

Mare nostrum, Mare Alienun: Identity, Epistemology and the Flusserian Imagination of Flows¹

Mare nostrum, mare alienun: identidade, epistemologia e a imaginação flusseriana dos fluxos

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ABSTRACT

The topic of identity and its developments in digital culture have emerged in a relatively marginal way in Brazilian communication studies. This article intends to explore certain aspects of Vilém Flusser's thought regarding identity and otherness in contemporary times. Simultaneously, it proposes to perform a reading of the imaginary of flows and of the liquidity that, as we believe, crosses part of Flusser's work and finds maximum expression in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. In Flusser's philosophy of fiction, an ethics of relation with otherness is elaborated, which is based on the imaginative act of assuming points of view and identifying with the other. Such ethics finds resonance in recent proposals in the fields of cultural theory and philosophy.

Keywords: Vilém Flusser, identity, fiction, marine imaginary.

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RESUMO

O tema da identidade e seus desdobramentos na cultura digital têm emergido de forma relativamente marginal nos estudos de comunicação brasileiros. Este artigo propõe explorar determinados aspectos do pensamento de Vilém Flusser a respeito de identidade e alteridade na contemporaneidade. Ao mesmo tempo, propõe-se a realizar uma leitura do imaginário dos fluxos e da liquidez que, segundo cremos, atravessa parte da obra flusseriana e encontra expressão máxima em *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. Na filosofia da ficção de Flusser, é elaborada uma ética da relação com a alteridade, que se funda no ato imaginativo de tomadas de ponto de vista e identificação com o outro. Tal ética encontra ressonância em proposições recentes nos campos da teoria cultural e da filosofia.

Palavras-chave: Vilém Flusser, identidade, ficção, imaginário marinho

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The subjects of identity and otherness occupy a curious position in communication studies. Although they seem key to the phenomenon of communication and are occasionally approached, in different ways, in works addressing topics such as globalization, marginality or socialization processes, they are mostly dealt with superficially in studies in the field, when not ignored altogether. More than that, possibly due to its merely intermittent interest in philosophical investigations, communication theory has often remained oblivious to the long tradition of debate on identity and otherness running through philosophy. It is true that writers such as Martin Buber, Charles Taylor or Emmanuel Lévinas are occasionally mentioned in communication studies, but given the question's centrality to the processes of symbolic exchange, attempts to address it in communication are still seemingly timid.

However, this tends to change in the coming years due to a series of different factors whose comprehensive discussion is prevented by the limited scope of this work. Prominent among them is the role played by the internet in bringing the subject of identity to the core of debates on digital culture, initially viewed as an environment conducive to fostering the free and ludic play of identities. In this sense, one might place a first relevant wave of discussions on the subject in the 1990s. In the virtual world, no one would be necessarily attached to a fixed and complete identity, and one of the most comprehensive expositions of this thesis is found in Sherry Turkle's classic study *Life on the Screen* (1997). Nevertheless, it is an age-old debate (at least for the *dromocratic* parameters of the networked society) whose naive and optimistic approach has been replaced by more critical and informed views. Currently, the debate on the issue of identity revolves around the use of social networks in identity politics or recent reconfigurations of the ideological spectrum and political forces linked to the use of digital media. A recent book by Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies* (2017), is a good example of this second type of discussion. Nagle adds yet another chapter to a long series of critical reviews of digital utopias by suggesting that internet anonymity and the libertarian hacker culture have not necessarily fostered a healthier or more progressive political environment. Contrary to what much of the left expected, the astounding rise of "alt-right" (as well as various other forms of conservatism) in online environments seems have made the digital world an ideal space for the current spread of misogyny, racism and micro-fascisms of the most varied persuasions.

Actually, Nagle ends up linking the two discussions mentioned above, since she partially puts down the growth of conservative movements in the internet to the excesses and misconceptions of online identity politics. As she points out in the book's conclusion: "There is no question but that the embarrassing and

toxic online politics represented by this version of the left, which has been so destructive and inhumane, has made the left a laughing stock for a whole new generation” (Nagle, 2017: 97). The popularity of conservatism among the youth of digital environments would thus have been largely fueled by the politics of persecution and censorship of the so-called social justice warriors, contributing to the idea that to be a right wing may be “exciting, fun and courageous”, possibly for the first time in history (Ibid.: 112). Some of Nagle’s theses are unquestionably controversial² but deserve careful consideration. Indeed, in recent years the domain of identity debates has become a furious battlefield in which expressions such as *subject positions*, *safe spaces* and *legitimacy* have fueled right-wing discourses about the supposed authoritarianism of the left and its inability for dialogue.

This whole immensely complex context – in which youth and libertarianism may be associated with reactionary signs and minorities identified as *oppressive forces* – requires us to reinvestigate the subject of identity in its subtler philosophical, anthropological and sociological dimensions. What does it mean to speak of identity in times when the concept seems to have undergone a paradoxical mutation, showing signs of both flexibility and rigidity? How can we reposition the relationship between identity and otherness in a context which affirms the open and unstable dimension of identity as a construction while materializing its relationship with the other in a conflict often averse to the true emergence of otherness? Might Byung-Chul Han (2016: 9) be correct in saying that “the time in which there was the other is over”³ and that today this figure is vanishing in its manifestations as mystery, seduction and pain, only to be replaced by the “terror of sameness” (*der Terror des Gleichen*)? In the limited space of the paragraphs below this study proposes to merely suggest an initial reflection capable of outlining interesting and innovative ways to approach the issue of the relationship between sameness and otherness. It starts out from the work of a philosopher of communication who, like few others, never lost focus of the dialectic between identity and otherness: Vilém Flusser.

First of all, it is worth noting that themes such as identity and dialogism, as well as the relationship with otherness (and even radical otherness or what Peter Szendy calls “le tout autre”⁴), were at the core of Flusser’s thought early on. Deeply influenced by the philosophy of Martin Buber, the author identifies in intersubjectivity an essential mechanism of human constitution. In the emergence of the fundamental poles *Ich-es* (the relationship of the self with objects) e *Ich-Du*⁵ (the relationship of the self with the other), the human being elaborates its limits and is singled out. We are constituted in this encounter with the world’s thingness (*dinglichkeit*) and with the human

² As evidenced by the heated debate following the session “Better think twice: subcultures, alt-s, and the politics of transgression” at the 2018 edition of Transmediale, a well-known electronic art festival in Berlin in which Nagle took part alongside Florian Cramer.

³ Original text: “Die Zeit, in der es den Anderen gab, ist vorbei”.

⁴ Cf. Szendy, 2011.

⁵ I-it and I-you, respectively.

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⁶Original text: “stiften sie einen Bestand”.

counterpart, which, together, define our boundaries. Primary words such as I and you do not express things, but “establish a mode of existence”⁶, i.e. they are *existencializing* (Buber, 2009: 3). Flusser assimilated Buber’s thought in different aspects of his work, not only in the field of communication, but in the many other areas he took on. Even at certain unsuspected moments the issue of I-it and I-you encroached on the meanderings of Flusser’s concerns even more surprisingly than would be expected. In the book *Natural: Mind*, published in 1979, Flusser radically blurs the traditional boundaries between nature and culture in a surprisingly modern way. When reflecting alternately on the particularities of the works of nature and of human ingenuity (such as the Fuorn Pass and the Trans-Amazon Highway), he (2011: 16) concludes that

Probably the two types of culture and art do not exist and have never existed in a pure state, and every concrete culture or art is a mixture or synthesis of the two proposed types. That makes it extremely problematic, not only to want to distinguish, ontologically, between various cultures, but also to want to establish a rigorous dialectic between culture and nature.

At the end of the work he goes so far as to assert that the ontological distinction between nature and culture can no longer hold at the present moment (Ibid.: 150). In fact, all fields of knowledge that deal with the problems addressed in the book have undergone profound change in recent years: From the notion of subject to the idea of science and the theme of nature, no traditional construct has remained intact. Above all, the principle that an observer-subject objectively situates himself on an object as a distant spectator no longer holds, according to Flusser. At this point one sees that the concept of identity, whatever it may be, becomes highly problematic.

Indeed, in developing the idea that man ceases to be subject to become project, Flusser goes a step further in dissolving the concept of identity. Such a transformation surely took place in stages, over a long period. In modernity, when our religious faith was displaced by faith in technology, we turned from God to things. However, by then they had already become hazy given the perception that it is we who design things (just as it was with God). It is what Flusser (1998: 12) defines, in *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*, as a “phantasmatic process” (*gespenstischer Vorgang*), which, through the fine term “enlightenment” (*Aufklärung*), confuses fog with clarity. Both the solidity of the subject and of the world are undone – and thus we find here an image that can easily slide into the notion of liquidity, of a (vital, epistemological) medium in which the former firmness of the earth is replaced by the fluidity of water – an argument that could be used to propose an aquatic or oceanic imaginary running through Flusser’s thought⁷.

⁷ It is worth noting that, in an amusing coincidence, the German word “Fluss” means “flow,” “river.” Flusser would therefore be “that which flows.” Hence the title’s pun alluding to the “Flusserian imaginary of flows.”

In an expression of irony curiously close to the term used by Friedrich Kittler a few years later, the Czech philosopher states that the “so-called ‘I’” (*das sogenannte ‘Ich’*) is no longer a definable unit. Like Kittler’s (1986: 3) “so-called man” (*der sogenannte Mensch*), the Flusserian self finds itself dissolved in webs of technologically mediated relationships. But unlike the latter it is still markedly sustained in the mental substrata forming the vast intersubjective network (*intersubjektive Vernetzung*) which characterizes the telematic society. If for Kittler (Ibid.) the means powerfully “determine our situation” (*bestimmen unsere Lage*), for Flusser the technologically empowered consciences should still define the course of history. And it is hence – once again simultaneously near and far from the Kittlerian machine-like universe – that Flusser suggests the formation of a new “post-humanist, postmodern anthropology”⁸ (1998: 18). In the new world that starts taking shape from the telematic-digital situation, “Those who do not wish to dream, but instead to keep both feet on solid ground (those who do not wish to design themselves) are currently forced to either not perceive or minimize numerous observable trends”⁹ (Ibid.: 59-60).

In other words, knowledge and theory are now constituted with the support of fantasy and dream. It is therefore about designing (*entwerfen*) possible worlds for the future. For reality itself, Flusser claims, starts showing itself as fantasy. In this context, it is the man with no firm ground (*Bodenlos*) – *the aquatic man*, one might even say – that will seek out existential paths. A man freed from the boundaries of the *capsule of self*, whose identity and body will be always unstable and moving. This proposal takes us back to *Natural: Mind*, more precisely to the passage in which Flusser stresses the similarity between aerial and aquatic animals and confronts them with “terrestrial animals.” That is because terrestrial animals, although “not entirely deprived of an opening towards open space” (2011: 34) relate to it in a very different (and more limited) way than the beings of air and water. While for man “space is an ocean that bathes the flat island they inhabit,” both bird and fish are inhabitants of an “ocean-space” (Ibid.: 34). Should not then the man of the future be more aerial or marine so as to move freely, not in planes, but in a truly three-dimensional space? And in fact, in *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt*, Flusser wonders whether it would not be interesting for this future man to experience other bodies, other means, in which thought would happen in an entirely new and diverse way. Why not exchange, for example, our spherical dual brain for the fully spherical brains of cephalopods? (1998: 100). There is no real reason, he asserts, to continue limited to what natural genetics has given us, since we will soon be able to transform our bodies into living works of art. This is the ultimate and most material sense of the subject becoming project.

⁸Original text: “Eine neue, post-humanistische, ‘post-moderne’ Anthropologie”.

⁹Original text: “Wer nicht träumen, sondern mit beiden Füßen auf festem Boden bleiben will (wer nicht Lust hat, sich zu entwerfen), der ist gegenwärtig genötigt, zahlreiche beobachtbare Tendenzen entweder nicht wahrzunehmen oder zu minimalisieren”.

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Flusser's epistemological-genetic-technological utopia is certainly as seductive and fascinating as it may be dangerous if not sobered by certain critical views. Issues of gender, race or social inequality only occasionally surface in the author's reflections. Can they simply disappear into the background of a technological fantasy about man's liberation from the bonds of body and identity? If Flusser deserves huge credit for developing an epistemology of the aquatic environment, free from ground constraints and land bias, on the other hand, as Melody Jue (2014) argues, his description of the "vampire squid from hell," a character in one of his most celebrated "philosophical fictions," adopts a decidedly "sexualized" and male perspective. *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, this entity which represents both libertarian dangers and powers of a future humanity, would also be a representation of the photographic gesture in its more traditional critical formulation, connecting the camera with a "masculine, penetrative logic" (Ibid.: 92). That happens because, according to Jue, Flusser cannot bring his proposition of an aquatic epistemology to the necessary conclusion, since he still views the media in "dry" terms rather than representing them according to the fluid and moving logic of aquatic existence. If *Vampyroteuthis* is a "speculative fiction that takes seriously the conditions of the ocean as a novel and cognitively marginalized starting point for philosophy" (Ibid.: 93) and for such deserves our admiration, it nevertheless does not attain a "more radical materiality of water" (Ibid.: 100), characterized by its essential errancy. Flusser focuses on a terrestrial media theory of *inscription* as controlled activity.

Addressing also the issue of sexuality, noting that Flusser's *Vampyroteuthis* leaves no room for fluid genres, but is grounded on "heterosexual physicality," Richard Iveson (2014: 395) develops an even deeper criticism. For him, Flusser fails to overcome the limits of traditional anthropocentrism, trapped in a vicious circle that seeks to deconstruct the human while continually returning to it. If it is a relatively easy task to point out shortcomings in Flusser, who died in 1991, from a contemporary point of view informed by the most recent gender and post-humanism theories, that does not mean they are any less valid. We may naturally always engage in attempts to redeem the thinker from his epistemological sins, deriving many of his views from the cultural environment in which he was immersed until his death. Flusser was an important witness and participant of a very specific moment in the development of digital culture, which made it extremely hard to escape the emerging naive and utopian enthusiasm regarding the development of digital technologies. Following an entirely different path, however, and drawing on an argument with which I tend to agree, Katherine Hayles (2014) vindicates *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* as an interesting epistemological instrument for a new non-anthropocentric object-oriented ontology¹⁰. Although Flusser does indeed often tend to view *Vampyroteuthis* as a romanticized other of the

¹⁰"Object-oriented ontology" (OOO) is the term used to define a very recent philosophical movement whose main goal is to undermine the ontological privilege granted to man in relation to other beings. Usually regarded as a part of so-called "speculative realism," it starts from a critique of Kant and from the idea that philosophy is stuck in a correlational circle (knowledge is only possible in the correlation between mind and world) to try to elaborate new ontologies. In this sense, see, for example, the pioneering work by Meillassoux (2006).

human, he achieves in his speculative and fictional method certain propositions which would otherwise not be noticeable. For Hayles, this represents a strong and productive paradox in Flusser:

Human imagination is the best way, and perhaps the only way, to move beyond anthropocentrism into a more nuanced understanding of the world as comprised of a multitude of world views, including those of other biological organisms, human-made artefacts, and inanimate objects. (Ibid.: 177)

And that is not because we humans are in any way more skillful or better than other beings (a return to anthropocentrism), but because our particular weaknesses require us to have such imaginative capacity. In yet another paradox, we need it precisely because we consider ourselves special (and therefore somehow separate from the world and other beings). In other words, the ability to imaginatively project ourselves to the world experiences of other entities is a remedy we need to fight narcissism, one of the distinctive signs of our species.

However, I have no interest here in making an apology for Flusser in the abstract, but rather of suggesting ways of reading his work capable of leading to concrete results for our unique epistemic and cultural situation. Actually, it is perhaps the philosopher's weaknesses, various contradictions and blind spots that make him interesting and still relevant to our particular historical context. It seems to be no coincidence that his work, especially *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, has enjoyed a revival among academic research addressing in recent years the intersections between philosophy, cultural studies and the theme of post-humanism (Cf. Peters, 2015; Thacker, 2015; Maoilearca, 2016). This recent rediscovery of an author who remained neglected for various years has come about precisely at a historical moment of special interest in issues related to topics such as new materialism, speculative realism and post-humanism. Indeed, the paradoxical and uncomfortable Flusserian associations between humanism and post-humanism, science and fiction, imagination and method may offer interesting alternatives to reflect on issues like identity in the complex context of digital culture.

Albeit not entirely materialized in his oeuvre, for instance, Flusser's proposal for an epistemology of the liquid medium paves the way for more fluid, more open and perhaps more adequate forms of reflection to deal with the dialectic between materiality and immateriality in our age. But what would such an epistemology consist of? If, as argued by Jue, (2014: 85) there has always been a "terrestrial bias of philosophy and critical theory," Flusser affords us the possibility of imagining fluid and alien epistemic spaces in which theory may be fertilized

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by the imagination, creating conditions for a philosophy and theory in which instability emerges as a creative force.

Thereby, in a sense he goes back to original powers of philosophical enterprise which, as Gunter Scholtz suggests, arose precisely from our relationship with the ocean. The cradle of philosophy was the sea, and “its basic principle was water”¹¹ (Scholtz, 2016: 13). If for Plato the ocean is viewed as a place of “impurity and clouded knowledge”¹² (Ibid. : 36) that is precisely because here we have already moved on from the mythical and poetic horizon of the Presocratics to the logical and rational identitarianism of later philosophy. With Aristotle and the law of excluded middle, identity is even further cast in stone, representing an ontological limit that cannot be exceeded. In the sea, on the other hand, every limit is temporary, every mark is unstable, every definition is changeable. In Thierry Hentsch’s (2015) reflection on a potential alternative ethics for the West, the sea is an essential figure. It is, in fact, that which reminds us of the need for boundaries while suggesting the fluidity of every limit: “The sea will be there always and never in the same place. Faithful and inconstant, similar and different, it stirs in me the other and the same without, however, confusing them. In it the limit breathes”¹³ (Ibid.: 24). Flusser’s liquid epistemology, forever fascinated with ocean and sea creatures, can thus be aligned with a new ethics of identity. An ethics founded on the mythical figure of the ocean, also encompassing the issue of identity traversed by colonial traumas, in an African imaginary that, according to Françoise Vergès, identifies the seas as a place of “fear, death, loss of identity” (2001: 146), since the sea voyage was associated with the terror of slavery. For Vergès, however, it is a question of replacing the centrality of one ocean with another, of challenging the centrality of the Atlantic in African history and thinking the Indian as a territory of creolization. This is the ocean that emerges as a space where “local and regional identities are in flux” (Ibid.: 147).

Thus, it is curious to note how liquid images have indeed recently influenced not only the theme of identity but the whole discourse on the cultural transition from the modern to the contemporary. It is this image, for example, that marks a significant part of Zygmunt Bauman’s popular work *Liquid Modernity*, whose main thesis is the dissolution of the certainties and confidences that marked the modern experience. Whereas modernity seemed to establish the social on firm ground, with a relatively solid belief in institutions and possible futures, in the new liquid times it is insecurity and fear that shape the existential experience. The liquid thus represents the loss of a foundation, a situation in which social systems can no longer preserve their structures “because they decompose and melt faster than it takes to cast them” (2008: 1). Faced with such a situation, the individual feels progressively insecure and, more than ever, recurrently called

¹¹Original text: “ihr Grundprinzip war das Wasser”.

¹²Original text: “Ort der Unreinheit und der getrübbten Erkenntnis”.

¹³Original text: “la mer sera là toujours et jamais au même endroit. Fidèle et inconstante, pareille et diferente, ele agite en moi l’autre et le même sans du tout les confondre. En ele la limite respire”.

on to produce meanings and identities in an environment characterized by *spaces of flux* (Ibid. : 84). Indeed, the association established by Bauman of the networked society (telematic, for Flusser) with the image of fluids merely follows a much more general trend, identified by Thomas Sutherland (2013) as ontology or metaphysics of flux and which can be found in various other thinkers in the field of social theory, from Landa to Negri and Shaviro. However, Sutherland develops a scathing criticism of this trend. According to him, it is responsible for clouding the important role of stasis in the sociocultural phenomena of the contemporary world. By obsessively repeating the flux trope, theorists would incur a metaphysics incapable of capturing the unique materiality of certain dimensions of social life. However, none of Sutherland's criticisms undermine the thesis that the contemporary imaginary betrays a certain obsession with liquid figures. On the contrary, they actually reinforce it. And if an imaginary is powerful enough to penetrate so broadly the field of epistemology and theoretical apprehensions¹⁴, it would no longer suffice to merely criticize it. Moreover, one must discover what positive powers such images can bring us; it is essential to *recolonize* this imaginary, extirpating from the images of flow the vectors of social panic and extreme uncertainty haunting them. We are therefore faced with a theoretical and practical task: To determine in what sense such images can help us build a future pervaded not by fears and anxieties, but by potential creative and non-reactive forces.

Such a task could be effectively described as Flusserian. After all, in *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* (as well as in various other parts of his oeuvre), Flusser views theory and thought not only as valuable instruments of evaluation and prediction, but as tools to build worlds, as mechanisms to design and imagine possible futures. As he clearly expresses in the cited work, "in considering potentially feasible designs (*möglich gewordener Entwürfe*), we already deal with a design, with the attempt to compute possibilities so as to bring them closer to materialization"¹⁵ (1998: 42). We find there an ethics of thought which, to become continually real, requires the involvement of science. The latter ceases to be a disinterested observer of the world to commit to the destiny of men. Human science always starts out from abstraction to concreteness¹⁶, from dispersed dreams to imaginary aggregates that tend to materialize. It is an inversion of Plato's utopia, that is, of facing theory "no longer as discovery of truth, but as projection of meanings"¹⁷ (Ibid.: 57). This is essentially the task of the groundless man, of the thinker in the state of *Bodenlosigkeit* (groundlessness). In reality, according to Flusser, this is a *Stimmung* (mood) which characterizes our age and there is nothing necessarily negative about it. To live groundlessly is to be open to projective and creative possibilities of a world in permanent construction. In

¹⁴ In Gilbert Durand's (1993) mythocritique, the imaginary is such a fundamental force that it effectively shapes the domain of reflection, of theoretical thought. Thus, all Platonism, a fundamental origin of Western principles of rationalization, would be structured on ascension myths of the diurnal regime of the imaginary.

¹⁵ Original text: "Bei dem Bedenken möglich gewordener Entwürfe handelt es sich um einen Entwurf, um den Versuch, Möglichkeiten zu komputieren, um sie einer Konkretisierung näher zu bringen".

¹⁶ And not the opposite, which, incidentally, seems to underpin Sutherland's criticisms of the use of liquid metaphors by social theorists: "The metaphysics of flux overly abstracts the lived conditions of our existence – in prioritizing mobility, speed, and immateriality, it obscures the situated materiality and substantiality of the individual actors (whether human or non-human) within the world" (2013: 9).

¹⁷ Original text: "nicht mehr als Entdecken der Wahrheit, sondern als Projizieren von Bedeutung zu begreifen".

his philosophical autobiography, Flusser (1992) goes so far as to suggest that the very life of man in the state of *Bodenlosigkeit* should become a laboratory for the experiences of others – a theoretical action, therefore radically incarnate. In his situation of permanent migration between languages, lands and cultures, Flusser becomes the perfect archetype of the groundless thinker, someone who lives the experience of *Bodenlosigkeit* with full intensity (*sozusagen intensiver*) (Ibid.: 11).

The Flusserian propositions also allow a fresh view of theme of the imaginary. Theorizing means imagining possible futures. And in telematic society, utopianly liberated from work, imagination is excited by the subject's relationship with computer screens and systems. Everything becomes project and the immateriality of the imaginary representations is converted into the matter that will take shape in dreamed transformations. More than an adaptive faculty or one linked to the arts, imagination will play the role of realizing the projects of networked humankind. Therefore, the idea of fiction as an epistemic instrument becomes so central in Flusser that it allows us to actually speak of a *philosophy of fiction*. However, one should recall that Flusser's thought is set in a much broader tradition whose roots can be traced at least to the work of Kant and Hans Vaihinger, especially (of the latter) *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (1922). If Kant suggests that we should always reason as if certain metaphysical propositions were true to obtain some theoretical gain from the simulation, Vaihinger develops an entire philosophy of "fictionalism." If we imagine – as indeed Hegel did, recalling that for him such fiction is a palpable reality – that the entire history of mankind is endowed with a purpose and a design, we are capable of extracting from this useful fiction a theoretically productive view of history that compiles its seemingly random facts into a structuring coherence. Like Flusser, Vaihinger considers that an idea is important insofar as it helps man adapt to the world. He is therefore interested in *concrete action*, in what we can pragmatically extract from an idea in one context or another. The fictionalist method – or method of compensating errors, as Vaihinger also defined it – in the scope of mathematics consists in starting out from fictions, mental experiments, to gradually correct them against more effective ulterior fictions. Ultimately – and this is a main point – it is not a matter of approaching science as a search for a *truth* or disinterested knowledge, but rather of determining how it can contribute to its own self-preservation and to the adaptation of man to his environment. In this view, "error and illusion may have greater value than truth"¹⁸ (Bouriau, 2013: 82).

That illusions are necessary and healthy devices for the spirit had previously been suggested by Nietzsche. Vaihinger, in turn, defines as *objective* any idea that allows spirits to agree, that is, their universalization. This "doing as if" (*als ob*) helps us understand paradoxical experiences such as those derived from

¹⁸Original text: "l'erreur et l'illusion peuvent posséder une valeur supérieure à la vérité".

the realms of aesthetics or religion. When we refer to subject, soul or substance, for example, we are resorting to useful fictions that help us approach certain mental clusters in unified way. Thus, incidentally, metaphysics “should not be ashamed to recognize its poetic, unscientific dimension”¹⁹ (Ibid.: 54). For Flusser, science itself must seek in fiction and mental experiments the tools to explore reality more efficiently (and more humanly). The Czech philosopher sees no sense in science with no human character, that is, devoid of a certain pragmatic dimension.

Given this definite Flusserian praise of the powers of fiction – whose ultimate expression is perchance *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* (fantasy blended with science report) – it is interesting to note the growing interest in recent years in fiction and the idea of speculation as useful tools for fields such as philosophy, anthropology and art. There will be no room to develop this theme here, but for now it suffices to cite, in the domain of philosophy, Peter Szendy’s *Kant chez les extraterrestres* (2011), and the more recent volumes *Futures and fictions* (Gunkel et al., 2017) and *Fiction as method* (2017) in the areas of cultural studies and art, respectively. While Szendy develops the (highly Flusserian, one might add) notion of “philosofiction” to highlight the vital importance of fiction in the history of philosophy, Jon Shaw and Theo Evison (2017: 14) argue that all institutions, especially in our age, are sustained in their essence by fictions. From methodical instrument of phenomenology – it is no surprise that Husserl appears so constantly in Flusser’s reflections and that phenomenology is his method of choice – to foundation of philosophical discursiveness in Derrida, fiction thus emerges as a category which, alongside the imaginary, requires renewed respect from science and reason as an epistemological tool.

No doubt – resuming the central theme of this work – the issue of fiction acquires equally important features regarding identity. *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* is, among many other things, a reflection on the meaning of being human in the face of the world and the other beings that inhabit it. It is also an expression of the Flusserian obsession with the theme of difference (of the animal aspect) and of the alien. *Vampyroteuthis* is a fable of the possible relationship with an extreme otherness, a position that may be occupied by a huge variety of beings. To use Peter Szendy’s incredibly similar language (2011: 56), it is a fantasy of the encounter with the “entirely other” (*tout autre*), that mysterious limit “whose radical otherness is not traceable in a circumscribed outside”²⁰ and which we need to define ourselves. It is the limit of the *cosmopolitique* fictions and from which our specificity is philosophically constituted. By taking over the fictional place of this other, of the vampire squid from hell, we exert the possibility of imagining other selves, other futures, other existential conditions. Just as Thomas

¹⁹Original text: “ne doit pas avoir honte de reconnaître sa dimension poétique, non scientifique”.

²⁰Original text: “dont l’altérité radicale n’est pas localisable dans un dehors circonscrit”.

Nagel philosophically asked, “What is it like to be a bat?” Flusser ponders what it means to be an octopod from the depths: What its concerns are, how its worldview is constituted, how its culture and art are developed. This movement of identifying with the other is radically grounded in fiction. As Fritz Breithaupt stresses in *Die dunklen Seiten der Empathie* (2017), fiction is one of the important starting points of empathy. The latter is a *Mit-erleben* (experiencing together) that depends on imagining the other’s viewpoint (*Standpunkt*) – a term quite dear to Flusser – transporting oneself to the place of the other. Such “transport’ begins with a mental walk, such as when watching a movie or reading a novel”²¹ (Ibid.: 16). When we visualize ourselves in another’s place, even though it is impossible to understand what is going on inside them in the face of a given situation, we can perceive aspects of them that are inaccessible to the other – precisely because we are *outside* that situation. We reduce it to certain basic features, making its understanding simpler and structured, while the other, existentially involved in the situation, is subject to a complex and simultaneous torrent of feelings, perceptions and ideas. In other words, “one has empathy because one can *aestheticize* the other’s situation and thereby clarify it”²² (Ibid.: 17, emphasis added). Isn’t that exactly what Flusser does in his philosophical fictions by summoning the powers of fiction, poetry and mental experiment to explore new existential *loci*, new possible identities?

His suggestion of a “vampyreuthis-like” future for technologized humanity, with all dangers and possibilities entailed, is based on a concept of identity that, albeit grounded on the materiality of the world (and hence the importance of applying contemporary, feminist, postcolonial and other kinds of filters to Flusserian ideas), never considers identity as a given, but rather as something “to be done”. And instead of dividing the human into multiple non-communicating vessels, he suggests that the proper way is always that of dialogue, of the fundamental relationship with the *you* that teaches and defines me. In this sense, the pendular epistemology (*pendelnde Epistemologie*) the thinker urges us to accept is a challenge worthy of the contemporary (1998: 263): Learning to leap from one point of view to another in perspectivist fictions capable of dissolving our identity capsules and, anti-anthropocentrically, help us design other possible futures. ■

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²¹Original text: “Transport’ beginnt mit einem mentalen Mitlaufen wie beim Schauen eines Films oder Lesen eines Romans”.

²²Original text: “man hat Empathie, weil man die Situation des anderen ästhetisieren und damit klären kann”.

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Mare nostrum, Mare Alienun

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