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Introduction: Michel Serres and the times

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Over the past decades, interest in the work of Michel Serres, a longtime member of the *Académie Française* and renowned philosopher since the late 1960s, has undergone a renaissance. Without abandoning the philosophers dear to him (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Blaise Pascal, Lucretius, to name a few), his lyrical prose or the wide range of academic and non-academic perspectives that has characterized his ‘generalist’ style from the beginning, Serres’ writings today capture the urgencies of the times more convincingly than anyone else’s; from the digital revolution to the ecological crisis to the future of the university, *all* the crises that mark the world today are addressed in a lucid, affirmative and remarkably original analysis by Serres. Publishing an average of one book a year (reaching up to four volumes in 2015 alone), his immensely creative and diverse perspectives on the ‘times of crisis’, or ‘the contemporary’ as we will call it from now on, have already given him the status of a philosophy superstar in his home country. There, *all* of his books are now becoming bestsellers, especially since the publication of *Petite poucette* in 2007, which sold over 300,000 copies in France alone. In addition, Serres has a radio show in France (with Michel Polacco) which has up to four million listeners weekly. I do not know of any

philosopher, alive or dead, who has been able to attract such audiences, or whose ideas are so thoroughly grounded in our various intellectual traditions, yet so entangled with the here and now. Following the massive sales of *Petite poucette* (translated into English by Daniel Smith as *Thumbelina*) in France, Serres is gaining more and more readership in the Anglophone world. With a dozen volumes currently translated into English (there are over seventy titles available in French, so we are still talking about only a fraction of his oeuvre) and now a book series with Bloomsbury Press in which his philosophy is being explored, serious attempts are being undertaken to establish Serres, well into his eighties now, as a leading twenty-first-century philosopher. Finally.

A philosophy of the contemporary

This volume aims to explore the way Michel Serres thinks the contemporary, the way this has always been key to his thinking and the way this has intensified over the past decades. To do this, the contributors to the volume aim not so much to write ‘about’ Serres (‘explaining’ his thoughts) as to write ‘with’ him. In a way, their aim is to ‘work’ with his writings; to explore how they resonate with the world. This comes very close to the way Serres himself puts the philosophers, artists and scientists that interest him in step with the events and the experiences that he has lived through. From his first publication on Leibniz (*Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*, published in 1968), his breakthrough, it was clear that Serres was not impressed with the disciplinary (i.e. arbitrary and constraining) borders that are so important to academia today (more so than ever), but which in the end – of course – aim only at safeguarding a field of study, or the positions of power it secures. Being occupied with Leibniz while occupying Leibniz, Serres never limited his analyses to the reception of Leibniz in philosophy, to the themes dominant

in philosophy or even to the structures of twentieth-century academia. For Serres, the book is not opposed to the world, it has no subject (no particular idea functions as its essence) and it has no object (it has no strict relationship with its outside world). This means that rather than taking 'a book' as his point of departure, Serres, much like a proper premodern philosopher, begins by picking up the many different resonances which 'occur' as he reads the book and the world, or better, from which both the book and the world come to be. Starting from these resonances means that the philosopher is to analyse how the pink world paints the Panther Pink, while the Pink Panther paints the world pink (to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). Rather than having a subject or an object, philosophy is about the reading/writing of the concept (pink in this case) and empowering all the senses, and the aim of philosophy is then to map this concept across all of its appearances (in all that it *necessarily* resonates with). This is the original task of philosophy; to become aware of, *and* to realize, a wholly new world.

In order to train one's soul as a philosopher, one must wrap oneself around this world, and search for ways to live it. This is why Michel Serres always lived an adventurous life. Born in Aquitaine in the south of France in 1930, he was raised on the banks of the Garonne river, far removed from the intelligentsia in Paris. After naval academy, where he majored in mathematics and physics, and some years of travelling the seas of the world, the currents of the times carried him to further his study in philosophy and the humanities. Starting his academic career in Clermont-Ferrand, where he shared an office with Michel Foucault, he was asked by Foucault to come to Vincennes, at the margins of Paris, where he found his new home (and where the interview, later in this book, also took place). Nevertheless, Serres has spent much of his life travelling, teaching at many different universities around the globe. And notably, he always combines this with hiking, rock climbing and of course travelling the seven seas. This is a philosopher living a life, whose philosophy

is about thinking a life, whose ideas are inextricable from the river he grew up by, and from the exhilaration of climbing icy rocks.

The deep green and the bright blue have to be introduced into philosophy. For Serres, just as there is no world outside the book, there is no life 'outside' of philosophy. The tea houses in Rome matter to the tragedies of the Manhattan Project, as the thoughts of Empedocles matter to the ecological disasters taking place at the poles of our planet. Serres had to be there when the seas were dying (and he saw how we murdered them!). He experienced it through his own body. How could he not live (and die) through this, without rethinking Homer and Conrad? On the seas, Serres heard the wind cry for help, which once again showed that one never cries alone. Our companions are all around us (and not just in the 'species' that we can distinguish). We have only to search for ways to recognize them. The first task of philosophy is then to recognize such resonances, to feel them. Or, as Serres (2013, 37) puts it: 'I am initially what pain has made of my body; after that, long after, I am what I think' (*own translation*). This is what philosophy looks like, immediately moving away (in one simple and perfect stroke) from Cartesian dualism, the Cartesian Cogito and the Cartesian disregard of Nature, by offering us a wholly other alternative.

In one of his more recent books, Serres analyses the financial crisis, but he begins by saying something very important; namely, that the word 'crisis', coming from the Greek *krino*, actually means 'to judge'. He calls for the setting up of a new institution or tribunal in which the here and now, both visible (the stock market crisis) and invisible (the deep structures of capitalism), can be re-evaluated. Serres immediately adds that 'the crisis of all crises', being the ecological crisis, is in the end more central to our times than capitalism and modernism (which can best be regarded as the two horses that speed the ecological carriage . . . as expected, in the direction of a cliff). Reading the invisible, or deep structures that accompany the present, it doesn't take Serres very long to end up with René Descartes. Descartes (Serres 2012, 28), giving us the idea of the modern age, proposed that we become like 'the masters

and possessors of nature'. Of course, this idea reveals itself in many different forms in the ecological crisis as we witness it today. It encapsulates the dualism that lies at the heart of our complete and tragic misunderstanding of 'nature' (see also Serres [2017]). If the times so clearly ask us to set up an institution to evaluate all the crises that require judgement today, we *have* to take into account the many ideas, artworks and books that accompany our times, that cannot be left out of the equation when we map the crises in all of their complexity. (Of course, good ideas, artworks and books are necessarily timely, *id est*, they somehow always matter.)

This is what Serres sees as the task of philosophy: 'Philosophy is an anticipation of future thoughts and practices' (Serres and Latour 1990, 86). It has no power, like the sciences, but *in the name of the future* it has to speak up. It has to make use of its unrestrainable ability to compose 'a world, *in its totality, or in general, and in its most minute detail*' (168; emphasis in the original). And it has to offer this world, not just to academia, but to everyone. This book proposes thinking the contemporary with Michel Serres, to give birth to worlds of the here and now to which we have become blind.

To feel all the resonances, or to open up our minds to everything that happens with the times, the contributors to this volume, analyse various crises of the contemporary by situating Serres' institutions in the different crises of the contemporary. Serres wrote a great deal about how such institutions might be established in such a way as to give proper attention to the ecological crisis. Thinking the earth anew, Serres (2012, 31) distilled a concept and set up a new institution: 'This is what I call "Biogea", an archaic and new country, inert and alive, water, air, fire, the earth, the flora and fauna and all the living species.' This most fundamental new institution he called 'WAFEL', which stands for water, air, fire, earth and life. It is an institution which, through the sciences, the arts and philosophy (the different modes of thought available to us), could be given a voice that takes into account the earth as a whole, without being dominated by any elite (religious, capitalist or modernist).

The need for new institutions is a call for *transdisciplinary thinking* and for being occupied with the present as it occupies us, as I put it elsewhere (see Dolphijn 2012). In an older text, Serres (1982, 58) gives a timely example of why we need to open up all aspects of the present to our many different traditions in thought as it is only then that we can see the emergence of a new space, a new time. ‘No one can draw the edge of a cloud, the borderline of the aleatory where particles waver and melt, at least to our eyes. There a new time is being fired in the oven. On these totally new edges, which geometry and the art of drawing have abandoned, a new world will soon discover dissolution, atomic and molecular dissemination.’ Let us call on mythology, topology and new media art to teach us about these new times! We will never know what a body can do, but it is our responsibility to the earth, and to ourselves, to care, and thus to always question our presuppositions, to reach out to the unknown of the body, to the matters that matter.

A crisis is what matters

Throughout the book, important concepts that Michel Serres has been working with for decades (think of the parasite, *amis de vieillesse*, softness and hardness) serve as vital tools for analysis. These concepts are put to work in the movies we see, they appear in the buildings we live in, they traverse the institutions at which we teach and learn. To think the contemporary with the concepts that Serres has offered us, and not (implicitly or explicitly) with the Cartesian Dualist epistemologies that have obscured our vision, allows the contributors, careful readers of Serres from many different parts of academia, to *write the world as it occurs*, showing us this world to which we have been blind for so long. By asking the questions that only philosophy can ask, which means that we anticipate the knowledges and practices to come (as we read in the epigraph to this book), philosophy’s task now is to *raise the world that matters*, as a whole.

Raising the world that matters is impossible through critique. In an interview with Bruno Latour, Serres once said that '[a]n idea opposed to another idea is always the same idea, albeit affected by the negative sign. The more you oppose one another, the more you remain in the same framework of thought' (Serres and Latour 1990, 81). The dominance of Cartesian philosophy, modernist thinking or dualism cannot be shaken off by critiquing them. Rather, this is done by revealing the world that these traditions are hiding from us. Instead of commenting on the dualist others (Others), the affirmative approach that Serres takes inspires us to reveal the multiplicities, the noise, the flows of information that have made up our world from the start.

Serres aims to establish a materialist philosophy that could be considered a mathematical materialism (in the French tradition, à la Pascal) but that might better be called (after Leibniz) an algorithmic materialism, since it begins with the way information is emitted, received, stocked and processed (see also Serres in Braidotti and Dolphijn [2017, 13]). Starting with the algorithm and the way it traverses the organic and the inorganic, the mind and the body, nature and culture, the material and the immaterial, Serres neither accepts nor critiques the dualism of subject and object. His thinking traverses both (the subject and the object).

To be more precise (as this is an important issue), Serres (like Deleuze) *does not believe* in objects. The emergence of the object (which is to say our belief in them), he has stated many times (see, for instance, Serres [1995, 87]) should be considered the only identifiable difference between animal societies and our own. The object is invented to *stabilize* our relationships, to slow down the time of our revolutions. Isn't that exactly why first the church and then the state was so keen on creating objects, totems, places of worship, prisons and courthouses, making our histories slow? And isn't late capitalism, so focused on speeding up the processes of production, most of all known for having a fetish for just about every object imaginable? Serres is right when he concludes that there is no sacred without the sacred object, no war without an army and no

exchange without value. Making us believe in the object seems to be necessary for the operation of power in human societies. It surely explains that the late capitalist world we live in today, in contrast to the idea that it is characterized by speed, has by now come to an almost complete stop; immobile as a traffic jam. Capitalism and modernism are forcing us to look in the stone eyes of Medusa. A whole system of objectified belief is being created in order to keep the monetary machines running. The machines that benefit those in power.

Thinking with love

The petrifying power of capitalism and modernism (among others) have given us the petrifying forces of critique (as discussed above). To avoid looking into the eyes of Medusa, the contributions in this book are unwilling to comment upon the writings of Descartes, his subject position, his dualism, his view of nature. We walk on. Being true to life, to the forces of life, to the sensations that guide life and the pains that warn of death, this book focuses with Serres on the madness and the *sophrosyne* of that which we love, that which occupies us affirmatively, that which we care for and for which we take responsibility. In *Biogea*, Serres asks us to follow Empedocles, who thought in terms of love and hate, just as Spinoza, two millennia later, thought in terms of joy and sorrow. It is the same simple lesson: let us strive for love or joy and let us move away from hate or sorrow. Longing for *Biogea* means longing for the unified voice of the world, and the hope that knowledge and wisdom will once again function together (through new institutions, transdisciplinary analysis). Serres (2012, 75–6) thinks with Empedocles when he reviews the state of academia today, suggesting the necessary changes that life asks for: ‘Simple and easy, our old sciences rested on the analysis that separates and cuts up, on the cutting up that separates subjects from their objects. Hate? Difficult, global and connected, the life and Earth sciences presuppose communications, interferences,

translations, distributions and passages. Love?’ Not only the Garonne river but also the sea flows through Serres, resonates with all of him and thereby also flows through all of his thoughts. The sad conclusions that the sea is dying, therefore, *has* to play a role in all the ideas he proposes to us. It does not terrify him, rather, it forces him to rethink the sea anew. The only way to give birth to a new sea is to love it dearly. Thus, we have to set up the new institution to *think with* the sea, to find the allies, the resonances, that together can reveal a new sea. Biogea, where humans and the world live in symbiosis.

This counts first and foremost for the way we, in our day and age, have been alienated from the world we live that ‘rethinking nature’ is actually what shows our human impotence at its (Freudian) best. Let us therefore give rise to a new world, a new university and a new (posthuman/nonhuman) society. A new world, which philosophy has to compose in its finest detail. It is a new world that we love, that we occupy while it occupies us and that is offered to all as a gift from the future.

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