Vilém Flusser and the Abysmal Privilege of Our Platforms

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The following short talk—an initial thinking-through and provocation from my recent reading—was presented at [HASTAC 2014](#) in Lima, Peru, as part of the "Political Platforms: Software, Social Justice, and Designing for Change" panel, which included Beatrice Choi, Anne Cong-Huyen, Amanda Philips, and Tara McPherson (discussant).

At some point in the 1980s, the Czech-born philosopher and media theorist Vilém Flusser became obsessed with a squid. More precisely, Flusser began to look to the Vampyroteuthis infernalis, whose genus and species name translates into English as "the vampire squid from hell." Staring back at him from its barely-known, unlit deep-sea environment, Vampyroteuthis infernalis—this seemingly alien creature—became like a reflection to Flusser, both us and the squid acting like "mirrors of that which we have denied." And yet while this creature, so drastically different than ourselves, gazed back at Flusser with its distinctly human-like eyes, he was careful to note that, "Should we care to recognize something of ourselves in this animal, we will have to plunge into its abyss."

Vampyroteuthis infernalis is a mollusc, and the etymology of the creature's phylum was not lost on Flusser the media theorist. From the root word mollis, which means soft, Flusser drew the connection to "software" and what he, at the time, saw as the processing of immaterial information. Beyond an etymological affinity with computing, Vampyroteuthis infernalis is quite literally a processor, though its processing is biological, indiscriminate, and mostly thrust upon it. Plunging deeper, Flusser turns to the German word Dasein, or, "being in the world," which is central to understanding both the squid and ourselves, as he writes, "Reality is neither the organism nor the environment ... but rather the concurrence of both." And so Flusser looks to the squid and its abyss, discovering a "Vampyroteuthic Dasein," in which "objects are free-floating

entities in a current of water that happen to tumble upon [it]," and for whom culture is a binary act of "discriminating between digestible and indigestible entities."

In this brief provocation, I'd like to look at what we might be able to consider the abyss of our platforms, especially as a central few come to dominate our attention and affect our Dasein Vampyroteuthically, positioning us as individuals tumbling upon the free-floating information, objects and relationships of our increasingly "open" culture.

Like the unlit, deep-sea abyss of Vampyroteuthis infernalis, computers, software, and platforms have long been cloaked in the rhetoric of darkness, most commonly today through the phrase "blackbox," which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as, "a device which performs intricate functions but whose internal mechanism may not readily be inspected or understood." But in order to confront the opaque, we must first, as Flusser wrote, "penetrate behind appearances in order to free things from the veil of light." For, amidst the mesmerization of our screens and interfaces, we often further veil, making it increasingly impossible to ever reveal the privilege of our platforms—both the embedded and the evoked. As Lori Emerson writes in her book *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*, "what concerns me is that 'user-friendly' now takes the shape of keeping users steadfastly unaware and uninformed about how their computers, their reading/writing interfaces, work let alone how they shape and determine their access to knowledge and their ability to produce knowledge." There are quite explicit examples of these deceptive processes in action, what Harry Brignull calls "dark patterns," by which he means the "type of user interface that appears to have been carefully crafted to trick users into doing things." And while we associate these dark patterns most regularly with the nefariousness of spam, we're too often less-inclined to look toward the so-called light, the platforms we most use to represent ourselves, such as the popular commercial platforms of Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, and others. When we refuse to or cannot look into the light, behind the illuminated surface reflecting ourselves, we further elide, push deeper into the darkness, what powers the privilege of our platforms, across a continuum of technical mechanisms and, increasingly, cultural and political assumptions and ideologies. As Flusser sees in his devil squid from hell, so too does Wendy Chun, in her book *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, see something abysmal in our platforms. Chuns says that historically our interfaces "render

the central process for computation—processes not under the direct control of the user—daemonic." When we combine Emerson's concern for access and use with Chun's notion of "the history of interactive operating systems as supplementing—that is, supplanting—human intelligence," we can begin to see the contours of the abyss—a space filled with values both human and machinic—and the changing nature of our Dasein in the so-called digital age.

In the introduction to his translation of Flusser's 1983 book [Post-History](#), Rodrigo Maltez Novaes, writes of post-historical, "Vampyroteuthian" society—that is, "a society of artifice and lies, of surfaces"—that "if technical apparatus function … according to binary values, then these are the values they impose onto the world." These binary values—the choice of on or off, one or zero—have increasingly affected more than the simple mechanics of our machines and platforms, but have infected culture in many ways. (The use of the word "infected" here, it should be noted, infers the many means we have to fight off infection.) One example of this is computationalism, what David Golumbia, in his book *[The Cultural Logic of Computation](#)*, describes as, "the view that not just human minds are computers but that mind itself must be a computer." Like binary values, this emphasis on computational thinkings fuels a neoliberal, techno-determinist ideology that sees in the networked computer the inevitability of a utopian future; a future that, [as I've mentioned elsewhere](#), is "hostile to the race, gender, and class experiences of those outside the hegemonic white, wealthy, and vastly powerful venture capitalist class that supports it."

Along with the rise of computing and its inherent privileging of the binary, in addition to networking and social media, we've seen the effects of binary values on culture and communication, most clearly in the ideological regimes of openness—from the open society to open source, open government and open access. Within this paradigm, the binary is open or closed, and our platforms have predominantly implemented these binary values, with a clear preference—based on funding models that rely on free labor and access to our data and content—for the open. Take for instance Twitter, whose user accounts default to open, but for whom the only other option for those interested in negotiating access remains the visibly marked "locked" account. And even when developers of these platforms—themselves deeply invested in computational conceptions of the world—do allow more robust settings, these are so ever-shifting and inaccessible

so as to dizzy us until we, exhausted, only feel situated having chosen the open or closed setting.

While these simple examples may seem harmless, the implications of binary values and the privileging of openness are, as Flusser prophetically showed through his conception of post-historical humanity, quite profound. [As Nathaniel Tkacz has argued](#), "the logic of openness actually gives rise to, and is perfectly compatible with, new forms of closure … [and] … there is something about openness, about the mobilisation of the open and its conceptual allies, that actively works against making these closures visible." These closures—enabled by openness, centrally controlled, and algorithmically patrolled—enact something like a Vampyroteuthic Dasein, in which no longer are we actively thinking ethically and negotiating and performing the various and complicated facets of our humanity; but, like Flusser's vampire squid from hell, are unthinkingly processing what's thrust upon us, our environments these dark, blackboxed spaces in which our objects of culture are "free"-floating entities in a current of wi-fi that we happen to tumble upon. This, then, might ultimately be the abyss of our platforms, but need it be?

[In a recent talk](#), Kimberly Christen-Withey, discussing the ideology of openness, stated that "open is only one way of seeing," and that information is not, as Flusser says, immaterial, but embodied, and "always grounded." Indeed, embodiment allows us to confront the abyss of our platforms, to challenge binary values and the ideology of openness. Christen-Withey's work on the Mukurtu CMS is exemplary for challenging the binary of open and closed, for embedding and enabling robusts community control, agency, protocols and constant cultural negotiation within a platform for managing and sharing digital cultural heritage. Indeed, Christen-Withey's choice of the word "grounded" resonates with Flusser, who realized that in surmounting our animality, we were bestowed upon the ground, while Vampyroteuthis infernalis was banished to the abyss. Yet our task, despite our alienation, is to constantly confront and never lose sight of our groundedness, something our platforms have historically not been able to help us with. But it is in platforms like Mukurtu and others that we see a way forward for confronting privilege; and for refusing to adopt the Vampyroteuthic Dasein, seeing in it the vampire squid from hell, something we long ago rightfully denied.