likely to let us grasp these unsuspected affordances—this is in substance the work carried out over the past thirty years by a thinker unjustly unrecognized in the French-speaking area, yet

canonized in Germany and very recently re-discovered in the world of Anglo-Saxon *Media Studies*.

- 7 Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) had to flee from the Nazi invasion of Prague. For thirty years, he lived in Brazil as a communications philosophy teacher. Then, with the generals coming into power, he fled this country to spend the rest of his life in France. He has produced an impressive corpus consisting of generally short and hardly classifiable essays, somewhere between phenomenology, technological speculation and the theory of media. The recent *Flusser-revival*, twenty years after his death, is evidence that he is now recognized as one of the most powerful and inspiring thinkers in the field of digital mutation, further developing the ideas of his predecessor Marshall McLuhan in directions remarkably similar to those taken by such famous names as Gilbert Simondon, Félix Guattari or Pierre Lévy.
- 8 The following pages will try to find an alternative to our familiar way of thinking the digital cultures. To do so, we will study a text—"strange" in every respect—written by this author, who was proud of his strangeness. This exploration will take the form of a free diving, interspersed with a certain number of necessary stages. We will start in the abyss, before we gradually go back up to a place that looks similar to life as we experience it in the networks.

Vampyroteuthis infernalis

fig. 1

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyrotheuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

- 9 The vampire squid (*vampyroteuthis infernalis*) is a cephalopod mollusk, similar to octopi and squids, living as deep in the sea as the human mind can imagine. While our evolution, with the standing position allowing us to walk upright on the surface of the Earth, resulted in our head being as remote as possible from our feet, cephalopods have evolved in the opposite way, which eventually made their head (*céphalè-*) coincide with their feet (*-podes*). Our organism “has bent backwards to distance the mouth from the anus”; theirs has “bent forwards to bring the mouth closer to the anus”⁷. Humans yearn to rise towards the sky and its light; the vampyroteuthis has sunk into the darkness of the abyss, which is absolute in the extreme depths where it is one of the few creatures that are able to live. While our appearance on Earth is recent, the vampire squid is one of its most ancient inhabitants, contemporary of the dinosaurs, and has managed to survive for over 200 million years. We have nothing in common, from habitat to age, including the most instinctive behaviors: when humans feel hunted down, they try to hide in a dark corner; to escape its rare predators, the vampyroteuthis “spits” bioluminescent mucus which serves as a luminous barrier.
- 10 While humans constantly get busy and bustle about in order to extract objects from the world, using them in turn to produce other objects with a view to obtain or produce yet other objects, “the vampyroteuthis sucks in the world instead of handling it. [...] The objective world did not become, for it, a sphere of activity but one of experience. [...] The vampyroteuthis became an impassioned subject whose objective antipode is actively rushing toward it to be passionately enjoyed” (41). Our *Dasein* (which means “being in the world”) pushes us to roam the world in order to grasp and do; its *Dasein* has it stay still and become permeated with what it absorbs.
- [...] These two cultures are incomparable. For us, objects are problems—obstacles—that we handle simply to move out of our way. Culture is therefore, for us, an activity aimed against stationary objects, a deliverance from established things (from natural laws). For the vampyroteuthis, on the other hand, objects are free-floating entities in a current of water that happen to tumble upon it. It sucks them in to incorporate them. Culture is therefore, for it, an act of discriminating between digestible and indigestible entities, that is, a critique of impressions. Culture is not, for it, an undertaking against the world but rather a discriminating and critical injection of the world into the bosom of the subject. (39)
- 11 Therefore, the vampire works like a *filter*: its feet and head fold over an orifice that serves both as its mouth and anus. It gets in and out, it goes through, it flows. It sucks the life out of it. However, while it is in, it sorts, selects, discriminates, it retains some and lets some go. The entity is an in-between within a flowing environment: the organic body consists of intertwining membranes (*-derma*) folded around one another.
- Eucoelomata [...] consist of three types of cellular tissue: the ectoderm, mesoderm and endoderm. The ectoderm encases them and delineates them from the world, and the endoderm produces secretions that allow them to digest what they can from the world. Most interesting of all, however, is the mesoderm. It lies between the protective and digestive layers and allows these animals to affect the world. (7)
- 12 The principle of this peculiar mode of “action” is to be found in the derma, which apparently are just being passively penetrated—without their actively “doing” anything. The same goes for humans and vampire squids. The only difference lies in the type of dermis that each of them has been pushed to develop to the fullest. “Eucoelomata were disposed to one of two evolutionary possibilities: to refine either the endoderm (the digestive system) or the ectoderm (the nervous system)” (8). We have taken the first path, that of digestion, which has us wander the world in search of

objects to get our teeth into; the vampyroteuthis has taken the second path, that of *aisthesis*, which refines its sensitivity to everything that brushes past it, touches it, penetrates it. The most interesting is yet the mesoderm, located “between the protective and digestive layers,” between the digestive system and the skin: it is in the mesoderm that the nervous system ramifies. It is where the inputs, both from the outside (skin) and inside (digestive system) are woven. This is where the nexus constituting our self is formed:

In succinct and concrete terms, the environment is that which we experience and we, in turn, are that in which the environment is experienced: Reality is a web of concrete relations. The entities of the environment are nothing but knots in this web, and we ourselves are knots of the same sort. (31)

- 13 Deep in the abyss, we could not see a thing at first. What is this antediluvian mollusk? How is it that we are told about its features and ethology in detail? Does this vampyroteuthis infernalis really exist? What can it teach us? The closer and more patiently we look at it, the more likely we are to eventually notice what could very well be its bioluminescence: its existence, symmetrically opposed to ours, seems to imply something about our own existence as stitches in a fabric of concrete relations, the nervous system of which now goes through all bodies, countries and oceans on the planet. *De nobis fabula narratur.*

fig. 2

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

Medial psychopathology of the depths

- 14 This text, which Vilém Flusser started writing in 1981, was published in German in 1987 and illustrated with drawings by Louis Bec. As demonstrated by Riccardo Venturi's studies⁸, this most strange opusculum is to be read as standing at the crossroads between two traditions. On the one hand, although Flusser is not used to citing his sources and even if he seems to ignore the many researches conducted right after the discovery of the vampire squid by Carl Chun in 1899—researches that have resulted in numerous scholar publications throughout the 20th century –, his analysis makes the most of his incredible skills in phenomenology to reinterpret the observable (phenomena) with a view to identify models for underlying behaviors of a much wider reach, like he did as early as his first Brazilian publications such as *A História do Diabo* (*Une Histoire du diable*, 1965) and his first book translated into French, *La force du quotidien* (1973), in which he reconstitutes our experience from objects such as canes, pens, bottles, carpets or glasses⁹.
- 15 On the other hand, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* is to be considered in the context of issues that will lead Flusser to publish his most advanced and visionary theoretical works throughout the 1980s, with a global view to raise awareness on the revolution of our communication modes resulting from the broadcast of techno-images, since the invention of photography, phonograph, cinema, radio and television, as well as from the advent of the “telematic information society” stemming from the digital. While the ethological description of the vampire squid explicitly appears as an animal “fable”—the moral of which is at the reader's discretion—this fable undoubtedly has to be read as the figural investigation of the anthropological transformations described in *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* (*Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 1983), *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* (*Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 1990) and *Die Schrift: Hat Schreiben Zukunft ?* (*Does Writing have a Future ?*, 1992).¹⁰
- 16 In a totally remarkable article¹¹, Melody Jue wisely proposes to read the speculative fiction of the vampyroteuthis according to a threefold system of analogy referring to (1) humanity as a whole (from a new reversed perspective), (2) the new world of experience introduced by photography (the technical equipment of which includes an immersion in liquid chemicals and in darkness, a reversal into a negative, the manipulation of luminescence) and (3) a form of “post-historical” conscience, in which information and intelligence would flow from a node of players-networks to another. This third level of interpretation is precisely the one that I would like to further explore in the following pages. If, according to Flusser, the aim of the work is to seek a new life form deep inside us, to help us “overcome anthropocentrism and to examine the constraints of our life from the perspective of the vampyroteuthis” (12), it is rather as a *description of our mode of immersion in the digital* that this fable appears—at least to me—to convey a particularly stimulating moral, insofar as it blurs the reference points that we use to justify our “moral” judgments.
- 17 I will then propose to consider the writing of *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* from the perspective of Flusser's long study of the “digital revolution,” the issues of which he understood as early as 1970. Fifteen years before Félix Guattari, he wished for the advent of a post-media era, whose “telematic” technology would allow for a reversal of the “irresponsible” logic inherent to 20th-century mass media:

To simplify, today's prevailing connection mode can be described as follows: images are produced by a "sender" and then circulated through a "cable harness" in a single direction: towards the addressees. Consequently, the latter are "irresponsible," since the cables do not transmit their potential responses; they all get the same message and therefore share the same points of view; they do not see each other, because the cabling mode does not allow for any cross-connection. This is why all images are perceived as so many realities, for that type of cabling does not let any criticism pass.¹²

- 18 Yet the irresponsibility and depoliticization pertaining to this mass-media communication mode could be overcome, provided that television looked "like a telephone with a screen" or "a typewriter with a screen and coupled with a computer"¹³. No sooner had Flusser painted this post-media utopia in glowing colors than he acknowledged pitfalls in 1974:

Should this breakthrough occur, should television become an open network involving as many partners as the current radio-television system or postal service network and telephone, this would imply a shift in the fundamental structure of our society. All windows would then be open, allowing anyone to discuss with everyone, and to discuss in such a way that reality would be perceived from a different, new perspective. This would be tantamount to a globalized politicization, because society would then be gathered in a global agora where everyone could "publish." New information would appear everywhere, along with new problems. Today, what is lacking is dialog; then, it would be discourse. Globalized politicization would deprive the private space from its content.¹⁴

- 19 Unlike Gunther Anders, who already carried out a scathing analysis of television communication in 1956, Flusser never indulges in a monolithic, one-sided and reductive denouncement of mass-media civilization. Contrary to defenders of post-media, he never makes the naive mistake of believing that digital interactivity and the horizontality of networks are the be-all and end-all of the domination issues either. The screen-sharing allowed by the multiplication of low-cost smartphones does indeed provide a way out of mass-media totalitarianism, by allowing everyone to partake in the social "dialog" (for instance through the online circulation of recorded evidence of police brutality against oppressed minorities), thus pluralizing the one-way "discourse" of the dominant media. For all that, an abundance of horizontal "dialogs" could very well drown every structuring "discourse" in trite palaver, as free as it is meaningless.
- 20 Flusser thus conducts analyses that equally show the liberating promises of the "new media" and their implicit new alienations. In the words of the one contributing the most in spreading his legacy—Siegfried Zielinski, director of the FlusserArchiv—this approach raises awareness on the different forms of *psychopathologia medialis* that haunt every mediatized communication¹⁵. Even if the vampyroteuthic fable often hints at gloomy prospects—"to rape human brains" (67) or "a cybernetic Nazism" (71)—it especially excels at revealing the inherent ambivalence of medial devices, which makes it impossible to draw a simplistic moral from this highly disconcerting fable. Once again, Melody Jue gets it right: "Vampyroteuthis thus embodies both a kind of totalitarian power (seeking to inscribe its memories on others) and resistance to this same power (taking the role of the inscriber/programmer instead of the inscribed)."¹⁶
- 21 What will become of us—half psychopaths, half augmented transhumans—as the digital culture in which we are now immersed allows for a "globalized politicization" turning each and every individual into a small news agency provided with the means to play an active role in the circulation of technical images within the "global agora"? It is this

question that the half-fictional, half-documented speculation developed in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* tries to answer—not without providing a dizzying number of alternatives. Indeed, while the deep-sea cephalopods first reveal a digital (liquid) alternative to the cultures developed over millennia by those featherless bipeds of humans treading the *terra firma*, the vampyroteuthis also hints at an alternative to the digital as we know it today.

fig. 3

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

The immediate mediation alternative

- 22 Let us now take a closer at Flusser's writings on the art form performed by the vampyroteuthis in the abyss. We will be able to determine more clearly than anywhere else what is simultaneously fascinating, disturbing and truly inconceivable in the alternative of (to) the digital that this fable promises—the (utopian ? dystopian ?) prospect of an *immediate mediation*.
- 23 As mentioned earlier, vampire squids light up the abyss with their bioluminescent emissions (chromatophores, mucus, sepia), producing forms—"artworks"—quite similar to our paintings, sculptures and shows. However, Flusser points out two essential differences between human art and vampyroteuthic art:

We have to assume, then, that the vampyroteuthis broadcasts information in sepia clouds. For two reasons, however, its manipulation of this cloudy material is incomparable to our own production of cultural artifacts. The first is simply the ephemerality of the sepia cloud. Its edges dissipate too quickly for it to serve as a

(relatively) permanent store of information. The second reason is that the information communicated with these clouds is exclusively intended to mislead its receiver. These nebulous manipulations are meant to deceive. (52)

24 Therefore, vampyroteuthic art is first and foremost “immediate” in the sense that it does not last: it is a live, ephemeral show one must experience in real time, *hic et nunc*. Its temporality is that of the “live” (*versus* pre-recorded). Here one recognizes the distinction made by Flusser in his “Phenomenology of television” published in 1974: contrary to the common sense that only regards television as a “small screen” introducing an experience formerly confined to the “big screens” of cinemas into the households, he insists that one acknowledges a radically different “ontophany”¹⁷: while the cinema screen falls within the field of *pre-recorded representations*, ranging from cave paintings to photographs, including Renaissance paintings, the television screen falls within the field of *live representations*, modeled on windows and mirrors¹⁸.

25 However, contrary to the most commonly used windows and mirrors, the bioluminescent cloud thrown by the vampire squids “is exclusively intended to mislead its target. These nebulous manipulations are meant to deceive.” The bioluminescent emissions of vampyroteuthic art operate as deceptive windows—or in other words their function is precisely what Günther Anders denounced in 1956 when dealing with the “ghosts” of television transmissions:

The images processed by the mediation of television [...] are *simultaneous* and *synchronous* with the events that they depict. Just like the telescope, they show *what is present*. [...] The ambiguity that is inherent to radio and television broadcasts lies in the fact that they put, at once and out of principle, their receiver in a situation obliterating the difference between experiencing an event and being informed about it, between *immédiacie* and mediation, a state in which the receiver no longer knows for sure whether they are facing an object or a fact. [...] The task of those who provide us with an image of the world thus consists in elaborating a misleading Whole from multiple partial truths.¹⁹

26 The submarine emissions making up the vampyroteuthic art are yet way more disturbing than the cheap ghosts Anders accused of “obliterating the difference between *immédiacie* and mediation.” Even more than television alienation, the bioluminescent sepia “clouds” deserve to remind us of this—equally synchronous and achronic—entity which becomes the increasingly ubiquitous medium of our digital cultures: the *cloud*. Although it may seem opposite to *live* television broadcast, since it gathers the pre-recorded data that we wish to keep at our disposal, the cloud indeed represents a sort of mobile window providing us with a permanent and ubiquitous access to our data “landscape.” The fact that it stores past memories is certainly not as relevant as the permanence that must be kept live in its case. My e-mails, documents, pictures, music files, videos, but also the software required to read these various files—all of this is available to me provided that I stay connected. Should a squirrel gnaw on the ADSL cable connecting my computer to the network, should my smartphone contract be terminated for non-payment, the window would be closed on everything that used to document, inform, feed my cultural identity.

27 The television window used to show us news of the world, in a generally true simultaneity, though from the perspective of a deceiving Whole. As for the cloud window, it gives access to the very matter of our mental and social life, in a simultaneity that is constantly subjected to the hazards of *live* connection. The access to the data that is potentially useful to our information and representation has never

been as immediate (easy, instantaneous, ubiquitous); the access to the memory media of our identity has never been as mediate (distant, impenetrable, heteronomous). We still use the term “window” to refer to the rectangular surfaces that, within our screens, give us a delightfully immediate access to all available digitized contents; and yet, those of us who still depend on *Windows* know only too well that the mediation required for this feeling of *immédiacite* to be conveyed can be abstruse (black box effect), cumbersome (endless updates) and exasperating (each augmented version adding new complications to previous difficulties). By relocating our data from our hard drive to remote servers, the cloud only extends the invisible mediation chains which simultaneously improve the availability of our digital devices and increase their vulnerability.

fig. 4

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

Carving brains

- 28 By plunging us as deep as possible in the clouds, at the very bottom of the abyss, the vampyroteuthic fable may allow us to come in touch—albeit quite blindly—with what may very well be the most essentially disturbing property of the digital culture, in which we are increasingly immersed. According to Flusser, the main difference between human (Western, modern) art and vampyroteuthic art lies in the fact that the former becomes estranged through the manipulation of material objects serving as mediation, while the latter immediately comes true through the impressions that the subjects get. “To transmit their acquired information, however, humans make use of

artificial memories such as books, buildings, and images. [...] Material, lifeless objects (stones, bones, letters, numbers, musical notes) shape all of human experience and thought. [...] It is typical of humans to allow objects to absorb their existential interests. [...] Humans live as functions of their objects.” (61-63) On the contrary, the vampyroteuthic art is purely “intersubjective and immaterial”:

Its art does not involve the production of artificial memories (artwork) but rather the immediate incalculable of data into the brains of those that perceive it. In short, the difference between our art and that of the vampyroteuthis is this: whereas we have to struggle against the stubbornness of our materials, it has to struggle against the stubbornness of its fellow vampyroteuthes. Just as our artists carve marble, vampyroteuthic artists carve the brains of their audience. Their art is not subjective but intersubjective: it is not in artifacts but in the memories of others that it hopes to become immortal. (63-64)

- 29 Here, at the very bottom of the abyss, we may have reached the true alternative that the digital cultures are revealing. *They are cultures without objects*. Instead of patiently and meticulously carving external objects with a view to create, assert, refine, reinforce and perpetuate our subjectivities within our self (immortalize), as suggested by the age-old program of Western art, the digital cultures are absorbed in the immediate and ephemeral inter-impression of networking subjectivities. According to an optimistic version, a few years after Flusser’s death, this will be the advent of a “relational aesthetics,” caring about strengthening and improving human relations²⁰. However, the vampyroteuthic fable sees it from a gloomier perspective: “As our interest in objects began to wane, we created media that have enabled us to rape human brains, forcing them to store immaterial information.” (67).
- 30 Whether experienced as an irresistible urge or embraced as the utmost sophistication, this passion for intersubjective relations unmediated by objects, yet presentified through interfaces, could very well determine digital cultures that we blame for being superficial, inane, ephemeral, presentist, scared of disconnection, narcissistic, complacent, impatient, fast, indifferent to detail, uninterested in perfection, thrown together, improvised, unstable, unaccomplished. From the perspective of the traditional moral of art, all these nasty faults seem to logically result from an evolution whose principle would be to “vampyroteuthize our art,” or in other words “to overcome our dependence on material objects, to renounce artifacts for an immaterial and intersubjective art form.” (65).

fig. 5

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

Navigation or filtration ?

- 31 Let us try to get back to the surface after this long exploration of the abyss. This trip into the deep sea revealed a cultural otherness that is about to become dominant within digital connectivity. We would be experiencing the gradual swing of a culture valuing the mediating object, to a culture valuing the immediate impression made on its peers. One can easily picture how this transition may have been encouraged, if not induced, by the gradual penetration of the digital into every sphere of our existences. Digital cultures—as they have developed at the double instigation of passionate hackers and interested capitalists—lead us to multiply our connections and think our personal agency in terms of interfaces, rather than in terms of the manipulation of objects. In the words of Stéphane Vial, the digital ontophany is interactive, versatile, “other-phanic,” reversible, flowing and nihilatable²¹ – so many characteristics that perfectly apply to intersubjective relations, although our relation with material objects made it unimaginable up until recently.
- 32 The digital existence depicted by the vampyroteuthic fable is not so much to be comprehended in terms of actions as of *affections*. It pertains to “psycho-pathy” in the literal sense of the word, since it consists in “affecting souls” (with sympathies or antipathies). The emissions of sepia clouds, the bioluminescence, the involution of the tentacles coat, all constitute gestures—another term that is dear to Vilém Flusser²²—which do not so much aim at making or producing as impressing. Maybe digital

ontophany is essentially structured by the dynamic of affect exchanges, even more deeply than the dynamics of capital accumulation or intensification of productive collaborations. One of the first lessons to learn from the vampyroteuthic fable consists in acknowledging the profound alterity of digital culture with regards to the expectations inherited cultures raise in us. The message hammered home by Vilém Flusser throughout the last decade of his—too short—life pointed out that we were not equipped, neither intellectually, nor imagination-wise, to take up the challenges of the dual anthropological revolution experienced in the early 20th and 21st centuries (the surge of technical images and advent of the digital). We keep on judging and condemning behaviors, the new operating rules of which we fail to understand (induced by the circulation of technical images governed by telematic programs), for the sake of obsolete moral criteria (inherited from the civilization of writing). Acknowledging the radical (still hardly perceptible) alterity of digital cultures amounts to taking a first step toward the assessment of both their threats and promises.

- 33 From this perspective, the submarine fable can be summarized by a reversal of metaphors. We have gotten used to talking about “internet users” “surfing” the web with the help of “browsers”²³. This corresponds quite well to the ancestral experience of featherless bipeds staying on the water surface to go from a port to another, or to experience the thrill of a sailing race. This realm of “navigation” implicitly enhances the manipulation of objects (ropes, rudder, compass) by humans mastering their movements on the surface of a liquid element in which they fall only by accident.
- 34 The vampyroteuthic fable invites us to develop an imaginary world that is way more suitable to explain our state of increasingly deeper immersion in digital environments. We are not so much divers as we are cephalopods, who now have trouble figuring out whether their feet are separate from their head: how does one move on the web ? by moving one’s fingers (clicking, skimming) ? by talking (voice control) ? by moving one’s eyes (eyetracking) ? through neuronal impulses (brain sensors) ? Besides, it is as difficult to figure out whether the mouth is distinct from the anus, so busy we are eliminating the trash and junk from our messaging services.
- 35 Our main activity has less and less to do with the thrills of pleasure-boating, and becomes more and more related to unrewarding yet unavoidable tasks of “discriminating between digestible and indigestible entities” (39). While we may—fortunately—have the exhilarating feeling of surfing a carrier wave at times, the typical day of the digital native rather consists in making a selection among the streams that go through them down below: “culture is not, for it, an undertaking against the world, but rather a discriminating and critical injection of the world into the bosom of the subject.” (39) This function of filter, membrane, performed from within a milieu that penetrates us, does not correspond in the least to the idea we have of humans: it “disgusts” us as much as entrails, mucus, tentacles, orifices and the behaviors of the vampyroteuthis do. Flusser has us dive at the very bottom of the abyss to destroy the walls this disgust made us build and to inhibit the “hierarchy of disgust [...] incorporated into our ‘collective unconscious’” (12). *De nobis fabula narratur*: it is our very alterity that the fable has to help us acknowledge. We are immersed cephalopods rather than tanned sailors, we are stitches in a fabric of inter-affections and bioluminescent emissions, rather than ship’s boys handling cordages and sails.

fig. 6

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

Mediumistic *immédiacie* and mediating manipulation

- 36 However, a second lesson—orthogonal to the first one—must undoubtedly be learnt from the vampyroteuthic fable. The inherent ambivalence to the Flusserian writing cannot settle for an acknowledgment of the vampyroteuthis as *the* ultimate model of digital existence. Not only does this fable invite us to identify and understand the alterity resulting from the immersion into the realm of digitized technical images, it also demands that we resist to the totalitarianism implied by this model of sociality. While it is important that we learn “to overcome anthropocentrism” (12), regarding the vampyroteuthis as the inevitable fate of humans is out of the question. The fable rather describes the dynamic tension and constant friction between opposite tendencies:

Whenever we attempt to humanize it, we do so as it attempts to vampyroteuthize us. [...] It is impossible to indoctrinate the vampyroteuthis without also being indoctrinated by it. [...] We should be somewhat wary of those who condemn surfaces in their pursuit of the depths. Though they allege to be seeking what is human in the vampyroteuthis, it is more likely that they will discover what is vampyroteuthic in themselves. [...] At the present, there is nothing more hazardous than such a renaissance of Romanticism. (67)

- 37 The digital as represented by the vampyroteuthis is a world where membranes allow “data” to penetrate them (or not). As soon as they are ascribed the status of “prehensions,” and when one analyzes them from the perspective of their affordances, one reintroduces the human figure of the object handler, which is also an integral part

of the mode of existence of digital objects—which probably would not exist without human practices. The sharing of affects has always been important in the human world. Digital cultures only provide them with new scopes of practice and appropriation scales. As both a phenomenologist of everyday objects and media theoretician, Vilém Flusser constantly demands that we do not fall for the illusions of *immédiacie* and the opacities of the various black boxes. On the contrary, his entire work consists in helping us to comprehend the affordances provided by the mediating objects, in order to redirect the mediations through which our relational fabric is woven.

- 38 To avoid the twofold romantic illusion of either escaping the depths of the vampyroteuthis by taking refuge in human purity, or taking one's leave of humanity by identifying with the monster of the abyss, Flusser helps us to understand *the two-sidedness of mediating objects* (similar to the two-sidedness of the linguistic sign formalized by Saussure in the early 20th century). Cave paintings, Renaissance paintings, photographs, films, television broadcasts, social media profiles and Skype chats are *both* vehicles for intersubjective impressions, whose power of *immédiacie* seems to increase as certain technical developments are achieved, *and* manipulated as well as manipulating objects, resulting from strategic prehensions and conveying unexpected affordances that are directed toward other strategic prehensions. Drawing freely from distinctions suggested by Thierry Bardini²⁴, the term *mediumistic* could be used to define the side of intersubjective *immédiacie* depicted by Flusser in vampyroteuthic art, and *mediating* the side of strategic manipulation operated through the production of artistic (at least a bit, in any case) objects.
- 39 As a result, we now better see the internal alternative of the alternative to the cultural traditions of modernity that the digital cultures embody. In a world that seems to favor the mediumistic inter-impression of psychopathologic subjectivities, digital “countercultures” would have to be sought in every place where a fetishistic care is given with regards to the design and making of mediating objects (Facebook account, algorithm, email, web radio, MOOC)—mediating objects that are raised to the status of artifacts rather than used as brain imprinting apparatus. Assessing the powers of mediumistic *immédiacie* unleashed by the digital is a necessary first step that the fable of the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* helps us happily take. Learning to reassert the value of the mediation's precision and the very consistency of mediating objects in the context of digital technical images will be the challenge *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder* will try to take up. This issue is still central nowadays and will define our future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

fig. 7

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

© Zones sensibles, with their kind permission.

ANDERS Gunther, *L'Obsolescence de l'homme* [1956], translated by Christophe DAVID, Paris, L'encyclopédie des nuisances, 2002, p. 154, 183 et 188.

BARDINI Thierry, "Entre archéologie et écologie: une perspective sur la théorie médiatique," *Multitudes*, no. 62, Spring 2016, p. 159-168.

BOURRIAUD Nicolas, *L'Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, Presses du réel, 1998.

CASTORIADIS Cornélius, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

FLUSSER Vilém, "Pour une phénoménologie de la télévision" [1974], in Flusser Vilém, *La Civilisation des médias*, translated from German by Claude MAILLARD, Belval, Circé, 2006, p. 107-108.

FLUSSER Vilém, "Une révolution dans le domaine des images" [1991], in Vilém FLUSSER, *La Civilisation des médias*, translated from German by Claude MAILLARD, Belval, Circé, 2006, p. 60.

FLUSSER Vilém, *Gestes* [1999], Marseille, Al Dante, 2014.

FLUSSER Vilém, *History of the Devil*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

FLUSSER Vilém, *La Force du quotidien*, translated from German by Jean MESRIE et Barbara NICEALL, s.l., Paris, Éditions Mame, 1973.

FLUSSER Vilém, *Pour une philosophie de la photographie*, Belval, Circé, 1996.

FLUSSER Vilém, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated by Christophe LUCCHESI, Bruxelles, Zones sensibles, 2015.

GIBSON James J., *L'Approche écologique de la perception visuelle* [1979], Paris, Éditions Dehors, 2014.

GUATTARI Félix, “Vers une ère postmédia,” *Terminal*, no. 51, octobre 1990, republié dans la revue *Chimères*, no. 28, printemps-été 1996. [En ligne] <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Vers-une-ere-postmedia> [consulté le 25 mai 2016].

JUE Melody, “Vampire Squid Media,” *Grey Room*, no. 57, automne 2014, p. 82-105.

LÉVY Pierre, *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995.

LOWENHAUPT TSING Anna, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2015.

VIAL Stéphane, *L'Être et l'Écran*, Paris, PUF, 2013.

WHITEHEAD Alfred North, *Procès et réalité. Essai de cosmogonie* [1929], Paris, Gallimard, 1995.

ZIELINSKI Siegfried, *Archäologie der Medien. Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hörens und Sehens*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2002.

NOTES

1. Félix Guattari, “Vers une ère postmédia,” *Terminal*, n° 51, October 1990, republished in *Chimères*, issue 28, Spring-Summer 1996. Available online at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Vers-une-ere-postmedia>
2. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, 2015.
3. Cornélius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.
4. See for example Alfred North Whitehead, *Procès et réalité. Essai de cosmogonie* [1929], Paris, Gallimard, 1995.
5. James J. Gibson, *L'Approche écologique de la perception visuelle* (1979), Paris, Editions Dehors, 2014.
6. Pierre Lévy, *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995.
7. Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* [1981-1987], translated from German into English by Valentine A. Pakis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 41. From now on, the page numbers will be indicated between brackets after the quote. The illustrations are taken from Louis Bec's *Rapport de l'Institut scientifique de recherche paranaturaliste* going together with Flusser's work. The author of this article would like to thank Alexandre Laumonier and Zones sensibles, respectively for the French translation and edition, as well as for allowing him to use a few illustrations.
8. In an article to be published in 2016 in *Critique d'art*, n° 46, Riccardo Venturi has reconstructed a great part of the investigation files relating to the vampire squid and explored extremely interesting new leads on the originality of Flusser within this tradition. I thank him for sharing the content of this article with me before its publication.
9. Vilém Flusser, *History of the Devil*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014 and *La Force du quotidien*, translated from German by Jean Mesrie and Barbara Niceall, s.l., éditions Mame, 1973.
10. To this day, only the first of these books has been translated into French (Belval, Circé, 1996). The other two should be translated as soon as possible.
11. Melody Jue, “Vampire Squid Media,” *Grey Room*, n° 57, Fall 2014, p. 82-105.
12. Vilém Flusser, “Une révolution dans le domaine des images” [1991], in *La Civilisation des médias*, translated from German into French by Claude Maillard, Belval, Circé, 2006, p. 60.
13. Vilém Flusser, “Pour une phénoménologie de la télévision” [1974], *La Civilisation des médias*, op. cit., p. 107-108.
14. *Ibid.*

15. Siegfried Zielinski, *Archäologie der Medien. Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hörens und Sehens*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2002. To visit the Flusser archives, see <http://www.flusser-archive.org/>
 16. Melody Jue, "Vampire Squid Media," *op. cit.*, p. 93.
 17. I use the expression coined by Stéphane Vial: "by phenomenality of phenomena, we refer to the way the being (*ontos*) appears to us (*phainomenon*), in the sense that the latter induces a specific quality of being-in-the-world. We call it *ontophany*, in the etymological sense of the word, as coined by Mircea Eliade, meaning that something shows itself to us. In this sense, supposing that every ontophany of the world is a technical ontophany, or at least possesses a technical dimension, amounts to postulating that there are predetermined conditions for perception, which are not transcendental, as suggested by Kant, but technical, as proposed by Bachelard" (*L'Être et l'Écran*, Paris, PUF, 2013, p. 110).
 18. Vilém Flusser, "Pour une phénoménologie de la télévision" (Toward a Phenomenology of Television), *art. cit.*, p. 97-99.
 19. Gunther Anders, *L'Obsolescence de l'homme* (The Outdatedness of Human Beings) [1956], translated from German into French by Christophe David, Paris, L'encyclopédie des nuisances, 2002, p. 154, 183 and 188.
 20. Nicolas Bourriaud, *L'Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, Presses du réel, 1998.
 21. Stéphane Vial, *L'Être et l'Écran*, *op. cit.*, p. 185-247.
 22. Vilém Flusser, *Gestes* [1999], Marseille, Al Dante, 2014.
 23. The French term is "navigateur" (sailor/navigator) (Translator's Note).
 24. Thierry Bardini, "Entre archéologie et écologie: une perspective sur la théorie médiatique," *Multitudes*, n° 62, Spring 2016.
-

ABSTRACTS

This paper offers a reading of the strange book written during the 1980s by the media philosopher Vilém Flusser entitled *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, recently translated into French. Through this unsettling fable with a deep-sea octopus as a subject, Flusser describes our new algorithmic and digital world as the other side of a world to which we got used to before its advent. We discover a universe full of bioluminescent filters, immediate mediations, brain sculptures and so-called "data" that actually represent "plugs".

INDEX

Keywords: commitment, digital practices, information culture, internet youth

AUTHOR

YVES CITTON

Yves Citton is a professor in French literature at the university of Grenoble-Alpes, a member of the UMR *LITT&ARTS* CNRS 5316 and co-director of the *Multitudes* journal. His latest publications

are *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Paris, Seuil, 2014), *Gestes d'humanités. Anthropologie sauvage de nos expériences esthétiques* (Paris, Armand Colin, 2012), *Renverser l'insoutenable* (Paris, Seuil, 2012), *Zazirocratie. Très curieuse introduction à la biopolitique et à la critique de la croissance* (Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2011), *L'Avenir des Humanités. Économie de la connaissance ou cultures de l'interprétation?* (Paris, Éditions de la Découverte, 2010), as well as *Mythocratie. Storytelling et imaginaire de gauche* (Éditions Amsterdam, 2010). His articles are available for free consultation at www.yvescitton.net.