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Peace and Technology. Michel Serres

Abstract: The article envisages a reconsideration of Michel Serres' theoretical insights that are deeply connected to the exponential development of contemporary technology. Being especially focused on the ethical and creative dimension of discourse, the philosopher (concomitantly a scientist and an essayist) tries to recapture the post-humanist conceptual frames through a different kind of terminology, underlining especially the fertility of humanity's strong disavowal of violence and the joyful possibility of living in the most peaceful social dynamic that people have ever known.

Keywords: Biotechnology; Philosophy; Michel Serres; Ethic; Processuality; Simondon; Morphology; Plurality; Totipotency.

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He teaches at the Sorbonne, but you can watch him on YouTube, easily-intelligently problematizing immortality (he stresses, first of all, the main lesson of our times: humanity has to assume the whole responsibility for every macro/micro act: we are nature, we are synths, we literally make nature, we are being made by it, and this is pure happiness). The conceptual fauna of Michel Serres' philosophy is deeply connected, first of all, to the '60s and 70s spectrum of scientists and philosophers, this highly encyclopedic and resourceful author being, at that time, a professor at the experimental University in Vincennes, together with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and others. But, before that, Michel Serres witnessed a disturbing ideological gradient (after World War II), enduring that kind of biased atmosphere even (or especially) when reading scientists' books/speeches, a fact that made him shift off his interests from biology to philosophy. He often explains his options insisting on a feeling of deep solitude (like Bergson – mocked almost all his life by his colleagues, remaining in a work-in-progress smooth flow thought). Let me quote from Serres: "He is well aware of the exclusion, wandering outside the city with its closed gates, he is not of this world. He is well aware of persecution: here I am alone on



earth, excluded by unanimous agreement. Excluded by a combat, by the general will. Henceforth I have only myself as a resource. Can he survive other way? Can one be auto-parasitic? Reveries: having only myself to feed. No, no, it's not impossible,¹ given the necessity of not accepting a hardcore, semi-Nazi scientific orientation or a radical Marxist one. A voice of great, formatting joy in philosophical thought, Michel Serres offers, at the deepest levels, a completely new style of writing and thinking.

I often think that this author is completely underrated, taking into account the positivity of his ethical positions and his very up-to-date conceptual florilegium related to technology. At the same time, I understand his distances to winning big fun crowds that would preach his ethics, Michel Serres choosing, actually, the most serene and, of course, honest life an intellectual could ever built for himself: that of a writer and of a teacher simultaneously.

There is a rich and veritable continuity, for Serres, between science, literature and philosophy, each terrain being in a comical-tricky way surveyed by Hermes – the god of information, the new “teen god” replacing Prometheus – the utilitarian, efficient, practical and earthy figure. Technology has transformed us into information dealers, as a Romanian artist has described himself. This edgy negotiation related to knowledge actually takes space to the detriment of that abundance of both desire (as in pleasure) and necessity from which we were born: eternal noise. Fighting noise involves building an ethnic, an astonishing, multi-diverse and open one (the open totality of Bergson? Or, maybe, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's saying *Let us create*

extraordinary words!, and considering the respect that Serres has for the two philosophers: “Maybe the radical origin of things is really that difference”²).

A very complex manifesto for proto-posthumanist philosophy, *The Parasite* advances not only some very deep poetical dynamics of behavior managing our existential show of flows, but also a very specific view on how technology could de-synchronize the human being in a healthy or even spiritual way. Actually, everything connected to disparity joins the conceptual spectrum of Serres: we are all parasites, pregnant women hold parasites in their wombs – until they are educated and become adults, we are the parasites of our lovers, until everything consumes itself, simultaneously generating new possibilities and insights. Everything becomes a process of emotional *exuviae*. Along this magnificent *processuality*, the human being, which is “always taking, never giving,”³ as Michel Serres notes, underlining the fact that “the societies of giving have disappeared, and even in Antiquity they were thought to be divine,”⁴ the most ardent problem is that of cruelty and violence. We are the only species, besides that of rats, which actually kills its members. A philosophy of the *adjective*,⁵ resisting *noise*, preaching, at the same time, its multipolar greatness that implies a total openness to what is new, has very contemporary concerns. If grace comes only in the middle, as a Buddhist would also say (actually, exercises of oriental meditation are explained by Serres very pragmatically: the social context was so tough that the need for inventing hardcore practices, putting the body into brackets, became an urgency), if *the third/the tertium* only, that sees each member of a binary



relation as double, is a threshold towards the end, both love or peace, built on complex-intelligent grounds, are the essentials of Serres' philosophy. The French theorist works with very concrete concepts, grafted on those miraculous present-future insights that reevaluate the power of technology. We just need to remember that each level of knowledge represents a constant and hungry search for its affinities through this constructive-destructive game.⁶ Speaking of *noise*, Serres claims that "[i]t must be included and excluded. This is both the story of rats and that of a complex system. Computer science and anthropology are joined together."⁷ Motherless/fatherless – the working entity (a philosopher, an artist, a writer, an experimental teacher, an alchemist, a scientist, an anthropologist, a curator etc., at once) is a serene machine of thinking, away from harmony, but always under the spell of its new approximations related to cosmic magic developments.

The Neolithic Age transformed the relationship human beings had with food ("You didn't eat so often or so well, or together before the miraculous Neolithic Age!"⁸) and feasts. It was the period that catalyzed wedding parties and also the period of the first man, who *territorialized* his parcel of land, "gave rise to his assassin,"⁹ humanity's techniques of excessive comforting engendering terrorism as we speak. We could aim, though, for something authentic in the name of the joy: the idea of working – inventing concepts, affects or, in other words, facing out life's novelty in a proper way.

This century's news definitely concerns technology, mainly biotechnology, producing a vast array of concerns, as many exponential discoveries generated

during the twentieth century (the initial resistance to the contraceptive pill or to legal abortion, etc. – profoundly relaxing afterwards women's affectivity, issues discussed by Françoise Dolto). In the era of Hermes – trafficker of information –, we face the problem of *finding a logos*, beyond the Statesman's measurements in the name of law alone.¹⁰ The transient body, "neither static nor homeostatic, but homeorhetic that flows and remains stable in the continual collapse of its banks and the irreversible erosion of the mountains around"¹¹ becomes a *converter* beyond the boundaries of rational representation. Unthought, or almost inconceivable through strong, freezing systematic lens, the body has now the possibility of escaping Mars' rough tendencies of dealing with any ontological clog. There's a pure, almost naive openness that thickens this possibility of experimenting eternal happiness (in the detriment of the warrior's delirium), through the knowledge of Venus – representing the creative sensuousness or intelligence's constant grace. Simondon, the engineer of philosophy, uses the term "metastability." Serres will name it "homeorhesis," the pragmatic target of both concepts embracing the amazing, accelerated or slowed down, variation of the universe's *morphology*, as Manuel de Landa would put it.

A veritable poetical manual about *flow*, subsuming the contiguity between science and philosophy, *The Birth of Physics* traces the first genealogy (in Nietzsche's terms) or the first archeology (in Foucault's terms) of science. The crucial element that set aside physicians or scientists, according to Serres, was their acuity in relation to *turbulence, disruptive elements, inequality, deviation, unbalance, flow, rupture, vortex*, hence



the idea of disequilibrium. As a whole series of theorists, from Meister Eckhart, Duns Scotus to Whitehead, Deleuze or De Landa underline: it was precisely laziness/the idea of sacredness (which hides pure violence and fear) in relation to chaos that bred the idea of *the negative*. Michel Serres asserts in his interventions that the only evil is unhealthy/aggressive gesture. Within this context, the exponential transfiguration of technology has led to oddly limited ways of thinking, and our biggest challenge would now be that of establishing an accurate and intelligent way to face this extraordinary era of technological quasi-abundance.

Favoring Archimedes' first attempt to mediate the relation with matter,¹² very reactive to Euclidean static geometry or other absolutists scientists, Serres juggles with Lucretius' conceptual and poetic manifesto *De rerum naturae* – an anti-nihilistic hymn about the moving fullness of the atom; Epicure, Spinoza, Bergson, and Prigogine praising the same kind of *dispersive* perspective towards transcendence: “Meta-physics is a metaphoric physics.”¹³

Ethics: it either enchants or it should not exist at all. It involves full responsibility, evoking our singular and great chance of experimenting with the joy of thinking plurality. Let us not minimize immortality – this would be an adequate echo of Michel Serres' main book: *Hominescence* (or auto humanizing), a must for both our generation and the future ones. The constant life/death synchronicity happening at a molecular level in our bodies eludes the need for problematizing the human condition around that already mainstream Heideggerian concept of *being*, Serres insisting that we are rather ways of being,

matters. Molecular biology and biotechnology (the manipulation of genes) have, in general, reduced, as the philosopher states, the randomness of the unhealthy accident in our lives. We are literally experimenting on the plasticity of our bodies or, as in Spinoza's philosophy, we together are God affecting Himself. In order to raise our awareness, Serres points to some of the main technological switches that reflect this strong connection between the most joyful ethical-pragmatic life we could ever have/think of and scientists' inventiveness. We may remember here the communicational boom after the '60s, as mobiles and the world wide web had progressively became global: a moment of Hermes – the god of information, replacing Prometheus (the invention of tools was also a gate towards culture for humankind, as Serres alleges), highlighting, at same time, the biological disparities between our bodies and the bodies of our ancestors,¹⁴ or the synonymy between the social context and rough stoic practices.

Being a *virtuality*, a *possibility*, the body produces novelty only by training itself; hence, Serres' work ethics that “opens itself to the secret of life,” to “the secret of culture.”¹⁵ Omnipotent, *totipotent*, discovering, through quantum mechanics, that which is micro-legislating life, could the human being also dream, perhaps, that the DNA is actually a music that “vibrates like a chord and that its form witnesses this very vibration?”¹⁶ Serres calls this new meta-peaceful, intelligent, innovative, utilitarian (in a spiritual way also) being the Biosom: “this different neologism designates a body – soma – on the way of embracing the totality of life,” by building a “global house.”¹⁷



Even (or especially) the technological era's gimmicks are played on a spiritual/emotional ground. We have to radically choose between war and peace, love or hate, spreading knowledge or diminishing love (we must emphasize the fact that Serres was a big supporter of Wikipedia or any other global cultural data net). We are in the middle of a virtual, infinite time with our minds "free for thousands of discoveries."¹⁸ A special insight into our future social dynamics underpins the act of resurrection, beyond those rigid limits of the Illuminists, for example: the revival of education and culture in all possible ways. One of the most beautiful concepts targets

the idea of a "new generation of monasteries": "So the knowledge acquired through the new technology is becoming complete through a pedagogy of disconnection and an ethic of detachment. The future belongs to the contemplative order. We will be saved from a gradual downfall into an insects' society by the one who is going to invent a new generation of monasteries: this word signifies a paradoxical association of solitary and solidary people."¹⁹

Avoid debate and never write polemically, look for peace that is ecstasy: a very, very personal and singular engraving of technology, waiting to be implanted into our plastic genes.

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NOTES

1. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr, Introduction by Cary Wolfe, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 110.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 110.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 24.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 31.
5. "The real is not rational, it is impossible and miraculous," *ibidem*, p. 79.
6. "Oxygen feeds the heat of our lives, but aging is a process of oxidation," *ibidem*, p. 72.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 67.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 64.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 139.
10. "The proto-worker of space, the prosopeia of topology and nodes, the Weaver who works locally to join two worlds that are separated [...]" – Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, Translated by Joseph V. Harari & David F. Bell, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, p. 52.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 64
12. "It speaks incessantly of inequalities apprehended or else, on the other hand, beyond apprehension. Better, it is the deviations which allow him to speak, as in the case for every speaker. Which make him walk like every walker. Which make him reason straight, that it is to say slopingly. Against Platonism," Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, Translated by Jack Hawkes, Manchester, Clinamen Press, 2000, p. 22.



13. *Ibidem*, p. 43.
14. “If the first periods of women began around 14 years old, they now begin around 12 years old,” Michel Serres, *Hominescence*, Le Pennier, 2001 (“les premières règles féminines, qui apparaissent au tour de 14 ans, commencent aujourd’hui à 12,” p. 35, my translation).
15. *Ibidem*, “au secret de la vie,” “au secret de la culture,” pp. 56, 57.
16. *Ibidem*, “l’AND vibre comme une corde et que sa forme meme té moigne de cette vibration?,” p. 102 (my translation).
17. *Ibidem*, “cet autre néologisme désigne un corps – soma – en voie d’embrasser la totalité de la vie,” “une maison globale,” p. 126 (my translation).
18. *Ibidem*, “Savoir consiste alors non plus à se souvenir, mais a objectiver la mémoire, a la déposer dans les objets, a la faire glisser du corps dans des artefacts, laissant la tête libre pour mille découvertes,” p. 264 (my translation).
19. *Ibidem*, “L’enseignement par les nouvelles technologies se complète donc par une pédagogie de la déconnexion et par une éthique du détachement. L’avenir appartient aux ordres contemplatifs. Nous sauverons de la chute évolutive vers les sociétés d’insectes celui qui inventera une nouvelle génération de monastères: ce mot signifie une association paradoxale de solitaires et solidaires,” p. 306 (my translation).