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A Modest Proposal for the Saponification of Fats.

On the Role of Satire in Vilém Flusser's Work

“The true intellectual is like a mosquito that prevents society from sleeping. It keeps disturbing it with its buzzing, and when it finally ceases to revolve in the air above it, it swoops down on it, stings it, draws blood, and infects it with a feverish and potentially dangerous illness.”¹

Vilém Flusser, Anatol Rosenfeld

1. LOL

A short video with the title “Mein Denkstil ist satirisch” (My way of thinking is satirical), which was republished in *Flusser Studies 29* on the centennial of Vilém Flusser's birthday², shows Edith and Vilém Flusser engaged in a conversation with Andreas Müller-Pohle and Volker Rapsch that took place in August 1988 during the Kornhaus-Seminar in Weiler im Allgäu. In this short statement, Flusser speaks about external constraints, most probably alluding to academic rituals of seriousness and credibility and of the progressive lowering of a mask hiding his devilish provocative side. „I have felt less and less dependent on external constraints and, as a result, more and more entitled in bringing the fundamentally satirical tone of my thinking to the fore. ... that is, in the *Philosophy of Photography*, I still played the totally serious thinker ... but then I increasingly lifted the mask ... and, I think I almost dropped the mask completely with the *Vampyroteuthis* while writing it I laughed almost non-stop ... so I believe that my way of thinking is satirical.”³ Flusser is most probably alluding to a statement attributed to Franz Kafka about his novel *The Trial*. Kafka is said to have laughed out so loud while reading to friends from the first chapter of the novel that it stopped him from continuing (Stach 2002: 553).

As far as I know this is the only instance where Flusser explicitly defines his thinking style as satirical. He wrote other satirical texts before, for instance the short text “A vaca. Conto” (The Cow. A tale) that he published as early as 1961. I will come back to this text in second part of the essay. Some of the texts from the “Posto zero” series published in the early 1970s shortly before

¹ “O verdadeiro intelectual é como pernilongo que não quer permitir que a sociedade durma, que a perturba com seu zunir, e que, quando cessa de girar no ar por cima da sociedade, baixa para picá-la, tirar-lhe sangue, e infectá-la com doença febril e potencialmente perigosa.”

² See <http://www.flusserstudies.net/archive/flusser-studies-29-%E2%80%93-2020-centennial-three-part-issue>.

³ „Ich habe mich immer mehr von äußeren Zwängen freigeühlt und infolgedessen immer berechtigter gefühlt, den grundlegend satirischen Ton meines Denkens ins Bild zu bringen. ... Also in der Fotophilosophie habe ich immer noch vollkommen den ersten Denker gespielt ... und ich habe diese Maske immer mehr gelüftet ... und ich glaube beim *Vampyroteuthis* während dessen Schreiben ich fast ununterbrochen gelacht habe, habe ich die Maske schon beinahe fallen gelassen ... und ich glaube, mein Denkstil ist satirisch.“

he moved back to Europe can also be considered as satirical.⁴ However, contrary to Flusser's own statement I would not define his style as predominantly satirical, especially in view of the wider array of text-types that makes up his oeuvre. Flusser uses many other stylistic and rhetorical means: irony and parody, paradox and contradiction, as well as textual strategies that call attention to the fictionality and artificiality of language (play with words, alliteration, paronomasia etc.) (Guldin 2011). In my view, satire is just one important strategy among a plurality of other interacting writing strategies. In this sense, Flusser's overall style could be described as a mixture of different converging and diverging elements, a fundamentally composite style which mirrors the plurality of his philosophical approach. But then, why did Flusser emphatically define his overall style as satirical? And what role does the specific moment in time and space play in this respect?

Flusser had published *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* five years earlier (1983) and *Vampyrotheutis infernalis* the year before (1987) both with the German editor Andreas Müller-Pohle. The two books, especially the first one, had made quite a stir at the time initiating a new more successful phase of his writing career. *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie* is the actual turning point that projected Flusser to the fore, first in Germany and then on a wider scale. In late summer 1988, when the interview was made, he was working on the new project *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* (Flusser 1989) that would be published one year later. These circumstances call for a series of questions: Was Flusser trying to influence the reception of his new book? Did he have the impression that his German readers were missing out on a fundamental trait of his writing? Did he perceive their attitude as too academical? Did he want to reorient the way his books were being read at the time or was he simply trying to create an expectation for the new book? Is the statement therefore to be taken as a conscious provocation on Flusser's part? Let me add just this: to perceive satire in Flusser's scientific fables or irony in Kafka's absurd and dark world, for that matter, also requires a reader who is smart enough to detect and appreciate them.

Flusser's illuminating statement, sadly enough, was practically without any effect: If one looks back on the last thirty years one must draw a sobering conclusion: The interpretation that highlighted the theoretical side and the reductive view of his work that goes with it – Flusser the digital thinker and the serious media theorist – have prevailed in the end. This is also due to Flusser's own ambivalences in the way he presented himself and his thinking in public in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the interview, Flusser speaks of academic seriousness as a role to be played, questioning simple notions of objectivity. That truth can be constructed and invented is something that was

⁴ In this issue of *Flusser Studies* we have republished a few examples of the "Posto Zeries" in their original Portuguese version and in an English translation. We have also wanted to make Edith Flusser's and Vera Schwamborn's still unpublished German translation of the whole series available to the readers of this journal.

clear long before the age of deep fakes. However, recent events in academia and the political world at large have shown how effectively truth can be fabricated. Objectivity and credibility are in part the result of specific rhetorical strategies. And this is not only true for the humanities. Flusser repeatedly stressed the problematic side of the authority of authors situating his own writing within the essayistic tradition and clearly distancing himself from the writing of academic treatises (Flusser: 1998), where the author tends to disappear behind a veil of objectivity. The essay-writer does not conceal his personal history and his emotional and intellectual engagement. Furthermore, Flusser always thought of his writing as an attempt to combine science, art and ethics, truth, beauty and goodness. This is exactly what happens in his openly satirical texts.

Flusser's short comment has far reaching consequences for the interpretation of all of his writings and raises a series of questions that would have to be pursued in a wider context: Is there an ironical fabulatory undertone in all his writings even those considered to be straightforward comments on communication and media theory? Have all his texts to be viewed in the light of his more fictional essays, that is, as philosophical fictions or metaphorical phantasies? Is *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, for instance, more than a theoretical reflection on the relationship of image and text and the importance of photography? Can it not also be read as a metaphorical speculation on the social apparatus, in its more terrifying form of the Nazi concentration camps where the killers are simple functionaries executing a program?

In the interview, Flusser defines *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* as a fundamentally satirical work. The text has been generally read as a comment on present day media revolution, but never as a satirical text. In what sense, then, is *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* a satire? I will try to give a first tentative answer to this question in the last section of this essay linking the diabolical octopus with other satirical animal characters in Flusser's work, two of which have been included in *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge*: the ventriloquist tape worm and the *Bibliophagus convictus*. In the first part of the essay, I want to discuss some elements of Flusser's use of satire and compare the short text "Verseifung von Fetten" (Saponification) with Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal".

Elements of Satirical Writing

'Satire' comes from the Latin *satur*, 'full', and *satura lanx*, 'a dish full of various kinds of fruit'. The name was used in Roman antiquity in many ways, but always referring to things consisting of various parts or ingredients. The notion of 'satire', thus, stresses textual diversity and complexity pointing to a fundamental aspect of Flusser's thinking: the constant mixing and merging of different points of view through juxtaposition and contamination of discordant elements across time and space. In this very general sense, Flusser's writing is always 'satirical'.

A prominent satirical writer that Flusser knew and had read is the Dutch humanist and philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536). In Flusser's *Reisebibliothek* in the Archive in Berlin there are two titles associated with this writer: *Elogio da Loucura*, an undated Portuguese version of *In Praise of Folly* published in São Paulo, and Johan Huizinga's *Europäischer Humanismus: Erasmus* published by the editor Rowohlt in Hamburg in 1958.

In Praise of Folly was first published in 1511. In this book, Folly appears as the main character and the narrator. Erasmus uses a biblical trope that opposes foolishness to wisdom in a provocative way. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. [...] For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. [...] But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." (1 Corinthians, 1, 20-27) Foolishness and wisdom, weakness and strength exchange places in a world turned upside down. Inversion is an important strategy of satirical writing. Erasmus uses this biblical notion which questions the hierarchical set up of the society of his time and turns it against the established official church in Rome. The narrator begins by praising himself and then moves on to satirize the abuses of the Catholic doctrine and the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

This points to three fundamental aspects of satirical writing to which I will come back in connection with Flusser's texts: the figure of the narrator, the target(s) of satirical thinking and the notion of inversion. These three aspects question both any stable notion of truthfulness and the straightforwardness of any representation of reality. Within the context of modern science, this strategy can also be used to question the notion of scientific objectivity by stressing the fictional and hypothetical side of scientific endeavor. Furthermore, satirical writing questions moral standards and the legitimacy of political ideologies. In "Verseifung von Fetten", Flusser combined a satire of political ideologies with a satire of pseudo-scientificity.

The work of the Russian philosopher, literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin provides further of elements of satire some of which can also be detected in Flusser's writing. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin 1984b) he lists the freedom of plot and philosophical invention which is not bound by the needs for historical or everyday realism; the choice an experimental narrative point of view – see for instance Flusser's tales of the tape worm or the seahorse (Flusser 2022: 33-5 and 21-24); the experimentation with psychopathological states of mind, like madness or split personality – see for instance Flusser's tale of the *Bibliophagus convictus* (Flusser 2022:47-49); unexpected meetings between unrelated often opposed realities; and finally elements of social utopia. In *Rabelais and his World* Bakhtin (1984a) describes the grotesque world of carnival. Grotesque satire

consists mainly in an inversion of the hierarchies of the ordinary world. In the carnival, the world stands on its head, the lowest climbs to the top. This is not only an essential element in many satires, as already pointed out in connection with *In Praise of Folly*, but also in Flusser's *Vampyrotheutis infernalis*, as well as in the already mentioned tales of the tape worm and the *Bibliophagus convictus* where animals dethrone human beings from their position as the highest point of the evolutionary process by turning them into simple executors of their will.

In his dense and insightful essay, "Vilém Flusser's Philosophy Fiction", Abraham Moles (1996) addresses some other important aspects of Flusser's philosophical fables than one can also detect in his satirical writings. Flusser made use of the phenomenological artifice of distancing to create an alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*). The relationship with the strange and exotic is also a constant of phenomenological thinking. Moles places Flusser in a tradition of thought that ranges from Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* to Francis Bacon's *Utopia*⁵, Jerome Rothstein's *Wigglenorm Physics*, Jakob von Uexküll's world view of a dog tick and Poincaré's geometry of flatworms. Another example is the satirical novella *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott that was first published 1884 (Abbott 1992). The tale which is written by a square and takes place in a fictional two-dimensional world is a scathing commentary on the reductiveness of Victorian culture. Moles places philosophy, literature, physics, biology, and mathematics in the same line of tradition highlighting a convergence between the humanities and the natural science which was also a central notion⁶ in Flusser's work.⁷

The American ethnographer Ruth Benedict should also be included in this list. Her work *Patterns of Culture*, which Flusser cites in a German version⁸ in the bibliography of *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*⁹, and is to be found in his "Reisebibliothek" (Benedict 1953), strives for similar phenomenological alienation effects. Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* that served as a model for Benedict in her 1925 account of the uses of cannibalism¹⁰ also belongs in this tradition and might have been known to Flusser. I will now discuss a less known example of a short satire from Flusser's

⁵ In the "Reisebibliothek" there are two books by Francis Bacon: *Essays*, J. M. Dent and Sons, London 1939 and *The advancement of learning*, John Dent and sons, London 1934.

⁶ See V. Flusser, "The Novel Called 'Science'" and "Der Roman der Wissenschaft" in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

⁷ Flusser held the short address "Science Fiction" at the Vienna TV Club 2, on March 20, 1988, in which he discussed the grey zone between science and fiction. This text was published along with an English translation by William Hanff (see his contribution in this issue of *Flusser Studies*) in *Flusser Studies* 20 (December 2015) (<https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanff-science-fiction.pdf> / <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/hanff-science-fiction-en.pdf>). Strangely enough, the editor of the new English translation refers only to the German original but not to the English translation (Flusser 2022: 95, Footnote 1).

⁸ R. Benedict, *Urformen der Kultur*, Rowohlt's deutsche Enzyklopädie. Reinbek 1955.

⁹ V. Flusser, *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert*, <https://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/flusser-das-20-jahrhundert.pdf> p. 2015.

¹⁰ See R. Benedict "The Uses of Cannibalism" in M. Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (Boston, 1959), p. 44-48

oeuvre, “Verseifung von Fetten” (The Saponification of Fats), and compare it to Swift’s profoundly unsettling “A Modest Proposal”. The comparison will highlight thematic and stylistic differences and parallelisms. One wonders why Flusser did not include it in *Angenommen Eine Szenenfolge*.

A Modest Proposal

Jonathan Swift’s (1677-1745) “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of the Poor in Ireland, from being a Burden to their Parents or Country; and for making them beneficial to the Publick” was published in 1729. The text mocks the heartless attitudes towards the Irish poor and the British policy towards the Irish population in general. It plays with one’s expectations from the very beginning and slowly draws one in before one realizes where the argumentation is moving. The first pages describe the miserable plight of the starving beggars in Ireland, so that the reader is completely unprepared when the narrator comes up with his cynical proposal. It is only on the third page that he drops his mask: “I shall now therefore humbly propose my own Thoughts; which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. I have been assured that by a very knowing *American* of my Acquaintance in *London*; that the young healthy Child well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether *Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled*; and, I make no doubt, that it will equally serve in a *Fricasie* or *Ragoust*.” (Swift 175: 257) Notice the choice of the introductory words “humbly”, “not to the least objection”, the use of a (fake?) witness, an American living in London, and the cruelty of the short but detailed and exhaustive list of possible ways of cooking at the end of the sentence that wants to distract the astonished reader from his/her shocking discovery.

The anonymous narrator is most probably Irish, protestant and strongly against any Popish influence in Ireland where the population was mainly Catholic. In this sense, he shares some attributes with the author. He has no personal financial interest in the scheme he proposes. As he cynically states at the very end: “I have no Children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine Years old, and my Wife past Child-bearing.” (Swift 1975: 264) Swift purposefully creates sympathy for the Irish and a dislike of the narrator who seems to feel emotion only for the members of his own class.

A second reading reveals how carefully Swift has orchestrated his storyline. It already begins with the title which wrongly suggests a reasonable approach for an improvement of the condition of the poor and thus of the country in general. The title also highlights the modesty, seriousness, and restraint of the narrator who in the end reveals himself to be a cold-blooded soulless monster. The title thus functions as a *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical technique aimed to capture the goodwill of the reader from the very beginning.

Swift lampoons the work of the English economist, physician, scientist and philosopher William Petty (1623-1687) and the social engineering popular among followers of Francis Bacon. Petty developed theories on economics based on political arithmetic that are made fun of by Swift. “I therefore humbly offer it to *publick Consideration*, that of the Hundred and Twenty Thousand Children, already computed, Twenty thousand may be reserved for Breed; whereof only on Fourth Part to be Males; which is more than we allow to *Sheep, black Cattle, or Swine* [...]” (Swift 1975: 257). A central strategy of the narrator is the systematic dehumanization of the children of the poor. It begins with the use of terms that are normally reserved for animals. Human beings are then reduced to their bodies and transformed into simple providers of meat and other utilities. The “*Carcase of a good fat Child*, which, as I have said, will make four Dishes of excellent nutritive meat [one] may flay the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable *Gloves for Ladies, and Summer Boots for fine Gentlemen*” (Swift 1975: 258) This gruesome detail became reality in the German Concentration camp of Buchenwald where human skin was used for lampshades. The fact that this was an isolated case and not a systematic practice does not lessen its profoundly disturbing effect. As I will show there is a comparable element in Flusser’s text.



Figure 1. Fat-free substitute for soap (Stadtmuseum Berlin 1917)

As in Kafka’s novels and short stories there is a tension between form and content, in this case between the impassive carefully argued proposal and the complete absence of any form of compassion for the slaughtered children. The fabric of the text, however, is not homogeneous. At certain points irony pokes through the surface subtly subverting the world view of the narrator by testifying against him. “I GRANT this Food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords; who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children” (Swift 1975: 258). This is also a strategy Flusser uses in “Verseifung von Fetten”.

Flusser wrote a German (“Verseifung von Fetten”), a French (“Saponification des graisses”) and a slightly longer Portuguese version (“Sabonetes”) which was published in *Ficções Filosóficas* (Flusser 1998a: 149-152).¹¹ Since Flusser’s practice of self-translation tends to reduce the length of the texts, it can be assumed that the Portuguese version was written first and that Flusser, decided to translate it into German and then again into French this time aiming for a publication in a French journal. He sent his friend Alex Bloch the German version together with a letter written on February 7, 1982 (Flusser 2000: 160-163). The most important change in the German version – probably motivated by the fact that Bloch was also a survivor of the Holocaust – is the short reference to alleged instances of soap (Fig. 1) being made from human body fat in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. This is also the reason I used the German and not the Portuguese version for my translation into English.

In the letter, Flusser defines “Verseifung von Fetten” as a fable, asks Bloch to react to the text (“Bit reagieren Sie darauf”) and adds: “Die Fabeln machen mir Freude. Im Unterschied zu Krishnamurti (sic!) ist meine Botschaft nämlich tatsächlich antiwörtlich: ich will gerade nicht beim Wort genommen werden (I enjoy the fables. In contrast to Krishnamurti, my message is actually antiliteral: I don’t want to be taken at my word)” (Flusser 2000: 159).

The narrator is a fictional Planning Commissioner from the Department of Planning of the Department of Justice writing on behalf of the Minister of Justice in Mexico City on March 7, 2001. The Portuguese version “Sabonetes” does not end by mentioning the position of the narrator (“Der Genosse Planungskommissar”), but with the short notation “Assinatura ilegível” (Signature illegible). The addressee is the Laboratory of Organic Chemistry in the Global Institute for Technological Research. The political ideology which in this future dystopia has conquered the whole world is probably Marxist as the interlocutors call each other comrades (*Genossen*).¹² In this future world, everybody is a functionary in a gigantic apparatus and science is in the service of politics. The religiously tinted ending which takes on a cynical connotation after one has read the text confirms this assumption: “Long live the five-year plan for the establishment of Eternal Justice on Earth!” The text is basically an exchange between functionaries of a political and scientific apparatus. This is a major difference with Swift’s text that stages an anonymous representative of the leading classes whose argumentation is only partially inspired by theoretical concerns. Flusser’s functionaries are a personification of the unholy alliance between modern science and politics typical of the 20th century with all its destructive power. The short reference to German concentration camps short-circuits Communism with Nazism. The request goes to the laboratory of organic chemistry but the intentions it voices are clearly political.

¹¹ See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

¹² See Carolina Marostica and Igor Oliveira Prado in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

Contrary to Swift's text the argumentation of the narrator of Flusser's text is inconclusive and unconvincing and his analysis to no avail. Furthermore, the fact that he refers to the saponification practiced within concentration camps not only conflates his political ideology with that of German Nazism but shows that his argumentation is based on false facts. The terrifying side of Swift's tale is the thoroughness and extent of details provided. "Saponification", on the other hand, raises more questions than it answers. In Swift's text children are going to be slaughtered, cooked, and eaten and their skins used for shoes and gloves. From the point of view of the narrator, the logic is irrefutable. The narrator of "Saponification", on the other hand, does not tell us if people will have to be slaughtered before their fat can be transformed into soap or if their dead bodies will be used. Perhaps Flusser was aware of these inconsistencies and preferred not to include the text in *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge*. But then, the satire may reside in the very inconsistency of the Planning Commissioner's argumentation, based on a pseudo-scientificity that is only thinly veiled by a political agenda asking for global justice but ultimately call for violence.

As in Swift's *Modest Proposal* the main declared aim is to resolve a social problem, in this case a local problem, poverty in Ireland. In "Saponification" it has become a problem on a global scale: the shocking differences between the industrialized western world and the poorer parts of the globe and the urgent need for "a fair distribution of the goods". In both cases the solution is sought through the exploitation of human bodies, children in one case, adults in the other. The attempt to simplify the complexities of international relations soon leads the argumentation into unresolvable contradictions. Flusser mocks the pseudoscientific nature of simple quantification which anticipates the more terrifying 'objectification' of human bodies that is to follow. The two are inextricably linked. Living active relationships are turned into dead bodies, both in the scientific discourse and the reality it projects. "In attempting to quantify the inter-worldly and inner-worldly relationships, the above-mentioned commission focused *on a single parameter*, namely the *amount of fat stored in the human body*, from which non-quantifiable parameters of the single worlds, such as the relative economic, historical, political, cultural, and religious situation can be projected. Simple parameters, such as body size, body volume or body weight, initially lent themselves to quantification, but they have proved inadequate. Therefore, the ministry of justice feels compelled to approach the issue of justice from its chemical side [emphasis added]."

The four different worlds are defined based on the amount of fat stored in the single human bodies. "In the first world, one can make out a secondary tendency to lose weight, which, however, cannot override the basic tendency towards obesity. A basic tendency that manifests itself in some North American specimens as monstrosity. This accumulation of fat leads to various forms of obesity and sclerosis." Ironically this diagnosis has assumed a worrying quality in the last few years. "The second world is in a transitional stage between lack of fat and obesity. However, this should

not be regarded as a state of equilibrium [...]. On the contrary: everything indicates that the prevailing tendency is also obesity.” In the third world, the majority of the bodies “stores only the minimum of fat which is needed for their functioning on the lowest level. However, there are also some bodies that are even fatter than those in the first world. This can be observed particularly well in Arabic countries.” And finally in the fourth world, beset by extreme poverty the bodies “are skeletal and do not dispose of the necessary energy for any movement.” Each of the four states are reinterpreted in reductive political terms as formalistic mental rigidity, progressiveness and socialism, economic motivation, or revolutionary movement, and in the case of the fourth world, as lethargy, fatalism or cynically as alternative forms of life. In this reductive thinking that does not consider living relationships but focuses on dead objects quantity automatically becomes quality.

However, it soon becomes clear that international trade relations cannot be used as a model for a global redistribution of fat. The narrator supplies a series of reasons: the excess fat of the first world is undigestible, the second world focuses on the absorption of fat from the third and fourth worlds, the excess of fat of the third world is drained by the fat bodies located there, and because of the lack of any excess fat the fourth world is not able to participate in the exchange. This basically means that there is no fat to be redistributed. It is not clear why the fat of the first world is undigestible. The implicit suggestion is to use excessive fat as food in other poorer parts of the world. A scientific way out of this quandary is the saponification of fats, a system which “has been tried out in an experimental fashion in Germany in the 1940s”, which consisted in the separation of esters into alcohols and acids.

In different instances in the course of the 20th century, circulated the idea that soap was being made from human body fat. The British press claimed during World War I that the Germans operated a corpse factory in which they made glycerin and soap from the dead bodies of their own soldiers. During and after World War II, rumors claimed that soap was being mass-produced from the bodies of the victims of Nazi concentration camps in German-occupied Poland. The Nazis did not produce soap on an industrial scale with the fat extracted from Jewish corpses. This idea was used to frighten camp inmates. Flusser’s careful formulation does not provide any details but simply introduces the deeply unsettling idea of using human bodies as simple material negating the humanist and Christian notion that human beings and their bodies are an end in themselves.

The narrator does not suggest whose fat is to be used but swiftly moves on to the possible advantages, which as the rest of the argumentation, lack the inescapable logic of *The Modest Proposal*. Add to this that they freely conflate moral, medical, political and chemical reasons in a senseless jumble. As there is no actual fat to be redistributed the whole argumentation is to no avail. Despite this, the narrator suggests a series of possible but ultimately useless solutions leading the whole argumentation ad absurdum: “the saponification of fat bodies in the first, second and third

world [...] could produce the necessary soap to clean up the scene”, the glycerine obtained in the process could be used “as a remedy against fatty hearts, or as explosives to be used against the [revolutionary] movements in the third world”, the alcohol obtained could be used “as an anaesthetic to appease the tendency towards more fat in the second world” and finally the acids obtained could be used “as a counterweight for the decomposing forces of alkalis.” The commission also “suggests perfuming the soap produced in this process in the most pleasing way.” In the Portuguese version one can find the sentence: “Em suma, espera-se da saponificação verdadeira catarse dos quatro mundos.” (“In short, a true catharsis of the four worlds is expected from saponification.) Catharsis, indeed.

The main point of “Saponification” is a dehumanizing strategy depriving human beings and their bodies and their dignity in the name of a better future and scientific progress. It is a metaphor for the reductiveness of a specific scientific discourse that has abandoned any ethical considerations. The ends never justify the means. The text questions the heartless objectivity of a science that has become the henchmen of political terror. From this point of view Communism and Nazism do not fundamentally differ.

I will now discuss Flusser’s satirical use of animal characters in his philosophical fables and their relationship to the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.

Ants, Unicorns and Cows

In an interview, Flusser sets off his philosophical fables from traditional fables. “Human beings and their condition should be considered from a pre-human point of view. This is an old tactic that is called fable. [...] It is true that in traditional fables animals are given the floor, but the one who actually speaks is the critic disguised as an animal. Is it possible to take up the point of view of an animal on humanity and stick to it, that is, to see humans through the eyes of an animal – not a mythical animal, but an animal, as biology describes it?”¹³ (Flusser 1996: 42) Within the framework of satire, however, there arises a problem: even if the point of view throughout the tale is that of an animal, the critical intention behind it remains profoundly human. Assuming that animals are not satirical, of course.

Flusser knew the European tradition of animal fables from Phaedrus to La Fontaine and the bestiaries of the Middle Ages which both used animal characters to satirize wrongful human

¹³ „Der Mensch und seine Situation soll von einem vormenschlichen Standpunkt aus reflektiert werden. Das ist eine alte Taktik, die tatsächlich Fabel heißt. [...] In den Fabeln der Tradition wird zwar den Tieren das Wort gegeben, aber der das Wort führt, ist der als Tier verkleidete Kritiker. Wäre es möglich, wirklich einen tierischen Standpunkt zu uns einzunehmen und auf diesem Standpunkt zu verharren, uns also mit den Augen eines Tieres zu sehen – aber keines Fabeltieres, sondern eines Tieres, wie es uns die Biologie schildert?“

behavior. He repeatedly used animal characters in his satirical essays. In the “Reisebibliothek” there are three books (Fig. 2) that attest Flusser’s early interest in animals and animal fables: W. W. Henigst Engelhardt’s *Parasiten des Menschen* (Kosmos Stuttgart 1953), Maurice Burton’s *Animal Legends* (Coward McCann, New York 1957), and Pierre de Beauvais’ *Bestiaires du moyen âge* (Stock Paris 1980) edited by Gabriel Bianciotto.

Besides Pierre de Beauvais’ shorter version containing 38 of the altogether 71 chapters, this edition contains extracts from the “Bestiaire divin” of Guillaume de Clerc de Normandie and the “Bestiaire d’amour” of Richard de Fournival. Maurice Burton (1898-1992) was a British zoologist and popular science author who wrote a series of books of natural history among them one about the legend of the Loch Ness Monster. Engelhardt’s book on parasites of the human body obviously also deals with tape worms.

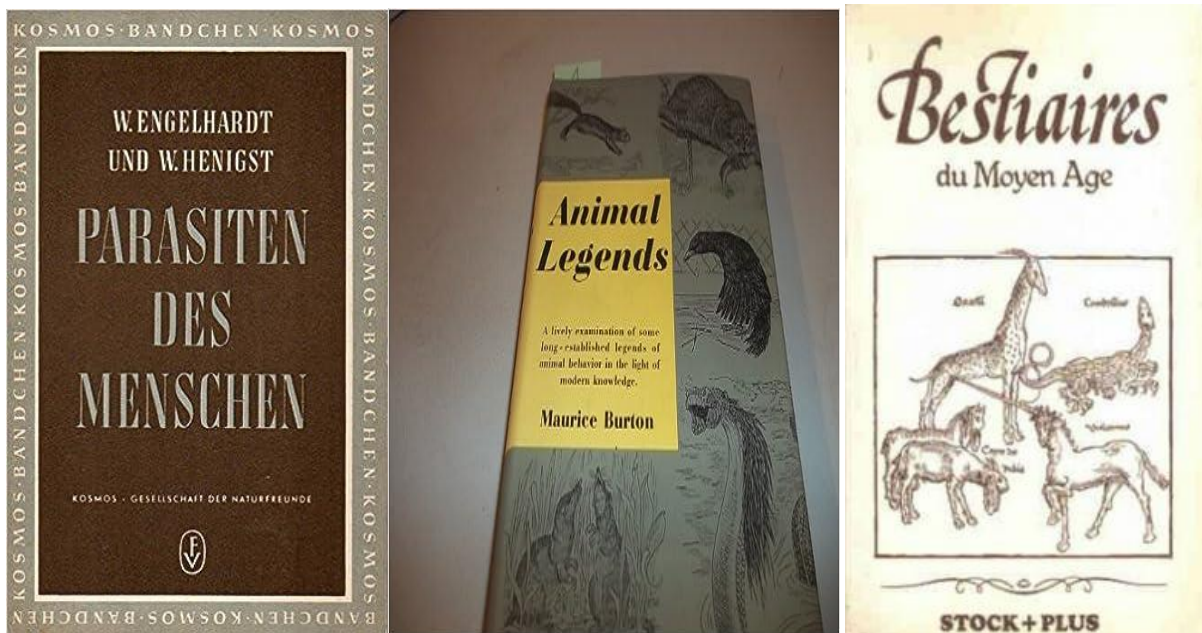


Figure 2

The “Bestiaire” written between 1246 and 1268 in the Picard dialect, Pierre de Beauvais who lived in the 13th century is a compendium of different animals. The shorter version of the “Bestiaire” which was accessible to Flusser in the 1980s includes two composite animals not usually found elsewhere: the Muscaliet, which is said to have a body like a hare, legs and tail like a squirrel, ears like a weasel, a muzzle like a mole, hair like a pig and teeth like a boar, and the Orphan Bird that has attributes of the Peacock, Eagle, Swan and Crane. The shorter version includes 38 animals that by modern standards are both natural and mythological. Among them are the lion, the pelican, the owl, the eagle, the phoenix, the siren, the ibis, the hedgehog, the fox, as well as the ant and the unicorn, on which Flusser wrote two short texts: “Formigas – Bichos I” (Beast I – Ants) and

“Unicornios – Bichos III” (Beasts III – Unicorns) published in the “Posto Zero” series in Folha de São Paulo, on March 22 and 24, 1972 respectively.¹⁴ As Flusser wrote his two texts in 1972 and the edition of Pierre de Beauvais’ *Bestiaire* was published in 1980 one cannot claim a direct textual influence. However, I will briefly describe how the two animals are described in the medieval tradition to create a background for Flusser’s own treatment.

The medieval unicorn (Fig. 3) resembles a small goat or a horse. It is strong and swift and has a single straight long horn in the middle of its head. To capture and tame it a virgin girl is placed in its path. In Christian allegory the unicorn is Jesus Christ, who was made incarnate in Mary’s womb, captured and put to death. The unicorn’s fierce wildness stands for the inability of hell to hold Christ. Its small size is a symbol of Christ’s humility in becoming human and the single horn represents the unity of God and Christ. Ants are disciplined like soldiers (Fig. 4). They carry grains in their mouths and fill up their storerooms to provide food for winter. In Christian Allegory ants working together for the common good are to be understood as a lesson to men, who should work in unity. The splitting of the grain represents the separation that must be made when reading the Bible, distinguishing the literal from the spiritual meaning. The bestiary illustrations of ants are almost always very simple showing only a series of dots or bean-shaped objects with legs. The most common images show the ants walking in lines toward grain or climbing grain stalks to gather the seeds.



Figure 3: *Del Unicornie (On the Unicorn)*



Figure 4: *De Formi (On Ants)*

In his two texts, Flusser shifts the allegorical perspective but still uses the animal character to make a point about present day society. Ants allow for a different, more humble and less ambitious but perhaps more efficient approach to the human condition and its fundamental loneliness since the traditional link between macro- and microcosms was cut in the The Renaissance. Flusser brings

¹⁴ For the Portuguese original, as well as an English and German translation see this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

the two dimensions together again, but with a twist. “Beasts I – Ants” deals with the costly attempts to “locate intelligent beings in the cosmos” and to “communicate with them. The premises behind such quests are apparently these: such beings must exist because the cosmos is big, and such beings must be more intelligent than us, because it is difficult to imagine that they might be even less intelligent. The two premises are a little dubious, but they serve to justify the attempt of the human species to break through its agonizing loneliness.” Flusser ironically places scientific search of extraterrestrial space within a spiritual religious context: “In the past loneliness was not so terrible. Angels and gods used to make love with the daughters of men; magicians specialized in such tasks used to communicate with superior powers and medieval saints used to talk lively with birds and fish. Human isolation emerged with Renaissance. Man (with capital M) started to assume that he is the sole subject of the world, he began to assume the world as his object and started to manipulate the world scientifically and technologically. Such human loneliness is elegantly called ‘humanism.’ Currently the only possible extra-human contacts are the conversations of retirees with dogs and those of old maids with parrots.”

The text then shifts from the infinity of space and the distant silent stars to the smallest and most humble of animals. This mirrors the narrative of the medieval bestiary. “This is surprising. The human species is not the only species on Earth, after all. Why spend millions of dollars to communicate with uncertain species on uncertain planets from Alpha Centauri if there are undoubtable species nearby, which we have not even tried to communicate with yet? Ants are an example.” Perhaps “ants have information [...] that is worth something?”

If “Beasts I – Ants” deals with the relationship of science and religion, “Beasts III – Unicorns” – notice the irony of the plural form – begins with a consideration on the utility of animals. In the traditional view, domestic animals are definitely better than wild ones. “Though they are not, strictly speaking, domestic animals, they are extremely useful to man. Their utility varies with time. In antiquity their horn, properly ground, would serve as medicine against any venom. In the Middle Ages, the unicorn would serve as attribute of virginity, and therefore had an undeniable public utility. In Romanticism and Post-Romanticism, it was widely used as theme for poetry (despite the word “unicorn” does not rhyme with many others in the Latin languages). And currently it is indispensable for books on logic and theory of knowledge. Indeed, such books could not exist, if the unicorn did not exist, nor if he did.” The Unicorns’ utility, and this is something they share with ants, lies in the point of view they allow for. “To prove it, consider the following statements: ‘The apple is green. Blood is green. God is green. Freedom is green. The current king of France is green. The unicorn is green.’” The first statement might be true or not. The second is false. Both have meaning. The other sentences do not have meaning. [...] It would be easy if we could say that those sentences do not have meaning because their subjects, which are God, freedom, the current

king of France, and the unicorn, do not exist. But we cannot do so. One cannot say God does not exist, because it would be necessary to define the term ‘God’ before. An impossible task.“

The situation changes with the unicorn. Here, everyone agrees that it does not exist. The sentence “the unicorn is green” has no meaning. If it was not for the unicorn “books on logic and theory of knowledge would have no sense. Because they would not be able to exemplify what does it mean ‘not to have sense.’ This would be a shame, especially for professors of logic and theory of knowledge. However, fortunately, there is the unicorn, and Socrates is his faithful companion. So, Socrates is mortal, and the unicorn is green. Long live culture.” The non-existence of the unicorn, thus, becomes the very presupposition of logical thinking. This is its utility.

The two texts discussed here are ironical but not satirical. They propose a shift of perspective, but do not scourge misbehaviour or abuse of any kind from an ethical point of view. They propose a reorientation. In this sense, not all of Flusser’s texts that make use of an animal character are necessarily satirical.

On December 3 and 9, 1961 Flusser published “A vaca. Conto” (The Cow. Tale) (Flusser 1961): It is one of the very first texts Flusser published in Brazil and the only early text that made it into *What If?* (Flusser 2022: 39-43) under a new title: “Eleventh Scenario: Mechanical Engineering”. Flusser also wrote a German (“Maschinenbau”) and a Portuguese version (“Industria pesada”) for the early versions of *Angenommen* and *Suponhamos* respectively, but he did not write an English variant for the incomplete English version of *Suppose that*. The different versions are all structured as a collage of newspaper clippings from different geographical locations. There are minor differences between the different texts, but the general idea is the same. “A vaca. Conto” is a satirical tale about the excesses of production and consumption of Western industrialized society that ultimately lead to its self-destruction. The German and Portuguese versions of *Angenommen* and *Suponhamos* end with the short note “this is where the press service ends” which strangely enough is missing in the new English translation (Flusser 2022). This adds a new dimension to the text as it presupposes the existence of someone who selected and put the different clippings from all over the world together, possibly someone working for an international news agency. The short note also suggests that the destructive power of the super-cows has swept all over the world annihilating all human culture apart from a hypothetical survivor operating as a belated chronicler of the end of the world.

The gigantic cow “Supercali”, first developed in Calcutta, multiplies and spreads all over the world thanks to a global combined scientific endeavour. The gigantic cow is an allegory of the unholy alliance between religion and science. Kaali is a major Hindu goddess associated with death and destruction. In India cows are holy and basically untouchable. This has devastating

consequences. The excrements of thousands of cows end up by flooding and submerging entire cities while their unstoppable appetite kills millions of people.

In the speech “Thought and Reflection” that Flusser held on December 5, 1963 (Flusser 2005: 3), inspired by Brazilian Anthropophagy he links scientific progress to devoration: “Thought is [...] the process of grasping which expands into the world of bodies in order to devour them. The methods of this devouring process are science and technology. But there is another direction in which thought can move, namely the opposite direction. In this motion thought turns against itself in order to devour itself, i.e., to understand itself and modify itself.” (Flusser 2005)¹⁵ An antidote to rampant unbridled scientific and economic progress is self-devoration as a form of self-control.

Contrary to the two texts on ants and unicorns whose origin could be traced back to the European tradition of animal fables that must have been known to Flusser, “A vaca. Conto” is a satirical tale of a world that has completely lost control over that which it has created. “Ants” shifts the traditional view from discipline and a sense of duty to smallness in a world possessed by gigantism. “Unicorns” shows that phantasy is the very basis for logic thinking and that there is no clear-cut opposition between imagination and logic, or the metaphorical and the literal for that matter. It is a defence of fables and philosophical fictions in general. But as I have pointed out before, these two texts cannot be defined as satirical.

Taenia solium* and *Bibliophagus convictus

Two other texts, in which animals play a central role that were included in *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge*, however, can be described as satirical: the story of the tapeworm and the *Bibliophagus convictus*.¹⁶ Both the *Taenia solium* and the *Bibliophagus convictus* transform or better degrade human beings into a mere bodily support and a passive mouthpiece for the articulation of their own interests. In this sense, both animals are ventriloquists.

In the German version the ninth scenario bears the ironical title “Wirtschaftswunder” (Economic Miracle) which refers to the rapid reconstruction and development of the economies of West Germany and Austria after World War II, the very countries that had started the war and killed millions of Jews in the Holocaust where Flusser’s whole family was killed. The voracious ventriloquist tapeworm that considers itself a model for a better human society of the future based

¹⁵ English version of a speech delivered in Portuguese at the Public Library of São Paulo on December 5, 1963 at the end of a series of lectures. “Pensamento e reflexão” was published twice, in *Revista Brasileira da Filosofia* – volume 14, number 53, January/February /March 1964 – and in a collection of essays *Da religiosidade* (São Paulo, 1967).

¹⁶ See also the contribution “Bibliophagus convictus – Relatório 313 sobre o incidente ‘Caso Alegria’” by Carolina Marostica and Igor Oliveira Prado in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

on pure parasitism has usurped man's place as the crown of evolution inverting the traditional hierarchical set up. The human host is reduced to its body alone, he merely provides the required food and carries out the will of its host living in his intestines. With the tape worm human beings and animals switch their roles. The parasitic life of the tape worm in the midst of endless feeding and sexual pleasure is also a satire of a society dominated by limitless consumerism and hedonism.

The *Bibliophagus convictus* uses man as a mouthpiece but with a more ironical and critical intent. In early English and Portuguese versions, the story is told from a subjective point of view. In a subsequent German version, as in *Angenommen*, Flusser opted for a third person narrator.¹⁷ Contrary to the tape worm the Bibliophagus resides in his host's brain. This hybrid insect, which is probably inspired by the common bookworm (Fig. 5), lives in hives like bees and feeds only on printed alphanumeric texts that it consumes in paragraphs. It chews them with the help of an acid called "criticasis" that turns into "informasis" when it fuses with the printing ink. This morsel passes through the mouths of all other *Bibliophagi* who each swallow a small bit of the morsel which is then carried by a "mediator" to all other hives. Soon everyone is duly informed, and the new information leads to a genetic mutation of the species. However, any redundancy in the chewed and swallowed text morsels leads to cancerous growths that affect each single Bibliophagus and their species as a whole. For this reason, the species has an interest in the generation of texts that do not contain redundancies. It must intervene in the process of generating text merely to survive. The fable fits perfectly into a world like ours that is more and more based on continuous cultural recycling and systematic plagiarism from the academic world to the realm of politics. In Flusser's satire, innovation has to be imposed from the outside, against human will, and by a parasitic hybrid insect, a decidedly lower species on the evolutionary scale.

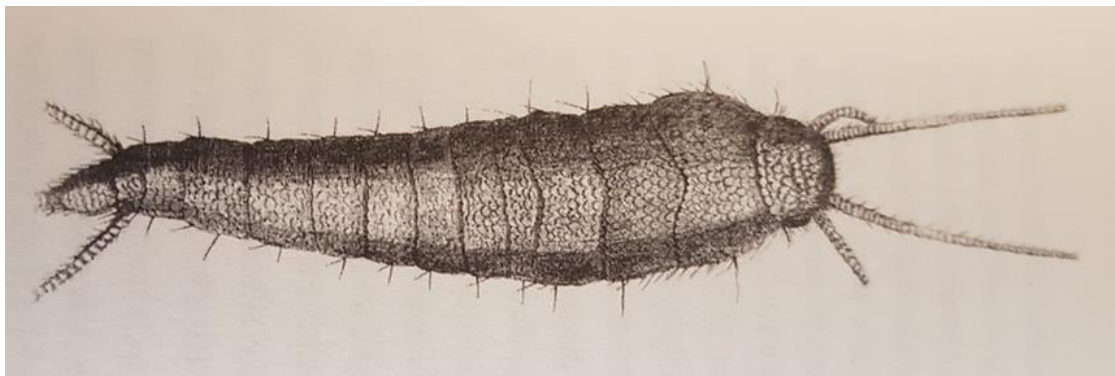


Figure 5: Bookworm from Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665)

¹⁷ See in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

In the brain of a deceased writer, one discovers a *Bibliophagus* that is still alive. The writer who had the insect placed inside his brain via a trepanation had died of an overdose of “informasis”. “As we know”, writes the author with self-irony, “suicide among unknown writers is quite common.” (Flusser 2022: 48). As in “A vaca. Conto” the trepanation soon assumed epidemic character spreading all over the world. “One of the findings indicated that the epidemic of trepanation appeared suspiciously similar to the distribution curve of printed texts.” (Flusser 2022: 48) Flusser mocks the growing redundancy and lack of originality in the production of books, but also the tsunami like character of book publication typical of present-day culture, a phenomenon that extends to all other areas of cultural production and consumption. The text ends with an ironic twist that calls attention to the story itself like the short note at the end of “A vaca. Conto” quoted before: “even this text was likely composed under the influence of a *Bibliophagus*.” (Flusser 2022:49) A last question to be explored at this point is if the other texts in *Angenommen Eine Szenenfolge* are also satirical.

Since Flusser supposedly dropped his mask in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* it would be consequential that his following book would be openly and fundamentally satirical. This would also explain why he did not include “Beats I – Ants” and “Beasts III – Unicorns” from the “Posto zero” series but the early “A Cow. Tale”. If one takes a closer look at the different texts, however, one quickly discovers that other criteria both formal and thematical also play a role, first of all the subdivision in three main sections: family life, economic life and politics.¹⁸ The book has a symmetrical buildup: besides a first and a last chapter it is made up of seven six and again seven chapters, for the first, second and third part respectively. Some but not all texts are satirical. Besides the two texts I have already commented upon there is also “Foreign Aid” (“Entwicklungshilfe”) (Flusser 2022: 36-38) that operates with a satirical inversion of the relationship between the industrialized western world and the archaic societies in the eastern provinces. Flusser is using here the strategy that recalls Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*. The inhabitants of the distant Western peninsula, that is, Europe, suffer from paranoid insanity as the three shamans report from their ethnological expedition. This led them to generate “a method called ‘science’ and out of it emerged a black magic they called ‘technology’.” (Flusser 2022: 37) The shamans speak of continuous excess and entirely superfluous inventions, like the electrical light. The global diffusion of Western culture and science is interpreted as an epidemic that threatens to infect large parts of earth. However, there is still hope, as the shamans “insist that they can exorcize it” (Flusser 2022: 38).

Satirical elements also play a role in other texts like “Son” that stages a seahorse and “Agriculture” (“Umweltschutz”) which discusses the relationship of nature and culture and contains an ironical reference to the work of Martin Heidegger and the hopelessly diseased Black Forest.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the structure of *Angenommen* and the way the different stories are related to each other compare “Rafael Alonso, Suponhamos: cenários para uma ética flusseriana” in this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

This would confirm the hypothesis that Flusser's statement in the video interview has not to be taken as it is but as a strategic attempt by Flusser to introduce a new point of view in the general discussion of his work. In the last section I would like to briefly discuss Flusser's contention that *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* should be read as a satirical text.

***Vampyroteuthis infernalis* as a Satirical Text**

In the essay "Um mundo fabuloso", which appeared in Estado de São Paulo on November 28, 1964, Flusser introduces a tapeworm alongside a squid that claims for itself and its species the fact that the majority of species live in the sea and not on land, and that man, as a vertebrate, basically developed against the current of evolution. The essential elements that one encounters again in *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* written more than twenty years later are all present here: the defamiliarization achieved through the animal point of view, the comparison between Octopoda and human beings and the reference to the bottomless, diabolical world of the deep sea where the world of the earth's surface literally stands on its head.

One of the main aspects is the way the Vampyroteuthes communicate with each other. The Vampyroteuthis infernalis lives in a colourful world at the bottom of the sea and communicates thanks to his chromatophores. His skin contains elastic pigment cells which allow him to change its color in a very short time. Flusser was probably inspired by the work of the German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll who had studied the sensory perception of various animal organisms among them sea worms, amoebae, jellyfish, and ticks which allowed him to develop theories on how they experience the world. In the "Reisebibliothek" there is a copy of *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen. Bedeutungslehre* (A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning), one of Uexküll's most important work in an edition of 1970.

The narrator is an unspecified, neutral "we" that Flusser also uses in other satirical texts, a composite figure reuniting biology, scientific speculation, social criticism, communication and media theory, philosophy, and literature. The fundamental hybridity of the narrator corresponds to the composite nature of the text himself. Even if the information provided on the octopus is generally correct with respect to biology, the overall effect is a combination of fiction and fact.

The passages of interest in connection with a possible satirical reading are above all the chapters dealing with his inverted physical nature when confronted with our world and the culture he created at the bottom of the sea. As Flusser puts it in an interview, in the body of the Vampyroteuthis infernalis the twistedness of human thought has become flesh. "They are animals that are becoming more and more twisted. Here philosophical twistedness, philosophical vertigo become flesh. [...] Twistedness has always fascinated me. It is a form of human alienation. And these

animals are even more alienated than we are. ... This twisting movement, this dizzying movement, this screwing movement is the movement of thought.” (Flusser 1996: 43-4)¹⁹

Flusser also uses the squid as a model to satirize the limitations of present-day human culture especially in view of the media revolution. But the truly satirical point is the selfishness and destructiveness of the Vampyroteuthis’ cannibalism, a moment that is already adumbrated in “A vaca. Conto”. The Vampyroteuthes cheat on each other, and feed on each other. They are basically grotesque bodies when compared to human bodies. Their fluid situation is a criticism (satire) of our still persisting fixation on the material world and our sedentariness. They are the true crown of creation as the tapeworm and have overtaken us in many respects.

Concluding Remarks: Why a Translation is not always a Translation

The notion of satire introduced by Flusser as a new point of view on his writing helps to question the problematic nature of the narrator, that is, the authority and credibility of the author. In many texts, the main satirical element lies in the choice of a narrating voice which often leads to an inversion of generally accepted points of view. Besides animal characters (as the *Bibliophagus convictus*), some of them speaking in the first person (a tapeworm or a seahorse) and a general “we” – as for instance in the “Fourth scenario. Great Uncle” (Flusser 2022: 14-16) –, Flusser uses scientists, scholars and politicians of doubtful character and authority – the Planning Commissioner in “Saponification”, or the anthropologist at the conference after the April revolution in the “Fifth scenario. Brothers”. (Flusser 2022: 17-20). This new perspective also strengthens the idea that Flusser’s texts are above all essayistic and highlight the literary quality of his writing. The question to be explored at this point is how this impinges on the role of the media theorist and communicologist and his ethic and aesthetic engagement. Perhaps a first possible answer to this question could be the notion of a textual continuum from satires to philosophical fables and openly essayistic texts to other more theoretical oriented work. Flusser’s texts are hybrid in many ways.

In the opening chapter of early German, Portuguese, and English versions, one can still find the subtitles “Einleitende Bedenken”, “Duvidas preliminares” and “Introductory considerations”²⁰ as well as a telling epigraph by Sir Isaac Newton that sets the general tone of the whole book: “Hypotheses non fingo.” (I contrive no hypotheses). The epigraph still appears in the original German edition of *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* (Flusser 1989: 6) (Fig. 6), but, strangely enough,

¹⁹ „Es sind Tiere, die immer verschrobener werden. Die philosophische Verschobenheit, der philosophische Schwindel wird da zu Fleisch. [...] Die Verschobenheit hat mich schon immer fasziniert. Sie ist eine Form der menschlichen Entfremdung. Und diese Tiere sind noch weit entfremdeter als wir. ... Diese Drehbewegung, diese Schwindelbewegung, diese Schraubenbewegung ist die Bewegung des Denkens.“

²⁰ See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

it has been removed from the new English translation without any comment (Fig. 7). It is as if one had eliminated the first movement of Beethoven's 5th symphony, the four notes played by the lower strings and clarinets.²¹

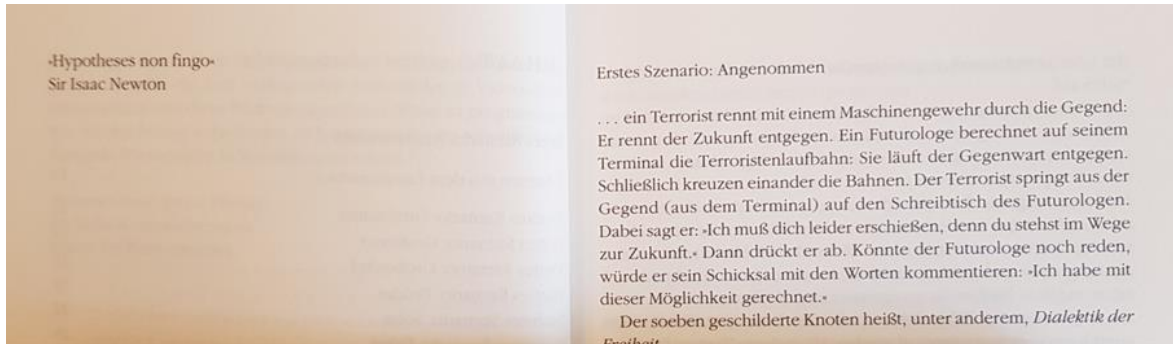


Figure 6: *Angenommen*

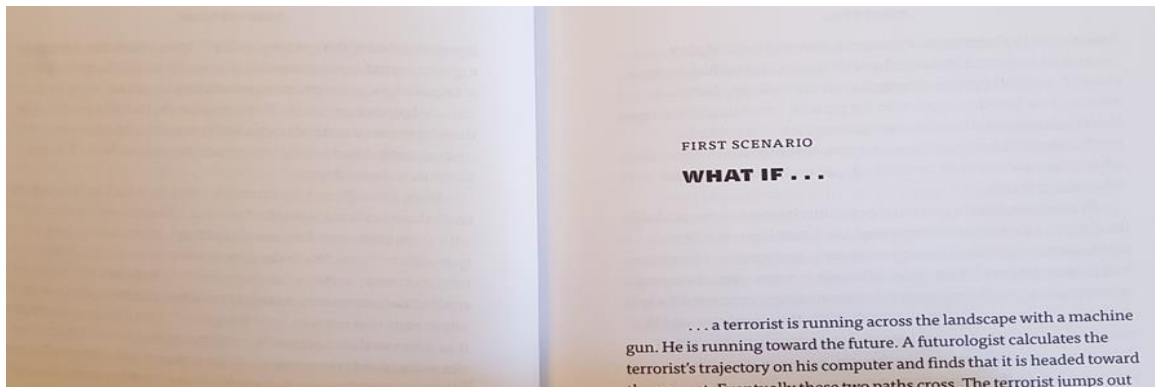


Figure 7: *What if?*

The original English title envisaged by Flusser, *Suppose that*, was an attempt on his part to preserve the German *Angenommen*. Surely a poor choice, but there was a reason for it. The verb *annehmen* allows for a series of illuminating puns that are based on the use of different prefixes: *an-*, *wahr-* and *vorweg-*. This is a specifically Flusserian writing strategy that can be found throughout his work (Guldin 2011). Furthermore, *annehmen* does not only mean ‘to suppose’ but also ‘to accept’. This implies that all our suppositions and hypotheses project scenarios and behavioural models that are ultimately up for collective acceptance. Our thinking creates a possible future that demands to be translated into reality. *Annehmen* is also linked to *wahrnehmen*, ‘to perceive’, but literally, ‘to take, to accept something as real’ (*wahr nehmen*), and to *vorwegnehmen*, ‘to anticipate’ (Flusser 1989: 7-8). In this sense, Flusser writes: “Die *angenommene* Zukunft kann *vorweggenommen* werden” (The accepted future can be anticipated) [emphasis added]. (Flusser 1989:8). Perception (*Wahrnehmung*) is associated with an illusionary moment: We perceive things and very often accept them ipso facto as real

²¹ See also footnote 6.

instead of questioning our way of looking at things. This sentence cannot be found in the English translation.

Instead of the title and subtitle Flusser had chosen for the German edition (Flusser 1989), *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* (A sequence, series of scenes) the English translation (Flusser 2022) opted for *What if?* and *Twenty-two Scenarios in Search of Images*. This alternative title and subtitle were most probably taken from an early English version of the first chapter (Fig. 8).²² The original subtitle of the chapter, *A series of scenarios in search of images*, was slightly changed by spelling out the overall number of scenarios. This is definitely a good choice from an editorial point of view, but it erases the philosophical implications of the German title discussed in the previous paragraph. Flusser must have been aware of this as he reverted to the earlier *Suppose that* in subsequent versions.

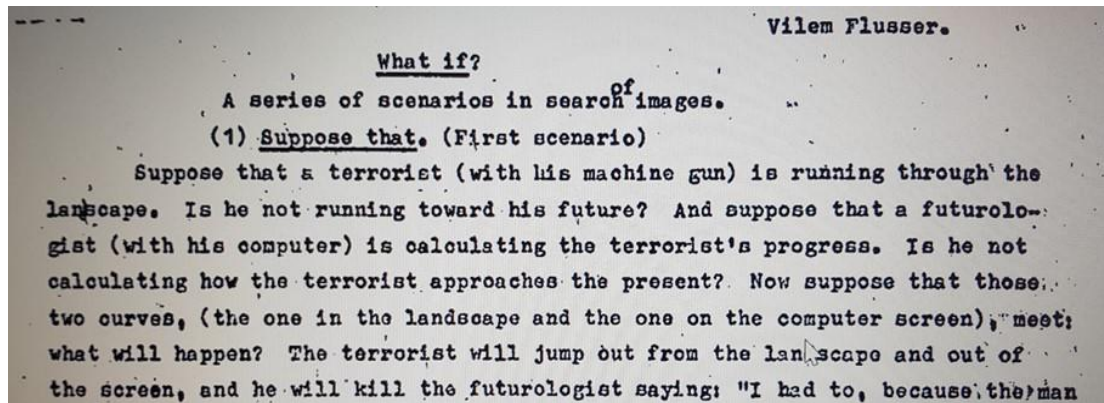


Figure 8

Even though the new English version is explicitly defined as a translation (Flusser 2022: iii), there is no mention of any original(s), not even in the afterword of the translator. *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* is briefly mentioned in the introduction (Flusser 2022: ix), but its relationship to the English translation is not clarified. This highly questionable editorial practice leaves the reader at a complete loss: If it is a translation what happened to the original? What was the original language? Is it a translation from the German, the French, or the Portuguese? Perhaps there is more than one original to be considered? Is it a recreation, rather than a translation? Or maybe it is both? The choice of the title and the subtitle suggest that the new English translation is a combination of at least two elements from two different originals: the head comes from an early English version of chapter one and the body, most probably in its entirety, from *Angenommen. Eine Szenenfolge* (Flusser 1989). But then, there may be more hidden surprises in the text itself.

Whatever the reasons for such an unusual translational practice, by choosing not to mention the original(s) a series of changes that go well beyond the interpretative freedom of the

²² See this issue of *Flusser Studies*.

translator became possible without any need to explain them. At this point one can ask oneself, why the translators did not simply put all their cards on the table explaining their choices and their reasons to the reader. It would have been an excellent chance to discuss Flusser's own uncomplicated way of dealing with originals in self-translation and the questionable notion of an untouchable self-contained original. But let me get back to the deleted epigraph.

Newton's "Hypotheses non fingo" appears in the essay "General Scholium" that was appended to the second edition of *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1713). In the context of Flusser's text, it stands for a specific view of science that opposes fact to fiction. Hypotheses should arise from facts and not from arbitrary or untried evidence. A philosopher should be prepared to abandon any speculation based on evidence that is not founded in reality. Flusser uses this quotation in a programmatic and ironical way: There is no clear-cut border between fact and fiction, scientific treatises, and philosophical fables, even if the two are different from each other. In this sense, he writes in the first scenario: "*Probability* is a chimera, its head is true, its tail a suggestion. Futurologists attempt to compel the head to eat the tail (*ouroboros*). Here, though, we will try to wag the tail." (Flusser 2022: 2). In the German original, Flusser uses a play on words that the reader of the English translation will look for in vain. "*Wahrscheinlichkeit* ist eine Chimäre, ihr Kopf ist wahr, ihr Schwanz scheinlich. Futurologen versuchen, den Kopf zum Fressen des Schwanzes zu bewegen (Uroboros). Hier hingegen wird zu wedeln versucht" (Flusser 1989: 9). The relationship of fact and fiction is captured in a hybrid metaphor combining an organic (head and tail) and an artificial point of view (chimera) (Flusser 1998: 146-148): The head comes first, is at the top and is true (*wahr*). The tail is at the end, at the bottom, and is apparent (*scheinlich*). Fact and fiction merge. However, fact comes before fiction, and truth before probability. Futurologists attempt to foresee the future by devouring the probable, that is, by subsuming and submitting the tail to the logic of the head. A gesture of appropriation. Flusser's texts go the other way by inverting the organic hierarchy of head and tail. The head (*wahr*) and the tail (*scheinlich*) belong to the same body of probability (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*). Flusser's texts give some leeway to the fictional side of truth without abandoning its dependence on it. The wagging tail suggests playfulness and a complex hither and thither movement in need of interpretation. Satire is a specific way of wagging the tail.

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