

How to Think Posthumanly with Nature?

Octopodal Creatures as Conceptual Personae of an Alien Nature

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INTRODUCTION

'It matters what ideas we use to think of other ideas.'

(Marilyn Strathern qtd. in Donna Haraway 2016, 34)

Today it is dawning on an increasing number of people that there is something deeply rotten about how many people in philosophy, industry and politics have been relating to nature; at this historical moment – named the Anthropocene by many authors – when the consequences of carbon emissions, deforestation and general pollution are haunting current and future generations, when the diversity of species is declining, an increasing number of people recognize the reality of climate change.¹ With good reason, one might welcome the seemingly new endorsement of conservation over exploitation. However, without diminishing the importance of conservation efforts, it is also important to realize that – even though conservation seems to be in opposition to exploitation – the discursive and historical baggage of both impulses is intimately related. In the co-edited book *Decolonizing Nature*, William Adams and Martin Mulligan, analyze how the British Empire not only initiated a system for exploiting but also for conserving nature (Adams and Mulligan 2003, 1). Conservation as a form of future-oriented moderation was thought to be necessary in the context of managing natural resources and in the more romantic sense of preserving ‘unchanged wilderness’ (Adams and Mulligan 2003, 1). The underlying assumptions were, Adams and Mulligan argue, that the Western, rational and enlightened man was in a position ‘to order and conquer’ (Adams and Mulligan 2003, 3). What is problematic about the British Empire’s view on nature, including the seemingly noble discourse of conservation, is that nature is framed as something passive, and the legacies of this discourse can still be found in some environmental activist slogans that call for ‘saving’ or ‘protecting’ the environment.²

This might appear as a merely verbal way of expressing the evident urgency of the so-called Anthropocene. However, as Mary Kahn points out, there is a strong ‘connection between language and power’ which she also locates directly in the context of academic literature in the natural sciences where a ‘linguistic chauvinism to other species’ still prevails (Kahn 2001, 241). She is specifically interested

in the linguistic biases that depreciate the animal to ‘lower forms of life’ by the use of a ‘passive’ and ‘soulless voice’ thereby perpetuating a system of power and sidestepping uncomfortable questions concerning responsibility (Kahn 2001, 241-42). Within literature, as noted by early ecocritic and literary scholar William Rueckert, elements like the earth and sun ‘were treated as subjects but bereft of subjectivity – *symbolically* present but absent as concrete entities, material actors’ (qtd. in Iovino 2018, 112). What these examples from disparate discursive fields have in common is that they present the concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse as intimately entangled. Therefore, as exposed and criticized by Kahn and Rueckert, nature is oftentimes approached as passive, as an object that can be known and talked *about*.

Ecofeminist and science and technology scholar Donna Haraway has extensively criticized this premise. One of her points of critique is that ‘[s]pecies Man does not make history’ as in every event there are many factors which are beyond human control (Haraway 2016, 49). To overcome this human arrogance, she proposes that we think with non-human entities such as animals. In this paper, I will take this ‘thinking with animals’ as a way of ‘thinking with alien nature.’ I propose nature as alien to counter the colonialist idea of nature being a passive object of knowledge that can be ordered and conquered. Thus ‘alien’ here helps me to conceptualize nature as evasive to the possessive grasp of Anthropos and simultaneously to defy the idea of making object-subject distinctions between nature as passive object and the human as the knowing subject. Nature will be understood as that which constitutes our world (including the world of other life forms). Nature does not stand in opposition to, nor is it neatly separable from, culture, but rather co-emerges with it. In this sense, my approach is in line with Serenella Iovino’s version of (material) ecocriticism as she views ‘nature and culture, world and text, as mutually permeable’ (Iovino 2018, 112). Such an understanding of nature clearly forms a departure from the long-held and colonizing view that nature is ultimately knowable and a distinct object from humans.

The ecocritical approach makes nature an extremely broad concept. In this paper, I will focus on quite particular case studies which by no means should be considered representative for alien nature, but which provide a very specific entry point into the discussion. My case studies will be comprised by octopodal species in the writing of Haraway and Vilém Flusser. In ‘Tentacular Thinking’ from *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway introduces a variety of tentacular creatures (e.g. the spider, the octopus, and Medusa from Greek mythology) to rethink the Anthropocene. Although the creaturely is of central importance to her text, Haraway provides relatively little detail about the specific embodiment of the various tentacular beings she introduces. Therefore, I will complement her text with Flusser’s *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*. This text was first published in 1987, almost 30 years before ‘Tentacular Thinking’, and can be roughly summarized as a conceptualization of the human through the perspective of the vampyroteuthis infernalis, or the vampire squid, which belongs to the genus and order of octopoda (Flusser [1987] 2012, 6). Flusser meticulously details the embodiment and mental life of the vampire squid which makes his work very useful for creating a more specific idea of what it would be like to

think with other species. I will take the tentacular and octopodal creatures of Flusser and Haraway as instances of an *alien* nature. The complexities of alienness will be addressed through the spatial concepts of *here* and *elsewhere*. These concepts provide me with the theory and language to conceptualize a nature that is unknown and yet imaginable, a nature that is an *elsewhere* and yet somehow present in a *here*.

The foundation of this article will be the notion of conceptual persona, which in Deleuze and Guattari designates the figure or voice through which philosophers develop their concepts. I will propose to expand their proposed assemblage of conceptual personae with non-human octopodal members. From there, I will investigate how octopodal conceptual personae, as articulations of an alien nature, may dialectically structure a way of configuring nature that is both available (*here*) and unavailable (*elsewhere*) to us. One section is dedicated to the relevance of material specificity for an *elsewhere*, an alien nature. This is followed by examining the simultaneity of *here* and *elsewhere*, reality and unreality through Foucault's conceptualization of the mirror. Lastly, *here* and *elsewhere* will be examined as fractal arrangements and a site of diffraction.

ACKNOWLEDGING NON-HUMAN CONCEPTUAL PERSONAE

Before we embark on conceptualizing alien nature as embodied by octopodal creatures through the notions of *here* and *elsewhere*, it is necessary to examine the role an octopodal agent could play in the endeavor of going from thinking *about* to thinking *with* nature. This brings us to the question: what is thinking in the first place? Deleuze and Guattari address this age-old question in their book *What is Philosophy?* One of the key ideas they introduce is the notion of the conceptual persona, which they define as the voice through which philosophers develop philosophical thoughts (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 62). Thus, the conceptual persona designates the way philosophers express themselves, to whom and how they speak. Among the personae they discuss are the friend, the athlete, the idiot, the judge, and the stammerer. These conceptual personae should be viewed in an abstract manner. For example, the friend as a conceptual persona does not represent 'an intrinsic persona' or an 'empirical circumstance' but rather 'a condition of possibility of thought itself' (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 3). The conceptual persona is the voice by which concepts are articulated. If, for instance, a conceptual persona stammers, it is the language of that kind of thought that stammers (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 69). Deleuze and Guattari do not spell out explicitly what a thought that stammers would be like, it is rather an invitation to think about the character of thought. Most of the time, Deleuze and Guattari propose, the conceptual persona is not explicitly introduced by the philosopher and needs to be deduced by the reader (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 69).

Importantly, the parliament of conceptual persona is not a closed society. According to Deleuze and Guattari, 'the list of conceptual personae is never closed and for that reason plays an important role in

the evolution or transformations of philosophy' (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 5). As this essay is concerned with the question of how to think in a posthuman way *with* nature, I propose that the time is due to imagine new conceptual personae that are no longer exclusively human and would allow for a new discourse. I would like to suggest the genus of octopoda as found in the writings of Flusser and Haraway as possible conceptual persona of an alien nature.

'[T]o think-with a host of companions' is explicitly endorsed by Haraway as she assigns her tentacular creatures such as the spider quite a concrete task (Haraway 2016, 31). In the face of our current environmental and political 'troubles' that nowadays are commonly discussed under the heading of the Anthropocene, Haraway's tentacular companions are meant to be contributing to a process of 'collective thinking' (Haraway 2016, 31). She elaborates that '[m]yriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene', which she advances as a more apt conceptualization of the earth since it is not limited to any rigid time frame and figurative categorization (Haraway 2016, 31, 51). Creaturely storytelling as pictured by Haraway is distinctly non-binary. She additionally describes it as 'speculative fabulation, science fiction, science fact, [and] speculative feminism' (Haraway 2016, 31). Haraway traces the word 'tentacle' back to its Latin origin where it designates 'to feel' or 'to try', so that a layer of explorative hapticality is added to the storytelling of her leggy critters (Haraway 2016, 31). Thus, for Haraway, thinking with her tentacular creatures (or what she terms 'tentacular thinking') happily confuses philosophy with science and fiction. In this sense, she clearly departs from Deleuze and Guattari, as they mark a clear distinction between thinking in philosophy, the arts and sciences. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is only in philosophy – the plane where concepts are formed – that thinking occurs through conceptual personae (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 65-66). Yet, for the purpose of this paper, Haraway's 'demon familiar[s]' as she also refers to the tentacular creatures she uses in 'Tentacular Thinking', should still be regarded as conceptual personae since viewing them as conceptual personae highlights their most important function: to develop concepts to think with.

Flusser's text, by contrast, presents a case where the conceptual persona needs to be deduced by the reader. In Flusser, the vampire squid is the protagonist of the eponymous treatise, the vampyroteuthis, Flusser's imagining of its being and world is the subject of his writing. But the vampyroteuthis infernalis is more than the lead figure of Flusser's writing: the specific corporality of the octopodal animal inspired Flusser to imagine other ways of thinking. In ways that will be further elucidated throughout this paper, the vampire squid is Flusser's vocabulary to address the question of *Dasein* itself, of literally 'being there' (in space) or being-in-the-world. Thus, Flusser develops new conceptual thinking through the vampire squid, making the vampire squid a viable conceptual persona in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. In addition, Flusser himself adapts modes of thinking he considers to be specific to the squid in his treatise. For example, according to Flusser, the vampyroteuthis 'is a mythomaniacal deceiver' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 53). In light of Flusser's ambiguous writing that also mixes science with fiction, it seems that this does not only apply to the vampyroteuthis as the subject of the treatise but also to the conceptual

persona of Flusser's writing. Emblematic of this is the report given in the appendix of the 'treatise' from the 'Institute Scientifique de Recherché Paranaturaliste'. The existence of such an institute is very unlikely. Almost no information about it can be found online except from references to Flusser's text. Nevertheless, Louis Bec, the supposed founder and president of the institute, seems to be a serious biologist and zoosystematician and his CV includes the founding of the institute. Besides, paranaturalist seems to be a neologism created by Flusser. Tellingly, the prefix *para* in Greek refers to something, which is *beside* or *beyond*. The confusion around the veracity of the institute suits the impetus of the treatise, as Flusser – in a 'vampyroteuthic manner' – is not concerned with revealing a truth about the subject of his writing, instead he is deceiving and luring his readers into an opaque confusion of fact and fiction.

Though not equally explicitly, Haraway and Flusser introduce their respective non-human and posthuman conceptual personae and give instructions on how to think with them. However, the reader will never know the truth about these conceptual personae due to their fundamental alienness. This could easily be taken as a reason to resign from trying to imagine alien ways of thinking, but instead of dismissing alien nature on this ground, it may be more productive to think of it as an *elsewhere* that is part of the space we are inhabiting in the *here*. Thinking of alien nature in spatial terms produces a logic where *here* and *elsewhere* can exist simultaneously next to each other, instead of a system in which each element of this duality is mutually exclusive due to the linearity of linguistic grammar and propositional calculus which we find in formulations such as 'if...then.' In addition, thinking the alien nature of non-human conceptual personae as embedded in differentiated space produces the scenery for conceptualizing thinking as the dynamic activity of traveling and exploring.

To understand thinking through spatial and migratory figures is not a totally new idea or exclusive to non-human conceptual personae. According to Deleuze and Guattari, 'the role of conceptual personae is to show thought's territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations': concepts are not objects but territorial entities (Deleuze and Guattari [1991] 1994, 69). Such an approach is resumed by Rosi Braidotti's conceptual persona of the nomadic subject (Braidotti 2013, 87). According to her, 'thinking is a nomadic activity, which takes place in the transition between potentially contradictory positions' (Braidotti 2006, 199). Through this figure, she conceptualizes the procedural aspect of thought, an activity that is always in movement and transition and defined by the relations it makes instead of by clearly defined and demarcated entities. A corresponding spatial dimension seems to underlie Haraway's conceptualization of thought, as she writes about *Pimonia cthulhu*, 'this spider is in place, has a place, and yet is named for intriguing travels elsewhere. This spider will help me with returns, and with roots and routes' (Haraway 2016, 32). These ideas of establishing, traversing and negotiating space will be crucial to understand posthuman conceptual personae and their potential contribution to thought. In the spirit of Haraway's definition of the spider's relation to space, the

following section will be dedicated to an examination of how the vampyroteuthis and octopodal multispecies are intimately situated within their place and their material environment.

II. THE MATERIALITY OF SPACE AS A CONDITION OF AN ELSEWHERE

In his short essay, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' ([1967] 1984), Michel Foucault gives an interesting account on different qualities and functions harbored within space. He claims that space is never neutral and innocent but soaked in social processes, and that different rules apply to different spaces (Foucault [1967] 1984, 3). The interest in space can still be found in the humanities. In the wake of new materialism, the postmodern focus on social constructivism gave way to a new interest in the materiality of space alongside the discursive semiotic dimension of space. As Donna Haraway puts it: 'The question of whom to think-with is immensely material' (Haraway 2016, 39). Symptomatically, when imagining the habitat of their respective octopodal creatures, both Flusser and Haraway focus on the materiality of space. Flusser situates his vampyroteuthis in the abyss of the South China Sea. He pays a lot of attention to the fluidity and pressure of water and he imagines a habitat that is radically different from an environment where *homo sapiens* moves around comfortably, where things appear to be more solid and graspable (Flusser [1987] 2012, 9, 33). Furthermore, within Flusser's work, light is a defining feature of the experience of space. We live in sunlight, whereas Flusser's vampire squid resides in an 'eternal night', which is only illuminated through 'flashes of their own bioluminescence' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 19-20). From this perspective, it also seems logical that 'our directional shift led to the freeing of our hands and to the opening of our eyes to the horizons', whereas for the vampyroteuthis this resulted into the downward migration of their sensory and tactile organs (Flusser [1987] 2012, 18).

Haraway is less committed to describing *one* habitat in full detail, instead shifting with an admirable speed and elegance between different elements and terrains. This is also because her tentacular incarnations are less consistent in their manifestation. For example, her *Pimoida cthulhu* 'lives under the stumps in the redwood forest of Sonoma and Mendocino Counties' (Haraway 2016, 31). The species name *Pimoida cthulhu* is derived from a fictional tentacular critter invented by the writer H.P. Lovecraft, namely the cosmic creature Cthulhu, who appears as octopus and dragon. This is how Haraway relates her arthropod to 'the abyssal and elemental entities, called the chthonic', which literally designates the place 'of, in, or under the earth and the seas' (Haraway 2016, 31, 53), causing Haraway to change the name into *Pimoida chthulu* (thus including the 'ch' from chthonic) (Haraway 2016, 31). Haraway also states that *Pimoida chthulu* (modifying the spelling once again) 'allies with the decidedly nonvertebrate critters of the seas' (Haraway 2016, 54). She even includes 'snaky Medusa and the many unfinished wordings of her antecedents, affiliates and descendants as being part of the same family' (Haraway 2016, 31, 52). Generally, she positions her tentacular friends within the elements of earth and water, two

elements whose materiality we are able to feel with our skin. It is furthermore indicative that by referring to science writer and radio producer Rusten Hogness, Haraway suggests 'compost' as a new way of thinking what is now gathered under the umbrella of posthuman(ism), and in a similar vein 'humusities' instead of humanities (Haraway 2016, 32). Thus, even though Haraway's 'all over the place writing,' which touches upon many different possible habitats of octopodal creatures, is less extensive than Flusser's account of the abyss of the South China Sea, it does not imply an indifference concerning the material specificity of space. She theorizes this more abstractly when she writes: 'Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something' (Haraway 2016, 32). This idea is also of utmost importance to her idea of tentacular thinking as way of making sense of the world through immediate touch with material specificity, instead of detached observation.

In both Haraway and Flusser, the material specificity of the environment does not serve a merely ornamental function, but creates the condition for the alien nature of tentacular beings. According to Flusser, it is not only taxonomically that 'humans and vampyroteuthes live far apart from one another. We would be crushed by the pressure of its abyss, and it would suffocate in the air that we breathe' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 5). In other words, the vampyroteuthic world remains materially inaccessible to us since a different body would be required to live in the *elsewhere* of the vampyroteuthis. As a consequence of this impossibility of living in each other's spaces, a meaningful encounter is prohibited (Flusser [1987] 2012, 5). In Haraway, we also find a fascination with the abyss. For example, she attributes the name *Pimoid cthulhu* to the 'denizens of the depths, from the abyssal and elemental entities, called chthonic' (Haraway 2016, 31). Later on, she situates the Gorgons from Greek mythology in the abyss as 'chthonic entities' who possess 'underworld powers' and most importantly would kill men who would meet their gaze (Haraway 2016, 53-54). Here again, as has been the case in Flusser, the abyss is paired with ideas of conditions unviable for human habitation. Therefore, the abyss is an *elsewhere*, not because we are not there at the moment, but because *we cannot go there*. The differential materiality of spaces is capable of separating bodies since different bodies thrive in different environments. As such, the materiality of space conditions the existence of an alien nature.

Does this imply a material determinism of some sort? Flusser asks along similar lines the question: 'Is the vampyroteuthis a product of the abyss or has it adapted to it?' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 30). Seeing any life form as a product of its environment would go against the ideas of entanglement that are proposed by both Flusser and Haraway: it presupposes that one entity produces the other while remaining unchanged. Instead, Flusser puts forward the idea that 'the reality is that I exist in relation to the environment, and the environment exists in relation to me' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 70), meaning that both the environment and the subject live in relation to each other.

Co-becoming of different species and their material space is also a line of thought that can be traced in Haraway's writing. She muddles her concept of 'thinking-with' with 'becoming-with', a notion she

introduces more explicitly earlier in *Staying with the Trouble*, where becoming-with designates general becoming, as becoming always occurs in a co-constituting process with the environment and other companion species. She summarizes this idea pointedly when she writes: ‘Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings’ (Haraway 2016, 12-13).

Thus, habitat and life forms should not be seen as separable entities that stand in a deterministic relation to each other. Instead, they can be understood in Karen Barad’s terms of ‘intra-action’, a concept Haraway explicitly embraces in her chapter on ‘Tentacular Thinking’. With this concept Barad revises the idea of interaction, which implies two separate entities that come into contact with each other. The concept of ‘intra-action’ by contrast, proposes ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’ (Barad 2007, 33). This is to say that entities only come into being through their relations in the process of intra-action (Barad 2007, 33). As a consequence, a new understanding of causality is brought about: animal and environment do not merely adapt to each other (which would suppose pre-existing entities), they co-emerge. Against this background, it becomes clear why the *elsewhere* of the non-human conceptual personae matters so much: it is the otherness of material space within which the alienness of octopodal creatures develops. Therefore, imagining other spaces that are other by means of their different material condition may serve as a *terra incognita*, as unexplored space, for imagining differently embodied life or alien nature.

According to Foucault, ‘other spaces’ do not merely exist in the realm of imagination as is the case for utopias. They can also manifest in ‘real places’, as what he terms heterotopias (Foucault [1967] 1984, 3). Foucault gives a variety of examples of heterotopias, e.g. the honeymoon trip, the cemetery, the garden, and the museum. According to him, utopias and heterotopias are bound together in ‘a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror’ (Foucault [1967] 1984, 4). He considers the mirror a utopia ‘since it is a placeless place’, yet, simultaneously, operates as a heterotopia:

it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.
(Foucault [1967] 1984, 4).

Even though Foucault never uses the words *here* and *elsewhere*, these terms may be understood as bound into the logic of the heterotopic mirror, where the *elsewhere* comes to stand for the projected image and the *here* for the material presence of the mirror. This is relevant for the further understanding of our posthuman conceptual personae not merely as a phantasmagoria but also as a material presence in our world. In the following section, I will adopt an understanding of the double reality of the mirror as a site for nomadism, or, to use Rosi Braidotti’s words, as a ‘transition between potentially contradictory

positions’, as a way to go back and forth between articulations of an alien nature (e.g. the vampyroteuthis) and ourselves.

III. THE MIRROR TO REFLECT ONE ANOTHER

A mirror does not have to be narrowly understood as a flat surface that reflects light. According to Flusser, for example, the vampyroteuthis also functions as a mirror (Flusser [1987] 2012, 9). In the spirit of a heterotopia, the vampyroteuthis is both the material presence that enables mirroring and the mirror image itself. The mirror does not only give a ‘superficial’ image, it provides something more ‘profound’, namely a reflection (as in thought) on our *Dasein* (Flusser [1987] 2012, 9). On the one hand, it is alien to us – it designates a space of virtuality that can be only imagined by projecting an *elsewhere*. On the other hand, the vampire squid resembles us, it manifests in a material reality, and reflects a *here*.

Octopod as Antipode

Humans and octopods ‘encounter one another as mirrors of that which we have denied’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 26). The oppositional nature of humans and octopods can be already observed on a physical level as our anatomy varies largely. Octopods pertain to the class of cephalopods, which ‘are animals whose head and foot combine in such a way that the head emerges from the middle of the foot (“head-footed”)’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 6). They possess light-projecting organs on their limbs (according to Flusser ‘it would be as though our fingertips had eyes’) and they are able to communicate by altering their skin color (Flusser [1987] 2012, 20-21). The posture of octopods seems to be ‘reversed’ (compared to humans), as they are ‘belly up’ and ‘the front becomes the bottom and the back becomes the top’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 13). Additionally, they have an open back, which is simultaneously their ‘libidinous orifice’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 14). All this is very different from our own anatomy. These physical differences, Flusser elucidates, evolved a long time ago, at the crossroads of evolution, when humans followed the path of further developing their digestive system, whereas the vampyroteuthis further evolved their nervous system (Flusser [1987] 2012, 8). Accordingly, squids are able to react with superior speed and accuracy to external stimuli compared to humans (Flusser [1987] 2012, 19). All this suggests that in terms of anatomy the vampire squid is fundamentally other if not in outright opposition to the human.

Considering the cardinally different embodiment of the vampyroteuthis from *homo sapiens*, it is not surprising that Flusser also imagines its experience of the world unfolding in a radically distinct manner. He speculates for example that

for the vampyroteuthis, it is precisely love, the recognition of others, and orgasm that constitute the natural state of *Dasein*. The natural state of human *Dasein*, on the contrary, is defined by universal hatred, by the universal struggle for survival – one against all. By

overcoming its animality, therefore, the vampyroteuthis learns to hate; by overcoming ours, we learn to love (Flusser [1987] 2012, 59).

In other words, the mental life of the vampyroteuthis and its modes of engaging with the world is in diametric opposition to what Flusser considers would be the natural human way. Flusser underpins this grand conclusion with very specific differences in human and vampyroteuthis being. For example, whereas humans pride themselves for their faculty of deliberate reasoning, Flusser writes that the orgasm for the vampyroteuthis cannot be separated from thought; 'it resolves contradictions not by logic but through coitus' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 41). Our thinking further differs since whereas 'we philosophize in order to proceed from falsehood to truth, it philosophizes in order to lie ever more completely' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 53). The oppositional anatomy of the vampire squid also comes along with a reversed ethical system, as Flusser writes 'we should not forget that the vampyroteuthis stands on its head: its hell is our heaven, its heaven our hell' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 59). These aspects seem to suggest that Flusser's vampyroteuthis as a mirror reflection is alien, a utopia, and projecting a virtuality or an *elsewhere*. It is something we cannot experience ourselves, but we may try to imagine it.

Octopus as Carbon Copy

Despite all these oppositional traits of squids and humans, Flusser writes, 'the vampyroteuthis is not entirely alien to us' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 5) and that 'we recognize ourselves in them, insofar as they are a part of the same stream of life' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 17). Their likeness, just like their difference, starts at a biological level. As Flusser writes, we are both bilateria, we have the same metabolism, we both have a mesoderm, they are equally 'constructed of genetic information' and we even have 'common ancestors' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 26, 6-7). As a result, we 'harbour some of the same deeply ingrained memories' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 6). These passages suggest anatomical and biological similarities, if not sameness.

Besides physical commonalities, Flusser also speculates that their mind is very close to our own. For example, Flusser writes, 'as complex beings with complex brains, we are both partially rational and partially oneiric' (Flusser [1987] 2012, 41). He makes it very clear that there is no reason why the vampyroteuthis should be considered incapable of reflection or as lacking 'Geist', that is to say spirit or mind (Flusser [1987] 2012, 46, 24). Furthermore, Flusser sees our shared bilateral constitution as conditioning us to dialectically oppose certain positions, (Flusser [1987] 2012, 26) and indeed he uses the vampyroteuthis not to blur the boundaries between hate and love, heaven and hell, orgasm and analysis, but to reverse them. Another point of concurrency is the shared impulse of making art in order to leave traces of our existence in the minds of others (Flusser [1987] 2012, 67). This shows that the vampyroteuthis, besides being the alien *elsewhere*, also displays shared features with us. From such a perspective, the vampyroteuthis also opens up the possibility of partaking in experiences, a condition

which no longer totally excludes it from ‘our reality’ but instead provides the possibility for bleeding into our *here*.

Therefore, the vampire squid, which Flusser considers to be a mirror, displays a double reality of being identical and fundamentally alien at the same time. Understanding the vampyroteuthic mirror as a heterotopia enables us to think the contradictory condition of sameness and difference, *here* and *elsewhere*, as being welded together in the same ‘object.’ This helps us to understand the *elsewhere* of alienness not as something that is *either* there *or* not but as an attribute that is *simultaneously* a material presence (*here*) and a virtual reality (*elsewhere*). Importantly, it is precisely because of (and not despite of) this foundation of sameness, because of the possibility to share a *here*, that we are capable of comparing us with them, see their radical difference, and imagine octopodal stories from *elsewhere*. It also implies that in the vampyroteuthic conceptual persona the alienness of *elsewhere* is always there, a condition that deprives the human of total knowledge and the possibility of talking *about*. The nomadic travels of the vampyroteuthis between *here* and *elsewhere* can be seen as reflection, as a dialectics of space, which never resolves into a synthesis.

IV. THE VAMPYROTEUTHIS AS FRACTALS AND DIFFRACTION

Throughout the *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, Flusser refers to his own writing as a fable, a genre where animals are oftentimes anthropomorphized (e.g. Orwell’s *Animal Farm*) and operate as a kind of mirror for human *Dasein*. I have already provided some textual examples that suggest that the octopus mirrors the human. However, Flusser’s ruminations on the octopod as antipode reveal that he does not simply humanize the vampyroteuthis, but actually takes it as a conceptual persona to explore another, oftentimes oppositional way of making sense of the world, which is counterintuitive to human thought. His report closes with the question ‘is it not the intention of every fable, after all, to hold one mirror up to another?’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 75). The image of the double mirror perfectly captures the tone and philosophy of Flusser’s text. At the end there is no ‘moral of the story’, no easy definition of what we are. The double mirror does not simply reflect an essence, it reflects reflections, shows different angles, and shows space in ever-smaller versions nested into each other.

The double image that is produced in this way consists of a multiplicity of smaller versions of the whole. Therefore, it can be thought of as a fractal, a geometrical figure where every part has the same character as the whole (snowflakes are a common example for fractals in nature). This provides a useful way of understanding the structural patterning (not the quality) of *here* and *elsewhere*. In Flusser’s writing, these two spaces are not organized beside each other. For example, Flusser writes that the habitat of the vampyroteuthis ‘is not only the depths of something like the South China Sea but also, and perhaps even more so, the depths within ourselves’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 69). Thus, our inner abyss could be seen as a component part of the larger whole, the ocean. This ‘fractalization’, like a mirror held up to another,

goes both ways. In this sense Flusser writes ‘the vampyroteuthis inhabits our depths, and we its’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 71). Consequently, the abyss as a fractal slightly deviates from the mathematical figure: it is not entirely clear which abyss is the whole, and which is the component.

Flusser does not spell out what exactly he means with ‘our depths’, or ‘the depths of the ego’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 70). However, it seems to be strongly inspired by depth psychology (*Tiefenpsychologie*), which pays tribute to the unconscious for therapeutic purposes. For example, Flusser writes that the vampyroteuthis emerges psychoanalytically from our nightmares (Flusser [1987] 2012, 74). In this way, he taps into a body of literature that conceptualizes the abyss as the realm of unconsciousness. Philosopher and psychoanalyst Jon Mills gives a comprehensive account of how Hegel’s ideas on the abyss anticipated Freud’s notion of the unconscious. According to Mills, the ‘nightlike abyss’ in Hegel describes an unconscious intelligence, an incomprehensible and obscure depth from which consciousness and images may surface (Mills 2002, 6). This resonates strongly with how Flusser describes the sensing of the vampyroteuthis, as he figures that its reason is preconceptual (Flusser [1987] 2012, 47). In Mills’s view, the unconscious abyss constitutes ‘a necessary presupposition for imagination and for higher forms of intelligence’ (Mills 2002, 6). If the octopus dwells in the abyss, and if we take the octopus as a conceptual persona of alien nature, sensing stories from *elsewhere* requires openness to intelligences that are not fully controllable and available to consciousness.

Above, the mirror as a site for reflection (as in thought) has been proposed to conceptualize the simultaneity of *here* and *elsewhere*. Yet, the notion of reflection might be misleading since the abyss as place of eternal darkness can be hardly seen as producing an illuminating reflection. The abyss does not allow for light to travel straightly; it is not directly accessible. Tellingly, Flusser describes the mirror at one point as ‘distorting’ (Flusser [1987] 2012, 9). Therefore, it might be more accurate to think of the mirror as a locus of diffraction. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, diffraction designates ‘the spreading of waves around obstacles.’ Haraway takes this term from physics and introduces it in the humanities as a feminist reading strategy (van der Tuin, 2018, 99). According to Haraway, diffraction is:

record[ing] the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form, thereby giving rise to industries of [story-making about origins and truths]. Rather, diffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness (Haraway qtd. in Barad 2012, 51).

Diffraction defies the idea of origins and instead is process and transformation-oriented. To understand emergence from the abyss through the concept of diffraction helps to conceptualize the complex situation of the (in)availability of alien nature. The idea of diffraction metaphorically elucidates that it

is only through materialization and emergence that images, imageries and imaginations of an alien nature become available to us; it is always a second-hand experience. In that regard, Haraway's tentacular multispecies are a beautiful expansion of Flusser's vampyroteuthis. They are continuously evolving, metamorphosing and transmogrifying. Thereby they embody the notion of emerging from the abyss and diffraction.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that in order to think posthumanly *with* nature, in order for us to sense stories from *elsewhere*, it may prove highly innovative and generative to imagine non-human conceptual personae as voices of an alien nature. Therefore, this paper can be seen as an elaboration of the epigraph: '[i]t matters what ideas we use to think of other ideas', which for the purpose of this paper might be rewritten as 'it matters what conceptual personae we use to think with nature.' Tentacular creatures are resourceful as conceptual personae since they allow us to imagine situated being and intra-active emerging in materially specific other spaces. Their way of sensing and making sense of the world is radically different from how we think. Thus, their alien embodiments may spark our imagination of posthuman modes of being-in-the-world.

To grasp this complex and seemingly paradoxical situation of the posthuman conceptual persona as being available to our imagination and totally alien to us at the same time, different spatial orders and modes of traveling have been proposed. Figuring them as heterotopic mirror provides a way of comprehending the projective *elsewhere* of alien nature as always already implicated in the physical embodiment of the *here*. More precisely, the spatial arrangements of *here* and *elsewhere* can be understood as embedded in each other by understanding octopodal species, in a Flusserian manner, as a double mirror: a constellation of reflecting surfaces that produces an infinite amount of images nested into each other. As the alien *elsewhere* is part of the reality of the *here*, the possibility for nomadic traveling back and forth between *here* and *elsewhere* is given. This dynamic tension between the known and the unknowable posthuman conceptual personae lends itself to developing, modifying, and reversing concepts. Yet, understanding the world from a truly alien perspective remains per definition impossible. Tentacular personae are not vehicles that simply displace the truth from *elsewhere* to *here*. To better understand what they can do, I have proposed the idea of emerging from the abyss as diffraction, where diffraction designates a form of traveling that already includes alteration. As it is the case with the fictional computer Deep Thought from the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, the octopodal conceptual personae will not be able to give a humanly understandable 'Ultimate Answer'. However, it is precisely by acknowledging the failure of total intelligibility and control, the persistent element of unspeakability, that makes it intriguing and revolutionary to think with alien nature. Possibly, it is the beginning of a counter narrative to ongoing practices of colonizing nature.

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¹ The term 'anthropocene' has been first popularized by Paul Crutzen in 'Geology of Mankind.' 2002. *Nature* 415 (6867): 23. See also, e.g. Waters, C. N., J. Zalasiewicz, C. Summerhayes, A. D. Barnosky, C. Poirier, A. Ga Uszka, A. Cearreta, M. Edgeworth, E. C. Ellis, M. Ellis, C. Jeandel, R. Leinfelder, J. R. McNeill, D. D. Richter, W. Steffen, J. Syvitski, D. Vidas, M. Wagemann, M. Williams, A. Zhisheng, J. Grinevald, E. Odada, N. Oreskes, and A. P. Wolfe. 2016. 'The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene.' *Science* 351 (6269). or Edwards, Lucy. 2015. 'What Is the Anthropocene?' *Eos* 95. The anthropocene – although today very controversial and understood in many different ways – in Crutzen referred to the historical time starting with the industrial revolution and is constituted by phenomena such as humanly induced carbon emissions, global warming, growing population, deforestation, and interventions into water ecologies, all of which will make the geological layer of this epoch notably distinct from previous ones.

² For example, the "epic fail" campaign by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) posted 2017 videos that are titled and conclude with 'save our water', (World Wildlife Fund. 'Save Our Water – WWF PSA Campaign.' YouTube. March 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p24LVYYdF4>) and 'protect our forest' (World Wildlife Fund. 'Protect Our Forests – WWF PSA Campaign.' YouTube. March 20, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCzV7L0maKs>).