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Michel Serres and Media Theory: An Introduction

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Abstract

This short article introduces the special section, ‘Michel Serres and Media Theory’.

Keywords

Michel Serres, media theory

No single word, neither substantive nor verb, no domain or specialty alone characterises, at least for the moment, the nature of my work.
I only describe relationships.
For the moment, let’s be content with saying it’s ‘a general theory of relations’.
(Serres and Latour, 1995: 127)

Commentators on Michel Serres (1930–2019), as Steven Connor (2004) reminds us, “are fond of observing [that] his work is concerned with connections, mediations and passages...[inhabiting] intermediary spaces: between culture and science, between past and present, myth and physics (Connor, 2004). A former student of both mathematics and philosophy, Michel Serres emphasised the duality of his training (and the effort to transcend duality) throughout his career, influenced as much by the Bourbaki group of mathematicians as he was by Lucretius, Plato, Leibniz, Comte and Bergson, and interested in a wide range of developments in structural mathematics, information theory, thermodynamics, chaos theory, biology and ecology. According to Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier (2019), these foundations led Serres to address the classical philosophical concepts of form and relation through the lens of contemporary scientific developments in a lifelong effort to develop a theory of interference, networks and

transdisciplinarity (see Osborne et al., 2015). For N. Katherine Hayles (1988), however, there remains something contradictory about Serres' attempt to develop universal theories of fragmentation and to emphasise synthesis and disruption simultaneously.

Although topology (see Lury et al., 2012) and spatial-temporal relations remained a recurrent interest throughout his career, Connor (2004) identifies three broad phases to Serres' writings: the projection phase of the 60s and 70s in which he theorises and speculates about the links between such spaces; the immersive phase of the 80s in which he plunges into these unpredictable milieus already theoretically mapped out in his earlier phase; and the later synthesis phase from the 90s onwards in which he strives to articulate the imbrication of the local and the global. The essays in this collection span the various phases of Serres' oeuvre, some focusing on particular texts or concepts, others taking a wider view, all engaging critically with Serres' contribution to media theory.

For Timothy Barker, Serres' significance for English speaking media theory has primarily been for turning attention away from signification, language and representation and towards materiality, intermingling and sense experience, with his work on noise and the parasite being probably the most well-known. And in Barker's contribution to this issue, he thinks through the potential of Serres' work on messengers to change the way we are able to think of communication and miscommunication (all the more urgent an endeavour given the contemporary media-political climate).

Even more urgently, for Stephen Crocker, Serres' philosophy of viruses, noise (the 'third person' of communication) and pollution also potentially opens up a channel of communication in which to respond to nature's response to us in the context of the Anthropocene, confronting as it does our guiding ideological impulses to immediacy and control over nature and noise-free transmission.

Thomas Sutherland's contribution focuses on Serres' *Hermes* series of books to argue for the valuable contribution they make to a "thoroughgoing philosophical account of communication and mediation" and to a media theory "better able to reckon with its own status as a mediated (and mediating) object" in the face of pressures on media

theorists to keep up with media-technical developments and to conform to methodological positivism.

Ian Tucker focuses more on Serres' work on bodies and technologies, and his elaboration in particular of concepts such as relationality, noise, bodies, sense and data, to make sense of the contemporary issues of algorithmic appropriation (through 'pollution') and artificial intelligence (especially when assessed in terms of its inventiveness rather than its proficiency).

In light of some lesser-known works, Vera Bühlmann considers how Serres interrogates ways of seeing, thinking and knowing, suggests human intelligence is but a subspecies of artificial intelligence, and reconsiders the status of knowledge in relation to and before the background of non-knowledge.

John Phillips focuses upon Serres' identification of connections and crossings between scientific and mythological forms of knowledge and the extent to which they interfere with and influence one another, and upon Serres' meditations on the fate of the (post)human in the historical transition from economies of production to technologies of mediation.

And the issue ends with a reprint of Cary Wolfe's introduction to the 2007 edition of Lawrence R. Schehr's 1982 English translation of Serres' *The Parasite*, republished as the first volume in Wolfe's Posthumanities series with the University of Minnesota Press. Wolfe's introduction is significant for reframing *The Parasite* within a wider scholarly context, positioning it as a pioneering work in systems theory and posthumanist studies as well as information theory and poststructuralism.

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