

Rainer Guldin

*On Spiders, Amoebas, Vampire Squids and Worms:
Vilém Flusser's Metaphors of Devoration and Digestion*

“Não podemos contentar-nos com a gula porque ela nos conduz à destruição de nós mesmos. [...] Urge, portanto, uma ‘filosofia da gula’. Urge uma apreciação ética, estética e principalmente existencial da gula.”

Vilém Flusser, *Da Gula*

Vilém Flusser's texts make frequent use of the metaphors of swallowing, devouring, ingesting, consuming, eating, digesting and evacuating. Numerous examples in different guises can be found throughout his work. One of the origins for this image-cluster can be found in the Brazilian idea of cultural anthropophagy as it was put forward by Oswald de Andrade in his influential *Manifesto Antropófago* first published in 1928 (see also Echeto / Sartori 2007). As Susanne Klengel (2009: 125) has recently shown, Flusser most probably got to know this text in the course of the 1960ies through his contacts with Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and other Brazilian writers of Concrete Poetry who were strongly influenced by the movement of *Tropicalismo* practicing a reevaluation of the concept of anthropophagy from a cultural point of view (see also Reinaldo 2010).

In *Brasilianische Philosophie – Brazilian Philosophy* – a text published in 1970 in the *Staden-Jahrbuch*, Flusser connects the work of Oswald de Andrade directly with the idea of philosophical anthropophagy (Flusser 1970: 134). In this context Flusser makes use of the two German words *einverleiben* and *überwinden* – incorporate and overcome – to describe the way one would have to deal in the future with de Andrade's philosophical contribution, that is, feeding on the idea of cultural cannibalism itself in order to digest and assimilate it. Digestion is seen here as an organic and mental process articulated in two successive and complementary steps: *Einverleiben* implies the idea that the notion, after having been dismembered and decomposed, is synthetically and organically integrated into an already existing system of thought; *überwinden*, on the other hand, suggests that by doing this the idea is always critically and above all creatively transformed. *Einverleiben* without *überwinden* is an incomplete, indigestive form of absorption that can lead to an upset stomach. These two crucial steps have also to be considered when dealing with Oswald de Andrade's idea of cannibalism. Devoration and digestion, therefore, imply for Vilém Flusser always an ethical stance: responsibility for what we feed on and the way we deal with it.

Flusser always approaches the idea of anthropophagy from a double perspective: thinking, reading, writing and translating are different ways of devouring and digesting the world, but all these processes can fold back on themselves and in turn be devoured and digested. Devoration, thus, always devours itself, the way the *Ouroboros* swallows its own tail. There are forms of devoration and meta-devoration. But there is more to it: for Flusser devoration cannot do without self-devoration the same way translation cannot do without re-translation, science and technology without philosophy, or thought without reflection. In fact, contrary to Brazilian cannibalism, Flusser describes the concept of devoration as an inevitable, but highly problematic, if not a fundamentally destructive way to interact with the world: the object is violently appropriated, torn to pieces or sucked to the marrow and left behind as an empty carcass. In many instances Flusser criticizes this problematic dimension of the act of devoration asking for a corrective, which ironically enough is a form of self-devoration. Through self-devoration not only that which has been devoured and digested but the very act of devouring itself can be critically scrutinized and its aggressive nature ultimately kept in check. With Vilém Flusser, and this could be seen as his particular contribution to the discussion of cannibalism, anthropophagy becomes autophagy and cannibalism self-cannibalism (Guldin 2008b).

In his essay *Thought and Reflection* (Flusser 2005)¹ Flusser applies this double principle to the very way thinking operates within a modern Western context, distinguishing between science and technology on the one hand and philosophy on the other: „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. The term ‘reflection’ shows where this kind of thought moves to, namely into the direction opposite to advancing thought. The German term “Nachdenken”, (which means ‘to think behind or after’) shows how this kind of thought works, namely as a check on thinking. And finally the Czech term ‘rozmysleni’, (which means ‘analytical thinking’) shows the result of this kind of thought, namely thought dismembered. Reflection is therefore the inverse motion of thought, wherein thought is being controlled and decomposed into its elements. The method of reflection, which is the devouring of thought by itself, is philosophy. Philosophy is therefore exactly the contrary of science and technology.“ (Flusser 2005: 3)

In *Teoría da tradução como teoría de conhecimento* Vilém Flusser uses the metaphor to describe the relationship between different scientific discourses. Each discourse devours the other interpreting it from its own point of view. Devoration is, thus, also a theoretical will to power, a reductionist affirmation of supremacy. „Assim descobri, num choque de surpresa e admiração, que cada

¹ For the Portuguese version see Flusser 2002: 37-46.

ciência diz respeito a uma ‘realidade’ diferente, e que cada uma desse ‘realidades’ reclama para si exclusividade e devora todas as demais. Perplexa ante o espectáculo nojento das ‘realidades’ que se devoram mutuamente, a minha fé na ‘realidade’ ruiu.“ (Flusser 1963)

Another new element introduced by Flusser is the idea of successive multiple forms of devoration that he deduced from his own multilingual writing practice moving from language to language, translating and re-translating each text in a different language. In the course of multiple translation processes, a text – the meta-code – swallows and digests another text – the object-code – that is in turn feeding on a text it has previously ingested. The final version will end up having the structure of a Russian doll, each doll containing all the previous ones, with the difference that they would all be dissimilar. In the case of retranslation, the structure would get even more complicated because a particular version could contain an earlier version of itself contained within still another version. In such a case “the original relationship of the two codes is reversed: the object-code becomes now a meta-code. In other words: after the French code has swallowed part of the [...] English one, he is in turn swallowed by the English code [...] so to speak with the English in his belly.” (Flusser 1996: 343)²

Flusser’s method of systematic self-translation as a way of creating new texts always leads back on to itself, chewing what has already been chewed, thus negating any linear development. Flusser comments on this self-deprecatingly, in a letter to his friend Alex Bloch, using yet another aspect of the feeding-metaphor: “[...] as you once put it mercilessly yourself: licking one’s own vomit.” (2000: 199)³ The simple, hierarchical, unilateral and linear relationship of original and translation disappears behind a complex reversible circular mode of interaction. This regressive circular motion opposed to a progressive linear line of development, is not only relevant for the relationship between science and philosophy, as well as thought and reflection, it also reappears in a speech Flusser held on the 23rd November 1991 where he used the metaphor of the worm to describe the functioning of our modern post-industrial information society. I will come back to this text at the end of my paper.

In the early 1970ies Flusser wrote a book on Brazil, *Brasilien oder die Suche nach dem neuen Menschen* – Brazil: looking for the new man. In the section dealing with the project of a Brazilian language still to come, suggesting by analogy the shape of a new Brazilian culture, Fusser makes

² “[...] dreht sich das ursprüngliche Verhältnis der beiden Codes um; der Objektcode wird zum Metacode. Mit anderen Worten: Nachdem der französische Code einen Teil [...] des englischen verschluckt hat, wird er seinerseits vom englischen verschluckt, [...] sozusagen mit dem englischen im Bauch.” [translation by the author RG] A frequent image Flusser makes use of is that of having something *in the belly*. „Of course I definitely do have Heidegger ‘in my belly’. But I cannot stand him, because I cannot stand myself.”(Flusser 1996c: 151) [“Ich habe Heidegger natürlich völlig ‚im Bauch‘. Aber ich kann ihn nicht vertragen. Weil ich mich nicht vertragen kann.“] [translation by the author RG]

³ “[...] wie Sie es einmal mitleidlos sagten: das eigene Kotzen lecken.” [translation by the author RG]

use of the metaphor of multiple successive digestions re-interpreting it in a cultural sense. The Brazilian language is made up of a series of African, Indian, Asian and European influences that it has ingested in the course of its history, and forms three specific strands interacting with each other: the language of the archaic interior, as well as the proletarian and bourgeois variants. Each group in turn feeds on the language, passing it on to the next group, after having chewed and digested it. “Those who contribute to this digestive process [...] are truly seized by a rapture of language manipulation [...] (Flusser 1994a: 150).⁴ We will again come across this specific view of digestion as a collective act of communication in a text Flusser wrote in the early 1980ies about an insect literally feeding on printed matter.

In *Da Gula* also published in 1963 Flusser operates a distinction between hunger and gluttony arguing that this difference is typical for our Western society. We attempt to kill hunger by eating, but the more we eat the hungrier we become. In the orient, however, hunger is stopped by fasting. In Flusser’s understanding gluttony is more than just an individual or theoretical problem. It is a fundamental metaphor for the workings of the progress-oriented industrialized societies of Western modernity. Colonial expansion, the conquest of nature, urbanization and industrialization are all seen as different forms of devoration, in the course of which the world is appropriated but unfortunately also destroyed. In the 21st century the collateral effects of this constantly accelerating diabolical⁵ mechanism that drives our culture have become more and more apparent. Devoration and digestion are not a problem in themselves. All organic life on earth feeds on its surroundings. With the human species, however, it has clearly gone out of hand. We need, therefore, an aesthetic, ethical and existential theory of consumption to deal with its deleterious consequences. “O homem [...] devora tudo. Devora a superfície e as entranhas da terra. Devora, psicologicamente, as suas próprias entranhas. Devora, hegelianamente, o seu próprio passado. Devora, pela ciência, o seu próprio futuro. Devora, pelo espírito, não somente tudo o que é, mas ainda tudo que é possível. A sua gula é insaciável. Quanto mais devora, tanto mais e mais depressa precisa devorar. Esse devorar insaciável e geometricamente acelerado é chamado de ‘progresso’. [...] A gula humana transforma a natureza progressivamente no excremento chamado ‘parque industrial’. Mas a gula não pára neste ponto. Volta-se contra o próprio parque industrial para devorá-lo.” Everything we produce can be considered a form of excrement. Human relationships turn into institutions. Even the soul is evacuated in form of psychological tests. In the end we will be eaten by our own excrements. “Doravante o homem servirá de alimento aos

⁴ “Die an diesem Verdauungsprozeß mitarbeiten – und das tut eigentlich jeder, der schreibt und publiziert – werden von einem wahren Taumel der Sprachmanipulation ergriffen [...]”[translation by the author RG]

⁵ For Flusser the history of the West can be described as a diabolical affair. The devil himself remains a profoundly ambivalent figure striving for control and independence and destroying the world in the process.

seus próprios excrementos. Ele será devorado por seus instrumentos, suas instituições, suas doutrinas e seus testes.” (ibidem).

Devoration and self-devoration are used by Flusser not only to explain the difference between science and philosophy, to describe processes of translation and re-translation and to interpret cultural processes but also to formulate a theory of media evolution, leading in translational steps from picture to text to technical image (Guldin 2005: 223-246 and 2010: 164-194). The Brazilian communication theorist Norval Baitello Junior who read Flusser’s work from an anthropophagic point of view pursued this fundamental theme in a series of highly illuminating texts (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2010), exploring systematically and in detail the use Flusser makes of the cannibalistic metaphor to explain the workings of communication and culture, as well as the unfolding of history and post-history. Flusser’s historical interpretation of media evolution relies heavily on the idea: Images are torn to pieces and ingested by texts which in turn are consumed by technical images. Images and texts feed on each other and are contained in each other like the different languages in a multiple translation process. In fact, technical images contain texts that have previously fed on images. Post-history folds back on history – which contains pre-history in its belly – devouring it in the process. By turning into post-history history starts feeding on itself.

As the aspects mentioned so far have already been explored in depth I would like to turn in this paper to two other, equally significant aspects of Flusser’s use of the metaphor of devoration and digestion, in an attempt to expand the field of its applications and to explore its different argumentative functions. Let me begin with the symbolical importance of digestive processes within alchemy.

In *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* first published in 1987 there is a short passage at the very beginning in which Flusser deals with the feeding apparatus of mollusks. The *radula* is an anatomical structure comparable to a tongue. It is a finely toothed, chitinous ribbon, used for scraping or cutting food before it enters the esophagus. As Flusser points out, up to 75.000 movable chitinous teeth cover the surface of the *radula* amounting to a weapon more terrible and deadly than the tooth of a tiger or the human hand. These movable teeth can not only be found on the tongue but continue well into the body of the animal, so that even the esophagus helps crushing the food before it reaches the belly. “With some mollusks, especially gastropods and cephalopods, the stomach develops a crystal organ in the form of a spiral [...] the ‘coecum’ secreting enzymes and remindful in its form and function of the alchemist’s retort used for the precipita-

tion of gold.”(Flusser 1993: 16)⁶ The Vampyrotheuthis, thus, possesses a digestive organ that reproduces in its very shape the form of subsequent processes of transformation: a spiral, revolving on itself.

Siegfried Zielinski (2010: 23) has pointed to the significance of theories from the early modern age for Flusser’s work in general but also to the importance of alchemistic metaphors for his notion of projection – in German *Entwerfen* – a fundamental concept of his later works, especially the unfinished, *Vom Subjekt zum Projekt* – From Subject to Project (Flusser 1994b). In Flusser’s narrative of media evolution which leads man further and further away from the concrete world into an ever growing abstraction⁷ – the last stage corresponding to the medium of the technical image – is the presupposition for a radical change. It is only in the present that man can finally overcome his status as mere subject of an object and turn into a liberating project. Interestingly enough, alchemist *proiectio* is also the highest state of transmutation reached by gross matter after it has gone through a series of refining and purifying stages. Zielinski’s remark holds true also for Flusser’s practice of translation and his use of the metaphor of digesting. As we have already seen, devoration, digestion and translation belong in Flusser’s work to the same metaphor-cluster. Writing through multiple translations can, in fact, also be viewed as an alchemical process of refinement and purification, in which words are slowly cooked and decomposed in order for the ultimate text – synthesizing all previous ones – to come into being.

In his essay *Le mythe de la digestion* Bachelard points to the vicinity of digestion and cooking. “[...] la digestion est une lente et douce cuisson, donc toute cuisson prolongée est une digestion.” (Bachelard 1978: 172-3) In the practice of the alchemists the different substances employed feed on each other. Bachelard speaks of a reciprocal absorption (ibidem: 178) of the different substances and points to the aggressiveness involved in the alchemical digestive process. “Les corrosives ordinaires, affamés comme ils sont, cherchent à dévorer les métaux, pour assouvir leur faim, ils les attaquent avec furie.” (ibidem: 175) Digestion is after all a destructive, analytical act in which the ingested material is decomposed and dismembered before it can be assimilated.

Paracelsus speaks of the *archeus*, a principle presiding over the growth and continuation of all living beings, as the inner alchemist. It is active in the process of digestion separating useful constituent parts of food from dispensable ones. Not everything that is digested is also assimilated. When we deal with ideas, the digestive process absorbs some but discards others. Some notions, as Flusser has shown in his description of the amoeba, are stocked, even if they are basically indi-

⁶ „Bei einigen Mollusca, bei den Gatsropoda und den Cephalopoda, entwickelt der Magen ein spiralisches Kristallorgan [...] das ‘coecum’, das Enzyme ausscheidet und in Struktur und Funktion an die goldpräzipitierenden Retorten der Alchemisten erinnert.“ [translation by the author RG]

⁷ The ladder of abstraction, as Baitello Junior (2007) calls it, can be compared to the biblical Ladder of Jacob leading into heaven (compare Guldin 2008a).

gestible. I will come to this point in due time. In alchemy the furnace used to provide heat for alchemical digestion, the *athanor*, is a self-feeding furnace, designed to maintain a uniform temperature similar to the one within the stomach allowing the substances to be slowly cooked. It is within the body of the retort that through slow concoction raw material is dismembered and decomposed and finally transformed in the most noble of metals. To this physical procedure of successive forms of purification and distillation corresponds an analogous development in the alchemist himself who strives to refine and transmute himself in the process. Flusser would probably speak here of the subject's transformation into a liberating project.

The second aspect I would like to explore here more broadly is Flusser's use of the metaphors of devoration and digestion in connection with his philosophical fables. These are texts mostly staging a chimerical hybrid animal, half-way between nature and artifice. Flusser repeatedly and insistently dealt with the metaphors of devoration and digestion in connection with these imaginary creatures, always exploring new dimensions of the phenomenon. From the early 1960ies to the late 1980ies he described artificial cows, philosophical spiders, doubtful amoebas, a ventriloquist tapeworm, a bee-like insect feeding on printed matter, an infernal vampire squid, cannibalistically feeding on the members of his own species, and a gigantic worm devouring the world.

Gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins, plays also a central role in Flusser's *Die Geschichte des Teufels* – A history of the devil – in which the different sins are listed according to an inner principle of evolution.⁸ Positioned between wrath and greed, gluttony represents the devil as a manufacturer (*Erzeuger*). Gluttony is linked to technical history and its attempt to fill in the gap created by death (*die Lücke des Todes stopfen*) by manufacturing objects and instruments (*Hinstellen und Herstellen von Objekten*). The spirit of gluttony is a revolt against instinct. We do not want to follow our instinctual drives anymore, writes Flusser, we want to make the real more real, by swallowing and crushing it with our teeth, by digesting and excreting it. We want to ingest the world with our spirit and slowly digest it into symbols. Swallowing the reality that hinders and hedges us in from all sides is an attempt to control and subjugate it. “[...] after a metaphysical process of digestion” the world is secreted again as an “obedient excrement of unformed matter. In this digested and secreted world our spirit, so we hope, is free, because after all it is the creator and master of these objects in the second degree.” (Flusser 1996a: 107)⁹

⁸ I am quoting here from an unpublished text explaining the structure of *Historia do diabo* sent to Felix Philipp Ingold on the 8th February 1983 together with an explanatory letter in which Flusser stresses the thematic link between the book and *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*.

⁹ „[...] nach einem metaphysischen Verdauungsprozeß als gehorsames Exkrement von ungeformtem Zeug ausgeschieden werden. In dieser verdauten und ausgeschiedenen Welt ist unser Geist, so hoffen wir, frei, denn er ist ja der Herr und Schöpfer dieser Dinge zweiten Grades.“ [translation by the author RG]

Bachelard develops this possessive dimension of the metaphor of feeding from a psychological point of view. “La digestion correspond en effet à une prise de possession d’une évidence sans pareille, d’une sûreté inattaquable. [...] La faim est donc le naturel besoin de posséder l’aliment solide, durable, intégrale, assimilable [...]. Cette possession fait l’objet de tout un système de valorisation. L’aliment solide et consistant a une prime immédiate.” (Bachelard 1978: 169-170) The stomach is the organ charged with the slow and systematic grinding of food: “meule philosophique et animée qui broie sans bruits, qui fond sans feu, qui dissout sans corrosion; et tout cela par une force aussi surprenante qu’elle est simple et douce [...] elle agit sans éclat, elle opère sans violence, elle remue sans douleur.” (ibidem: 171-2) Drinking cannot be compared to eating. The things we want to get our teeth on have to be solid. Liquid aliments won’t do. The stomach has a primordial role in feeding and digesting. Its functions are prefigured by what goes on in our mouth. Incisors and canines start tearing at fibers and muscles, saliva is secreted and the pre-molars and molars begin crushing and triturating. This definitely holds true for human beings, but feeding as a fundamental principle of organic life, as Flusser repeatedly shows in his different narratives about worms, amoebas and spiders, can assume the most different forms. It is by comparing these different forms that we can better understand our own feeding and digesting habits and the metaphorical significance they have for our appropriation of the world. Instead of teeth, whales have baleen plates, sieve-like devices made of keratin, edged with hairy plates, which they use to filter small particles of food – krill, plankton and small fish – out of the enormous quantities of sea-water they swallow every day.

The *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, another voracious creature endlessly aspiring and devouring its surroundings, is a centripetal vortex; it does not have any hands but tentacles which it originally used to fan a liquid stream of food towards and into its mouth (Flusser 1993: 36). It carries its head below its erect belly and is bent on producing new information, rather than informed objects. Our way to perceive and interact with the world is fundamentally active: we meet a standing world of objects to be manipulated. The *Vampyroteuthis*’ perceptivity, on the other hand, is passionate, passive and impressionistic. It does not meet and confront itself with problems standing in its way. In this sense it is not a spider moving along the strands of its net, occasionally coming across flies. The *Vampyroteuthis* awaits a fluid world endlessly surging towards it; it avidly sucks in reality like a vampire the blood of its victims. From its point of view culture implies a fundamental discrimination between digestible and indigestible bits, that is, a selective criticism of impressions. By using the *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* and other animals real or chimerical as mirrors for the human being, even on a physiological level, Flusser suggests that our cultural attitudes, our instruments and symbolic systems are basically linked to our organic set up as humans and mammals.

In *A vaca – The cow* – a text published as early as 1961¹⁰, but very much to the point considering the present success of bio-genetic manipulations and the creation of forms of artificial intelligence, Flusser describes the construction of a gigantic cow. Ironically enough, the first specimen is not conceived and built in the West, but in the orient, in India. In his experiments with the zebu, the *bos primigenius indicus*, also known as humped cattle, Tchandra Prananda, professor of biology, succeeded in eliminating all genes apart from those responsible for the processes of digestion. The digestive cow Kali is a “superintestino” (Flusser 1961), an artificial mutation that looks like a Zeppelin without a skeleton. It lies in the oriental outskirts of Bombay, in a hangar bigger than Saint Peter’s cathedral in Rome.¹¹ The beast does not have any respiratory organs and “o sistema nervoso se limita a funções reguladoras da digestão. [...] Basicamente ‘Kali’ consiste de uma boca em forma de portão, munida de dentes colossais, de um sistema digestivo gigantesco (os intestinos medem 758 km), e de uberes de dimensões proporcionais. [...] os dentes trituram e os intestinos se movimentam peristalticamente 24 horas por dia.” (ibidem) In the West the experiment has met with enthusiastic reception. Prof. Lévy-Dupont of the Sorbonne in Paris has declared that Kali represents a new era in the history of humankind. More cows are enthusiastically built all around the world, in order to ensure enough food production for humanity at large. But the dream turns into a nightmare. The diabolical unstoppable logic of endless increase inherent in the act of devoration takes its toll. The cows need more and more food and not getting enough start feeding on the workers responsible for alimending them. But they will not stop here and go on to devour the very people that built it.

Another creature whose feeding habits Flusser explored in the 1960ies, this time from a more existential and philosophical point of view, is the spider. Modern and contemporary philosophy, so Flusser, explaining his metaphorical method of investigation, has introduced a series of new concepts in an attempt to explain the world in terms that are less abstract than those used by previous philosophical approaches. Unfortunately these very terms have become as abstract as the earlier ones. There is, however, a way to visualize the specific content of this new terminology, that appeals to our imagination: The philosophical tale of the spider and its net, “modelo para a construção de edifícios mentais.” (Flusser, *Da mosca e da aranha*: 1)¹² The world is as spider’s net whose threads have been secreted by the spider itself. They determine the very way it experiences the world. „Como se apresentará o mundo deste seu ponto de vista aranhesco? Como uma serie de acontecimentos que se dão nos fios de sua teia. Os fios da teia são o lugar no qual o mundo se dá.“ (ibidem: 1) In this extremely simplified ontology there are spiders and nets.

¹⁰ See also Flusser 1989: 53-8.

¹¹ Kali is the Hindu goddess of eternal energy, time and change. The name itself means black and death. She is generally considered dark and violent, an incarnation of annihilation. In Flusser’s text Kali basically stands for a new, technologically oriented religious cult.

¹² See also Flusser 1999:48-9.

And there are flies. „A realidade se dá nos fios da teia em duas formas de Ser, mosca e aranha. [...] A mosca, que é o objeto da aranha [...] é jogada contra a nossa teia [...] para ser devorada. A mosca nos é dada, está diante das nossas tenazes. Diante da mosca, no ato de apalpa-la, devora-la e digeri-la, estamos nos realizando. A mosca a ser devorada é o nosso futuro, a mosca sendo devorada é nosso presente, a mosca digerida é o nosso passado.” (ibidem: 2) The subject is seen as a spider producing the foundation of his own world. He meets objects along the way and deals with them by devoration and assimilation. To digest means to absorb and remember. Knowing is, thus, an aggressive act of destruction and inglobation. Flusser expands the metaphor by discussing it in connection with different philosophical theories. „ Podemos assumir, em teoria diversas atitudes em face da mosca. Por exemplo a hegeliana. Podemos dizer que a existencia da aranha exige a existencia da mosca para poder realizar-se. A mosca é a antítese da aranha. [...] A síntese é a mosca devorada, e mosca portanto aranhizada. [...] Mencionemos ainda a atitude heideggeriana. A mosca é a coisa (‘Ding’) da aranha, é a condição (‘Bedingung’) aranhizada. As carcassas das moscas devoradas são testemunhas (Zeugen) da passagem da aranha pelo mundo moscal. São abandonadas e ultrapassadas (ueberholt), deixadas, inteiramente chupadas, na teia, so instrumentos (Zeug) da aranha. A projeção da aranha atravez do mundo moscal é marcada pela transformação das coisas (moscas a serem devoradas) em instrumentos (moscas chupadas). Assim a aranha se liberta progressivamente das moscaas, assim vive autenticamente. O devorar da mosca (a vivência) é a realização da aranha.“ (ibidem: 3) Hegel’s concept of *synthesis*, as well as Heidegger’s notion of *überholen* are also seen as forms of devoration and digestion through which the spider can realize itself and live authentically.

At the end of the essay Flusser criticizes the spider’s attitude towards the world, defining it as fundamentally aggressive and destructive. To understand the world is to conquer and devour it, that is, to transform reality into a graveyard. Although inevitable from a spider’s point of view, this attitude is too extreme. Of course, Flusser is alluding here to the aggressive history of Western civilization and its fixation on endless conquest and assimilation of reality. We are in desperate need of ironical distance. How can the spider, caught up as it is in its net and its constant mad pursuit of flies actually transcend its existential situation? A change of perspective is needed. We cannot leave the net we inhabit. The only way out would consist in changing our point of view by focusing on the net itself. It is only by going against the very grain of our typically Western attitude to the world, that we can find a way out, by actively thinking about the basis of our existence, that which transforms us into spiders and the objects we come across in flies to be devoured in the first place.

A particularly interesting example of the feeding metaphor can be found in Flusser’s *A dúvida – On Doubt –*, written in the mid 1960ies describing the intake of new linguistic elements into a

given system in terms of an amoeba feeding on its surroundings. The amoeba sends out a conquering pseudopodium which engulfs the foreign element with the intention of assimilating it. Contrary to the other examples dealt with so far, devoration and digestion are portrayed here not as a disruptive, penetrative violent act but as a quiet slow, quasi-static process of continuous absorption and osmosis. “A ameba emite um pseudópode em direção de algo extra-amébio e o ocupa. Em seguida, já dentro da realidade amébio, forma-se um vacúolo ao redor desse algo conquistado. Este algo faz parte agora da ameba, sem estar incorporado ao seu metabolismo. O vacúolo se fecha e o algo se transforma, gradativamente, em ameba, isto é, em protoplasma, ou seja, torna-se realidade amébio. Nesta imagem [...] a digestão corresponde à conversação.” Some of the foreign elements refuse to become integrated into the body of the amoeba and remain undigested, a constant challenge to the unity of a system that tries in vain to break them down in order to assimilate them, liberating new creative forces in the process. “Embora a ameba possa ocupar toda possibilidade com seus pseudópodes, e possa formar um vacúolo ao redor de toda a possibilidade ocupada, não pode digerir todas as possibilidades. Por exemplo, um cristal de quartzo pode ser ocupado e encapsulado dentro de um vacúolo, mas não pode ser digerido. Todas as contrações do vacúolo resultam em vão, o cristal continuará sempre como um corpo estranho dentro do protoplasma da ameba. O melhor seria expeli-lo, a não ser que o cristal sirva, justamente por ser o corpo estranho, de estimulante ou catalisador dos processos metabólicos da ameba.” (Flusser 1999: 61-62) In this passage Flusser uses the metaphors of devoration and digestion to visualize the functioning of creativity and its connection to the collective process of conversation in which new ideas are elaborated, that is, discussed. The new aspect with regard to his other texts dealing with digestive processes is the possibility of the ultimate inability of any given system to decompose and assimilate a new foreign element. What happens when two systems are so different that the feeding one is unable to break down what it has ingested? In the metaphoric description quoted above the indigestible substance is a quartz crystal, a mineral substance that remains within the amoeba as a painful thorn to remind it of its failure to fully absorb the new element. In Flusser’s translation theory this irreducible thorn would be an untranslatable element forcing the target-language to make an extra effort of assimilation, circumventing the foreign substance without eliminating it by total absorption. This aspect is linked to the idea of overcoming (*überwinden*) dealt with before, but goes definitely beyond it. Indigestibility and untranslatability – as was the case with self-devoration – point to the limitation of each system but at the same time act as catalysts expanding the system from inside.

In *Angenommen* – Suppose –, first published in 1989, Flusser took up the idea of a collective circular process of rumination and digestion in his description of the *Bibliophagus convictus*

(Flusser 1989: 63-66)¹³ In the same book a mute, but paradoxically loquacious tapeworm (*taenia solium*) appears on stage using the voice of its human host as a ventriloquist would, in order to present its view of the world (Flusser 1989: 45-48). This insatiable parasitical creature does not digest its own food any more, but only quietly absorbs the substances that have already been digested by its host. The tapeworm represents an extreme version of the metaphors of devoration and digestion described so far. The world is no longer swallowed, chewed, digested, decomposed and filtered for digestible matter that is finally absorbed. The tapeworm has no teeth, no saliva, and no stomach to speak of. He indiscriminately sucks in through his porous skin whatever its host provides, multiplying the many segments making up its wormlike body. Each of these segments contains thousands of microscopic eggs. In fact, most tapeworms are hermaphroditical, possessing both male and female sexual organs. The tapeworm lives in a world of pure bliss based on constant sexual arousal and endless love. In a perverse reversal of the Christian doctrine of *Imitatio Christi*, it advocates an *Imitatio Taenia* as ultimate solution to all human problems. Through this carnevalistic inversion the metaphors of devoration and digestion are carried to their extreme and the parasitical position of the human race on the face of the earth is ironically questioned.

The *Bibliophagus* belongs to the order of Hymenoptera, one of the largest orders of insects, comprising wasps, bees and ants. It does not, however, fit the usual categories. Although it looks very much like a bee it has unusually long antennae that it can wrap around its body when not feeding or communicating. The insect shares attributes with the bee and the ant and creates large social organisms centered on an egg-laying queen. The *Bibliophagus*, as the name already suggests, feeds on books. He does not eat any manuscripts or teletexts, but only printed matter. "Another particularity is that it will refuse to eat any text which had been eaten by another Bibliophagus before, even if that text were eaten in an altogether different edition or even in a different language. The physiological explanation for this oddity is this: After having devoured a paragraph of a text (*Bibliophagus* never eats single lines or entire pages), the insect chews on it. Its mouth secretes an enzyme called 'criticase', which reacts with the printer's ink to form an acid called 'informasis'. The morsel is then rolled over and over again in the insect's mouth, until it forms a ball which is vomited into the mouth of another *Bibliophagus*." Three elements are of importance here: the choice of the specific medium on which the texts are written; the preference for paragraphs over lines or pages because these generally contain a single idea; and finally his predilection for texts that are completely new to the community of the *Bibliophagi*, even if they have been changed through revision or translation. *Bibliophagus* not only transforms the act of reading into

¹³ In the German edition it is the chapter *Chemische Industrie* – Chemical industry (13th scenario). I am quoting from an unpublished English version of the text originally written for *Art Forum*.

an act of chewing, its saliva interacts with the printed word creating new information, the way a reader would employ his critical sense and imagination. During the chewing process, fractions of informasis are ingested, entering the digestive system of each insect, where they “are processed in the typical insect fashion, (much as if they were pollen).” (Ibidem: 1) For insects, pollen, as informasis, does not represent food in the strict sense of the term – even if bees, through evolutionary adaptation, have actually learnt to feed on pollen. They are, so to speak, food for thoughts, insofar as both are carriers of genetic information. By metaphorically comparing informasis to pollen, Flusser suggests that new information works in an analogous way; that it can fecundate and create new life if it meets adequate reception. Furthermore, this comparison suggests possible evolutionary links between feeding and thinking that go beyond the merely metaphorical.

The collective process of chewing goes on until all *Bibliophagi*, as knots in a connecting net, have been duly informed by feeding on the circulating paper-ball. In this version of the collective process of remastication, the drawback – the dystopian dimension – is that the information is simply carried on without being re-elaborated and enriched in the process. It is therefore the opposite of Flusser’s vision of a multicultural Brazilian culture and its practice of translation. Here the synthesis of novel, complex information out of differing but not necessarily new elements is absolutely central. The *Bibliophagi*, conversely, feed only on completely new information, avoiding useless repetition, but without altering it in any way. There is no loss of information during the transfer of the message from insect to insect – as with the perfection of the language of Angels envisaged by Swedenborg – but there is also no change whatsoever.¹⁴ The *Bibliophagi* show no real creativity in their communication. In the cultural processes envisaged by Flusser, on the other hand, it is not so much the starting point that ensures novelty but the subsequent elaborations by the different knots involved. To use the two German terms introduced at the beginning: the essential moment is not incorporation (*Einverleibung*) but overcoming (*Überwindung*). The exchange of information through the net of *Bibliophagi* cannot be considered true communication as there is no element of interpretation involved. As Michel Serres puts it: “Systems do work because they do not work. [...] If [an] exchange is successful – if it is perfect, optimal and instantaneous – the connection dissolves [...] Connection is a non-connection.” (Serres 1980: 107)¹⁵

Once all the members of a single hive “have chewed upon this particular bit of informasis [...] a messenger, (called the ‘mediator’), is sent to the next hive with the bit of informasis in his mouth, and thus a chain is formed which links all the *Bibliophagi* hives in the world.” (ibidem: 1)

¹⁴ Jonathan Swift describes a similar situation in his *Gulliver’s Travels* (see Guldin 2008b: 109-110).

¹⁵ „Systeme funktionieren, weil sie nicht funktionieren [...] Wenn dieser Austausch erfolgreich ist – wenn er perfekt, optimal und unmittelbar ist – löst sich die Verbindung selbst auf. [...] Die Verbindung ist eine Nicht-Verbindung.“ Quoted in A. R. Galloway, *Außer Betrieb: Das müßige Interface*, Cologne 2010, p.6. [translation by the author RG]

Flusser ironically uses the word ‘to inform’ also in its literal sense: to in-form, to give a form to something. By using it in the context of feeding and digesting he points to its dangerous power in shaping the minds of those that are his carriers. In fact, the first specimen of a *Bibliophagus* was detected in the head of a deceased writer where it had been put after voluntary trepanation. The writer probably suffering from lack of originality had died because of excessive consumption of informasis. As Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception* shows, ideas are like viruses that can be implanted in our heads and from there determine the way we see the world. It is only by actively re-laborating received ideas that we can defend ourselves against the power of tradition and common sense. Ideas, as Stalinism and German Nazism have shown, can ultimately subvert and destroy our minds. In this sense the state of the *Bibliophagi* is basically totalitarian. Equality and osmotic permeability are transformed into forms of power and help shaping the opinion of the collective down to the very last detail. The network of the *Bibliophagi* is basically unnatural. The *Bibliophagi*¹⁶ are all connected to each other as single computers in a network. Such interconnected structures are not to be met with in nature as they are open to all sorts of dangers because of the extreme ease of transmission. A virus can easily spread through the whole system subverting it from within, as has happened several times with the internet in its earlier phases.

The main reason for the peculiar taste of the insect lies in the fact that what it has chewed not only passes into the mouth of all other insects of his species but finally reaches the queens of the single hives. “In the queen [...] they penetrate the ovaries and infiltrate the genetic information. Thus each new text devoured will result in a mutation of the entire species, be it devoured by any insect whatsoever. This is why any ‘second reading’ will result in cancerous growth within the genetic matter: ‘redundancy’. Which poses a problem: quotations from old texts in new ones endanger the species, they threaten degeneration.” (ibidem: 1) Flusser’s provocative association of redundancy with cancerous growth is a telling comment on the growing importance of the present-day practice of cultural recycling.

In *Die Informationsgesellschaft. Phantom oder Realität?* – ‘The information society: phantom or reality?’ (Flusser 1996b)¹⁷ –, and with this I come to the last example I want to discuss here, the metaphors of devoration and digestion are used in connection with a worm in order to sketch the functioning of our contemporary information society. Flusser asks his audience to imagine a living tube, an earthworm for instance, with an input, a mouth, and an output, an anus. The world flows through the gorge into the body, is digested there, that is, processed, and leaves the body through the anus. From a human point of view we could say that nature flows inside the mouth

¹⁶ The term *convictus* refers to the fact that the *Bibliophagi* in order to secure the production of texts devoid of redundancy have entered into contact with writers and journalists all over the world convincing them to have a *Bibliophagus* installed through trepanation in their very brains. Once placed there, the insect would inspire them to new astonishing ideas through continuous secretion of informasis.

¹⁷ Flusser held the speech in November 1991, shortly before his death in a car accident.

of the organism to be informed there and leaves it as culture. The situation, however, is more complicated than that: we do not simply eat nature in order to evacuate culture. The culture we excrete slowly loses the information it transports, becomes garbage and from there returns to nature. The whole process might thus be described as a circle: nature, processing, culture, garbage, nature. As Flusser points out, such a circular model has definitely abandoned the idea of historical continuity and linearity in favor of the notion of eternal return. From this point of view any participation in the development of culture results slightly absurd, as everything we produce is ultimately destined to disappear again, the way our feces dissolve into nature. Flusser compares this first organic model with a technical one, a machine. Raw matter flows into the machine to be processed, that is, to be shaped according to specific information, and leaves it again. These informed objects are used and consumed till they disappear again. The discipline explicitly dealing with the stage of processing, or digesting for that matter, is information theory. In this last use of the metaphor of devoration and digestion many of the elements mentioned before reappear. The central element is the moment of digestion when raw matter is processed, that is, informed, or to use the metaphor of the machine, stamped into form. New is the cyclical idea that what is evacuated finally returns to a natural state in order to be re-devoured again.

To conclude, I would like to recapitulate briefly Flusser's use of the metaphors of devoration and digestion. Flusser made use of the Brazilian notion of anthropophagy but also hinted at alternative historical sources (alchemy). He extended the meaning and the fields of application of the metaphor criticizing at the same time its more problematic aspects, without trying, however, to systematize its forms and functions. Devoration and digestion are sometimes treated separately and occasionally used as synonyms. The difference between the two is not always clear; digestion, in fact, can take place both in the mouth and the stomach (with the *Bibliophagus* for instance). Instead of simple devoration, Flusser focuses on the possible metaphorical dimensions of digestion: to digest means to incorporate (*einverleiben*) and to overcome (*überwinden*), digestion is compared to the functioning of conversation and is not unlike Hegel's notion of *synthesis* and Heidegger's concept of *überholen*. In his philosophical fables staging a series of imaginary animals Flusser explored alternative not-human ways of feeding in order to highlight the specifically human dimension of the process. The two metaphors embody a general abstract principle explaining complex reciprocal interactions between different languages (translation and re-translation), scientific discourses and cultures, but also between opposing terms (thought and reflection). They are used, furthermore, to describe linear multiple processes that move from one stage to another folding back onto themselves at the end (history and post-history, media-evolution, translation and self-translation). Flusser also reflected on the relationship of digestibility and indigestibility, defining the latter as a valuable catalyst for creative processes. And finally, he transformed the linearity of

the devoration and digestion processes into a circular self-critical movement. The aggressive and destructive side of devoration that has manifested itself especially in the history of the West, has to be kept in check by constant self-devoration of the devourer and the principle of devoration itself.

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