



# Vampyroteuthis Infernalis as Bioluminescent Lighthouse to Think among the Living.

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## ► To cite this version:

Elise Rigot. Vampyroteuthis Infernalis as Bioluminescent Lighthouse to Think among the Living.: Some Mutations: From 1981 to 1991. *Flusser Studies*, 2021, Vilém Flusser and His “Languages”, 30. hal-03197472

**HAL Id: hal-03197472**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03197472>**

Submitted on 13 Apr 2021

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**Elise Rigot**

## **Vampyroteuthis Infernalis as Bioluminescent Lighthouse to Think among the Living. Some Mutations: From 1981 to 1991**

*Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is both a philosophical fiction and a scientific essay.<sup>1</sup> Flusser describes a creature of the abyss that is the complete opposite of human beings. From 1981 to 1991 (the year of Flusser's death), the book mutates with the writing process. As you might know, Flusser confronts his ideas in dialogues using different kinds of media such as letters, oral dialogues, essays, exhibitions, courses and translations. He works with a methodology that we could today call "art-creation" (Manning et Massumi 2018) through investigation.<sup>2</sup> There is a genealogy of the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (*Vampy*) from the French version to the Brazilian one. If we compare the three versions, the fantasy slowly becomes a metaphor for the human postmodern condition within computerized media. Thus, the *Vampy* as an *apparatus* allows us to navigate inside the cybernetic world we inhabit.<sup>3</sup> One opposite movement is also possible. It is the following: How can the philosophy of Flusser's programs, embodied in the different books and writing process of *Vampyroteuthis*, serve us as a lighthouse in this particular "moment of the living" (Worms 2016) that we are currently going through? What if *Vampy* was a "meta-model" for Flusserian thinking? What can we "inherit" from the *Vampy* model? According to Worms, this "moment of the living" which we inhabit puts us in the middle of a global problem where we need to quit both reductionism and sacralization of the living. This moment is about collapse, the Anthropocene, and the sixth great extinction caused by the human industrial activity.

Taking into account the three different versions of the *Vampy*, from the French to the Brazilian one, I propose to analyze the vampyroteuthis inputs in biological and ecological perspectives. In this regard, the French version is the first unpublished version. It takes the form of a typescript of fifty pages given as a gift to his friend, the artist Louis Bec in 1981. The typescript deals with an important scientific context. First, we have to note the existence of the French molecular school of biology with scientists such as François Jacob and Jacques Monod. We can also glance at specific thinkers and philosophers of biology and medicine, such as Henri Bergson and Georges Canguilhem. In the late 1960s, biology was linked to coding through the discovery of DNA, giving rise to the historical development of molecular biology.

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<sup>1</sup> According the revised edition translated from Brazilian version by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Flusser 2011).

<sup>2</sup> According to Marburger we can see in Flusser work the intent of translating "theory into practice" (2016) as an artist would do.

<sup>3</sup> That's the hypothesis explored by Citton (2016).

In addition, the current article aims to present another mutation into the creation of dialogical media. I am producing a podcast, called *Bio is the new black* that is a “gesture of searching”, to use a Flusserian terms (2014). The *Vampy* becomes a radiophonic creation performed by a comedian broadcasted to a local French radio, *radio FMR*, which is accompanied by a web presence. A link to the French online edition is at [this URL address](#). I translated parts of the program into English for the current issue, in a podcast called [Bio Is The New Black : Vampyroteuthis as a bioluminescent lighthouse to think under the livings](#) (Rigot 2020) that I invite you to listen to. In the English version, I have omitted two parts from the French version.

## The Vampy gesture

The first part of the writing process for *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* took place in France and was part of a continuous dialogue between Louis Bec and Vilém Flusser, from 1981 to 1987 for the first version of the manuscript. This French version remain a typescript. The other versions go until his death. Flusser explains that he “constantly translates parts written in German to French, English and Portuguese” in a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva written in 1981 and published at the end of the Brazilian version of the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* (2011).

In 1974, Vilém Flusser met the French para-naturalist artist Louis Bec. Invited one summer to Cabrières d’Aigues, near Pertuis by Louis, Vilém and Edith Flusser settle in the region. Small mounts, located in the Vaucluse, surround Robion. The fable of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* is born into the landscape of Provence with scents of cherry, olive and lavender. During afternoons filled with discussions and dialogues, in which Edith takes part, an octopodal monster invites himself to the conversation.

I found in the archive the correspondence between Bec and Flusser talking about the manuscript mentioning Vampyroteuthis from the year 1981. Later, in 1984, Flusser sends to Louis Bec and Dany Bec the pages 28 to 35 attached to a letter. These pages are still missing in the Vilém Flusser archive. This part corresponds to the chapter “(3) Phenomenologie (c) L’être dans le monde octopodal<sup>4</sup>” which corresponds in the English translation to the chapter “III. The World of the Vampyroteuthis c. Vampyroteuthian Existence” (Flusser 2011).

The scientific gesture: from genealogy & phenomenology to intuition, is clear by the table of contents. In Figure 1, there are three different tables of contents from the first French version (personal translation), the German one (translated by Valentine A. Pakis) and the Brazilian one (translated by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes).

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<sup>4</sup> Personal translation: “(3) Phenomenology (c) The being in the octopodal world”

1. [FR] Vilém Flusser & Louis Bec, <i>Vampyroteuthis infernalis</i> [1981-1983], tapuscrit, Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin	2. [GER] Vilém Flusser & Louis Bec, <i>Vampyroteuthis infernalis</i> , 1987, Immatrix Publication, Berlin	3. [BRAZ] Vilém Flusser, <i>Vampyroteuthis infernalis</i> , [1988-1991], 2011, Atropos Press, New York
(1) Octopoda	I. Octopoda	I. Octopi
(2) Genealogy	II. Genealogy	II. The Genesis of the Vampyroteuthis
(a) The Phylum Mollusca	The Phylum Mollusca	a. The Phylum Mollusca
(b) The Class Cephalopoda	The Class Cephalopoda	b. The Class Cephalopoda
(c) The (hypothetical ?) species Vampyroteuthis	The species Vampyroteuthis infernalis Giovanni	c. The Species Vampyroteuthis infernalis
(3) Phenomenology	III. The Vampyroteuthic World	III. The World of the Vampyroteuthis
(a) The octopodal model	Its Model	a. The Vampyroteuthian Model
(b) The Abyss	The Abyss	b. The Abyss
(c) The octopodal being in the world	Vampyroteuthic Dasein	c. Vampyroteuthian Existence
(4) Intuition	IV. Vampyroteuthic Culture	IV. The Culture of the Vampyroteuthis
(a) The octopodal thinking	Its Thinking	a. Vampyroteuthian Thought
(b) The octopodal society	Its Social Life	b. Vampyroteuthian Social Life
	Its Art	c. Vampyroteuthian Art
	V. Its Emergence	V. The Emergence of the Vampyroteuthis

Figure 1: French, German and Brazilian tables of contents of the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*

The last chapters of the book have evolved in the later versions. The fourth chapter called an “intuition” is where I found the most original ideas of Flusser. This intuition depicts the “culture” of the Vampy. This becomes obvious if we compare (4)(b) “The octopodal society” from the first French version to the German version “Its Social Life” and then into the Brazilian one “Vampyroteuthian Social Life”. The pronoun “it” has been totally changed in the latest version, as explain Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, “to leave [the Vampyroteuthis] as Flusser originally intended, as a character of philosophical fiction” (2011). Novaes later adds, that referring to the Vampy as “it” “would be an attempt to neutralize” a metaphorical image of the Devil contained in the *Vampy*, as a reminder or a sort of tribute to his very first book *The History of the Devil* first published in 1965 in Portuguese under the title *A História do Diabo*.

Flusser studied *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* as a model for a new research gesture. This idea came from the reading of both *Gestures* (2014) and Flusser's correspondence. In a letter to Louis Bec, written on the 30/03/1976, he wrote, "A new science is needed. From the experience of this gesture. Shall we do it?"<sup>5</sup> When reading two essays in the archive, a French unpublished essay *Considérations écologiques*<sup>6</sup> (that can be translated as "ecological considerations") and one English essay *Toward a map of the body*<sup>7</sup>, the idea of the text appears to us as a diagram<sup>8</sup> see Figure 2. In the interpretation of this drawing, Flusser describes the gap between a linear model (currently in use) and a circular one. From Cartesian space to dynamic geometry, from 2D human brain to 3D Vampyroteuthian brain, from a dualistic view of nature/culture to a circular model of nature and culture; Flusser is searching for a more cybernetic and biological way of approaching classic categories of philosophy.

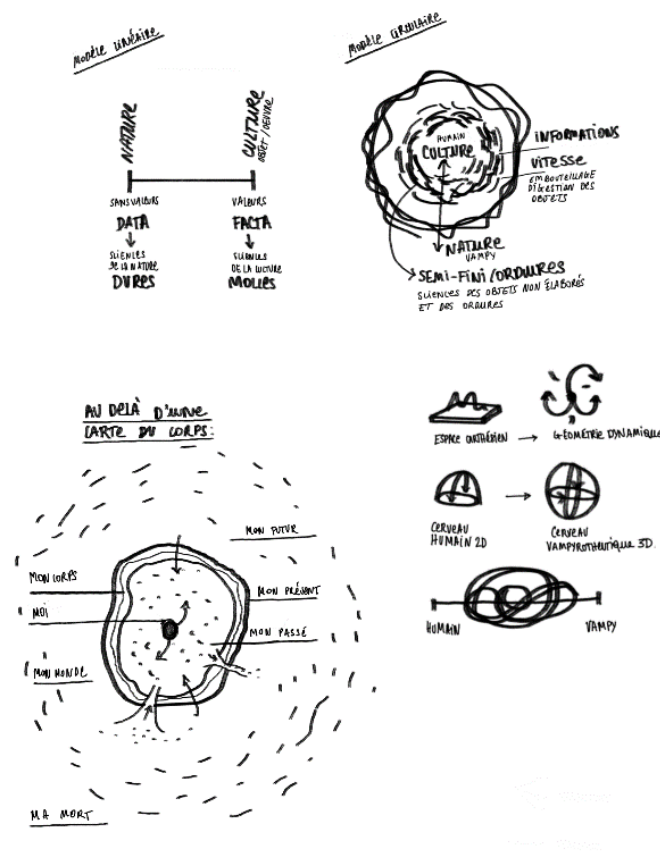


Figure 2: Schemes in between linear and circular model in essays of Flusser, interpretation of Elise Rigot

<sup>5</sup> Personal translation, original text in "French Il faut une science nouvelle. Apartir de l'expérience de ce geste. Faisons-la?"

<sup>6</sup> Flusser, *Considérations écologiques*, unpublished essay, Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin, Ref. nr.: 2935.

<sup>7</sup> Flusser, *Toward a map of the body*, unpublished essay, Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin, Ref. nr.: 2800.

<sup>8</sup> That particular way of thinking with diagrams for Flusser is presented in the research of Daniel Irrgang see the conference: *Reversing the vectors of meaning. The diagrammatic language of Vilém Flusser* (2020).

First, Flusser's writing takes into account the history of evolution with taxonomical notions such as "phylum", "class", "species". Then, he considers phenomenal philosophy by taking into consideration *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*' being-in-the-world. At last, he adds the notion of culture usually dedicated to human action. Thus, "thought", "social life" and "art" are words that depict Vampyroteuthian activities. Using three layers of vision: historical, phenomenal and cultural, Flusser gives a certain direction to make a new sort of natural science. These three perspectives allow us to envision the study of an animal outside "objective" references.<sup>9</sup> The first part, which deals with scientific information could also be seen as the history we've got of the *Vampy*: as history of the living travelling back to us with the image of the tree of life drawn by Ernst Haeckel. Phylums are our "heritage".

The *Vampy* model<sup>10</sup> raises the question: How to study a living being? As a matter of fact, the biologist Carol Kaesuk Yoon makes clear in her book *Naming Nature: The Clash Between Instinct and Science* (2010) that our categories are as much cultural as they are scientific. Thus, asking cultural questions about *Vampy*, about our living world is a scientific gesture.

## French molecular school of biology

When Vilém Flusser moved to France in 1975<sup>11</sup> (Flusser 2019), we are in a special moment, specifically in France. André Lwoff, Jacques Monod and François Jacob had won the Nobel Prize of Medicine in 1965. The three researchers at the *Institut Pasteur* discovered the operon's model. The later shows that our genes are not expressed in a constant manner over time, but that they are very finely regulated to meet the needs of our organism. Behind this explanation, François Jacob would write a "history" of biology under the term of "programme" (1970), like a computer program. Jacques Monod would write a "philosophy" of biology (1970).

The notion of "program" established by the school of molecular biology is included into a new history of evolution. By describing the evolution of man through information theory, the French school of molecular biology has brought a new reality: "The program of heredity". We see here an obvious connection between cybernetics and molecular biology, whose developments are parallel in time. However, as the historian of biology Michel Morange wrote (2012), it is rather a metaphor which allows François Jacob to explain the functioning of the evolution of the living. Even if it is

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<sup>9</sup> To go further on the notion of objectivity in science see the history of objectivity (Daston & Galison 2007).

<sup>10</sup> This idea of taking *Vampy* as a scientific model, as a manner of making a modelisation of the thought, is being underline in the title of a portuguese essay found in the archive dedicated to Dora Ferreira da Silva. See: Flusser, *O modelo vampyroteuthis infernalis*, unpublished essay, Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin, Ref. nr.: 2697

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Masure writes about his installation in France in the introduction to the french version of *Post-History* (Flusser 2019).

a metaphor, it does not make the demonstration any less strong. Scientific metaphors become our cultural heritage. That idea can be found in the work of two historians of science and feminist thinkers: Evelyn Fox Keller (1995) and Donna Haraway. We are inheriting images and imaginaries of science, which have an always situated history, and are not “neutral”. To inherit, Haraway never ceases to remind us, is a job (Despret 2013). In our case, Flusser as a French resident, is living in images of biology that take place into molecular biology. Those programmatic images of the living are his heritage. According to Jacob, “[t]he programme contains all the operations which the cycle accomplishes, leading the individual from youth to death. Furthermore, the genetic programme is not rigidly laid down. Very often it only sets the limits of action by environment, or merely gives the organism the ability to react, the power to acquire some extra information which is not inborn.” (Jacob 1973: 9-10)

The program is therefore not the reductionist vision that would reduce the living into a machine, but a logic at work in the natural language found in the transmission of genetic information. The school of molecular biology takes into account a history of evolution. In this story, DNA information is inscribed at the heart of each cell, and allows each living entity to transmit information to the next generation. François Jacob call it the “program” of heredity. This program, as geological time passes, “improves” and “refines” itself, to enable living beings to reproduce. François Jacob emphasizes in the introduction of *The logic of life: A history of heredity*, the difference between the biological genetic program and the computer program: the genetic material of the cell is not modifiable and relies on an improving structural organization, whereas the magnetic tape is rewritable, non-structural, and cannot improve itself. Thus, it is not so much the connection between organism and machine that is interesting to look at, but their attachment to the description of a program as a new form of reality.

## **The notion of program in a “historical” perspective**

I will share here a reading of an article that we found deeply instructive about the French debate which took place at the time when Flusser was writing *Vampy*. The context provided by his friend Louis Bec, who was connected with both artists and scientists, proved to be highly influential on his writing. The article is titled “Canguilhem, Foucault, Jacob: which philosophical moment in which biological moment?”<sup>12</sup> (Worms 2012). Georges Canguilhem, a French philosopher, made the philosophy of biology a philosophy of error, opposing the rational philosophy of the cogito

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<sup>12</sup> Personal translation of the title, original title: “Canguilhem, Foucault, Jacob: quel moment philosophique dans quel moment biologique?”

and the subject. It is with Canguilhem that we find spaces of possible individuation for the organism despite the existence of a potentially deterministic program of heredity. For Worms, Canguilhem operates an important shift in his reading of both Foucault and Jacob, which are not usually read together. The philosopher of the living asks himself, what ultimately came first between logic, language, archaeology and history? His answer leans on the side of history. For Worms, the moment in molecular biology is the one in which the living is grasped in a linguistic and logical model, and this moment is decisive.

It is in a new conception of history that we must find the foundations of the notion of program. In Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (1966), the *epistémè* designates our common ground. This ground is covered with the historical conditions of possibility of all knowledge and practices. This same ground exists in Jacob's work. For the first time, he writes a history of biology, where science is not the search for a truth but builds a reality. This reality is the programmatic vision of the world that appears to us in the mechanism of genetic information operating by chance and by necessity. This programmatic vision links with it, a reality of language, life and history.

François Jacob introduces his history of biology with the notion of a program in which "The organism thus becomes the realization of a programme prescribed by its heredity" (Jacob, 1973). We can see the same logic of analysis in the text "Our Program" of Vilém Flusser (2019). Both are rejecting finalistic and causal thought. Rejecting the idea of destiny and determinism. What we would like to retain here is the great clarity with which Jacob emphasizes that the theories of science reorganize the realm of the possible. He came back to this notion in depth through the work *Le jeu des possibles: essai sur la diversité du vivant*<sup>13</sup> (Jacob 1981). He writes in the conclusion "In this book, I tried to show that the scientific attitude has a well-defined role in the dialogue between the possible and the real. (...) It is hope that gives meaning to life. And hope is based on the prospect of one day being able to transform the present world into a possible world that seems better."<sup>14</sup> It resonates with a recent statement by the French philosopher Cynthia Fleury (2019). In the text, *Care is a humanism*<sup>15</sup>, the clinician and philosopher returns to our potential to inhabit reality. This reality, for us, is made up of the programmatic layers that appear to us. For Fleury, imagination and care must allow us to constitute a relationship with the world, to make the real habitable. Thus, we need imaginative elaboration to populate the reality of the programs, to inhabit it with our subjectivity. What images can populate this world made of programs?

<sup>13</sup> Personal translation of the title: *The Game of Possibilities: Essay on the Diversity of Living Things*

<sup>14</sup> Personal translation, original quote from French: "Dans ce livre, j'ai essayé de montrer que l'attitude scientifique a un rôle bien défini dans le dialogue entre le possible et le réel. (...) C'est l'espoir qui donne son sens à la vie. Et l'espoir se fonde sur la perspective de pouvoir un jour transformer le monde présent en un monde possible qui paraît meilleur."

<sup>15</sup> Personal translation of the title, original title in French: "Le soin est un humanisme."



## Imagination through programming

We know from secondary sources that Flusser had a deep knowledge of molecular biology. His correspondence with Milton Vargas published at the end of the Brazilian version of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* provides evidence for this. In a letter of the 28/01/1981, he wrote: “Taxonomy must be reviewed, replaced by another, less linear and more “cybernetic” (informative). This is urgent, given the existence of bio-molecular engineering. It is already possible to artificially introduce the genes of animals from different “phyla” into the genetic information of particular animals, including man, and to produce new, fertile “phenotypes”. New species may emerge artificially by crossing different phyla. These are such fantastic things that the imagination fails. (...) [T]he challenge is not biological but epistemological; to rethink evolution not in “causal” terms or “finalistic” terms, but in “programmatic” terms. By the way: you did not confirm receipt of “Post-History”<sup>16</sup>. Did you receive and read it?” (Flusser 2011: 136).

According to Flusser, the notion of the program is problematic. The problem with programs is that they turn us into civil servants, into *fonctionnaires*: they remove the sense of responsibility for our actions, the meaning of our work and make us cogs in a larger machine. For Flusser, the Western cultural program contains within itself the extermination of life, the most atrocious of such a program was Auschwitz. Flusser emphasizes the contemporary, program-driven condition led by absurdity: “We must neither anthropomorphize nor objectify the apparatuses. But to reach them in their idiotic concreteness, and their absurdity: that of a function programmed by chance and for chance. In their absurdity. (...) To accept that politics is an absurd game, to accept that existence is an absurd game. It is at this painful price that we will one day be able to give meaning to our games.”<sup>17</sup> (Flusser 2019: 54)

Flusser emphasizes this condition of reality that is the one of programs: their profound absurdity. Indeed, the program in which we live is the one where all inherent virtuality is realized by chance, but necessarily (2019).<sup>18</sup> Flusser makes this chance a major element in thinking about programs and their absurdity. In “Our knowledge” (2019), he underlines how this scientific knowledge is so far away from us because we live in a world of imagination. However, when reading Flusser, we must accept absurdity to avoid becoming pawns in a gigantic game. If we have to accept the

<sup>16</sup> The version of *Post-History* that Flusser mentioned is the one written in Portuguese. We are working here from the French version (Flusser 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Personal translation (Flusser 2019), the original text in French: “Nous ne devons ni anthropomorphiser ni objectiver les appareils. Mais les atteindre dans leur concrétude idiote: celle d’un fonctionnement programmé par le hasard et pour le hasard. Dans leur absurdité. (...) Accepter que la politique est un jeu absurde, accepter que l’existence est un jeu absurde. C’est à ce prix douloureux que nous pourrions un jour donner un sens à nos jeux.”

<sup>18</sup> Personal adaptation (Flusser 2019), the original text in French: “Un programme c’est un système où toute virtualité inhérente se réalise par hasard, mais nécessairement. Il est un jeu”

reality highlighted in the program of heredity told by Jacob and which literally hazardous mechanisms, we must also make them habitable. Now, in this new reality, we must constitute a relationship with the world with the help of care on the one hand and imagination on the other. This imagination must not be left to old dualistic quarrels. These programs must see the blossoming of new ways of inhabiting this disorder, this chance, this absurdity, these errors inherent of life. We must avoid at all costs the latent reductionism of the very imaginary of programs. We must live in the imagination within the programs. We must populate them comfortably with hybrid creatures.

All of these relations are part of the translation of *Vampy* into a radiophonic creation.

## Translating Vampyroteuthis into a podcast medium

I am producing a podcast as media research in our PhD in design. It has the quality of being situated by the voice that embodies a partial point of view and it is a dialogical medium that permits both guests to have a conversation about a subject, and the listeners to receive the proposition and engage in their own interior dialog. What does research become, then, if it takes the form of an audio podcast that can be listened to on digital platforms and broadcast on networks?

The voice is immediate, and yet, “having a voice” is not an automatic action. Somehow, it matters to establish the voice, providing a perspective on it. Pandelakis (2018) emphasizes this idea of “having a voice” through a conceptual framework of queer theory and radical feminism: we need both to deal with the situation of this voice as well as the reception of this voice. Yet, the podcast can face the question of the reception. The voice, encapsulated in the audio file, mutates through multifaceted online listening, depending on recommendations, communities and social networks. In this adaptation of Vampy into a podcast we try to give a voice to the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. You can listen to the English version translated for the colloquium online on podcast platforms such as Spotify or Apple Podcast and on the [website](#) dedicated to the podcast “Bio Is The New Black”.

To say that it is an adaptation would be wrong, instead this podcast is both a rewriting and a report of my research. In this sound-creation, you will encounter two gestures. First gesture made vampy world as our media world - that is the hypothesis of Yves Citton (2016): we are ourselves vampyroteuthis, except we don’t know how to filter the data that infiltrated our subjectivities. In the permutation of the vampy into a dialogic media (podcast) we emphasize the link in between *Post-History*, *Vampyroteuthis* and essays that we read in the archive.

The second gesture is the other way around: it’s the idea that Vampy is a lighthouse to understand this particular moment of living – in Worms’ vocabulary.

The podcast is a result of a research-creation methodology. We gave a first performance with Anthony Masure in Marseille in a festival devoted to gastronomy and octopi. It was a large public audition where we performed the text it next to the Mediterranean Sea with electronic music interludes. We coded a “mini” mobile website so that the public can interact with their phone screen during the performance at night, to make a reflective situation between the text and the situation.

The first text evolves into another text dedicated to my French-language podcast called *Bio Is The New Black* which I record with a comedian in a studio. The French podcast is separated into three parts and music. The first part is the radiophonic creation, the second part deals with archives and the third part is a chronicle with a text of Louis Bec and a reflection of Donna Haraway. I created an [online edition](#) for this podcast that mixes both listening and writing with an online tool developed in the thesis (2020) of Robin De Mourat, called *Ovide*.

Translating Vampy into a podcast medium is a gesture in borrowing expression, vocabulary, concepts, notions, sentences from the original text.

## Text of the radiophonic creation

The text is composed of three acts following the chapters of Flusser’s book and the research gesture we explored in this article.

### Act 1: The Vampyroteuthis Infernalis

Kingdom

*Animalia*

Phylum

*Mollusca*

Class

*Cephalopoda*

Order

*Vampyromorphida*

Family

*Vampyroteuthidae*

Genus

*Vampyroteuthis*

Vampire squid from hell

I'm going to tell you a tale. A story coming from the abyss. A story that interrogates the human condition. It's one about a cephalopod, cousin to the octopus and to the squid, living thousands of meters under the ocean's surface.

He is our absolute alterity.

This particular species was found in the china seas at the end of the 17th century, during a large scientific expedition: *Valdivia*. In this era, the German, Carl Chun identified the animal as belonging to the octopus family. Fished it, and brought it back dead to the surface of our lands for closer study. However, he is neither an octopus nor a squid and baffles our scientific taxonomy. Moreover, his eyes and brain strangely resemble ours.

Tell me Darwin: why have you separated vampys and humans into so many branches on the tree of life? Tell me, can we remove ourselves from your linear model?

Today, we can observe the vampyroteuthis infernalis with the help of a submarine, going thousands of meters deep. Some humans observe them: they call them "Octopus with ears". We've even built a high-pressure aquarium to accommodate him to our floor's surface in california. We reproduce his habitat to observe vampyroteuthis.

He possesses his own specific order, that of the Vampyromorphida.

The water that I find all around me is at the surface of his underworld, we have to descend, into the deep, to find this incredible vampiric being.

Just imagine for a moment, that the mirror of our existence appears through an octopod creature. A deforming mirror, metaphorical, incredible, impossible. Through this cephalopod, we can find a direction based on total otherness.

What does it look like? The vampire of the abyss can measure up to 12 meters in diameter. His jelly-like coat varies from black velvet to pale red, depending on the place and the lighting conditions. One membrane of skin links his eight arms, each arm is lined with prickles which could be either fleshy or sharp; inside of this "casing" is black. Only half of the furthest extremities of the length of the arms has suction cups and photophores. The color of his bulging eyes ranges from

red to blue depending on the lighting. The adults have a pair of paddle, which resembles fins or ears, projecting from the lateral side of their coat.

When he moves them, the Vampire of the Abyss seems to fly in the water.

From a metabolic viewpoint: everything opposes us. Evolution has made us two-legged beings, preferring an upright posture and walking. But with this mollusk, it's the other way around: the head coincides with the feet and the mouth is much closer to the anus.

Vampyroteuthis lives in a spiraling world: his line is a circle.

The vampire of the abysses is entirely covered in organs that produce light, called photophores. The animal has a great control over these organs, and is capable of producing flashes of light every fraction of a second, for minutes at a time, to disorient predators. The vampyroteuthis produces clouds, called sepia, which floats in the water

These biological attributes are the manifestations of intra-specific highly refined communication.

As distant as the vampire of the abyss may seem to be, we share with him the particularity of a psyche beset by an environment of very complex information. Sprawling intelligence.

Close your eyes, imagine:

A luminous animal, with a cape. At first tucked under himself, he must spread his coat to open to the world. He is literally capable of absorbing the world. He is a harmless vampire. His cape is a lure. A game played on the perception of others. He is ok with feeding himself with the rain of planktons which float peacefully around him. His favourite food is glowing snow that crosses the deep.

Man comes from the continents.

*The vampyroteuthis from the abyss.*

We aspire to the light.

*He buries himself in darkness.*

If our species is relatively recent.

*His species dates back to the oldest times.*

He doesn't tolerate the air that we breathe.

*Whereas we would be crushed by the pressure of the depths where he lives.*

*He is mollusc*

We're skeletal

Man thinks in two dimensions.

*Vampyroteuthis in three.*

Man is cartesian

*Vampyroteuthis is dynamic.*

We experience the earth; we manipulate it with our hands

*He absorbs the world, its representation is experiential*

We work for God

*He works for the Devil.*

"Vampyroteuthis comprehends the world thanks to eight tentacles that surround the mouth, originally destined to suck in food and bring it close to the mouth. Therefore the world apprehended by him is a fluid and liquid world that precipitates into vampyroteuthis. His purpose in knowing the world is to digest it. His eight tentacles are extremities of his digestive apparatus. Here resides the most radical difference between human and vampyroteuthian epistemology: that for man, knowing is a gesture that advances against the world, an active gesture, and that for Vampyroteuthis, knowing is a gesture that grasps the world, a passive gesture. We men know with the aim of resolving "problems", and Vampyroteuthis knows with the aim of discriminating between the "influences" and impressions" that he suffers." (Flusser 2011: 72)

The hand and the tentacle. Two ways to perceive the world. Two diverging arts.

Who speaks for the cephalopod? Who for the Vampy? How does the vampyroteuthis infernalis think? What if the vampy possesses his own culture, a specific way of inhabiting the abyss?

## **Act 2: Vampyroteuthian Art**

In his eternal night the vampy uses light to communicate. He is able to transmit light information up to many minutes, to give them a specific form. From the tip of his arm, he ejects a cloudy and sticky mucus, bioluminescent, containing innumerable orbs of blue light. It can be an instantaneous

gesture, or a longer movement. His body is his canvas, his tool for transmitting information. For us, art withstands time: paintings, statues, cathedrals reside in an eternal form. In the abyss, materials do not last. But who between human beings or vampyrotheuthis, would like to be forgotten? Art, the practice we characterise as human, opposes nothingness. It inscribes information in stone, wood, and every other medium. Art is a way to transmit these information for eternity. From the viewpoint of the vampyrotheuthis, human art is derisory. In his liquid habitat, only biological and genetical information can settle in time. The vampy has already established the synthesis of genetical and informational art. The purpose of art, which is transmitting information into stable objects, doesn't work: art becomes intersubjective and immaterial.

The vampy does manipulate, however, sorts of objects. Particular objects. Biological objects, living, ephemeral:

The colour

The light

Sepia Clouds

He can give form to those clouds, he can emit light, activate the bioluminescence of his body. Certainly, he uses it to escape his predators. But most importantly, to transmit information. This information aims at deceiving its receiver.

Art, for the vampy is trickery: "[I]t's rape of another, aiming at the immortalisation in another – art as a strategy of rape, hate; art as trickery, as fiction, as a lie; art as a deceptive appearance, and so as "beauty" – the whole in an orgasmic atmosphere." (Flusser 2015: 61)<sup>19</sup>

Our world filled with objects is a perfidious world. The object resists information: the marble remains a marble. And the marble is destroyed over time. Human art is not the incarnation of the beautiful. Art is the realisation of an individual's experiences in an object. All at once: his knowledge, his values and his sensations. It's a way to dialogue with the eternal. Yet the vampy doesn't bind himself to objects and isn't fulfilled through them. For Vampy, eternity is acquired in otherness. Tentacles, chromatophores, sepia clouds, bioluminescence go beyond objects. The vampy doesn't rub against the resistance of materials but those of the spirits that reside in others.

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<sup>19</sup> Translation by Wayne Blackwood, original text in French: "C'est un viol de l'autre visant l'immortalisation dans l'autre - l'art comme stratégie du viol, de la haine ; l'art comme duperie, comme fiction, comme mensonge; l'art comme apparence trompeuse, et donc comme "beauté" - le tout dans une atmosphère orgasmique."

What's happening today while our information is stored in cybernetic programmes? What's happening now that biological information can be purposely manipulated by design?

The Vampy is the incarnation of the convergence of molecular biology and cybernetics. His world is populated by biological information, ephemeral. And already, its conduct is one of a programmer. The vampy plays with the conscience of its peers. He lures them with biological information, he tricks them. His art is pernicious.

The programmes appear to us. The Vampy lives already in this world of programmes. He knows. He doesn't try to oppose himself against cultural, genetic, computational relational programmes. In his anatomy, the world is a network of information of a diverse nature. To survive these programmes, he becomes a programmer himself, a player, and manipulates living information. He is at the same time totalitarian power and resistance. The vampy has agreed to the absurd nature of existence. He doesn't try to make sense of it. Neither should we look for meaning in his actions.

Art becomes intersubjective and immaterial.

With the automation of machines, the object becomes a piece of junk. A merchandise. A consumer product. But, the machine, the device, for the Vampy becomes the organism itself. What exosomatic devices will we use to orient us in a world populated with invisible and intersubjective conscience?

We live in the world with our values, we inhabit it with our situated vision: our perspective is already a point of no vision. The microscopes and the telescopes open up to us new worlds, through giving us new devices of perception. Uniqueness no longer makes any sense. We are thousands of living beings, micro-organisms, external forces and dynamics which live in symbiosis. Wanting to give a single meaning to life and to think that we can take control of it, is absurd.

Must we negotiate? Make new arrangements? The art of the object is substituted by an art of meeting and arrangement. Performances and installations.

Imaginary warriors, dualists, of conquest, that of the good guys versus the bad guys, friends or enemies, order or harmony. The weak or the strong. The submissive and the dominant. the master



and the slave. The pawn and the player. These imaginations kill us. There are only particular situations, layouts that offer us new ways of being in the world. There is no big battle card of the living to conquer and submit to our laws.

The genius doesn't exist.

We are programmers as much as we are programmed, the players and the pawns. Our art has to become an art of meeting.

Make no mistake. We are not vampyroteuthis and will never be. We don't live in the abyss, the black darkness of an eternal night. We are bipedal, who think about the world with our hands. We must search in him the ambivalence, contradiction and immersion that the surface is keeping from us.

### **Act 3: Our Vampyroteuthian World**

At thousands of meter deep, the abyss houses an octopodal being. And, if it is possible today, by science, to synthesize an artificial vampyroteuthis or to design a hybrid human-vampyroteuthis, that is not the interest of this fable.

We walk on the surface of the oceans. The fossils of vampy found in the Voulte-sur-Rhône reminds us of this. The vampy was here long before us, squatted in the depths, and he's beginning to leave the abyss. He goes back through geological times and mingles with our digital habits.

The vampy's world is our own. We are, ourselves, bodies being vampyroteuthised, constantly on the alert of immaterial information, ephemeral, intersubjective. Our critical apparatus must grab at a fluid and centripetal world. We must learn from the vampyroteuthis. Right now, you are subject to total vampyroteuthising. We are the ones who are being raped by the spirits. We, humans being of the twenty first century, would be on the verge of being vampyroteuthised.

This may appear strange to you. He lives thousands of meters deep. At this distance, the pressure is huge. Night is eternal, but sound travels very well. At this distance, only few animals survive due to the lack of oxygen and acidity of the environment. However. These abysses are also our own.

Let's think of the contemporary situation, at least the western one, loaded with all kinds of sensors and probes: cameras, geolocation devices, etc. Let us also think of the masses of information circulating on the communication networks. Bombarded with notifications, e-mails, solicitations, information and misinformation of all kinds, we find it increasingly difficult to find our way around in a world entirely built up of digital data. The technical environment of digital technologies, that of computing and computer programming languages, is a world of the invisible, prey to the worst manipulations, but also open to forms of creation that are still largely unexplored.

Like the vampyroteuthis, we immerse in this environment. Splashing around in data like fish in a small pool of water, we don't know anymore how to "filter" what goes on in us, which infiltrates our subjectivities without us realizing it.

Think of the great collapses of the living happening and those to come. Their hunt, their provision of an immoral and irrational design. Think of the exploitation of animal, vegetal and human life. We must try the experience of living as a bird, as a wolf, as a forest, as a coral reef, as a pigeon, as an octopus, like a jellyfish, an algae: the vampy will be our bioluminescent lighthouse in this quest. We must, we humans, designers, artists, scientists, come back to things themselves. Don't tempt the omniscient eye, don't try to lock the living into a big battlefield where we would be the winners.

We are looking for new metaphors and new stories to understand the real.

And that's where the octopus of the abyss comes in, whose geographic and temporal remoteness acts as a mirror of our contemporary condition. We have to go down into the abyss. Without light, at thousands of meters deep, maybe even further, the ocean region where the Vampyroteuthis Infernalis lives, is an environment with poor oxygen. This darkness, this condition of the invisible, is comparable to the fascination we feel for "black boxes", technological devices which are shaping our daily lives. Henceforth, could we learn from the octopus how to "navigate" with ease and elegance in this rain of plankton? Could he teach us to "sort out" what is unintelligible to us?

To seek in the octopodal model, a new way of telling the world that flows in us. To seek in his deception ways to guide us in this world. We need to create other para-natures, "methods parallel to the natural sciences, but which advances in the other areas of the real."<sup>20</sup> (Flusser 1978: 5)

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<sup>20</sup> Translation by Wayne Blackwood, original text in French: "des méthodes parallèles à celle des [ces] sciences (...), mais qui avancent dans d'autres domaines du réel." from the french essay *Ortbo-nature – Para-nature* (Flusser, 1978).

We could create other ways of perceiving the world. The Nature that we see is a nature of modern biology and natural sciences. It's a unique nature. This uniqueness doesn't exist. We need to create new entities, new stories and new images.

## To trouble programs

With Anthony Masure, we proposed three ways of acting in this situation regarding Flusser notion of programme and biomolecular biology that can be found in the vampyroteuthian model:

First, going above and beyond the natural/artificial distinctions. Second, to trouble the programs. Three, encoding without functioning. These reflexions can be seen in the article *Troubler les programmes* which will be published soon in a collective book about digital ecologies (Masure & Rigot 2021). I share some elements of this article in the following sentences.

In the preface of the book *Génétiquement indéterminé. Le vivant auto-organisé*<sup>21</sup>, the philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers shows that “the distinction between genotype and phenotype does not allow us to ask the question of what we call heredity, but extends (...) in biology, oppositions that fascinate and block thoughts, such as the innate and the acquired, freedom and determinism”<sup>22</sup> (Pouteau 2007: 10). The problem posed by the program is indeed that of freedom. What freedom exists in a life dictated by a hereditary program, in a cultural program, in a program of death? This idea is now reappearing in the form of a disorder, “[s]taying in trouble is the price to pay for trying to stop thinking about problems in terms of indicative solutions”<sup>23</sup> (Stengers 2019: 33) tells us after Haraway. Playing with this disorder, putting disorder in the programs, is what Haraway proposes with the cyborg figure, going beyond the notions of race, gender or sexuality. Haraway extirpates the cyborg from the military imaginary, to give it a hybrid, unnatural, feminist force: the establishment of a zone of disorder between different fields delimits an unexpected, unforeseen bundle of meaning (a new information) that opposes the contingency of the absurd. Here, no bad guys against good guys, no solutions to problems, no science and truths but only “situated” knowledge and stories. The cyborg recodes the relationships organism and machine, gender and sexuality, in a new emancipatory and feminist order. It would therefore be an interesting paradox to think of a “design of disorder”, i.e. not the will to order disorder (according to a plan), but to propose a new arrangement of reality where play can take place.

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<sup>21</sup> Personal translation of the title: *Genetically indeterminate. Self-organised living*

<sup>22</sup> Personal translation, original text in French: “la distinction entre génotype et phénotype ne permet pas de poser la question de ce que nous appelons hérédité, mais prolonge (...) en biologie des oppositions qui fascinent et bloquent la pensée, telles que l’inné et l’acquis, la liberté et le déterminisme.”

<sup>23</sup> Personal translation, original text in French: “Rester dans le trouble est le prix à payer si l’on essaie de ne plus penser les problèmes en termes de solutions indicatrices.”

Design researcher Marie Louise Juul Søndergaard explores this position with technologies dealing with female menstruation. In her doctoral dissertation *Staying with the Trouble through Design: Critical-feminist Design of Intimate Technology* (2018), she transposes Donna Haraway's thinking to see design as a way of provoking trouble. In her fictional design video *Your smart toilet assistant*, a young woman (in a fertile condition) asks her toilet, equipped with a connected assistant and biosensors, whether she should use protection for her next sexual intercourse based on her ovulation period. The assistant does not explain the answer but tells her that there is no risk of her getting pregnant. When he reveals, a few weeks later, that she is now pregnant, the scenario of a mistake by the assistant was not foreseen. And yet, these are the situations that can happen: it is reality. Juul Søndergaard wonders how we can conceive of bilateral relations with digital programs to share situations of trouble, rather than claiming their effectiveness at every moment. A feminist manifesto is proposed in the thesis and stipulates that design must provoke and respond to disorder, without claiming to find solutions to social, cultural, and ethical problems. In this feminist and critical vision of design, it is the functionalism of design that is called into question. Situations do not work, they happen and intermingle with each other, creating encounters, contingencies and hybridizations of meaning.

## Conclusion

Objectivity as God-vision, or the view from nowhere is a dangerous illusion. *Vampy* guides us in a situated knowledge where scientific praxis are embodied into cultural values. Today, in the sixth great extinction of the living, transmitting *Vampy* is a political act, that podcast media permits us to explore.

Finally, what I found particularly interesting is how *Vampy* becomes an apparatus for the thinking, not only for Flusser but also for us. Some years after, we can use this apparatus and confront it to our own condition of living and see in this model of alterity other ways of behaving.

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