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Flusser's Vampyroteuthic Sublime

The Squid from the Abyss

For centuries stories were told and images depicted of giant squid attacking ships and humans. The first known photograph of the giant squid (*Architeuthis*) from Logy Bay, Newfoundland in 1873 shows a dead squid hanging lifelessly on a T-shaped metal stand. Contrary to decades of popular lore that imagined the squid as an exotic, inhuman monster, the black and white photo shows instead a powerless corpse, a neatly draped, cloak-like arrangement of limbs. At once alien and familiar, the squid's long, suction-cupped tentacles spill over the side of the metal platform onto the patterned carpet beneath it. When Vilém Flusser was working on his book *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, on the vampire squid from hell, he wrote in a letter to Dora Ferreira da Silva from January 29, 1981: "Please let me tell you of the project that moves me at the moment. Twenty or thirty years ago, a giant cephalopod was fished out of Pacific waters, of difficult taxonomic classification (among the octopi and decapods), which received the name *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*" (Flusser 2011: 136). Flusser further wrote in that letter, that the "beast," as he called it, inhabits the abyss between 3 and 8,000 meters. The first pictures of an 8-meter-long adult giant squid in the wild were taken in Japan only as recently as 2004 and 2006 at a depth of 900 meters. In 2006, the first video of a 12-meter-long animal in its natural habitat was recorded in California. Before that, in 2005, the Melbourne Aquarium bought a 7-meter-long squid preserved in a block of ice. Adult giant squid measure up to 13 meters in length, which is the maximum length of the males; the females reach up to 10 meters. Claims of the existence of a 20-meter-long specimen of giant squid have not been proven. Compared to the giant squid, the vampire squid is a small animal – it measures about 30 centimeters in length. It is estimated that the natural habitat of the giant squid is in the range of 300 to 1,000 meters below the surface, while the vampire squid lives at a depth of 600 to 900 meters. Both squids survive deep sea conditions, within the oxygen minimum zone. Some giant squids live captured in aquariums worldwide, while the vampire squid has only ever survived up to two months in captivity. The vampire squid belongs to the class cephalopod but is not a squid. The inner side of the arms and tentacles of the giant squid are covered with suction cups, while

the vampire squid has suckers only on the distal half of the arms. The vampire squid is, in fact, a passive animal that feeds mostly on bits of organic debris. In order to save energy when attacked it diverts the attack away from its body with glowing arm tips far above its head. This could be a terrifying sight to behold if one follows Flusser's lead and imagines an enormous vampire squid the size of its 13-meter-long giant cousin.

Evading Instrumental Rationality

The tips of arms eaten by a predator are then regenerated. Instrumental rationality of techno-science would be interested in this feature of the vampire squid, if only the animal could live in human captivity in order to apply research objectives upon it. The case of axolotl, a sort of salamander, whose natural habitat – the swampy, dark freshwater lakes of the Mexico Valley – is today endangered because of urbanization, demonstrates how instrumental rationality of techno-science applies to an animal with an ability of limb regeneration, as the animal has been researched for over 150 years.

Biotechnology has become a relevant instrument of biopower as the power over life, which promises to attain the ultimate form of the regenerative human body, learning from species with better abilities to auto-regenerate and by instrumentalizing these animals. This techno-science supports the affirmative politics of life and over life, known to take place in the modern era of biopower, when, as acknowledged by Michel Foucault, the life of the human species is no longer depending on the right of the sovereign power to take life or let live, but “wagered on its own political strategies” (Foucault 1978: 143). It has become the “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (Foucault 2009: 138).

Accordingly, regenerative medicine, which is oriented towards the regeneration of life, is particularly relevant for modern society. In the course of the 19th century “medicine becomes a political intervention-technique with specific power-effects. Medicine is a power-knowledge that can be applied to both the body and the population, both the organism and biological processes, and it will therefore have both disciplinary effects and regulatory effects” (Foucault 2003: 252). Not only does medicine have the political power to regulate life, regenerative medicine is a product of an instrumental rationality aiming to subordinate the world according to the needs of humankind.

For instrumental rationality, the world is not only “present-at-hand” (German *vorhanden*), but it is also “ready-to-hand” (German *zuhanden*), as Martin Heidegger deliberated. Equipment has its

equipmentality, its assignment or reference of something to something – the “in-order-to.” Hammering therefore uncovers the specific *manipulability* (German *Handlichkeit*) of the hammer. However, not only things to be used as tools, but nature more generally is to be considered in its readiness-for-use. “Nature’ is not to be understood as that which is just present-at-hand, nor as the *power of Nature*. The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind ‘in the sails’” (Heidegger 1962: 100). Speaking in Heidegger’s terms with reference to our case, the readiness-for-use of the axolotl is in its instrumentality for techno-scientific purposes because of its regenerative ability. The vampire squid, however, escapes this instrumental mentality, although encompassing the potential for manipulability. That is because the animal is to be considered in complex with the environment in which it lives and which establishes a significant gap between the impossibility of the world of the vampire squid and the world of the human to coexist.

Die Umwelt of the Vampire Squid

An early 20th century zoologist and one of the first theoreticians of ecology, Jakob von Uexküll, who was also an important reference for Heidegger, differentiated between categories of environments and considered the role of the subject (1934). He differentiated between the subjective world of animals, *die Umwelt*, and the rather objective environment, *die Umgebung*, which he did not find of interest because he emphasized that there is no objective space *per se*. Instead, there is only a forest-for-a-woodcutter, a forest-for-a-botanic, a forest-for-a-wanderer, etc. The animals, however, operate within their respective *Umwelts*. The bee, the tick, and the fly that we observe neither move in the same world nor share the same world with us – the observers. In *die Umwelt*, the world and the animal are intrinsically, or existentially, linked. Uexküll considered the case of a tick. The fundamental aspects of the structure of *die Umwelt*, the environments that are valid for all animals, can be derived from the example of the tick. Out of the egg crawls a not yet fully developed little animal that even in this state can already ambush cold-blooded animals such as lizards, for which it lies in wait. Once the female has copulated, the eyeless and deaf creature finds its way to the warm-blooded animal from which it pumps a stream of warm blood. Uexküll ascertained that the tick uses its sense of smell and has no sense of taste. It takes in any liquid, so long as it is the right temperature. For the tick it is existentially relevant to find a meal: after eating, the tick will fall to the ground, lay its eggs, and die. The tick gets into a “functional cycle as a subject and the mammal as its object” (Uexküll 2010: 50).

More precisely, in *die Umwelt* there are carriers of characteristics, or of significance. In semiology, these would be marks (German *Merkmalträger*), which are also carriers of meaning (German *Bedeutungsträger*). These carriers are everything that interests an animal. An animal has receptive organs that are assigned to perceive the mark (German *Merkorgan*) and to react to it (German *Wirkorgan*). If one exchanged the tick with a giant squid, one could easily imagine that the squid would have an interest in the ship in the same way the tick is interested in a mammal. The squid would take the ship as an object in its *Umwelt*. It would suck on it with the numerous suckers on its tentacles. Finally, it would take it down into its world. Flusser considered the vampire squid in its environment, which is the very depths of the ocean, and the ocean as a place that is “brimming with life,” where four-fifths of the biomass is found and where the largest organisms live: “The lowest level, the ‘benthos,’ is the ultimate destination of all life on earth. It is there where all vital energy generated by plankton goes, and where all fertilizing cadavers go. The organisms that inhabit the ‘benthos,’ such as walking, swimming and digging animals, form the final link in the chain of life that encircles the planet. There are no plants in this region, only animals that are similar to plants. And Vampyrotheuthis dominates this region: he is the lord of all life. So this is the vampyrotheuthian environment, his habitat: the centre of the world. The great hole that sucks in all of life. It is permanently vivified by the manna rain that falls constantly. It is eternal night, illuminated by the living rays emanated by the living creatures. And eternal ‘son et lumière,’ a show of infinitely variable luminosity and sonority.” (Flusser 1987: 69)

The squid and its environment are in this case not ready-at-hand and not merely present-at-hand. This perspective speaks to human fear of the unknown and the inhabitable, as well as the admiration of the unusual and the powerful.

Vampyrotheutic Sublime

With the concept of the dynamically sublime, Immanuel Kant reflected upon nature as power. He defined power as “a capacity that is superior to great obstacles” (Kant 2000: 143). It is called force (German *Gewalt*), or domination – if it is also able to overcome the resistance of something that itself possesses power. “Nature considered in aesthetic judgement as a power that has no domination over us is dynamically sublime” (Kant 2000: 143). The aesthetic judgement of the sublime is essentially related to relations of power. When Kant enumerated the cases from nature, such as the threatening cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes, etc., he concluded that

“the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety” (Kant 2000: 144). According to Kant, this takes place because we “discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature” (Kant 2000: 144–145). Therefore, as Kant continued, this analysis of the sublime as ascribed to power seemed to run counter to the imagined representation of God as exhibiting himself in anger in the forms of thunder, storm, earthquake, etc. Furthermore, if we were to then imagine in our minds having any superiority over the effects of such power, it would seem sacrilegious. In submitting to religion, generally, it seems that adoration with bowed head, remorseful and anxious gestures, and voice are the only appropriate codes of conduct in the presence of God. Therefore, Kant concludes, “sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us (insofar as it influences us)” (Kant 2000: 147).

In the folk and fairy tales, it was common—if not narratively necessary—for the human characters to not only measure themselves against their superhuman creaturely attackers, but to find ways of resisting and outwitting them too. Usually, the battle comes down brains vs. brawn, with the brainy humans almost always outsmarting the beast. People wanted to identify with the brave youngster who defeated the dragon from the cave or the monster from the lake that was about to eat the princess. The production and circulation of these tales were modes of understanding the unknown and horrible dark world—a world perhaps full of beasts and monsters, perhaps not—a way of overcoming, in our collective minds, the resistance of something that possess power and a way of establishing man’s domination over that something so existentially horrible, which also meant overcoming man’s own fears.

For Flusser, however, the objective was not to resist or to “defeat” the squid/the beast. He unfolded three perspectives of the environment where *Vampyroteuthis* lives, wherein “[e]nvironments are just as much mirrors of the organism as the organism is a mirror of the environment” (Flusser 1987: 70). According to one, the abyss is a Paradise with shiny red, yellow, and silver crabs, a garden that whispers, shines, and dances, a delight of *Vampyroteuthis*, where he can enjoy the fruits. According to the second perspective, the abyss is Hell – for us, who “see a cold black hole under a crushing pressure, full of fear and turmoil, inhabited by viscous and repugnant creatures that eat each other with pincers and teeth” (Flusser 1987: 70). The final interpretation attempts to adhere to the ideological confines of so-called “objective” science. Nonetheless, Flusser-the-author doesn’t endorse any one interpretation. In Hegelian fashion, Flusser’s “own” interpretation strives for *die Aufhebung* (sublation) of the established concepts of the species, which all comprise the environment in which the species

lives. While he respects the vampire squid and its inhuman *Umwelt*, Flusser still imagines the creature as an impossibly powerful, alien thing. In this regard, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* and the greatness of its abyss unfold the sublime.

The Impossibility of the Two Species to Meet

The abyss is a particular habitat inhabited by *Vampyroteuthis*, but uninhabitable for man. To “discover” the vampire squid, we first need to get used to the unusual, Flusser deliberated (cf. Flusser 1987: 70). So, how can these two species meet if they do not live in the same world? “It is difficult for us to catch *Vampyroteuthis* in nets for fishing as well as those for knowledge. Both of us live separated by an abyss. The atmospheric pressure that he inhabits would crush us, and the air we breathe would suffocate him. If we manage to incarcerate his relative in aquariums in order to study them, they tend to commit suicide, devouring their own tentacles. But we are ignorant of our own behaviour, should he manage to drag us to the deep and incarcerate us under his glass domes in order to observe us.” (Flusser 1987: 23)

We literally live in different worlds, Flusser concluded, which also explains why he took up and subjected the case of the vampire squid to examination. “There is no ‘general world’ or ‘objective universe’ which is common to both. Such abstract world of science does not exist. If we find *Vampyroteuthis*, it is within our world that we find him. We do not find him as existence, but as object” (Flusser 1987: 73). The drawing of the giant squid found in Newfoundland in 1877 speaks volumes about this kind of meeting of man and squid. Flusser even wrote about existential difference, which is the difference between, said in Heideggerian terms, both of our beings-in-the-world, for which no mutual embrace could ever alter such difference, and thus: “Every attempt to transform *Vampyroteuthis* into a human complement is a betrayal of human existence, a dangerous romanticism. It is pointless to try to minimize this: *Vampyroteuthis* is our Hell” (Flusser 1987: 79). With *die Umwelt*, the world that we don’t share, *Vampyroteuthis* is condemned forever to the realm of the Other for the human.

Here we are confronted with the impossibility of these two species meeting in any manner other than in a subject-object relationship, be it from the human’s or from the animal’s perspective. It is no coincidence that Flusser – who had been influenced by Heidegger, who built upon Uexküll’s theory which corresponded so well to that of Kant – came to such a conclusion. Uexküll believed that

with the interconnectedness of the subject with the object, in *die Umwelt*, biology finally connected with Kant's philosophy by emphasizing the decisive role of the subject, because there can be no time and no space without a living subject (cf. Uexküll 2010: 52). For human then, there can be no other concept of Vampyroteuthis than the one human conceptualizes.

Conclusion

Flusser addressed the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* in its *Umwelt*, as well as the power relations between it and the human species. He was attracted by the vampire squid and awed its *Umwelt*, which was hostile to humans. One can recognize the mythical fear of getting sucked in by the squid and the abyss in his writing. In the aesthetic judgement of the sublime, nature has a power of which humans are aware, but which does not threaten us. Today, the deep-sea squid and its abyss are not the horrible immensity the human species needs to be afraid of. However, humans still have not sublated the gap between the worlds of the species and the impossibility of their meeting.

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