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Stephen Crocker

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**“As Soon as We Are
Two There is a Medium”:
Michel Serres’ Philosophy
of Relations**

STEPHEN CROCKER

Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

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Abstract

Michel Serres did not identify with any discipline or method of analysis. He described his work as a general theory of relation. In this essay I show how Serres’ theory of relations questions the guiding ideological impulses of our age – desire for immediacy in the actualization of our plans, particularly in our control of nature, and noise-free transmission in our communication systems. Serres’ analyses of the mediating work of viruses, noises, and pollution takes us beyond the fields of human communication and language and challenges our most basic ontological ideas and philosophical oppositions such as subject and object, nature and culture, signal and noise.

Keywords

Media theory, theory of relations, signal and noise, philosophy of nature, Anthropocene

Michel Serres was a wildly interdisciplinary thinker. From his early *Hermes* work to his late reflections on biosemiotics and the Anthropocene, his insights have cut across the fields of science, philosophy and literature. His work brings information theory together with jurisprudence, environmental philosophy, biology, globalization, ancient theories of physical matter and contemporary ideas of chaos and thermodynamics. He wrote books on topics as diverse as the founding of Rome and the cell phone culture of Millennials.

In an era of experts, Serres was a generalist. He distanced himself from any label that tried to pin him to a discipline or any object of analysis, such as literature or science. He was equally cautious of any fixed method of analysis to navigate the complexity – “Repeating a method, what laziness”, he remarked in *Troubadour of Knowledge* (Serres, 1997: 100).

If there is neither a method nor single object of analysis – the classical world, literature, or nature – that defines Serres’ thought, is there any unifying theme? In interviews, Serres explained to his interlocutors that what unifies his work is a theory of relations and connections. “My work has only one title, one subject: connection’ (Zouzani, 2003: 203).

To Bruno Latour he explained that: “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).

Serres’ philosophy of relations brings us into the uncharted philosophical terrain that lies between familiar oppositions such as sender and receiver, subject and object, local and global, sensible and the intelligible. His concepts describe the fine detail and inner workings of middles, medians and transformative in-between spaces. His books are filled with images of things intertwined: ropes, airport runways, switching stations, roundtables, eddies, crowds, packs, hordes on the move.

Serres’ philosophy of connection is written with a sense of political and ecological urgency. Global information systems and communication networks have allowed us to act on the world as a whole. The global reach of pollution, atomic energy, weather science, and genetics, to name just a few ‘world-objects’, means that our actions act on the whole of the world. As climate change and the discourse on the Anthropocene has recently made clear though, the world, or nature is not simply our object to act upon. It acts back on us and responds to our action in ways we had not anticipated. If the earth was our object to do things to, we have now become the object of our objects. We have become dependent on the actions of systems that we had thought our machines had made dependent on us. In this world, the philosophical dualism of active subjects and passive objects with which we divide up the real misses the world-wide

entanglements in which we now find ourselves. Serres’ philosophy of connection is an attempt to “escape the hell of dualism” (Serres, 1997b: 131) that is leading us toward a dangerous confrontation of a world-subject confronting a world-object and to reorient thinking around the medium or milieu they share.

A new kind of human being

In several of his post 1990’s works such as *Angels*, *Atlas*, *Hominesence* and *Thumbelina*, Serres addresses the effects of globalizing communication technologies and digital media such as the internet, the cell phone, satellite. The tone of these books is often McLuhanesque in the way that they lead the reader from questions about the capacities of communication media to larger cosmological changes in the materiality of knowledge, our relation to nature, to others and our image of mind and reason.

Like Marshall McLuhan, Serres is interested in the way that the user is used by the medium; i.e., the way that we have been changed by our media. Serres says that our machines have transported us from the age of Prometheus to Hermes, from an era of labor in which energy is captured through localized forms of muscle and mechanical force, to one where energy is regulated by global, de-centered information systems that act on the whole of humanity and the whole of the Earth at once. While our tools have knit the world together into a single integrated totality, our conceptual architecture remains rooted in mechanical and Cartesian ideas of subjects and objects, centers and periphery, things active and passive. Serres sees the work of philosophy or thinking as an anticipation of future thoughts and practices (Serres and Latour, 1995: 86) capable of understanding how our relation to ourselves and to nature is altered and shaped by the rise of centerless information systems that place the whole of humanity in touch with the whole of the Earth.

His 2012 book *Thumbelina*, a bestseller in France, is a popularized version of many of these ideas. It celebrates millennials or ‘digital natives’ as a new kind of human being who have been shaped by the capacities of digital media.

Without us even realizing it, a new kind of human being was born in the brief period of time that separates us from the 1970s. He or she no longer has the same body or the same life expectancy. They no longer

communicate in the same way; they no longer perceive the same world; they no longer live in the same Nature or inhabit the same space (Serres, 2012: 7).

Serres (here again, like McLuhan) traces the lineage of these new human types back to Humphrey Potter, the 18th Century boy worker who accidentally invented cybernetics when he “used the string of his top to tie together, on the arm of a steam engine, the inlet and exhaust valves that he had been hired to activate by hand. Trying to avoid a boring job so he could play, Potter invented, while suppressing his slavery, a kind of feedback loop” (Serres, 2012: 48).

In this early feedback mechanism, the basis of the later more sophisticated governor of James Watts’ steam engine, an output of energy is returned as a source of input. Between input and output now lies a channel of information that senses and modulates the force that passes through the machine.

Humphrey Potter’s invention leads us into a cybernetic world of recursive information systems where ‘hard’ mechanical force is governed by a ‘soft’ communication and control apparatus. From this point on, information systems, rather than muscles and ropes, regulate the transformation of heat into energy.

The industrial revolution’s capture of thermal force through resonating intervals of information leads everywhere to the rise of ‘world objects’ which connect local practices and living systems to complex global systems of control.

These include “A satellite for speed, an atomic bomb for energy, the Internet for space, and nuclear waste for time...” (Serres, 2006).

The problem is that world objects are not simply ob-jects, in the sense we usually give to that term; i.e. separate from us and available for our use. They change the context and capacity of our actions. They act on us: “We now live in those world-objects as we live in the world” (Serres, 2006). We miss what is happening here if we still see ourselves as subjects subjecting nature to our designs. Climate change and the Anthropocene show that “we are now the objects of our objects, which makes our objects in some sense subjects” (Serres, 2006).

The unwieldy imprecision of these formulations – subjects cum objects of their objects – underlies the limited capacity of subject-object dialectics to describe the complicated intertwining we now share with the living systems on which we depend because, as Serres puts it to Bruno Latour, “relations outnumber subjects or objects” (Serres and Latour, 1995: 107). To step back and “master the mastery” (Serres, 2006), to avoid the confrontation of a global subject up against a global object, we need to think back from the dichotomy of subjects and objects to the milieu they both share and are acted upon. In other words, we need a better philosophy of relations and connections.

The miracle of order from noise

It is in his work on noise that Serres deals most directly with the affective role that middles and media play in shaping communicants and their messages (Crocker, 2013). Latour has described “Serres’ systematic exploration of all the metaphors, myths and data, from the birth of Venus out of the sea to the bifurcations in Besnard’s cells, that allow him to understand those fringes, that he calls a miracle, that is order from noise” (Latour, 1988: 94).

Serres sees in the analysis of communicative noise a way out of atomistic ontologies and into a wide-ranging philosophy of connections and relations. Serres’ philosophy of noisy mediation questions the guiding ideological impulses of our age – desire for im-mediacy in the actualization of our plans, particularly in our control of nature, and noise-free transmission in our communication systems. Serres’ analyses of viruses, noises, and pollution takes us beyond the fields of human communication and language and challenges our most basic ontological ideas and philosophical oppositions, such as subject and object, nature and culture, signal and noise.

Information moves. It is communicated from senders to receivers, and from points of transmission to points of reception. We commonly imagine this movement as possessing a binary structure with a beginning and an end. A message is moved from a point of origin occupied by the sender to the terminal point of the receiver. In a successful communication, transmission and reception resemble one another and the medium remains a neutral conduit. “Perfect, successful, optimum communication no

longer includes any mediation. And the channel disappears into immediacy” (Serres, 1982: 79).

In *The Course on General Linguistics*, for example, Ferdinand de Saussure gives us an influential model of sender and receiver sharing messages that helped shape, among other things, Shannon and Weaver’s mathematical model of information theory (Daylight, 2017). In this simple image, a phonation leaves the mouth of the speaker and enters the ear of the other as an audition.



Figure 1: (Saussure, 2011: 12)

Stuart Hall pointed out that this simplistic model of communication lacked a social and political dimension to show how the message encoded passes through a technical infrastructure, relations of production and frameworks of meaning that change the message in important ways (Hall, 1991). Communication requires a medium which is not only a conduit between messages but also what Serres calls a ‘space of transformation’ which affects what is communicated. Saussure’s simple image of sender and receiver assumes that the communicants are in control of a neutral, ‘perfect mediation’, a medium that paradoxically disappears in the act of communicating and itself adds nothing to the communicants or message.

Serres summarizes the basic premises of this image of communicative immediacy:

Given: two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate, it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation (Serres, 1982: 79).

But communicants do not control the medium they enter and share when they exchange words or anything else for that matter. A message has to move through a middle that is not in the possession of either the sender or receiver. “As soon as we are two, there is a medium between us” (Serres, 1982: 70).

Each middle has its own distinct properties that affect the message in precise ways. In order to create the kind of liberal ideal of a noise-free circuit of communication, one that Jürgen Habermas called an “ideal-speech situation”, sender and receiver need to control their milieu and ward off distortion and coercion.

To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man. The most profound dialectical problem is not the Other, who is only a variety – or a variation – of the Same, it is the problem of the third man (Serres, 1982a: 66-67).

In Serres’ image of communication, noise is the ‘third person’ lurking in the circuit shared by senders and receivers, threatening any ideal-speech situation. In order to communicate, sender and receiver have to enter into this ‘third world’ and go up against the racket of their shared milieu.

Noise, then, is more complex and interesting than might first seem. It is not exactly a lack of communication; it indicates the contribution made by the medium shared by communicants. Any message must pass through a medium. The medium generates effects that stick to the message as noise. Noise, therefore, is an ineradicable feature of any communication. A message is something like a ‘compromise formation’ – a bit of message and a bit of medium. Each new innovation in media promises to minimize noise and clarify the signal, but inevitably generates its own kind of noise. In short, there is always a context of communication, or an environment, and so there is always a noisy third term.

Instead of asking how a clear signal gets distorted, Serres asks how any signal emerges from noise in the first place. *Genesis* (1997), a work on chaos and complexity, “should have been called Noise” (Serres and Latour, 1995: 74). Serres sees noise as not simply an unwelcome intrusion in communication, but as its facilitating condition. He writes:

“We are surrounded by noise. We are in the noises of the world, and we cannot close our door to their reception. In the beginning is the noise. The real seems to me to be stochastically regular” (Serres, 1982: 126). And in *Genesis*, “Cognition is subtraction of the noise received and of the noise made by the subject...There is noise in being and in appearing. It crosses the most prominent divisions of philosophy and makes a mockery of its criteria. It is in being and in knowing. It is in the real, and in the sign, already” (Serres, 1997b: 61).

The Parasite, one of Serres’ best known works, pursues this question of the ‘productive’ role of medial noise across the fields of sociology, biology and information theory. This work exemplifies the holistic spirit of Serres’ interest in media, which is not restricted to language and messages but opens out on to a more general metaphysical and ontological theory of how anything at all comes to be and to exist through a set of communicative relations.

I will just select a few themes here to illustrate the basic idea of parasitic noise and then go on to address the expanded idea of media, mediation and the theory of relations that emerges here.

Parasitism might seem like an odd way into a philosophy of media. It helps first to recall that in French, the word ‘parasite’ can refer to an organism that lives off a host, a social ‘free loader’ who takes and gives nothing in turn, or stochastic ‘noise’ in a communication circuit. These very different senses all share an idea of ‘interference’. Whether biological, social, or informational, the parasite flourishes by interfering in some already established circuit of exchange that joins a guest and host, or a sender and receiver. Its presence compels us either to try to expel the intrusive pest, or to readjust our internal workings so that we can accommodate its needs and live with it.

In a loud bar, I elevate my voice and speak only in those sentences that can rise above the din. As I write, the world is ravaged by the covid-19 parasite. Will we eradicate the virus or learn to live with an acceptable level of contamination, variants, and spread, caseload, carrying capacities, etc.?

A virus shares with a host organism the same relation that noise shares with a communication circuit. In each, case, a system of exchange between two, such as

subject and object, guest and host, sender and receiver, forms around the exclusion of an unwanted third that occupies the medium upon which they depend.

Serres draws on Henri Atlan’s theory of self-organization which shows how noise prompts a system to reorganize in a more complex form that incorporates the noise. In the field of media studies, we find an analogous idea in Jay Bolter and Robert Grusin’s (1999) concept of ‘remediation’. Since at least the Renaissance, each new representational medium emerges through an effort to provide immediate access to the real by correcting the inefficient mediation of the technology that preceded it. From mathematical perspective to artificial intelligence algorithms, innovations in media promise to deliver the same content as the preceding technology only more ‘immediately’, which is to say without the interference and distortion in which a signal had been trapped. The laptop accomplishes what the portable computer was supposed to, just as the smart-phone or -watch puts us in touch with everything the laptop promised but failed to deliver.

Whether biologic or informational, noise compels communicants to reorganize their relations. But whether noise indicates a lack or surplus of information depends on one’s position in the listening chain. After all, noise is interference only for the one who wishes to transmit a clear signal. The designated receiver or any interceptor may well consider medial noise an important part of the information packet that is transmitted along a channel.

For the sender who wants to convey a specific message, medial noise is interference that diminishes the clarity of their signal. For the receiver, however noise generated by the medium can also be an important hermeneutic source of information about the transmission. The information that we inadvertently communicate is often more important than our intended message. Freudian slips give us extra insight into ourselves and others. In the detection of forgery, information accidentally transmitted in a document – the graphite in Emily Dickinson’s pencil – is often more important than its written content. Traces of feces and epidermals left in cave dust tells us more about the lives of Neanderthals than the cave paintings they left behind, just as cookies and algorithms track the noisy metadata we generate in our passage through cyberspace.

The inclusion of this third element of the communication circuit also upsets our common ideas of activity and passivity. It means that, to actively transmit a signal, we first have to passively open ourselves to the effects of the medium in which it occurs.

“Relations spawn objects, not vice versa”

In these ways, the analysis of parasitic and medial noise leads us to question how anything at all comes to exist through mediated relations with another. A parasite – whether social, informatic or biological is a relational being. It acts on an existing system of relations. It instates itself between a point of transmission and one of reception. It does not act directly on the sender or receiver. It occupies the relation that connects them. The parasite does not act directly on things, but on relations that bind things. Recalling a phrase of Michel Foucault’s, we might say that it involves an “action on action”, or even more precise, a relation to relation (Foucault, 1982). The biofilm of microbes forms where my hand regularly touches the garbage can. It depends upon the ongoing relation to garbage that I have established in my home. Microbes diminish or flourish depending on this relation. I might intensify my sanitation practices or learn to accept a certain level of filth in my surroundings. Any routinization of a relation is based on the infrastructure of this third world of parasitic opportunity.

Serres’ interest is not in virology as such. It is in the way that parasitism helps us understand the way relations function in a system of exchange and so helps us think beyond the restricted horizon of ‘ontology’. “The theory of being, ontology, brings us to atoms. The theory of relations brings us to the parasite” (Serres, 1982: 185).

‘Ontology’ in the sense used here refers to a metaphysics and cosmology that sees the world composed of essences and entities which are first of all self-identical and complete, before they enter into relations and make use of media. In ‘ontology’, things come first, and relations come second. Parasitism, on the other hand, leads us to an image of a world in which there are always already relations at work that are opened to further mutation and parasitism. Viral parasites offer an especially rich image of this active and productive relationality since a virus has no DNA of its own and lacks the life-defining capacity to replicate itself. It is a relational entity in the sense that it can only live in relation to some already existing network of forces which it helps mutate.

The logic of parasitism shows us how, in any biological or communicative exchange, things both act and are acted upon. The ‘substantive properties’ and agency of any particular thing emerges from the capacities of the other objects on which it depends. Anything that acts opens itself to being acted upon. Serres develops from these ideas the concept of the ‘quasi-object’ as one way to think outside the ‘atomism’ of subjects and objects. Instead of imagining a dichotomy of subject and object, we might say that anything can be a ‘subject’ to the extent that it can act and elicit a response from another thing. It is, in turn, an ‘object’ to the extent that it can be acted upon by something else. Any given entity might have some ratio of these capacities depending on its position in a system of exchange. The quasi-object is made up of the capacities of subjects and objects: “The quasi-object itself is a subject. The subject can be a quasi-object” (Serres, 1982: 233).

Serres gives, as an example of a quasi-object, the action of a football in play. In the context of the game, the ball becomes a kind of ‘subject’ that elicits a limited range of responses from the players. The player is, in a sense, the object of the ball.

The ball isn’t there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance” (Serres, 1982: 226).

Just as a signal emerges from a noisy background, in this post-ontology of relation entities, substances and capacities emerge from this network of relations that make them possible. In other words: “Relations spawn objects, beings and acts, not vice versa” (Serres and Latour, 1995: 107). Serres explains that in this relational milieu “there are no instances. Or more correctly, instances, systems, banks, and so forth are analyzable in turn as exchangers, paths, translations and so forth” (Serres, 1982: 73).

These ideas play a central role in Bruno Latour’s development of Actor Network Theory in which any given thing that acts requires the agency of other things to realize its capacities, and is then, in its turn, a means through which other things pursue their ends:

Now it is the actor, which so far in this book was kept as a point, an atom, or a source, that has to be flattened out and forced to take a star-like shape. What should we call this newly “flattened” element? . . . Why not use actor-network? . . . an actor-network is what is made to act by a large star-shaped web of mediators flowing in and out of it. It is made to exist by its many ties: attachments are first, actors are second” (Latour, 2008: 217).

While much of late-twentieth century philosophy and social theory emphasized the social and linguistic construction of reality, Serres’ philosophy of relations opens up a way into a new kind of realism that accounts for the role of nature and non-human objects as actors and communicants in our affairs. His work in this area has influenced not only Actor Network Theory, but many other kinds of speculative realism and ‘object-oriented ontology’ that try to overcome the restrictive straight-jacket of a subject-centered philosophy to better understand how the world acts on us (Harman, 2018; Morton, 2008). Serres’ theory of mediation and noise shows that even if we accept human action as the paragon of agency, we must recognize that it always relies on some medium, means or ‘infrastructure’ in the largest sense of the term, which opens us to its affective qualities of forces and relations which we can never fully control.

It is easy to hear in Serres’ language a less than critical animism or mysticism when he tells us to listen to the noise of the cosmos or to know things without names we have imposed on them: “I would like to listen to the things ... the way they presented themselves before finding themselves named” (Serres, 2012: 38).

In ‘Revisiting the Natural Contract’ (2006) he addresses the concern that he is anthropomorphizing nature. He writes: “I am neither so dumb nor so animistic to think that Nature is a person.” Instead, he explains, he is recasting the relation to nature from a problem of assigning agency – who or what does what to whom – to one of dependency and complication. The idea is that: “We ourselves suddenly depend, and increasingly so, on things that depend on actions that we undertake (Serres, 2006).”

Today Serres’ philosophy of connection and co-dependency clarifies an important ambiguity in the discourse on the Anthropocene and the end of nature. The term Anthropocene signals, firstly, that human action has become an agent in the Earth’s

transformation. With this phrase we also recognize that our massive interventions into the natural world have elicited a response from nature that signals its difference from the plans and schemas within which we imagine we could contain and control it. Nature acts in ways that are unpredictable and indifferent to our plans.

In the late twentieth century, as the question of climate change emerged in the social sciences and humanities, it became popular to imagine that we had destroyed nature, or were living after nature. Anthony Giddens nicely summarizes the essence of the idea:

For hundreds of years, people worried about what nature could do to us – earthquakes, floods, plagues, bad harvests and so on. At a certain point, somewhere over the past fifty years or so, we stopped worrying so much about what nature could do to us, and we started worrying much more about what we have done to nature. That transition makes one major point of entry into risk society. It is a society which lives after nature (Giddens, 1997: 26).

While nature is now filled with our effects and information control systems, it is also true that there are few, if any, kinds of human activity that are not subject to nature’s reaction to our interventions. Climate change changes all aspects of how we live – politics, energy, food, social organization and culture. Serres’ philosophy of viruses, noises, and pollution tries to open a channel of communication in which to respond to nature’s response to us.

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Stephen Crocker is Associate Professor of Sociology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, specializing in social and political theory, social philosophy and media studies. He is the author of *Bergson and the Metaphysics of Media* (Palgrave 2013) and of numerous essays and works in social theory and media studies.

Email: bcrocker@mun.ca

