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**Bring the Noise:  
The Parasite and the  
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Posthumanism**

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**Abstract**

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The theory of being, ontology, brings us to atoms.  
The theory of relations brings us to the parasite.  
—Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

If ever a thinker made it clear that what we have come to call “posthumanism” is not in any sense what simply comes “after” humanism, it is Michel Serres. Some popular renderings of the *post-* in posthumanism offer it as the mark of historical succession in which (so the story goes) the human is transformed and finally eclipsed by various technological, informatic, and bioengineering developments rooted in the early twentieth century, and then greatly accelerated by the practical demands of two world wars and the cold war that followed them.<sup>1</sup> But Serres’s work asserts (to paraphrase

the title of his interlocutor Bruno Latour's book) that we have never been human, if by "human" we mean, to use Latour's half-humorous litany, "the free agent, the citizen builder of the Leviathan, the distressing visage of the human person, the other of a relationship, consciousness, the cogito, the hermeneut, the inner self, the thee and thou of dialogue, presence to oneself, intersubjectivity"—the list could be extended, of course.<sup>2</sup> "Asserts" is perhaps not exactly the right word here, however, because Serres performs this task—this labor, really—in a dizzying array of registers, a loosely knit tapestry of knowledges and disciplines that are threaded through more books than one can count (the actual number is upward of thirty-five texts at this point, depending on how you are keeping track). If this is the case with most of Serres's work, it is especially true of *The Parasite*, which (written from late 1975 to 1979, appearing in French in 1980 and in English two years later) stands at the center of Serres's long and distinguished career. *The Parasite* is, as many readers have noted, a book made of books, a text made of texts—so much so that its intertexts are listed by Serres at the end of the volume.

As with Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous assertion that the post-modern paradoxically comes *before* the modern, for Serres, the posthuman precedes and subtends the human, both ontologically and epistemologically.<sup>3</sup> It is constituted by what Theodor Adorno once called, with a rather different critical aim and apparatus at hand, "the preponderance of the object"—an unruly, asynchronous, material heterogeneity that "the human" founds itself upon only by repressing, mastering, or denying it even as, in reality, the human is constituted and in some sense determined by it.<sup>4</sup> As Serres puts it in the opening pages of *Genesis* (1982), the text that he published immediately following *The Parasite* (and many readers will rightly hear resonance upon resonance with the work of Deleuze and Guattari in this passage):

We are fascinated by the unit; only a unity seems rational to us. We scorn the senses, because their information reaches us in bursts. We scorn the groupings of the world [things like "a flight of screaming birds," "a cloud of chirping crickets," "crowds, packs, hordes on the move"] and we scorn those of our bodies. For us they seem to enjoy a bit of the status of Being only when they are subsumed beneath a unity. Disaggregation and

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aggregation, as such, and without contradiction [marking here his difference with Adorno's dialectics] are repugnant to us. We want a principle, a system, an integration, and we want elements, atoms, numbers. We want them, and we make them. A single God, and identifiable individuals.<sup>5</sup>

For Serres, the challenge is not so much exposing the false tidiness of such unities themselves. After all, he writes (and here he is squarely in line with a range of contemporary thinkers from Deleuze and Lyotard to Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, from Niklas Luhmann to Jacques Derrida), "We are as little sure of the one as of the multiple. We've never hit upon truly atomic, multiple, indivisible terms that were not themselves, once again, composite. The bottom always falls out of the quest for the elementary. The irreducibly individual recedes like the horizon, as our analysis advances" (*Genesis*, 2-3). Rather, the problem for Serres—an intellectual but also methodological problem—is how difficult it is to think otherwise; how to *perform* and *accomplish* such thinking. This is the challenge for what Serres calls "a new object for philosophy": "Can I possibly speak of multiplicity itself without ever availing myself of the *concept*?" (4; emphasis in original).

The one who thinks and writes, the subject of knowledge, must then take the other of knowledge seriously. "Noise" is always already part of the signal; blindness inescapably accompanies vision, which is why Serres's writing is so strange and so demanding. In fact, Serres's work, in a profound sense, struggles against clarity, which is to say that it struggles, in a way, against language itself, (mis)understood as the more or less transparent and unproblematic transmission of conceptual and analytical content from writer to reader. Indeed, as we know, one of Serres's great themes is *noise* (in multiple senses, but especially in the sense used in information theory in the second half of the twentieth century), and it is noise that Serres's writing doesn't just talk about but generates—not as the other or the opposite of content, but as content's very fiber. This is why Serres's writing—though intellectually powerful and penetrating—is not analytical but experimental; not cumulative and aggregative but discursive; not linear but meandering, doubling back on itself to remind itself of stones left unturned, details

too readily smoothed over, conclusions too well-varnished. And then we're plunged back into the welter, back into the complexity of it all. Back into the sea foam of noise.

Here, we need to remember that “noise” (for the English reader) forms the third and unsuspected meaning of the French word *parasite*: 1. biological parasite; 2. social parasite; 3. static or interference. As we know from classical information theory and its model of the signal-to-noise ratio, noise was typically regarded as simply the extraneous background against which a given message or signal was transmitted from a sender to receiver. For Serres, however, “as soon as we are two, we are already three or four.... In order to succeed, the dialogue needs an excluded third” (*Genesis*, 57); we may begin with “two interlocutors and the channel that attaches them to one another,” but “the parasite, nesting on the flow of the relation, is in third position” (53). For Serres, then—and here he joins a line of systems theorists that includes figures such as Gregory Bateson and, later, Niklas Luhmann—noise is productive and creative: “noise, through its presence and absence, the intermittence of the signal, produces the new system” (52). Or as Bateson puts it in the very last sentence of his seminal essay “Cybernetic Explanation” (1967): “All that is not information, not redundancy, not form and not restraints—is noise, the only possible source of new patterns.”<sup>6</sup> Luhmann helps clarify and develop the point in his major work, *Social Systems* (1984):

The difference between meaning and world is formed for this process of the continual self-determination of meaning as the difference between order and perturbation, between information and noise. Both are, and both remain, necessary. The unity of the difference is and remains the basis for operation. This cannot be emphasized strongly enough. A preference for meaning over world, for order over perturbation, for information over noise is only a preference. It does not enable one to dispense with the contrary.<sup>7</sup>

This is exactly what Serres has in mind when he asserts in *The Parasite* that “systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning.” Given the basic informational and communicational paradigm of “two stations and a channel,” messages are exchanged, and “if the relation succeeds, if it is perfect,

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optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed.” Thus, he continues, “Relation is nonrelation,” and if the channel that carries the message “disappears into immediacy,” then “there would be no spaces of transformation anywhere.” In this context his apparently paradoxical assertion that “the real is not rational” makes perfect sense (79).

I have gone into this paradigm of “noise” in some detail because, in the trajectory of Serres’s thinking, it complicates and refines the central model of “translation” (between elements of different disciplines, different bodies of knowledge, different loci in historical and social space) that occupied him in the five-volume Server series that precedes *The Parasite*—a model that might well be too readily understood, rightly or wrongly, in terms of a fundamental structuralism whose limitations were certainly evident, at least to thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, by the late 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Can we rewrite a system,” Serres asks, “not in the key of preestablished harmony,” but rather as “the book of differences, noise, and disorder”? After all, “the difference is part of the thing itself, and perhaps it even produces the thing. Maybe the radical origin of things is really that difference.<sup>9</sup> In Derrida’s formulation, there is “difference at the origin.” And it is noise, of course, that interrupts the already parasitic exchange between the country rat and the city rat in La Fontaine’s fable that opens this book, which is why (remembering the third meaning of the French) Serres writes, “The parasited one parasites the parasites” (*Parasite*, 13).

Other obvious comparisons could be made here with Derrida’s work, not least his meditations on hospitality, particularly since the “Translator’s Preface” to this book reminds us that the French word *hôte* corresponds to both “host” and “guest” in English. As Serres notes, “The host, the guest: the same word; he gives and receives, offers and accepts, invites and is invited, master and passer-by” (13). The logic here is in an important sense deconstructive, of course, but it is also perhaps more than that, more profoundly unsettled by the noise of the third, the noise from the outside, that in La Fontaine’s fable disrupts the momentarily structured (but also always already reversible) relations between the first and second parties, creating what Serres calls a parasitic cascade (5): “But who expels him? Noise. One parasite chases another out.

One parasite (static), in the sense that information theory uses the word, chases another, in the anthropological sense. Communication theory is in charge of the system; it can break it down or let it function, depending on the signal. A parasite, physical, acoustic, informational, belonging to order and disorder, a new voice, an important one, in the contrapuntal matrix” (6).

For Serres, this parasitic cascade, the chain, or what he sometimes calls the arrow of the ongoing movement of parasitic relations, forms the ur-dynamic of social and cultural relations.<sup>10</sup> As Serres puts it in the opening pages, “A human group is organized with one-way relations, where one eats the other and where the second cannot benefit at all from the first. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, ‘parasitic’” (5). And, much later:

The chain of parasitism is a simple relation of order, irreversible like the flow of the river. One feeds on another and gives nothing in return. Asymmetry is local on a chain and is propagated globally the length of a series, through transitivity. They make a line. For parasitism is an elementary relation; it is, in fact, the elements of the relation.

The relation upsets equilibrium, making it deviate. If some equilibrium exists or ever existed somewhere, somehow, the introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes; time has begun. (182)

From this apparently quite simple principle (although the same could be said, of course, for the principle of feedback, which Bateson will use to give original and penetrating accounts of everything from schizophrenia and alcoholism to “primitive” art in Bali), Serres will develop an extraordinarily novel theory of the very foundations of human relations, which are now seen as “derived,” Steven D. Brown writes, “from a founding disorder by way of a minor differentiation”; noise, the event, constantly forces temporarily homeostatic systems of interaction to reconstitute and reorganize themselves.<sup>11</sup> For Serres, Brown writes, human relations form “a parasitic chain which

interrupts or parasitizes other kinds of relations (that is, those of other animals, or the natural world itself,” as in animal husbandry or agriculture; but then those relations are in turn disrupted by the arrival of the “third,” the “uninvited guest” or “new arrival” who “provokes a new form of complexity” and “engineers a kind of difference by intercepting relations.<sup>12</sup> The arrival of the “third,” the “joker,” provokes what may be viewed in Serres as a primordial act of exclusion or “sacrifice”—radically contingent and in some profound sense nonsensical—whereby society constitutes itself in a founding countermove against the endlessly complexifying and disrupting parasitic chain. As Serres puts it in a fascinating meditation midway through *The Parasite*, “Agriculture and culture have the same origin or the same foundation, a white spot that realizes a rupture of equilibrium, a clean spot constituted through expulsion. A spot of propriety or cleanliness, a spot of belonging” (179). In fact, he argues, “The first one who, having enclosed a field or a bit of land, decided to exclude everything there, was the true founder of the following historical era” (178).

Many commentators have noted the influence of René Girard’s work on sacrifice, in *Violence and the Sacred* (1978), on Serres’s ideas here, but one might also mention the close proximity of Derrida’s analysis of the “sacrificial symbolic economy” in two particular registers. First, Derrida insists, like Serres, that we cannot simply step outside of the regime of what Derrida calls “carno-phallogocentrism” any more than we can step outside of metaphysics. For Derrida, the “question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat.” Rather, “since one *must* eat in any case ... *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well*?”<sup>13</sup> Not whether to eat, but how, is precisely what Serres’s model of the parasite takes for granted:

Parasite. The prefix *para-* means “near,” “next to,” measures a distance. The *sitos* is the food. In this open mouth that speaks and eats [here the resonances with Derrida’s “Eating Well” are manifold], what is next to eating, its neighboring function, is what emits sound. Para measures a difference between a reception and, on the contrary, an expansion. The latter makes one’s own what is in common and what will soon be even more one’s own, the living body. (*Parasite*, 144)



He concludes, reaching back for a moment to his thesis on (agri)culture just noted, “It already eats space.”

Second, both Derrida and Serres suggest that the “anthropological” aspect of sacrifice is tightly coupled—coterminous, in fact—with its conceptual expression in the philosophical canon. Serres writes:

The classical age appears to be a founder to us only by having taken up and performed this same motion elsewhere. The Cartesian meditation eliminates, expels, banishes everything, hyperbolically. Once again, a clean slate and a clear spot in the religious major mode, and this slate and this spot are the extent of which I am the master and possessor of my thought. The thinking ego chases the parasites out, chases out in prosopopoeia the most cunning of all who return, who might return at any moment and everywhere, thus chases everything out, speaking absolutely; it discovers, elsewhere, the world, the white of our dominance. (*Parasite*, 180)

This has profound implications, of course, for how one understands time, history, and historical explanation—implications that, as I have already indicated, make it impossible to understand the *post-* of posthumanism as simply “what comes after.” This is so in Serres’s thought for two reasons. First, as Maria Assad argues in her study of Serres and temporality, society for Serres is “founded on an act of violence by exclusion, while history is the chain of repetitive imitations of this act.”<sup>14</sup> For Serres, this means that one can no longer continue to just “do” history in a way that, underneath its account of apparent changes and transformations, is subtended by a fundamental repetition of the sacrificial structure identified by Girard and Derrida. Hence, the strangeness, the demanding nonlinearity and episodic quality, of Serres’s writing. One must—in fact and also performatively, on the page—construct an alternative view of time and history that makes possible the submission of the familiar frames, proportions, and exclusions of historicism and its fundamentally linear, narrative mode to the creative force of the new, the unthought, the unexpected: to the incursion of noise and the force of the event.

Second, then—against the view of what Serres’s contemporary Louis Althusser once characterized as an “ideological” understanding of time and history as one-dimensional and univocal, cut from one cloth, in synch with itself, moving at the same pace and rhythm throughout the social fabric—Serres will work to craft a different theory of time and history, one that is dynamic and “topological” rather than linear and repetitive. As Steven Connor explains:

Topology may be defined as the study of the spatial properties of an object that remain invariant under homeomorphic deformation, which is to say, broadly, actions of stretching, squeezing, or folding. [It is] not concerned with exact measurement, which is the domain of geometry ... but rather with spatial relations, such as continuity, neighbourhood, insideness and outsideness, disjunction and connection. Because topology is concerned with what remains invariant as a result of transformation, it may be thought of as geometry plus time, geometry given body by motion.<sup>15</sup>

For Serres, topological temporality is thus multidimensional and asynchronous, and in that sense it is subjected to a kind of spatialization that renders relations between near and far, past and future, ancient and modern in new and unexpected ways. In his conversations with Bruno Latour, Serres gives a wonderfully simple example:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. The science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry. As we experience time—as much in our inner senses as externally in nature, as much as *les temps* of history as *les temps* of weather it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one.<sup>16</sup>

There are very obvious, and very important, resonances here with the work of Gilles Deleuze, particularly Deleuze's study *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*—resonances that are only underscored when we remember that Serres wrote his doctoral dissertation on Leibniz.<sup>17</sup> But the point I want to stay with for a moment more is how this changes how we think about history and about “doing” history. As Connor characterizes it, “In place of the line of history, Serres proposes a series of different figurings of time, based on dynamic volumes. Time is seen as a river, forking, branching, slewing, slowing, rolling back on itself, ... a complex volume that folds over on itself, and in the process does not merely transform in time, but itself gathers up and releases time.”<sup>18</sup> What this means, as Serres puts it, is that “every historical era is likewise multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychromic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats.”<sup>19</sup>

We could not be farther from the “ideological” view of one-dimensional time criticized by Althusser. In fact, Serres argues, his approach is more empirically responsible than that, for “history is the locus of full causes without effects, immense effects with futile reasons, strong consequences from insignificant causes, rigorous effects from chance occurrences” (*Parasite*, 20). But precisely this, of course, is what separates him from Althusser's attempt to understand the complex phenomena of what he called “uneven development” and “overdetermination” because Serres's view rules out explaining them in terms of their determination by the economic infrastructure “in the last instance,” as Althusser put it (even if, as he added, “the last instance never comes”).<sup>20</sup> In what will turn out to be an ongoing if oblique dialogue with the Marxian theory of value throughout *The Parasite*, Serres sees the Marxian privileging of exchange and use value as determinative forces of social life and historical development as itself part of that same humanist legacy he is trying to complicate and combat.<sup>21</sup> Instead, *The Parasite* asserts the importance not of exchange or use value but rather of what Serres calls “abuse value” in the organization of societies—an abuse value that is indexed to the fundamental dynamic of a primary parasitism and secondary sacrificial expulsion that we have already discussed. This dynamic, Serres insists, comes before property, exchange, and the labor theory of value. As Serres puts it, “The balance of exchange

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is always weighed and measured, calculated, taking into account a relation without exchange, an abusive relation. The term *abusive* is a term of usage. Abuse doesn't prevent use. The *abuse value*, complete, irrevocable consummation, precedes use- and exchange-value. Quite simply, it is the arrow with only one direction" (80).

This will be easier to understand, perhaps, if we think of it in terms of one of the more familiar, adjacent motifs in contemporary thought, the *gift*, which is a close conceptual cousin to the parasite (the host gives to the parasite in a one-way transaction, without receiving anything in return). Students of the analysis of the gift and its ramifications in work by Derrida, Bataille, and others that is bent on complicating and deconstructing the pioneering analysis in French anthropology by Marcel Mauss will find much here to admire.<sup>22</sup> Serres writes that in modernity, "the freely given occurs only after the owing, the feast after the payment." But "for the gods, the situation is the inverse; the given comes before the owed." "This is certainly the world upside down," he continues:

The world turns in one direction; history has its economy where exchange is fundamental: it is called the meaning of history. It stops a moment, turns in the other direction, and in this new (hi)story, exchange appears after everything was freely given. It is not a new story; on the contrary, it is an ancient one, lost in the dark recesses of memory. There are only barely perceptible traces of the history of giving in texts and on monuments. Since then, we have been caught up in economic history, a time of calculation and exchanges and of making up for losses. Does this history have an outside? That is precisely the subject of this book. (*Parasite*, 30-31)

Of course, Serres's handling of the economy of the gift also marks a divergence, in a way, from the work of Derrida, one that is only amplified in the very ways that the two thinkers approach the closely related figure of the hand. As Steven D. Brown notes, one important difference between Derrida and Serres is that "Serres partakes, he savours the materials he works with. There is demonstration and invention, but very little critique."<sup>23</sup> But might this partaking not be viewed as a variety of the "eating of space" that we saw Serres discussing earlier, an "eating" that is perhaps also not so

much, to use Derrida's phrase, an "eating well"? Some critics seem to think so; Connor, for example, thinks that Serres, particularly in those works of the 1990s that follow *The Parasite*, "seeks the same kind of vast, encompassing synthesis of relations and inter-implications as did Leibniz," envisioning "a plenitopia of included middles in which no exceptions or exclusions or residues can be tolerated."<sup>24</sup> What Connor calls Serres's "ethical claims for synthesis, a holistic grasping of the complete shape of things" directs us in turn toward Serres's reading (derived in no small part from his mentor Gaston Bachelard) of the hand as "an image of pure possibility, a readiness to take any shape," as Connor puts it; "a naked faculty," in Serres's words.<sup>25</sup> Serres writes in *Genesis*—conjugating now the relationship between the figure of the hand and of thought itself—"When I think a given concept, I am entirely this concept, when I think tree, I am the tree....That is the unquestionable experience of thinking. No invention, no innovation without it...The hand is no longer a hand when it has taken hold of the hammer, it is the hammer itself. The hand and thought, like one's tongue, disappear in their determinations" (30). Thus, Serres asserts, "Inventive thinking is unstable, it is undetermined, it is undifferentiated, it is as little singular in its function as is our hand" (34).

For Derrida, of course, matters are quite otherwise, and thinking—after *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*—is nothing if not differentiated. Indeed, that differentiation (Derrida's various terms for it are *écriture*, trace, supplement, *différance* and so on) is the source of thinking's dynamism and spatializing movement. For Derrida (and here his reading of Heidegger is fundamental) there is no "naked" hand, no pure potentiality or plenitude that would, in a second moment, make available the hand's prosthetic transformation. Similarly, thinking, as Heidegger characterizes it, is "Hand-Werk," but it is less an act of "invention" or "expansion" than one of "reception," of which the open, skyward-facing palm might be a fit emblem—hence the common etymological root of "thinking" and "thanking," which leads us directly back, of course, to the question of the gift. Thinking is not, to use Heidegger's formulation, determined by biological or utilitarian function; it is not, Derrida writes, "of the order of conceptual grasping"; rather, it is a kind of reception. Most important, however, and this has a very direct bearing on the model of the parasite—"nothing is

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less assured,” Derrida writes, “than the distinction between *giving* and *taking*.”<sup>26</sup> For Serres—to put it very schematically—thinking, like the hand, is able to de-differentiate into prosthetic inventiveness on the basis of a prior plenitude as “pure possibility”; for Derrida, on the other hand (if the expression can be allowed in this context), thinking is already constituted by difference, and the hand (to stay with Heidegger’s rendering of it) is already nonidentical with itself because the difference between opening and closing, grasping and receiving (a difference that makes the hand what it is, from Heidegger’s point of view) cannot be secured.<sup>27</sup>

But perhaps we will do more justice to the peculiarity and specificity of *The Parasite*—which is not yet, after all, the work that will become the Serres oeuvre of the 1990s—by understanding the “abuse” of “abuse value” not in the common pejorative sense of “mistreatment” but rather in light of the Latin prefix *ab-* meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, “off or away from”: “abuse” value *at a tangent* to use and exchange value, at a distance from it: a different vector, a different type of value. Serres writes—again in obvious if indirect dialogue with the Marxian theory of value:

The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. The latter is simple and naive; the former is complex and mediatized....

To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have a relation only with the relation itself. Never with the stations from which it comes, to which it goes, and by which it passes. Never to the things as such and, undoubtedly, never to subjects as such. And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite*: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. It is always mediate and never immediate.<sup>28</sup>

This is clearly the logic behind the most well known and much-discussed concept to emerge from *The Parasite*, what Serres calls “the quasi-object.” “This quasi-object is not an object,” he writes, “but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in

the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject” (225). Take a basketball, for example. “A ball,” he explains, “is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value” (225). But when it circulates among subjects in a game, things change dramatically. “The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws.” In fact, “the ball isn’t there for the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball”; “playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance” (226). For Serres, as we have already seen, sacrifice, expulsion, and scapegoating are rudimentary forms of achieving social cohesion and producing intersubjectivity; we might say that they are fundamental displacements in the sense that (to stay with Serres’s terminology) they mistake “contents” for “relations” and “persons” for “positions.” But the quasi-object produces intersubjectivity in a much more subtle and dynamic (and for that reason more powerful) way. Brown explains the link between these two dynamics succinctly when he notes, “The principal question in the sacrificial scene is ‘who will be excluded?’ Which of the parasites will be expelled, breaking the chain? Who comes last in line? Who will be ‘it’?”<sup>29</sup>

The one holding the quasi-object, that’s who. “This quasi-object designates him,” Serres writes. “He is marked with the sign of the ball. Let him beware” (*Parasite*, 226). In a process that Serres likens to the game “hunt the slipper” or “button, button, who’s got the button” (225), the quasi-object is that “by which I am a subject, that is to say, submitted”; it is not just “a marker of the subject” but also “an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity” (227). “More a contract than a thing,” Serres writes in *Genesis*, “the object here is a quasi-object insofar as it remains a quasi-us” (88). In fact, as Niklas Luhmann has observed, for Serres “the stabilization of objects (identification, recognizability, and so on) is more likely to contribute to stabilizing social relationships than the famous social contract” that Serres discusses in *The Parasite* in his very densely textured meditations on Rousseau. In systems theory terms, quasi-objects aren’t objects at all but rather recursively stabilized designations. “Presumably,” Luhmann writes, “the objects that emerge from the recursive self-application of communication contribute more than any other kinds of norms and sanctions to supplying the social

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system with necessary redundancies,” whereby we know that “we” are “we,” and as such “their significance as objects implies a realm of social regulation.”<sup>30</sup>

But Serres and Luhmann—and this is my final point—come at the dynamics of social systems in complexly related but also crucially different ways. Like second-wave figures in systems theory such as Luhmann and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, Serres is keenly interested—as any student of science after Heisenberg must be—in the question and status of the observer. As he puts it, “a given noise, the sound of the conversation in the room, is a noise for the conversation I am having with my interlocutor on the phone, but it is a message for my guests. And for them, my conversation is a noise for their own. It all depends on the position of the observer” (*Parasite*, 66). Here, we seem to be quite close to Luhmann’s theory of observation as fundamentally a phenomenon of making self-referential distinctions, whereby what counts as meaning or knowledge is produced by the self-referential code of the system in a kind of radicalization (or just taking seriously) of the mantra by Korzybski that Bateson was fond of quoting: “The map is not the territory.”<sup>31</sup> For Luhmann, since the environmental “noise” outside the observing system is literally overwhelming, any system, if it is to continue its autopoiesis, must reduce that complexity by filtering it, if you like, in terms of a self-referential code. But at the same time, systems constantly transform themselves—build up their own complexity, to use Luhmann’s terminology—by having to respond to environmental noise.<sup>32</sup>

In that sense, Luhmann would agree with Serres that “an observer seated within the system...overvalues the message and undervalues the noise if he belongs to the functioning of the system” (*Parasite*, 68). “He represses the parasites,” Serres writes, “in order to send or receive communications better and to make them circulate in a distinct and workable fashion. Whoever belongs to the system perceives noises less and represses them more, the more he is a functioning part of the system” (*Parasite*, 68). And he does so, from Luhmann’s point of view, because noise, environmental complexity, is an overwhelming adaptive and evolutionary problem for systems that wish to continue their autopoiesis.



Here, however, things get complicated, for Serres contends, “It is not so simple. If systems were univocal or if they had one norm, this description would be enough. But systems function with several norms at a time” (*Parasite*, 68). This means, as he puts it with characteristic nonchalance, “Bivalent systems get lost around here”; “give or take one vibration, moving a hair’s breadth in either direction causes the noises to become messages and the messages, noises.” “The value of belonging passes through space,” he continues, “through the spectrum that separates or unites the two old values” (67)—hence, Serres’s interest in what he calls “spaces of transformation,” “the milieu, the mediate,” “what exists between” system and environment (71, 65).

Luhmann would put things rather differently. On the one hand, he would insist that all systems operate by a “bivalent” logic whose ur-form is the system/environment distinction. In this sense, he would flatly disagree with Serres that “systems function with several norms at a time” (*Parasite*, 68). For Luhmann, the only way a system could be said to operate with “several norms at a time” would be in the sense of their hierarchical nesting (as in, for example, the subsystems of the legal system), which would continue, however, to operate by a bivalent logic. At the same time, however, since there are no observer-independent systems (how would we know if there were?), systems can be said to operate “with several norms at a time” in the sense that they can be the site of a “semantic overburdening” (to use Luhmann’s phrase) in which several different second-order observations, using different codes, can make different observer attributions to any observed system. In a way, this does nothing more than acknowledge Bateson’s well-known appropriation of Kant when he notes that the most elementary act is “the selection of a fact” (a selection based on a given map or code or schema) from an object that is actually constituted by “an infinite number of potential facts”.<sup>33</sup>

But—and this is the crucial turn that separates Luhmann from Bateson and actually *links* him with Serres—Luhmann would add that any such selection is based on a constitutive distinction that is itself not just contingent (as Bateson insists) but also *paradoxical*, just as in the ur-form of distinction (system/environment) both sides of the distinction are a product of only one side (namely, the system making that

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distinction). This is what Luhmann calls the “blind spot” of observation, the paradoxical identity of both sides of the distinction that grounds observation (an inversion of what Hegel called “the identity of identity and non-identity”) to which an observer must remain blind if it is to use that distinction to carry out its operations. (For example, the legal system cannot acknowledge the paradoxical identity of legal/illegal—the paradoxical fact that both sides of the distinction are self-instantiated by one side, namely, the legal—and use that distinction at the same time). This is what Luhmann means—and it is crucial to understanding his relationship with Serres—when he writes that “reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it.”<sup>34</sup> The very distinction that makes the world cognitively available for an observer is also—just because that distinction *is* contingent and paradoxical—what makes the world *unavailable*, in the sense of generatively creating its own outside, what Luhmann calls the “unmarked space” of distinction. And this is why, Luhmann insists, “the world is observable because it is unobservable.”<sup>35</sup>

An irresistible and important moment in *The Parasite* that seems to be directed toward this “parasitical” ongoing movement and “distribution” (as Luhmann sometimes calls it) of observation surely suggests itself at this point, where Serres writes:

The observer is perhaps the inobservable. He must, at least, be last on the chain of observables. If he is supplanted, he becomes observed. Thus he is in a position of a parasite. Not only because he takes the observation that he doesn't return, but also because he plays the last position. The observer always makes less noise than the observed. He is thus unobservable by the observed. That is why he troubles and is never troubled, that is why he is an asymmetric operator. He is in the position of the subject. (237-38)

Here again, the relations between Serres and Luhmann are anything but straightforward since, for Luhmann, there can be no “last position” when we talk about observation, no noncontingent, nonparadoxical observation, which is why for Luhmann the observer could never be “in the position of the subject.” To put it another way, for Luhmann, the observer would be “parasitical” not because he is “last

on the chain of observables” but because the movement of observer attribution always flows in one direction, from second order to first order, in a process whose “motor” or “engine” is the paradoxical deconstructability of any observation’s grounding distinction. The observer is “inobservable,” then, not to the other but only to itself (Luhmann’s “blind spot”). Or, to put it in terms that are more those of intellectual history than epistemology, Serres’s critique of the observer would take for granted a first-generation systems theory view of that concept (found in Norbert Wiener, for example, and even, as it turns out, in Bateson) that Luhmann, like Serres, aims to deconstruct and expose.<sup>36</sup>

We are now in a better position, I think, to appreciate a remarkable moment in *The Parasite* where Serres suggests that therefore “the system is very badly named. Maybe there is not or never was a system.” “The only instances or systems are black boxes,” he continues:

When we do not understand, when we defer our knowledge to a later date, when the thing is too complex for the means at hand, when we put everything in a temporary black box, we prejudge the existence of a system. When we can finally open the box, we see that it works like a space of transformation. The only systems, instances, and substances come from our lack of knowledge. The system is nonknowledge. The other side of nonknowledge. One side of nonknowledge is chaos; the other, system. Knowledge forms a bridge between the two banks. Knowledge as such is a space of transformation. (73)

Can there be undeferred knowledge? Can we open the black box? And what would such a thing look like? These questions bring us back, in the end, to Serres’s “method,” to his writing, perplexing and unwieldy here as perhaps nowhere else in his body of work. Perhaps, to answer those questions, we just have to do the impossible anyway. Perhaps it is a question of what we think “thinking” is, not a reflection or representation but a performance, a practice. To paraphrase Serres’s philosophical soul mate, Deleuze, Serres is not content to say that we must rethink certain notions,

redefine certain concepts; he doesn't *say* it, doesn't argue for it, he just *does* it, and in so doing, he sets out new coordinates for the *praxis* of thinking.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Francis Fukuyama's popular tract *Our Posthuman Future* (London: Picador, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> I refer to the set of interviews Latour conducted with Serres. A best seller in France, they are available in English as Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). The Latour text in question is *We Have Refer Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); the quotation is from page 136.
- <sup>3</sup> Readers will habitually consult Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition*, but more useful here, perhaps, is his text *The Postmodern Explained*, afterword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
- <sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Sea-bury Press, 1973), 177—78.
- <sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Genevieve James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 2. Further references are in the text. An excellent introduction and overview of Serres's thinking may be found in the wide-ranging special issue of *Configurations* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2000), devoted to his work.
- <sup>6</sup> Gregory Bateson, "Cybernetic Explanation," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 410; emphasis in original. Bateson's explanations of information theory and systems theory generally ("cybernetics," in the parlance of the day) are remarkably lucid and engaging. See also, in the same volume, the essays "Redundancy and Coding" and "Form, Substance, and Difference." It should probably be noted here, as Bruce Clarke has reminded me, that the crucial bridge (for Serres and in general) between the contexts of physics (and specifically thermodynamics) and information theory is the concept of entropy, which is referenced in the unidirectional flow of parasitical relations. To put it another way, entropy parasites energy. For an excellent introduction to Serres that emphasizes these relations, see William Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).
- <sup>7</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. with Dirk Baecker, intro. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 83; my emphasis.
- <sup>8</sup> On this point, see Steven D. Brown's discussion in "Michel Serres: Science, Translation, and the Logic of the Parasite," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 19, no. 3 (2002): 1-27. The structuralist cast of the "translation" model is not surprising, given the well-known influence of anthropologist Georges Dumézil on Serres's earlier work, and it is evident in a definition provided by Michel Callon, one of the founders of actor-network theory, a movement profoundly indebted to Serres and his concept of the "quasi-object" announced in these pages. As Callon puts it, "Considered from a very general point of view, this notion [translation] postulates the existence of a single field of significations, concerns and interests, the expression of a shared desire to arrive at the same result...Translation involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different" (qtd. in Brown, "Michel Serres," 6). For an early and by now classic critique of the structuralist model, see Jacques Derrida's well-known essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- <sup>9</sup> Brown, "Michel Serres," 13.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Serres's discussion of the master-slave relationship (Parasite, 58—60) and his discussion of "The Stercoral Origin of Property Rights" (esp. 144—46, 150).
- <sup>11</sup> Brown, "Michel Serres," 15.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida (with Jean-Luc Nancy), "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava et al. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113, 115; emphasis in original. Derrida's work on this question is by this point quite

immense, but see, for example, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 winter 2002): 369-418, where Derrida provides a partial list of all the texts in which he has engaged this question (403-6).

- <sup>14</sup> Maria Assad, *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter with Time* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1999), 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Steven Connor, “Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thought,” *Anglistik* 15 (2004): 106.
- <sup>16</sup> Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 60.
- <sup>17</sup> And not just Deleuze’s Leibniz, of course. The concept of the fold had been appearing in Deleuze’s work, and in Foucault’s, since the 1960s, and shows up in the 1980s in the work of systems theorist Niklas Luhmann. For a detailed discussion of this concept in the context of the relationship of poststructuralist philosophy and systems theory, a context directly relevant to the signature combination of elements we find in Serres, see chapter 3 of my *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the “Outside”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), in particular the section “Folded but Not Twisted: Deleuze and Systems Theory.” For Deleuze’s Leibniz, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Connor points out that Serres’s approval of Deleuze’s work in *The Fold* is one of the rare acknowledgments of conceptually adjacent work by a contemporary (“Topologies,” 5)—a point about Serres’s work that is also pressed by Latour in their *Conversations*, 80-84.
- <sup>18</sup> Connor, “Topologies,” 109.
- <sup>19</sup> Serres with Latour, *Conversations*, 60.
- <sup>20</sup> See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), especially the chapters “Contradiction and Overdetermination” and “On the Materialist Dialectic.” On “structural causality,” see Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), 189ff.
- <sup>21</sup> See the discussion of money and exchange on pages 150, 156, 161, and 163.
- <sup>22</sup> Mauss’s thesis is that the gift is above all given in the expectation of reciprocity. In pre-market and pre-monetary societies, it serves as a kind of abstract exchange value before the fact. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (1954; New York: Norton, 2000). For an important recent critique, see Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Georges Bataille’s most well known early discussion of nonproductive exchange is probably *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927- 1939*, trans. and intro. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); but see also *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1991).
- <sup>23</sup> Brown, “Michel Serres,” 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Connor, “Topologies,” 111.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, my emphasis; 111; Serres, *Genesis*, 34.
- <sup>26</sup> I am summarizing here a number of different texts by Derrida, a more detailed discussion of which can be found in my essay “In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal,” in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1—57 (especially 19ff.). Of course, it should be noted that Derrida’s disagreement with this cluster of figures in Heidegger is how it reconfirms Heidegger’s humanism by separating the human and nonhuman animal ontologically. In a fuller discussion, we would surely want to trace more carefully Serres’s rendering of the animal in *The Parasite*, which, as I have already suggested, contains multiple resonances with Derrida’s; see, for example, pages 5, 10, 62, 65, and 86.
- <sup>27</sup> An insightful and important related point that bears directly on the Derrida-Serres relationship (although he doesn’t say so) is made by Connor when he suggests that Serres’s desire to dispense with “progressive or sequential time,” his “effort to show how time is inscribed in and punctuated by different kinds and states of matter leads him to deny all difference between time and its traces. The most important loss in Serres’s topologising of time,” he writes, “is the non-assimilability of time within thought” (“Topologies,” 112). What is lost—and this is crucial for understanding Derrida’s critique of Heidegger—is what is so fundamental for Derrida, namely, time’s alterity. On this point, see Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), especially chapter 3, “Aporia of Time, Aporia of Law: Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida.”
- <sup>28</sup> *Parasite*, 38-39. Here I think we must hear an explicit critique, or at least as explicit as Serres is likely to get, of Althusser’s famous notion that ideology is “a ‘lived’ relation to the real,” that it is, in his

words, “a relation of a relation” (namely, of the subject to an imaginary—in the Lacanian sense—representation, and of the imaginary representation to “real conditions of existence”). The relevant texts here are Althusser’s famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1971), 127-86; and *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), especially the essay “Marxism and Humanism,” where the “relation of a relation” formulation occurs (233-34).

<sup>29</sup> Brown, “Michel Serres,” 20.

<sup>30</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>31</sup> Bateson, “Cybernetic Explanation,” 449.

<sup>32</sup> This is not the place, of course, for a comparison, even a very general one, between Serres and Luhmann on the question of systems. For an excellent overview of the theory of observation, and of Luhmann’s work generally, see William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann’s Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). Especially relevant are chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>33</sup> Bateson, “Form, Substance, and Difference,” 453.

<sup>34</sup> Niklas Luhmann, “The Cognitive Program of Constructivism and a Reality That Remains Unknown,” in *Selforganization: Portrait of a Scientific Revolution*, ed. Wolfgang Krohn et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 76.

<sup>35</sup> Niklas Luhmann, “The Paradox of Observing Systems,” *Cultural Critique* 31 (Fall 1995): 46; emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> Directly related to this point is Serres’s wonderful rendering of the difference between seeing and hearing as modes of knowledge, which is meant to take issue with the (pan)optical associations of “observation” in the visual sense. See, for example, *The Parasite*, 125—26, and *Genesis*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze is characterizing the work of Foucault, in his book by the same title, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 30.

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