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**Genocide and a Tapeworm:**  
**Flusser's Post-Catastrophic Fabulism**

## 1. Introduction

Flusser received word of his family's interment in concentration camps in the 1940s, after he had escaped to Brazil without them. Thirty years later, reflecting on learning of their deaths, he remarked: "One<sup>1</sup> was already dead to one's parents, siblings, friends, and in turn, they were already dead to us. [...] When, much later, the news of their varying horrible deaths came, such news no longer touched us. The decision to escape had already condemned them to the realm of shadows and their mere murder by the Nazis was nothing but the mechanical execution of a project put in motion by one's escape." (2017, 38–39)

In the *What If?* scenario "War," Flusser wrote a short story from the perspective of a post-apocalyptic historian where he idly wonders why contemporary humanity feared genocide "as if mass death, that is death together with one's loved ones, would be worse than what was deemed necessary to experience the death of a loved one from cancer, a circulatory disorder, or asphyxiation" (2022, 56). The juxtaposition of these two descriptions of mass death, one personal, one speculative, can appear perverse. Would Flusser, as a refugee of the Holocaust, really speculate on the sentimental benefits of genocide?

Flusser's writing is full of similar remarks that approach horror with an almost grotesque degree of irony that defies easy interpretation. The present essay seeks to explicate Flusser's distinctive treatment of horror, catastrophe, and abjection. In his texts, especially *What If?*, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, *On Doubt*, and *Groundless*, we find a sophisticated set of equipment that both accepts the brutality of events like the Holocaust, the 1964 Brazilian coup, and the looming spectre of alienation via mass media, while simultaneously refusing to sanctify these events. As expressed in the prelude to *What If?*, Flusser's writing "[tries] to wag the tail" (2022, 3) of history and the imagination, carving out potentialities for engaging with horrific experiences. This essay will examine how Flusser accomplishes this through a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the early sections of *Groundless*, Flusser refers to himself with the impersonal third person "Man" in the German manuscript and "gente" in the Portuguese, even in intensely personal passages like the one cited here.

creative appropriation of the fable genre, demonstrating that Flusser's fabulist storytelling provides a unique model for thinking through horror.

Flusser's catastrophic thinking and writing places him in conversation with other post-Holocaust philosophers struggling to articulate a response to the events of mid-century Europe such as Hannah Arendt, Theodore Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. For Arendt, historicizing the Holocaust in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* could only be possible if we properly understand what is meant by "comprehension," ostensibly the central goal of any history: "Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be." (Arendt 1973, viii)

An honest reckoning with the Holocaust means pushing comprehension to its limits, challenging the temptation to turn towards tropes, common knowledge, or familiar patterns. Despite these challenges, Arendt writes from a "reckless optimism" that "it should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved" (*ibid*).

Benjamin and Adorno took more pessimistic positions. For Benjamin, the horrors of the First World War overwhelmed the narrative capacities of its participants. With its violent monstrosity and previously unimaginable industrious efficiency, combatants returned from the battlefield "not richer but poorer in communicable experience," lacking the words and tropes to meaningfully convey what they had witnessed (1999, 731). For Adorno, this practical and conceptual challenge took on an ethical tone when he famously declared, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1982, 34). The practical challenge identified by Arendt to avoid truisms becomes an almost unthinkable project in light of Benjamin and Adorno's allegations that irreparable cultural damage makes art and philosophy inarticulable or obscene.

Given these concerns, what possibilities exist for thinking and writing after catastrophe? Perhaps due to his geographic distance from the debates that have raged over Arendt, Benjamin, and Adorno's respective responses to the Holocaust or the World Wars, Flusser's response has been largely overlooked. To begin understanding how texts like *What If?* and *Vampyrotenhis Infernalis* offer their own unique mode of catastrophic writing, we must first understand how Flusser characterizes the post-catastrophic condition.

## 2. Thinking the Groundless and the Inarticulable

Traditional Phenomenology axiomatically takes comprehension as the inevitable *telos* of experience. Merleau-Ponty, for example, begins *The Phenomenology of Perception* with the fatalistic assertion: “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to sense, and there is nothing we can do or say that does not acquire a name in history” (2013, lxxxiii-lxxxiv). While comprehension may be slow to arrive, it is the fixed end point of the process of perception, the target at which all experiential processes aim. We can find similar assertions in early Heidegger for whom understanding constitutes a fundamental existential of Dasein<sup>2</sup> insofar as Dasein always already is thrown into the world with a “state of mind” that shapes experience. This Heideggerian sense of “understanding” may not be the everyday sense of the term insofar as Dasein can both understand and “merely keep it suppressed,” (Heidegger 1962, 182), but the assertion that all experiences are molded by unconscious preconceptions and affects is a fairly standard view, both in Phenomenology and broader audiences.

Despite his inspirations from European Phenomenology, Flusser’s work is consistently characterized by a skepticism of Phenomenology’s optimistic faith in comprehension. This is clearly illustrated both in his memoir *Groundless* and in his early monograph, *On Doubt*. In explaining the title of *Groundless*,<sup>3</sup> Flusser describes the term as a close synonym to “rootless,” “meaningless,” and “absurd” (2017, 19). Using “groundless” or “groundlessness” to describe the “climate” (2017, 20) of his experiences in Czechoslovakia and Brazil, Flusser calls attention to the inability of comprehension to fully capture or explain life. The problem is more than simply complexity, as if more sophisticated forms of thinking could eventually accomplish the goal of comprehension. Rather, Flusser argues that any effort to understand groundlessness would necessarily undermine the inescapable fact that said experiences *were* groundless. This means that, “The experience of groundlessness cannot be conveyed in literature, philosophy, and art without being falsified. Groundlessness can only be circumscribed in these forms, so that it may be partially grasped” (Flusser 2017, 21). The reality of groundlessness leads us directly back to the initial tension raised by Flusser’s dark joke about mass death: how can we faithfully attend to the incomprehensible without edifying it into something apparently reasonable?

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<sup>2</sup> In other words, comprehension is a basic component of human experience and existence. A full exploration of Heideggerian ontology and the relationship between Dasein and humanity is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Besides the philosophical implications of the term discussed here, *Groundless* is itself an ironic reappropriation of grotesque experiences. The original German term “*Bodenlos*” was used by Heidegger to describe Jews as lacking an ontological sense of worldliness and subsequently a significant degree of humanity (Wolin 2022). Whether Flusser was aware of Heidegger’s specific usage of the term is unknown. However, one can find a similar articulation of a relationship between Jewish identity and nomadism in *The Freedom of the Migrant* (2003), where Flusser defends a version of Judaism proud of its nomadic history in distinction to Zionism.

Turning to Flusser's earlier text, *On Doubt*, provides a more structured understanding of the problem. Here, Flusser asserts that every meaningful word refers to a concept and vice versa. This allows Flusser to write as if language and thinking are essentially synonymous (2014, 30). Similarly, the cognate Flusser uses for "groundless" is "the inarticulable," which despite its linguistic implication should be understood as referring to the unthinkable as well as the unspeakable.

In a writing style that will become more significant once we turn to fables, Flusser provides two illustrations of the process of thinking with regards to the inarticulable. The first turns to the image of a spider weaving a web. The second draws on an amoeba hunting with its pseudopods. Both of these animals and their modes of exploring the world serve to illustrate a dimension of human thinking. With the spider, Flusser aims to illustrate the use of tools to understand the world (2014, 37). For the spider, the "effective world," a term borrowed for Von Uexküll, is composed by the strands of its web. Only when an object or other organism disturbs a strand will it enter the world of the hunting spider. At this point, the situation sounds like a kind of spider Idealism, or the "biologically-biased Kantianism" of Vampyroteuthis (Flusser 2011, 61). However, unlike the Phenomenological belief that the entire world is comprehensible, the spider's web has significant holes through which the "unarticulated" can pass. Flusser imagines a cast of spider characters based on their disposition towards the web's holes: "The philosopher-spider affirms, negates or doubts the meta-web happenings, the poet-spider intuits them, the creator-spider endeavors to precipitate everything upon the web's threads in order to comprehend and devour everything, and the mystic-spider precipitates itself into the web's intervals in order to fuse itself with the whole and become free from the limitations of the web through a mystical union." (2014, 37)

Each of these spiders, the philosopher, the poet, the creator, and the mystic, recognize that there are things in its cosmos that will not be captured on its web. For all but the mystic, who perhaps signifies the optimism of Phenomenology as much as religious movements, the limits of comprehension can be taken up in a variety of different ways through speculation, intuition, or modifying the web itself. Regardless of the choice, the spider's predicament illustrates the relationship between thought (the web) and the inarticulable (objects that pass through or around it). Flusser closes the fable by laying bare its moral: just as the web cannot capture all, so too can the human intellect not capture the inarticulable: "Our effective, real, *wirklich* world exhausts itself through one of those many types of words. The rest is the chaotic, unarticulated world of becoming, which escapes through the weave of our web; a world that may perhaps be poetically or mystically intuited, but which is realizable only through words organized according to the rules of our web" (2014, 39).

The description of thinking as a web or net is a recurrent image in Flusser's work. Besides the fable of the spider in *On Doubt*, Flusser's courses on the philosophy of science "attempted to show how science, as well as art, philosophy, and religion cast a net of symbols around Man, a net that subsequently becomes 'true' because it mysteriously replaces reality" (2017, 274). In discussing the challenges of learning about Vampyroteuthis Infernalis due to their inaccessibility and their proclivity to commit suicide in captivity, Flusser writes: "It is difficult for us to catch Vampyroteuthis in nets for fishing as well as those for knowledge" (2011, 23). Later in the same text, he describes "concepts" as a form of "'models' [that] man stores in his memory to use them as traps in which he will grasp new objects, as yet unfelt" (Flusser 2011, 83). Finally, in the conclusion to *What If?* "There is a net in the black hole. I [Odysseus] call it *topos uranikos* (heaven, paradise). All surges of phenomena, everything that has ever happened, are captured in its loops and held for all times. We call these loops *eidiai* (forms). But the net is not apparent to those swimming in the surges because it is black. It does not appear. Nonetheless, there is one perspective from which it becomes visible. We call it *theoria*. The net comes into view through this theoretical perspective as an orderly network or web. We call this order *logic*. Therefore, the black hole emerges as an ordered network, invisible from the perspective of the swimmers, but that captures the disorderly surges of the visible, apparent web in its forms." (Flusser 2022, 80)

In each of these instances, theoretical reflection takes the form of a web, a net, or a trap. It catches some beings in its embrace and renders them knowable, but each of these figures also contains holes and gaps. Unlike other possibly similar philosophical allusions to networks or rhizomes found in Actor-Network Theory or Poststructuralism, Flusser's nets are less about what they join together than what they fail to contain. Like the philosopher-spider, we are left speculating as to what other entities exist that might avoid our webs.

But what if the inarticulate were to land on the web? This is the scenario illuminated by the second figure of the amoeba (Flusser 2014, 54-55). Unlike the spider creating an external web, an amoeba hunts by expanding its own body through pseudopods to surround and eventually digest its prey. The world of the amoeba is thus contained by its own outer membrane rather than a durable object like a web. Objects are brought in from the outside, but it is then the process of digestion that makes those objects part of the amoeba's body. Thus, while the spider was able to illuminate how language and concepts work like a kind of equipment for thinking, the amoeba amplifies the gap between an initial encounter with an idea, what Flusser calls "calling" in the sense of assigning a unique "proper name" to it, and comprehension or "conversation," the ability to make that idea part of an intellectual field of language (2014, 54).

However, not all objects that might be encompassed by a pseudopod can be digested. Flusser uses the example of a quartz crystal. An amoeba may consume, or “call,” a quartz crystal by enveloping it within a pseudopod, but it does not have the enzymes to break it down, i.e. to dissolve it into “conversation” (Flusser 2014, 55). The crystal endures as a proper name, undefinable in the sense used by G.E. Moore insofar as “it is simple and has no parts” (Moore 2004, 9). There is little more that the amoeba can do with the crystal besides holding it or ejecting it. The moral of the fable is a recognition of the incomprehensible: “Everything that is possible may be called. These appeals shall always result in proper names. We may say that everything can be apprehended by the intellect. However, not everything may be transformed into secondary words. Not everything can be utilized as a subject or an object of a meaningful phrase. Not everything can be assimilated to the mechanism of language. Not everything can be comprehended.” (2014, 55) The inability to digest the crystal does not imply its nonexistence. Rather, it serves as a reminder that reality is not always comprehensible.

The fables of the spider and the amoeba have helped to clarify the initial problematic. While *something* of the horrific may remain inaccessible, there are still possibilities for the webs of thinking and writing to apprehend, but what specifically do they reveal? In the following section, we will turn to *What If?* and *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* to examine the webs of fable as a specific form of thinking and writing.

### 3. Fables are not Metaphors

If *What If?* and *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* are to be approached as efforts to write about the groundless or the inarticulable, then what kind of web do they cast? The most immediately provocative element of both these texts is their playfulness and imagination, even to the point of being grotesque. After all, what kind of story would anthropomorphize an animal as a vehicle to address the Holocaust? Addressing this question will require two steps. First, we will need to clarify how Flusser’s approach to fables relates to other fabulists. Second, we must understand how these fables compare to other efforts of non-literal philosophy like mythology. In other words, what were the paths deliberately avoided? Once we have addressed both these questions, we will have a better understanding of why Flusser chose to write fables in the face of horror.

In the closing lines of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, Flusser characterizes his fabulist goals as “to contemplate this mirror [of Vampyroteuthis] with the aim of recognising ourselves in it, and with the aim of being able to alter oneself thanks to this recognition, is the purpose of every fable, including

this one” (2011, 126). In other words, fables use the typically non-human other to engage in a particular practice of the self. In this regard, Flusser closely follows a longstanding tradition of fabulist writing. From Aesop to the Enlightenment fables of Lessing and Mandeville, fables have been defined by two key traits. First, fables use non-human animals to supply their cast of characters. Second, fables all play an explicitly moral role, either advocating for or cautioning against a particular mode of conduct (Pérez Perozo 1946).

The relationship between the non-human animals that populate fables and the “moral of the story” has fascinated philosophers and literary scholars concerned with fables for centuries. It is tempting to see the animals as symbolic vehicles for life lessons. In this view, the writer selects an animal due to a metaphorical affiliation between the animal and the moral advocated by the story. However, Lessing vehemently objected to this view in his foundational *Abhandlungen über die Fabel*: “Does the fox merely *resemble* the strong and the wolf the strongest or *is* the former the strong and the latter the strongest. He *is* it” (qtd. in Cartwright and Le Poidevin 1991, 60, emphasis original). The contrast Lessing draws is between resemblance and identification. The key feature of the animals in fables is not that they resemble virtues in their ideal form, but rather that the animal empirically and concretely embodies the virtue or vice in question. The fact that the wolf is stronger than a fox is not merely a cultural trope or literary allusion, but a factual characteristic of the relationship between the two animals.<sup>4</sup>

The animals in fables instantiating particular virtues should thus not be confused with a naturalistic fallacy. Virtues are not made virtuous because they can be found among animals, but rather the animals provide a clear illustration of the dynamics of moral life. In other words, fables are not *arguments* for particular moral lessons so much as they are illustrations. Just as the animal is identified with the virtue, the fable itself is identified with its lesson rather than merely signifying it. As Berel Lang explains in his analysis of animals and morals in fables: “The writer does not tell us [the moral] – and the authorial premise evidently assumed by Aesop himself [...] is that to read the fable just is, in that act, also to identify the moral. Not because the moral cannot be separated from the narrative and not because the moral is ineffable, but because it *has* been said: that is, in the fable itself. No independent conclusion or inference would make either narrative or moral clearer or more compelling than they

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<sup>4</sup> Indigenous critics of the anthropological tradition of studying Indigenous cosmology and its inclusions of non-human animals make a similar argument against the metaphorical interpretation of fabulistic animals. For example, Cutcha Risling Baldy (2015) and Vanessa Watts (2013) argue that the Western anthropological tradition rushes to interpret mythological animals as mere metaphors rather than actual entities. Doing so discounts the empirical claims of Indigenous traditions and thus prematurely dismisses a more rigorous dialogue between Indigenous and settler communities.

are as disclosed together in the fable itself. To insist on the distinction between moral and fable might well, in fact, only confuse the reader. (Lang 1990, 204)

Fables do not use animals to advocate on behalf of particular lessons through animal characters. Rather, fables merge their non-human actors with the dynamics of ethical life to clarify its complexity.

Flusser's bestiary, ranging from the physically real *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis* to the cryptidic Abominable Snowman (2004a, 181) and the fantastical *Bibliophagus convictus* (2022, 47–49), portrays the same literal instantiation of characteristics seen in classic fables. Consider the account of *Taenia solium*, i.e. the pork tapeworm, in the ninth scenario of *What If?*, “Economic Miracle.” The tapeworm begins its eloquent introduction with a list of empirical facts about its species including its physiology and reproduction. Much like the similar opening chapters of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, this introduction serves to remind the reader that this is not simply a creature of Flusser's imagination but a real, concrete entity thriving in the world. The tapeworm then moves on to proclaim its own self-significance. Once again, Flusser's writing skirts the line between humor and seriousness. The tapeworm announces that “Economically speaking, I am completely satisfied. I am delivered from all such worries, because my body's skin (cuticle) only absorbs nutrients already digested by my host” (Flusser 2022, 33). Lest the reader think that the tapeworm is simply narcissistic, the fable concludes with a moral: “It is incumbent upon you humans to emulate me by overcoming the economy, thereby moving closer to the goal of life that I exemplify: parasitism” (Flusser 2022, 35). With its perfect efficiency and effortless subsistence, the tapeworm presents itself as the ideal of life that can, and ought, to be generalized to all animals including human beings.

Approaching the tapeworm as a fable allow us to understand the simultaneous irony and seriousness at play in *What If?* The tapeworm does not simply signify or provide a metaphor for parasitism, rather, it *is* a parasite. This much must be taken at face value. Likewise, in *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, the vampire squid does not merely represent alienation. It *is* alien, made clear in the repeated empirical descriptions of its habitat, evolutionary lineage, and physiology. However, with the tapeworm, is Flusser genuinely advocating for a parasitic mode of life? Here, the irony of the fable emerges. The tapeworm's efficiency provides an ironic escalation of the capitalist virtues. It undermines the Protestant work ethic by endlessly producing with minimum energy expended, outdoing any human expectation of productivity. The tapeworm is both beneath humanity and surpasses it. Again, none of these judgements are metaphorical. The tapeworm really *is* more efficient than human labourers by nearly any measure, and it is precisely this fact that makes the fable of the tapeworm such a compelling response to economic narratives.



By avoiding metaphor, Flusser's fables quite literally echo the horrors of the twentieth century. They are concretely, not figuratively, aftershocks of psychological and physical trauma. They provide a venue for Flusser to write, and thereby think, of the otherwise groundless and unthinkable. For example, the seventh scenario of *What If?*, "Grandchildren," contains a speculative future set after an unimaginable catastrophe. In a "Report to the Environmental Commission at the United Nations," the writer discusses gangs of children who have violently taken over a number of cities all around the world. Right away, it may be challenging to see this scenario as a fable. The characters of fables are traditionally non-human, and these "children" are, biologically speaking, *homo sapiens*. However, Flusser does not present the children as straightforwardly human. Much like the presentation of vampire squid and the tapeworm, Flusser begins with a physiological and detached assessment of the children's lives. The effect is to render them less clearly human. For example, "Physically, they are underdeveloped. Their IQ is close to the level of idiocy. They also carry numerous viruses, some of which have yet to be identified" (Flusser 2022, 25). This is once again the logic of fables. Flusser is not metaphorically presenting dehumanizing tropes. This story is a concrete instance of dehumanization, and thus the reader cannot see the children as entirely human.

This dehumanization, a product both of the writer's language and of the children's violence, leads to the assessment that the children surpass historical modes of understanding: "They live approximately at the same level as the Lower Paleolithic, except that they didn't, in fact, achieve that level from nature. Their habitat, metropolitan garbage, requires hunting methods different from those in the older Stone age. They do not represent a prehistoric phenomenon, but one that is posthistoric. To recognize them, we therefore need to create new categories that are different from those that are outdated. Only when such categories have become available will we be able to address the problem described here." (Flusser 2022, 26)

We might be reminded here of Arendt's retrospective look at the Holocaust, wherein familiar tropes and "common knowledge" hinder a full reckoning with the unprecedented horror that had befallen Europe. Similarly, Flusser imagines a scenario where the feral children attack culture so intensely that all the various webs of thought fail to understand them. They are the quartz crystal inside the amoeba: present, but impossible to digest. Until a new web can be fashioned, they will remain in this position.

However, the writer moves on and dismisses their own reservations. The next paragraph begins, "We have indeed tried to develop such categories. We concluded that we have to start with the second law of thermodynamics" (Flusser 2022, 26). What is significant for this fable is not how thermodynamics might explain the children, but rather the writer's eagerness to turn to an established,

recognized law to comprehend the incomprehensible. Does this effort succeed? After contemplating the ways that the children’s consumption of culture depends on their ancestors continuing to produce culture, and therefore an uneasy alliance via “symbiosis” emerging, the writer closes the fable: “In formulating this suggested resolution, we realize that such a symbiosis has always characterized the succession of generations. Since the dawn of time, older generations have produced culture in order to be tolerated by the youth. Accordingly, we can report to the Committee that nothing new has occurred since February” (Flusser 2022, 27).

The conclusion is striking and evidently false. Returning to the opening of the scenario, since February, millions of people and over a dozen cities had been destroyed by the children. To conclude that “nothing has occurred” implies an inability for the writer to acknowledge the profound changes to the world around them. The eagerness to explain the inexplicable through the familiar laws of thermodynamics produces a *reductio ad absurdum*, illustrating the limits of comprehension. However, Flusser neither needs to formally make this argument himself nor does he need to provide a metaphorical allusion to these limits. The scenario itself, as a fable, presents an instantiation of the inexplicable, a way for horror to peek out from behind the logic of writing without undermining it.

#### 4. Fables Versus Myths

Fables provide a unique mode of writing about horror, but to understand the merits of this approach, we must consider the alternatives that were available to Flusser, particularly mythology. Mythology has been a monumental feature of Brazilian philosophy, and Flusser’s decision to avoid writing in a mythological mode must be understood as intentional. Contrasting Flusser’s fables with Brazilian studies of mythology will clarify *What If?*’s contribution to Brazilian scholarship. Here, we will consider three representatives of mythological thinking. First, we will look at Claude Lévi-Strauss’ foundational study of mythology as the launching point of structural anthropology to see how mythology aspires to ground thinking. Second, we will look at Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s more recent analysis of mythology to see how the structuralist project lives on. Finally, we will turn to Flusser’s close friend Vicente Ferreira da Silva whose distinct philosophy of mythology provides a clear contrast with Flusser’s own fables. The central argument uniting Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro, and Ferreira da Silva is their conviction that mythology precedes or dissolves all distinctions.

Levi-Strauss was Flusser’s contemporary and a fellow Brazil-bound refugee of the Holocaust. As an anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss’ writing on mythology responds to an existing discourse in

comparative religion, represented by scholars like James Frazer and Émile Durkheim. In contrast to these earlier approaches, which treated myths as either an analogue of history (that European readers would typically dismiss as fanciful) or purely metaphorical articulations of a moral lesson, Lévi-Strauss attempted to understand mythology as specific in its choice of images, systematic in its global patterns, and meaningful in its imagination (1963, 208). His turn to structural linguistics provided him with the equipment to accomplish this task. By breaking myths into component “mythemes,” i.e. “bundles of relations” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 211) that link apparently distinct elements conceptually, temporally, or symbolically, Lévi-Strauss produces a meta-linguistic analysis of mythology that “provide[s] a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction” (1963, 211). Thus, even when his analysis appears pre-occupied by binaries, his structuralist approach to mythology presents binaries as merely a challenge to be swept aside by proper analysis.

This overcoming of contradiction has a specific relationship to the temporality of mythology, an element that plays a central role in Flusser’s own analysis of myth. While Flusser describes myth as necessarily cyclical, where everything is “set back into its proper place” (2004), Lévi-Strauss argues that myth is fundamentally “timeless.” He means the term in a technical sense. Myth ontologically structures time itself, and thus is not bound to beginnings, middles, and ends (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 209). In other words, myths are what gives time its meaning and not the other way around. While Lévi-Strauss and Flusser may disagree on the priority of time over myth, they arrive at a similar conclusion that mythology presents time and history as fundamentally homogenous. As Anand Pandian summarizes Lévi-Strauss’ work, mythology provides a “a temporal structure of anticipation and recognition” (2019, 55), a framework within which all events receive their order and place. For different reasons, such a summary applies to Flusser’s understanding of mythology as well.

Following in the Structuralist tradition, Viveiros de Castro also treats mythology as a distinct temporality that structures experience. For Viveiros de Castro, myth operates outside of time in a “precosmological condition” from which “the present state of things is actualized,” or made manifest (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 65). This mythic pre-cosmos is paradoxically both absolutely differentiated and unified. Human and non-human animals can both recognize themselves in the other, as evidenced by anthropomorphism and its reversals in myth, but the differences between humans and non-humans are also evident. As Viveiros de Castro states, “Far from evincing the primordial identification between humans and nonhumans commonly ascribed to it, this precosmos is traversed by an infinite difference (even if, or because, it is internal to each person or agent) contrary to the finite and external differences constituting the actual world’s species and qualities” (2014, 66).

While wary of identification, Viveiros de Castro's infinite differentiation might appear to produce a kind of ontological entropy, a point where the intensification of chaotic dynamics produces an overarching static morass. Everything is so incomparable to anything else that it all starts to look the same. Viveiros de Castro himself seems to arrive at this conclusion: "Myth proposes an ontological regime ordered by a fluent intensive difference bearing on each of the points of a heterogeneous continuum, where transformation is anterior to form, relations superior to terms, and intervals superior to being. Each mythic subject, being a pure virtuality, 'was already previously' where it 'would be next' and this is why it is not something actually determined" (2014, 67). By placing the stratum of myth prior to any actual entity, Viveiros de Castro's mythology can prioritize any potential transformation or relation that links any two entities over any form of concrete differentiation. In other words, our merely human perception of human beings as distinct from any other animal, such as a vampire squid, vanishes when considered from the pre-cosmological perspective of a "heterogenous continuum." Like Lévi-Strauss's mythology setting aside differences in time, Viveiros de Castro's mythology seems to set aside differences in kind.

This approach to difference fundamentally contrasts with Flusser's. In his analysis of the "'fable' told by biology," Flusser writes: "During this game [of evolution] the species of living beings distance themselves from each other, and each of them represent the unrealized virtualities of all the others. Each living being is like a monster that has had all of its virtualities amputated, apart from those that characterize it" (2011, 124). For Viveiros de Castro, every entity in mythology is a "pure virtuality," something that could become anything else. In Flusser's fables, these virtualities are cut off. Entities are strictly determined, even as they can evolve and change. In the quoted passage above, Flusser demonstrates an awareness that these alternative evolutionary possibilities *could have been*, but they were "amputated" and "unrealized." The result is a bestiary of characters ranging from the vampire squid to the feral children who are not only interpreted "as if" they were different from the human reader, but really *are* differentiated.

Flusser's prioritization of differentiation continues to contrast with the last approach to mythology we will consider here, that of his close friend Vicente Ferreira da Silva. Mythology played a central role in Ferreira da Silva's response to Heideggerian Phenomenology. Rather than treating poetry or language in the generic as the privileged forms of "discourse" (a term which, for Heidegger, refers to that which "makes manifest what one is 'talking about'" (1962, 56), Ferreira da Silva treats myth as a uniquely primordial form of discourse, providing "the original document of Being manifesting itself in prototypical-divine life" (2002, 375). Myths contain an "instituting force" (Ferreira da Silva 2002, 372) from which entities take their form, both concretely and figuratively. Therefore, like Lévi-

Strauss and Viveiros de Castro, Ferreira da Silva's mythology pre-empts the emergence of differentiation. By tracing European notions of a stable yet fractured cosmos back to its mythological roots, Ferreira da Silva hopes to accomplish two philosophical tasks. First, he responds to the Existentialist challenge of failing to find objective essences "at the level of things and historically variable eidetic forms" (Ferreira da Silva 2002, 371). This task is accomplished not through providing an immutable mythological foundation, but rather through the acknowledgment that mythology provides a dynamic story of change. Mythology thus provides Ferreira da Silva with his second key contribution, a process-based ontology whereby "our immovable and apparently inalterable reality is diluted by the creative and suggestive contact with the original poetic powers" (2002, 372). This primordial mythological stratum is in constant flux, but as with the other scholars of mythology, it does not produce a linear history. Rather, mythology takes place as "a primordial and founding process that conditions and institutes the manifest and that is at the base of all possibilities that emerge on the horizon of time" (Ferreira da Silva 2002, 378).

Mythology's ambitious ontological scope is precisely what separates Flusser's fables from Ferreira da Silva's mythology. Within Ferreira da Silva's mythology, everything attains its proper place. Even if the story of mythology may be rife with conflict, the writer or story-teller surveys a cosmos where everything is as it should be. This kind of broad scope and harmonious worldview repelled Flusser. Writing ostensibly for Ferreira da Silva after his death<sup>5</sup> Flusser notes, "Vincente theorises the existential and generalises the concrete, therefore putting forth a worldview that is entirely false" (2017, 140). Flusser here expresses the same challenge expressed at the outset of *Groundless*. How can a logical or even mythological discourse address the inarticulable without disregarding that limit? Ferreira da Silva's vice, according to Flusser, was pride. Not so much in the self, but in the capability of thought, via mythology, to supersede the concrete. As Flusser explains the contrast: "For Vincente, to challenge what is given meant to go in search of life (orgy and feast), while for us [Flusser], challenging what is given was tantamount to *hubris*, a form of beautiful but sinful heroism, such that it was imperative not to *challenge* what is given, but to go *with* what is given, so as to modify it" (2017, 148, emphasis original). The relative humility of Flusser's fables, highlighted by their divergence from mythology, is what allows them to address horror so effectively. Fables do not treat horror as something that can be captured by the webs of writing, but rather write in a mode where the horror concretely speaks through the text. It is noteworthy that Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro, and Ferreira da Silva all treat mythology as a form of primordial *logos*, a logic that provides a foundational structure for all forms of thinking.

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<sup>5</sup> This text, written as a "dialogue" for Ferreira da Silva in *Groundless*, may have ended Flusser's friendship with Vincente's wife, Dora (2017, 13).

Flusser's fables, while superficially similar through their use of non-human characters, never aspire to this goal. This lack of ambition is not due to a lack of imagination, but rather, as we can see in Flusser's direct confrontation with Ferreira da Silva, is an intentional goal of his fabulist writing.

## 5. Conclusion: Fabulist Thinking for the End of the World

Now equipped with an understanding of fables, let us return to the scenario of *What If?* that launched this article. The fifteenth scenario, titled "War," (2022, 55–57) does not appear to be a typical fable. There are no clearly illustrated characters, let alone non-human ones. The timeframe of the story is a confounding retrospective look back at future predictions. The writer of the text is some unknown number of years in the future, addressing predictions from the 1980s. The writer is perplexed that the "many voices" of the 1980s would find their future predictions of mass death, climate change, devastation, structural collapse, and radioactive mutation so bleak. For example, why were "giant insects, meat-eating plants, and disfigured idiots" so upsetting when the people of the 1980s were well aware of "the mechanism of natural selection" and should not have been concerned about "the rich branching of ecosystems today, their variety and abundance, and certainly not the refinement of the human being" (Flusser 2022, 57). It is in this context that the writer issued the seemingly grotesque description of "mass death" as "death together with all one's loved ones" being preferable to "natural death" (Flusser 2022, 56).

While aesthetically distinct from classic examples of fables, the logic of the story is fabulist. This is not a metaphorical discussion of catastrophe. The writer's considerations on war and death are unusual, but not absurd. Insofar as a contemporary reader might find their value judgements inhumane, we need only be reminded of the dehumanization of the feral children in the seventh scenario. The reader is not asked to agree with the narrator any more than they might admire a tapeworm. Instead, the grotesqueness of the description serves as its own fabulist illustration of the moral collapse brought about by catastrophe. The narrator seems to observe this himself, but once again judges the situation idiosyncratically: "The contradiction between the correctly calculated prediction of the future and the inadequately intuited foresight can be traced back to an insufficiently developed theory of catastrophes. *Catastrophe* meant a point on a projected curve from where it was impossible to calculate the curve's future trajectory – this much was clear even then. However, they considered this point to be dangerous,

not the emergence of something new. Because everything unknown is terrible, they feared catastrophe – instead of inducing them intentionally like we do.” (Flusser 2022, 57)

The “theory of catastrophes,” lacking in the 1980s but well-learned by this future observer, is precisely what Flusser himself presents in his fables. It is also what links Flusser’s grotesque writing in *What If?* to his concrete experiences of the Holocaust. The future writer’s description of the horrors of the twenty first century are not metaphorical. They are a direct response to the looming issues of climate change and massive conflicts.

As we consider the central role that horror and conflict play in many of Flusser’s fables, we should remember that Flusser’s characters are not always meant to be sympathetic. This is especially clear with the vampire squid. As Flusser presents the moral of his fable, he clarifies for the reader that the vampire squid’s characteristics are horrific: “Ultimately, Vampyroteuthis emerges: three in the South China Sea, or as the ‘death of God’ of theological texts, or in the form of programmed cybernetic thought, or in the form of propositional calculus, or even in the murderous romanticism such as the ‘Nazism’ of psychosociology. And that is to mention only but a few examples chosen *ad hoc*. In all of these abysses (and in others), his unexpected emergence has a bomb-like effect. When Vampyroteuthis emerges, he explodes.” (2011, 120)

With his protagonist revealed to be a violent explosion materialized, what should the reader make of an entire book dedicated to coming to know this creature? Can Vampyroteuthis be tamed by the nets woven by writing and science? Could something “deeper” like mythology accomplish the task? No, Flusser replies. Vampyroteuthis must be left outside these nets: “It has long been believed, most of all during the Enlightenment, that it is only necessary to de-pressurise Vampyroteuthis in order to make him harmless and ‘civilised’. What must be done, according to this opinion, is to bring him up bit-by-bit with all the technical caution available to habituate him bit-by-bit to the atmospheric conditions in the realm of the day. [...] Unfortunately, our times and the recent past provide undeniable proof that such hope is false and that every attempt of the Enlightenment and its successors was shipwrecked, that Vampyroteuthis could not be educated or humanised, and that despite every tolerance, he is intolerable.” (Flusser 2011, 121)

After all the story telling, Vampyroteuthis remains intolerable. Its horrors may not be contained by science, mythology, or philosophy. Through fables, Flusser allows for a glimpse of its form, and appreciation of its strangeness, but unlike his contemporaries he never seeks to master it through text. The reader comes out of the text with some information, but a larger appreciation for the inexplicability of the alien.

By providing an avenue for horror to emerge without presuming to understand it, Flusser's fabulist writing resolves the tension posed by writers like Arendt, Adorno, and Benjamin. How can we let the inexplicable appear in writing and thinking without distorting it and without abandoning a moral responsibility to face it directly? Flusser's answer is to insist on humility, limits, and a plentiful imagination that allows these experiences to impact us viscerally.

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