

II

STUDIES AND ARTICLES

STUDIJE I ČLANCI

To cite text:

Gehring, Petra (2021), "The Empiricism of Michel Serres. A Theory of the Senses between Philosophy of Science, Phenomenology and Ethics", *Philosophy and Society* 32 (2): 229–245.

Petra Gehring

THE EMPIRICISM OF MICHEL SERRES A THEORY OF THE SENSES BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE, PHENOMENOLOGY AND ETHICS

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the philosophy of the French philosopher Michel Serres, with an accent on his working method and unusual methodology. Starting from the thesis that the empiricist trait of Serres' philosophy remains underexposed if one simply receives his work as that of a structuralist epistemologist, Serres' monograph *The Five Senses* (1985) is then discussed in more detail. Here we see both a radical empiricism all his own and a closeness to phenomenology. Nevertheless, perception and language are not opposed to each other in Serres. Rather, his radical thinking of a world-relatedness of the bodily senses and an equally consistent understanding of a sensuality of language – and also of philosophical prose – are closely intertwined.

KEYWORDS

Michel Serres,
empiricism, parcours,
structuralism,
phenomenology

La connaissance vient du langage, certes; et si la philosophie nous venait des sens? (Of course, knowledge comes from language; but what if philosophy came to us through the senses?)

Michel Serres¹

Michel Serres is probably the most well-known 'unknown' contemporary french philosopher. He has been writing since the late 1950s – writing a lot, fluently, and creating his own *écriture*. His works do not fit into any format, they cross the boundaries of formats. One may ascribe that to Serres' academic background: He was as a trained mathematician; he gained a mathematical-technical experience, because he went to sea; at university he then changed his field of work to *épistémologie*, we would say history of science. And then he turned from history to philosophy. This wandering through the disciplines, of course, did not

1 Serres: 1985: 211; Serres 2008: 195. – In the following I quote from the English edition (Serres 2008) (abbreviated: FS) and add the French passage (Serres 1985) with reference (abbreviated: CS) as a footnote.

just happen. It follows decisions – movements of departure – and it has its own program, at first originated perhaps in a search movement, but then as an astonishing, even stubborn persistence on Serres' own themes, on his own ways of working. In fact, Serres is a programmatic theorist. His claim is not only to make philosophical contributions to a defined subfield. He wants no more and less than to reinvent philosophy, its forms and to some extent also its goals. I refer here less to Serres' own statements, they contain recognisable stylisation. In a publication of interviews – which is worth reading – Bruno Latour was able to persuade Serres to make such retrospective self-assessment, but Latour rightly also questioned them (Latour; Serres 1992). I will limit my own approach on Serres' methodology, his choice of topics and statements – as they can be found in his (in many ways astonishing) works. And especially I will carve out the quite radical empiricist trait that is inherent in his philosophy, although Serres usually neither is perceived as associated with the philosophical tradition of phenomenology nor as an empiricist, be it in the tradition of Hume, be it or Deleuze.

Before we delve into Serres' theory of perceiving and perception – a theory which is notably represented by the book *Les Cinq Sens* (*The five senses*) from 1985 – I would like to briefly try to classify his work as a whole. In doing so, I will first introduce Serres as a historian and a philosopher of science – which he still is and as which he is rightly seen in the main. In addition, however, more will have to be added to the picture, namely aspects of aesthetics, technology and especially ethics, of which it is difficult to say whether it really should be interpreted as 'ethical': They may also be meant in a culturally diagnostic, political or even religious way. How in *The Five Senses* a theory of sensual perception, a downright empiricism, fits with this cultural-critical trait of Serres's work will have to be considered in more detail.

1. Parcours and the Re-surveying of Knowledge

Serres becomes known in the 1960s, on the one hand as a structuralist-inspired – that is unorthodox, anti-hermeneutic – reader of ancient cosmological texts. He examines greek geometry, the mathematical models in Leibniz, the physics of Lucretius based on flows and vortices. On the other hand, he is active (by way of a very similar approach) as a reader of *belle lettres*: He writes monographs about Jules Verne, Émile Zola, a novella on Hermaphroditism by Balzac. In addition, there are works about painting, architecture, about angels, about Chinese landscape and other travel impressions; the city of Rome is the leitmotif of one of his books – and so on. Furthermore, there are works that completely break away from canonical authors as well as from historico-cultural scenes. Again only some titles: *Genèse* (*Genesis*), *Le Parasite* (*The Parasite*), *Le Contrat naturel* (*The Natural contract*), *Hominescence*.

The alleged arbitrariness of the choice of topics shows one thing above all: that Serres' theoretical interests lie on a different level than is reflected in the order of scholarly subject fields as we tend to group them. He is an expert in the *sciences*, the so-called rigorous disciplines of mathematics, physics, chemistry

and biology, as well as the electro-technical information theory and cybernetics, together with their history. But he also sees himself as a philosopher of ‘knowledge’ in general, without the need for a methodological change of perspective. This unbroken expansion of the field of his research contains a double thesis that creates distance in, again: two respects. Namely, first: supposedly rigorous scientific disciplines are cultural goods, historically bound and to be understood only in comparative terms, just like all other phenomena in our living environment. And secondly: supposedly ‘softer’ disciplines, non-empirical forms of knowledge or even everyday culture itself are in turn permeated by ‘hard’, ‘rigorous’ forms of order. These orders may be more complex, but they are no less precise and do not in principle obey less relevant rationalities than science itself. The first insight may sound like a cultural studies platitude – everything has developed, everything is relative. However, Serres is not at all concerned with relativism. Thus, more emphasis may perhaps be placed on the second insight. This is also quickly stated: Logics, forms of extra-scientific kind can be taken so seriously as if they were mathematics themselves. But it is then all the more unclear how to take this assumption methodologically into account and how to implement it epistemologically. Can we generate knowledge on this basis? Serres’ answer is clear: The pre-eminence of universal earnestness over universal relativism – is precisely where the the “confluence of the formal and cultural”², the Serresian project, begins. A by no means arbitrary but boundless transfer.

Mathematics, models of the rigorous science and epistemological observations are being exported – but at the same time, things like the everyday knowledge of the so-called non-scientific world – farming, cooking, mountain hiking, kite-flying – are being treated at the same level. From science to knowledge: We tend to associate this broader understanding of the epistemic domain with the work of Michel Foucault, who formulated the concept of the ‘historical apriori’ of experience – preceding all scientific conditions verification³. Serres, however, goes further in some ways. He takes Bachelard’s expansion of the search space of cultural reflection – not just science but knowledge (Gehring 2004) – perhaps even more comprehensively at its word. At an essential level, the world, heterogeneous as it is, including its archives, is a single stock. And one that can and should be remeasured. Serres is said to have a penchant for all-encompassing, encyclopedic projects, and this is true insofar as he became famous as an editor in addition to his own works: He released an anthology *A History of scientific Thought* and initiated an extensive series of books under the title *Corpus des Œuvres de Philosophie en Langue française*. While Foucault examined the ordering of particular disciplines, Serres embraced, as it were, the entire realm of knowledge accessible to us. I hold above all that Serres relativises the borders of disciplines (in favour of comparatively

2 Cf. Serres 1968: 27: “le confluent demeure, du formel et du culturel [...]” (my translation, pgg).

3 Cf. Foucault 1969: 166 ff.; dt. Foucault 1973: 183 ff.

‘individualising’ them), as well as he relativises (and characterises) scientificity in favour of the nevertheless dense and structured ‘rationality’ of everyday life and cultural phenomena. Even in abundance, not everything has to do with everything. The world can be read.

But: Serres doesn’t strive for a transcendental philosophy. In spite of being a structuralist, he avoids rigid ‘structures’. Rather, he is concerned with a radical renewal of Descartes’ *Regulae*: a ‘method’ does not need an order. It is at best a path. And it is an open, perilous, wild path: here Serres mobilises his experience as a sailor. Thinking pushes itself away from the ordered like a boat from the shore. It is at most a procedure. A heuristic. And its paradigm is the movement through the unknown. The voyage. Specifically: the sea voyage. Or the wandering, abandoning oneself to the terrain. Serres has elevated the term *randonnée*, ambling about, to a concept of method. It is directed not least against the idea of knowledge as a more or less clearly configured *discours*. Serres pits the concept of *parcours* against that of *discours*, propagated by Foucault and others. This appears where order falls back on stories, where even the orders of antique myths were still broken. So that only diversity, the unknown – and improvisation – remain: “an invariant which forms the graph of a parcours”⁴. Of a passage, that is. A crossing that knows no predetermined paths.

The bridge is a path that connects two banks with each other or transforms the discontinuous into a continuum. Or leads over a break or joins a tear. The space of a parcours is torn asunder by the river, it is no space for transport. Furthermore, there is not one space, but two multiplicities without a common edge. They are so different, that a difficult or dangerous operator is needed to join the two edges together.⁵

And suddenly I speak with many voices, I am unable to designate the border between storytelling, myth and science. Is this bridge in Königsberg the one, on which Euler invented topology, the bridge over the Viorne or the Seine of the Rougon-Macquart cycle or even the totality of bridges represented in the mythical discourse?⁶

Kant, according to Serres, “committed two errors”:

He recognised only one space, whereas one may define a multitude of different ones (and may do so repeatedly). On the other hand he makes the senseless

4 Serres 1977: 199: “il reste un invariant qui est le graphe d’un parcours”.

5 Serres 1977: 200: “Le pont est un chemin qui connecte deux berges, ou qui rend une discontinuité continue. Ou qui franchit une fracture. Ou qui recoud une fêlure. L’espace du parcours est lézardé par la rivière, il n’est pas un espace de transport. Dès lors, il n’y a plus un espace, il y a deux variétés sans bords communs. Si différentes qu’il est besoin d’un opérateur difficile, ou dangereux, pour connecter leurs bords.”; dt. Serres 1993: 209.

6 Serres 1977: 200: “Et, tout d’un coup, je parle à plusieurs voix, je ne sais plus marquer la limite entre le récit, le mythe et la science. Ce pont est-il celui de Königsberg, où Euler inventa la topologie, le pont sur la Viorne ou la Seine, au cycle des Rougon-Macquart, ou l’ensemble des ponts exposés aux discours mythiques?”; dt. Serres 1993: 210.

attempt of justifying orders within the transcendental subject, whereas we could extract everything from language and practice.

Thus we arrive at the following interim result: I have at my disposal operators, which I have extracted from naive symbols. These operators act upon something that philosophy at least doesn't express, i.e. the accidents and catastrophes of space and the multitudes of spatial varieties. What is that which is closed? What is that which is open? What is a connecting path? What is a tear? What is the continuum and what is discontinuous? What is a threshold and what is a border? This is the elementary program of a topology.⁷

Discours: knowable order and *parcours*: a path "which [only: pgg] opens up in the discretion of its elements and their combinations"⁸; these terms (*discours*, *parcours*) stand side by side on an equal footing. And Serres opts for the second. It is true that he also has studied discourses. But above all he investigates how recombinations and completely unexpected paths open up between them.

Only very briefly, I will indicate here how Serres implements this program of a kind of alternative and, from the outset, subversive-constructivist discourse research. In the five-volume anthology *Hermès* he tests the work with various – nearly always spatially illustrated – paradigmatic concepts: the communication network, the interference (overlay or disturbance), the translation (transfer), distribution or transport systems, and the North-West Passage, the passage through the pack ice, which would pave a new way between two separate continents, of which captain who dares it, however, cannot yet be sure whether it is navigable or whether it exists at all. What does Serres do now when he proceeds to the re-survey of scientific knowledge by means of such paradigms, which are undoubtedly very general? I pick out an example that starts from the so-called 'law of diminishing returns' – illustrated by the economist Turgot by means of a physical analogy (the loading behaviour of a feather). Serres chooses another, far more complex analogy. "I'm comfortable calling the Concorde", he writes, the famous French supersonic airplane thus,

an obsolete model. If we want to fly even faster, we will soon need to eliminate all passengers in order to make space for additional fuel tanks. In other words, in order to arrive at a slight increase in speed, we would need to apply a great deal more input. And this 'slight increase' decreases, while the 'great deal more

7 Serres 1977: 201: "[I] ne repérait qu'un espace, alors qu'on peut en définir de varies, de nombreux, et en nombre croissant; il tentait d'autre part le sot projet d'une foundation dans le sujet transcendental, alors que nous pouvons tout recevoir dans le langage et les pratiques. D'où ce bilan temporaire. Je dispose d'opérateurs, tires de symbols naïfs, qui travaillent sur un non-dit, au moins par la philosophie, savoir les accidents ou catastrophes de l'espace et sur la multiplicité des varieties spatiales. Qu'est-ce qu'un chemin de connexion? Qu'est-ce qu'une déchirure? Qu'est-ce que le continu et le discontinu? Qu'est-ce qu'un seuil, une limite? Programme élémentaire d'une topologie."; dt. Serres 1993: 210 f.

8 Cf. Serres 1977: 203: "[un chemin parallèle celui, qui] fut ouvert dans le discret des elements et leurs combinaisons".

input' increases enormously. In the extreme case, we would be transporting at an optimum, if we weren't transporting anything at all. And that's exactly what happens in military planes, which are much faster and more advanced than their civilian counterparts, but only carry one pilot and death. [...] It is a well-known fact that efficiency and returns have no place in the production of armaments. The reciprocal insight, unfortunately, is not as well-known: when returns decrease significantly, production heads towards death. Its only interest is in the art of war. Does the Concorde stand for a general law?⁹

From agriculture and physics (Turgot) to engines to war and peace – and then on to the knowledge economy of scientific inventions, in which, as is well known, military use also plays a role. The passage in question doesn't deal with the latter aspect in more detail. Instead, it is then about the yield curve of innovations in the history of mathematics. *Hermès 5* is preceded by a rewriting of the ancient story of Zenon, who competes with the tortoise. The Zenon of the North-West Passage tries different algorithms of locomotion, which always slow him down in the end. All methods build unknown obstacles in front of him. Then he discovers this new method: *randonnée*. He turns off, leaves himself to chance. Even the scale and step length, which he had previously varied individually, he now mixes up case by case, always differently. And what happens?

Suddenly the mountain lay close to the atom, and the compass rose close to the small angle, the mite dawdled a few angstroms from the tights of a giant, the hard cape shrouded itself in the broken froth of the wave. The orders were in order no more, the orders of magnitude were un-ordered, as were the types of forms [...]. This disorder, introduced into likeness, produced only the customary and the habitual. The space of reason did not say no to the space of life and of things themselves anymore. Zenon does not renounce reason in the mad abundance of the tangible, instead he learns that reason is a singular case in a lottery draw, one amongst other singularities [...]. He smiles, softly: I may be far from my destination, it doesn't matter, he says. But I do believe that I am not too far distant from reality anymore; don't repeat it. – The new Zenon, from Paris or London, called his method 'randonnée' [...].¹⁰

9 Serres 1980a: 132: "J'appelle volontiers l'aéronef Concorde un fin de série. A supposer que nous voulions aller plus vite, il faudra bientôt expulser tous les passagers pour faire place aux réservoirs de kérosène. En d'autres termes, pour acquérir un peu de vitesse, il faut consentir beaucoup plus de dépense. Et cet 'un peu' décroît beaucoup, lorsque ce 'beaucoup' croît énormément. A la limite, nous transporterons optimalement, à la condition de ne rien transporter du tout. Et c'est bien ce qui se passe dans l'aviation militaire, bien plus rapide et avancée que son homologue civile, mais qui ne porte rien qu'un opérateur et la mort. [...] Il est connu qu'en matière de production militaire, la rentabilité, le rendement ne comptent plus. La réciproque, hélas, est moins connue: lorsqu'un rendement décroît fortement, alors la production plonge vers la mort. Elle n'intéresse plus que l'art militaire. – La loi Concorde est-elle générale?"; dt. Serres 1995: 172 f.

10 Serres 1980a: 13 f.: "La montagne, tout à coup, fut voisine de l'atome, et la rose des vents de l'angle menu, le ciron se traînait de quelques angstroms sur des chausses de géant, le cap dur se constellait des embruns brisés de la vague. Les ordres n'étaient plus en ordre, les ordres de grandeur n'étaient plus ordonnés, ni les genres de formes [...]. Ce

In part, as pointed out, Serres proceeds very concretely (almost playfully), in part, however, in a very abstract manner – but mostly both at the same time. The most impressive book for me, an encyclopedia of possible logics in which the very tangible and highly formal problems are masterfully interwoven with each other, is *Le Parasite (The Parasite)*. The topic here are logics not of the excluded, but precisely of the included third, of the irritating power of a third party: logics of an at least a trivalent asymmetry (Gehring 2010).

2. Aesthetics, Technology, Ethics

This brings me only briefly to those fields of works which Serres has increasingly turned to in the course of the years and which go beyond the field of epistemology – be it ever so broadly defined. On the one hand there is art. In a small volume on the paintings by the Venetian Renaissance painter Carpaccio, Serres experiments with philosophical interpretations of images. Perhaps one should say, he fabulates or creates models referring to paintings – for the booklet does not pursue an art-historical approach. Even painted artifacts Serres rather takes as a system, if not as an implicit theory. In an opulently illustrated book about angels he groups texts and images egalitarian next to each other in order illuminate the theme of the messenger – aiming at the media-theoretical questions behind it. Needless to say, Serres already alludes to messenger and mediation technologies with his use of the leitmotif of ‘Hermès’ in his early works. As everyone knows, the demigod Hermes is also known to be responsible for thieves and for travellers – which points once more this other paradigm in Serres’ modeling games: locomotion as a journey into foreign worlds. Preferably the journey by ship.

Serres’ artful work with recurring motifs, his scientific prose has developed into an unmistakable idiom: formulaic, symbolic language and poetry at the same time – but this would be a topic in itself (Gehring 2006). Returning to aesthetics as a subject, I mention only that he also wrote on music. Mathematicians and musicians are “born under the same sky and at the same moment, like twins”, he writes in *Le Parasite*. “Without always being aware of it, they are forever together.” But only musicians know “what a chord is and how to put it into practice”.¹¹

désordre introduit dans la similitude produisait simplement l'état de l'habitude et de l'accoutumée. L'espace de raison ne disait plus non à l'espace de la vie et des choses elles-mêmes. Zenon ne renonce point à la raison dans la profusion folle du concret, mais il apprend que la raison est un cas singulier dans un tirage au sort, une singularité parmi autres. [...] Il sourit, alors, doucement: peut-être suis-je loin de ma destination, il n'importe, dit-il. Mais je crois bien que je ne suis plus trop éloigné du réel; ne le répétez pas. – Le Zénon nouveau, de Paris ou de Londres, appelait randonnée sa méthode [...]; dt. Serres 1995: 12 f.

11 Serres 1980b: 173: “[...] nés sous le même ciel et au même moment, jumeaux” – “Sans le savoir toujours, ils sont toujours ensemble.” – “[...] [Eux seul savent, parmi nous,] ce qu'est un accord et comment le réaliser.” – Cf. Petra Gehring 2020.

Serres loves beauty without loving purity, and he loves harmony, but not the harmony of unity or unanimity, rather that of polyphonic totality. A devoted enthusiasm for the never-ending variety – the non-trivial, the irreducible variety – also determine his aesthetic choices. The fact that, in addition to art in the narrower sense, technology, namely today's complex technologies, have advanced to become the almost miraculous realm and source of diversity, stands sharply before his eyes. Here, too, he is fascinated by almost everything. On the one hand his curiosity is directed especially at vehicles, transport techniques of all kinds, and on the other hand by communication technologies: smoke signals, semaphores, the morse apparatus – and above all in his later works: the internet. Serres can be read not only as a topologist or as a media theorist, but also as a theorist of technology. This should be underpinned, without my being able to deepen this as well.

Onward to moral philosophy and to politics. Here Serres has set a break with his book *Le contrat naturel* (*The natural contract*). This text is akin to a fire call. It takes a look at the ecological situation of the Earth and, in a very fundamental way, at the social that has led to it. There is not only a dramatic exhaustion of nature by culture and monstrous artifacts that threaten us together with our natural environment. But our very own and most basic relation to the world around us can be considered as failed. Because with what we imagined as 'nature', we created a fatal, a false category. Serres therefore demands nothing less than a new social contract – a social contract that would be made with nature itself and would include it in a new coexistence to be established. There are no examples in legal philosophy for such a 'natural contract' with a mute partner who cannot form a willingly decision or sign. Nevertheless, we need it – and its obligations we must execute with our bodies and actions. They must be more than letters on paper.

Henceforth, we will refute the word politics as inaccurate, because it only refers to the city, the public spaces, to the administrative organisation of groups. But he who stays within the city – formerly known as a bourgeois – knows nothing of the world. Henceforth, the one who governs must escape from the humanities, from the streets and walls of the city and become a physicist, emerge from the social contract, invent a new natural contract by giving the word nature back its original meaning of the conditions into which we are born – or will be re-born in tomorrow. Inversely, the physicist, in the most ancient greek sense of the word, but also the most modern, will approach the politician.¹²

12 Serres 1990: 75: "Désormais nous répouterons inexact le mot politique, parce qu'il ne se réfère qu'à la cite, aux espaces publicitaires, à l'organisation administrative des groups. Or il ne connaît rien au monde, celui demeure dans la ville, jadis appelé bourgeois. Désormais, le gouvernant doit sortir des sciences humaines, des rues et des murs der la cite, se faire physician, émerger du contrat social, inventer un nouveau contrat naturel en redonnant au mot nature son sens original des conditions dans lesquelles nous naissons – ou devrons demain renaître. Inversement le physician, au sens grec le plus ancien, mais aussi le plus modern, s'approche du politique."

As we know, (Serres' disciple) Bruno Latour took up the idea of an autonomy of things in his own way (Latour 1999). Serres, on the other hand, turned more to anthropological considerations. Mind you, a new type of anthropology. He speaks with an artificial term of *hominescence*, a demanded becoming human, which so far hasn't taken place.

3. The Five Senses

Les Cinq Sens, *The five Senses*, published as the first volume of a so far discontinued series called *Philosophie des corps mêlés* (*A philosophy of Mingled Bodies*). It is – even by Serres' standards – an exceedingly lavish book. For long stretches, it reads like a hymn branching out into stories, a tribute to the senses, a series of essays which are devoted to the facets of feeling, perceiving and, of course, to the body as the great and mysterious entity that initiates us into all this.

Indeed, the breadth and modulability of sensory experience itself is to some extent the subject of the book, plus its power to ground all that lies beyond perception. But I think the book has at least two other major themes. One is the role, possibilities, and limits of language confronted with the silent realm of the senses: how are perception and language related, and what does language do in the face of the force of sensory experience? Is it able to grasp them? The second theme is of interest to the scholarly reader: *Les Cinq Sens* is a discussion of the challenges of radical empiricism and its subtler (but perhaps weaker) variants in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Serres opts here ... in the end probably for both. For a radicalised phenomenology, one that doesn't turn away from language. But also for one that has to be grounded anew in empiricism – at least that would be my thesis.

The order of the book is somewhat confusing. However it does contain five chapters: at the beginning it is about skin and sense of touch, then the ears, the tongue with nose (taste and smell), the eyes and finally as fifth sense the sense of balance. But as for the rest, one is already at a loss. The five parts differ strongly in their extent, their headings said at first sight nothing and also the sections are completely heterogeneously headed, for example: "Tattooing", "Subtle", "Fog", "Cells", "Animal spirits". The heading "Birth" occurs twice, the heading "Fur" is in quotation marks. In the chapter "Boxes, Cases" there is a section "Healing in Epidaurus", in the chapter "Joy" there is a section "Healing in France". Possibly corresponding. Or not? It seems to be undecidable. Three successive sections contain the additions 'local', 'global' as well as 'global and local': a rascal who thinks of Hegel, and who then does not notice the small reversal that the third stage ('global and local') doesn't neutralise the two previous ones, but ends again with the first term. Such jumping divisions, to which one cannot make a rhyme, are often found in Serres' books. Whether we have a denial of order before us or a riddle (i.e. one or more coded orders) has, to my knowledge, not yet been clarified by anyone.

If we stick to the theme: our body has *five* senses, from these five senses our experience springs, that much becomes clear from the reading. But all

the rest is a “but ...”. The inordinate copiousness of the book, the order that is only hinted at, the crowded image of small cross-references – what Serres examines isn’t a world of discrete sensory perceptions, just the opposite: the complex, equally dense as well as mobile interrelationship of synaesthetically interacting fields. In an active zone of wonder called body, the five only supposedly exist as separate. And while we grasp, perceive and act, they lay ahead of objects and language in a mysterious way. Moreover, they are nonetheless always already intimately conspiratorial with both – the world of expression as well as the world of objects. It is only as if they knew more of both, words and thing, than these know of themselves – and than we can say. In this respect the senses are nothing pre-communicative. Instead, they are downright masters of communicating. And the bodily perception, though mute, is also abundant in reflected subtleties: a paradise, a primordial sea, a universe of communication.

[3.1.] That the senses are thus initial, but not original in the way that the body – initially empty – would have in them quasi filler necks, sensors, plugs, interfaces that let the world in, Serres already makes clear in the very first section.

Under the heading “Birth”, the book begins with a gripping scene that initiates the theme of perception as well as corporeality in an elementary way – namely right at the border of life and death. What we read is the account of the narrow escape of a first person narrator, Serres himself, from a burning ship. But the report also works as a subtle frontal attack against all forms of naive sensualism, as well as against the guiding difference of cognitive theory – inside and outside. The former – sensualism – supports the idea of a blank wax-board or of an automaton, including the corresponding genetically-constructed idea of incarnation (i.e. developmental psychology). The latter – cognitive theory – divides the nature of external stimuli from the nature of the internal stimulus processing (possibly with resulting reactions).

With Serres, in the first discovery of such a never before experienced, incomparable situation, we do not perceive like a child (receiving impressions) but it is an adult man who finds himself enclosed in the ship, physically connected with it, wedged between inside and outside, struggling to press his body through a much too small porthole – and then, as it were, flushed or washed out by a wave: born or newborn. But this is probably not due to certain sensory external information. Rather, most likely because the senses are already there. ‘There’ in the sense of ‘in that place’: thanks to an archaic knowledge, a wise complicity of the body with the technical artifacts and with the elements: fire, air, water. It is crucial for the rescue that the senses, in their cross-linked totality with the world, are always already on the outside. Our bodies reach all the way to the stars, that is what Henri Bergson has put it.¹³ Serres’

13 “Car si notre corps est la matière à laquelle notre conscience s’applique, il est co-extensif à notre conscience, il comprend tout ce que nous percevons, il va jusqu’aux étoiles.”, Bergson 2003: 138.

opening movement sets the scene and at the same time makes clear how this insight is not followed by a feeling of omnipotence, but by humility and grateful amazement.

That *The Five Senses* also demonstratively rejects any cerebralism right at the beginning - localization of the sensory clearing center in the brain, in the head, or fixed localization at all - I mention only in passing. "The soul resides at the point where the I is decided."¹⁴ the text says. And this point, that is what the story revolves around, manifests itself in the course of a transitory movement, somewhere beyond the center of the body - all the while being threatened with fragmentation. It emerges case by case. It is mobile. And it expends itself, spends itself. Just like my breath: "This internal sense proclaims, calls, announces, sometimes howls the I [...]"¹⁵

[3.2.] The section "Tattoos" takes up the theme of localisation again. And in does so radically decelerated and in an almost ethnographic mode: we study, without existential pressure, how the body does it.

The soul, not quite a point, reveals itself through volume, with precision in a ship, in the space traced by unusual displacements. Can we find it superficial now?¹⁶

The cutting of one's own nails, the touch of lips - what Serres describes here is what the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (taking up a neurological term) has called 'chiasmus' and what Edmund Husserl already investigated using the example of our two hands: the attempt to touch one's own touching (for instance when I touch something with one hand and then touch this touching hand with my second hand) - this attempt fails: either I feel 'myself' in one hand or else in the other. There is no reflexivity, which is ulterior to the *gestalt* that I am accustomed to inhabit wholly and completely; no reflexivity which now additionally once more unites the perception (detached from 'itself', as it were). The body plays ball with the soul 'locally', so Serres turns it. Furthermore Serres describes how we can discover that the zones of inner accessibility of our skin - the degrees of preparedness for this reversible self-perception - are unequally distributed.

There are zones where this contingency does not come into play. I touch my shoulder with my hand, but it is not possible to enable my shoulder to touch my hand.¹⁷

14 FS: 20/CS: 16: "L'âme gît au point où le je se decide."

15 FS: 19/CS: 16: "Le sens interne clame, appelle, annonce, hurle parfois le je."

16 FS: 21/CS: 18: "L'âme, quasi-point, se découvre dans le volume, exactement dans un vaisseau, par l'espace de déplacements extraordinaires: peut-on la chercher de manière superficielle [...]."

17 FS: 25 (translation modified, pgg)/CS: 19: "Il existe des lieux où cette contingence ne joue pas. Je touché mon épaule de ma main, et je ne peux pas faire que de l'épaule je touche ma main."

Instead of rough, sweeping categories such as ‘person’ or ‘subject’, complex topologies result of parts of the body in which a lot of ‘I’ oscillates and those which have inert object status, belonging to the ‘I’ rather in certain borderline cases. The soul extends “in patches”¹⁸ and, just as in early romanticist philosophies, it is not somewhere deep inside, but like a tattoo directly under the skin. As a “mingled body”¹⁹, as a colourful thing and as something that can be transmitted through touch beyond the borders of the body. Let us forget incorrect dualisms.

[3.3] Serres also writes about hearing, the noise that even the deaf hear, noise distributed around the world that we do not hear either because it tells us absolutely nothing, or because we would not endure it if we allowed it to tell us something. Our bodies make noise, nature makes noise, society, the collective, makes a tremendous noise.

In one scene of the book, we can see – but especially hear – the Amphitheatre of Pinara, surrounded by a mountain backdrop and a cemetery, and at the same time open to the sky like an auricle: A kind of sound machine in which the fact is multiplied that self-awareness arises from being able to hear ourselves, that we in turn only hear ourselves when something is thrown back at us, that we therefore need a city to make a collective audible, and that we need the dead to hear the past.

Again, we are faced with a chiasmatic structure, but one that is not reserved for the body, but is technically mediated: insofar as it is (merely) nature, the body is noise in the same sense as (merely) roaring sociality or the (merely) dead city. to separate noises, voices, sounds, to filter them, to amplify them, to transmit them. Perception theory cannot be other than information and telecommunication theory.

[3.4] Finally another section. It opens the chapter devoted to the sense of taste, where again we come across the analogy of the map, just as in the case of our body – being quasi tattooed by different levels of preparedness for perception. Similarly, yet abstractly as sensory phenomenologically unfolded into an entirely different form. In or more precisely: on the tongue time gathers. There already the wine list is an encyclopedia, before then catacombs bring to light an old bottle, which one can do justice for its part only by forgetting any hurry or haste:

It took us so long to finish this bottle that we are still talking about it.²⁰

Old wine gives us a new mouth. And it makes us speak in new ways, it awakens the tongue to nothing but itself. In the image of the second tongue, which is

¹⁸ FS: 25/CS: 22: “par flaques”.

¹⁹ Cf. FS: 25/CS: 22: “le corps, mêle”.

²⁰ FS: 152/CS: 166: “Nous avons pris tant de temps pour boire ce verre que nous en parlons encore.”

able to add a silent, sensual wisdom to what the first tongue says, Serres dares a kind of inverse image of what we know as the metaphor of the lie: the forked tongue as the one that speaks deceitfully and therefore double-tongued. However, the tongue that knows wine does not speak at all, it coexists with the silver of speech like the proverbial gold. From the drug that forces silence, the good wine differs in that it definitely inspires the words. “Aesthetics or anaesthesia”, is Serres’s laconic theory of the intoxicant, but “there is no third tongue”.²¹

As far as cognitive logic is concerned, the special thing about taste is its almost unbelievable capacity for condensation: although the sensual impression itself is quite fleeting, nothing adds up, nothing accumulates, it incomparably concentrates the past. Nothing can be visualised there. A fan emerges from a bottle: “I can draw a thousand maps, but I am only ever talking about time.”²² The smell, Serres calls it a third mouth, is added. This results in yet another model for the interplay of sensory perception and language. No transition, but a parallel action with marriage: three ways to speak, all are guests with all. A communion, three at a time. Modern tempo, chattering or consumerist repetition (as well as the renunciation of guest culture and friendships) are opposed to this form of – as we might call it – sensual intelligence. When Serres, in the question of wine culture, again gains a critical argument for the present from the fact that he confronts – as with *Concorde* – the maximum of a yield with the limits to which its realization must come, the punch line is turned around straight away:

Anyone who drinks a good wine will not talk of brands, cannot say fully what flows over the palate, or lingers in the mouth. A finely detailed watered-silk map is drawn there, lacking ready-made words to designate it or sentences to describe it, for want of experience, apart from feeble vocabulary which everyone ridicules. [...] If we had to set out what the wine contains, the list would be as long as our admiration of the wine was profound, the label would cover the bottle, the cellar, the vines and the surface of the countryside, mapping them all faithfully, point by point. [...] Concreteness resides in such density, reality in this summation, like a singular essence.²³

21 FS: 155/CS: 169: “Esthésie ou anesthesia, pas de tierce langue.”

22 FS: 158/CS: 172: “Je dessine milles cartes, je ne parle que du temps.”

23 FS: 222/CS: 240: “Qui boit de bon vin ne saurait parler de marque, ne peut dire intégralement ce qui passé ou reste dans son palais. S’y dessine une carte finement détaillée, une moire, sans mots canonisés pour la designer ni phrases pour la decrier, sauf lexique débile, don’t tout le monde se moque, faute d’expérience. [...] S’il fallait y énoncer ce que contient le vin, la liste s’allongerait d’autant qu’on estime le vin, le papier recouvrirait la bouteille, la cave, la vigne, la surface du paysage, comme une carte fidèle point par point. L’excellence ouvre une suite descriptive don’t on imagine qu’elle court à l’infini. Boire enveloppe cette liste et ce temps interminable: la singularité du cru, de la date et du flacon lui-même enroule cette immense série sur un lieu réduit, exactement sommaire. Le concret gît dans cette densité ou le reel en cette summation, comme une essence singulière [...]”

Here, not the increased technology (of the transport flight) advances to a weapon, but the increased technology (of the written recording) returns, as it were, to the earth and to what the mixture in the bottle – if one gives it time – always already knows, can and does.

4. Conclusion

It is hard to do justice to a book like *The five Senses*. Plea for diversity and the irrepressible generosity of the real. Scarcity in the strict sense of the word does not exist here - sensory impressions are free, not all are pleasant, but their abundance knows no comparison. The body has an almost paradisiacal economy, language, art and also technology are not its opponents, they are its more or less happy (for their part more or less inspired) guests. The only opponent of the senses and the body, their mysterious regent, is death alone – and the written, printed word. This as far as writing – in a truly platonic fashion – is able to live beyond death, while at the same time losing an elementary relation to the senses, to those five that can only speak for themselves. “Here is the tomb of empiricism, clad in engraved marble”²⁴, Serres remarks. “Empiricism” on the other hand, “ marvels at profusion, a philosophy of wellsprings, whereas economics, the calculation of equilibrium in exchange, suppresses it”²⁵ While those economies that rely upon negation and abstraction – probably smarter in a certain sense – repress abundance, calculate exchange processes in a state of equilibrium and cannot truly bear a state of plenty. Nor the confusion. Nor that which is mixed.

“We have difficulty speaking about mixtures or rationalising them”²⁶ as Serres points out in a passage of *The five Senses*. In fact it appears to me that Serres’ philosophy of *mixtures* goes a small but important step beyond phenomenologies of the previous type – as a philosophy of multiplicities and manifolds. However, I doubt whether this philosophy of mixtures is itself an empiricism (only and especially this). For that, Serres’ motif of the entanglement of words and perception is too much at the center of the theory of perception and the theory of bodies itself. And for that, the book is also too much itself a rehearsal for a poetry that is perhaps even more than sensual. Indeed, *The five Senses* can also be read as a contribution to the problem of scientific language. Serres puts his finger on the price one pays for formal gains in abstraction-as far as language is concerned. “Behold science, fully developed now, mature, powerful, reveling in its triumphs, celebrated above all else, do you imagine it cares what it looks like, at this stage?”²⁷ Serres’ answer is: No. Prose gets

24 FS: 199/CS: 217: „Voici le tombeau de l’empirisme, recouvert de marbre gravé.”

25 FS: 216f./CS: 234: “L’empirisme s’émerveille de la profusion, philosophie des sources, l’économie la supprime, calcule des échanges équilibrés.”

26 FS: 219/CS: 236: “Nous avons du mal à parler des mélanges, ou à raisonner sur eux.”

27 FS: 195/CS: 212: „Voici la science plus d’adulte, mûre, puissante, au faite des triomphes, première partout, va-t-elle s’inquiéter, l’âge venu, de son visage?”

ugly. It does not satiate. It seems, then, that language has no chance on two accounts: because it is language and because, in addition, a rational discourse alienates it from the world.

Empiricism always re-appears, according to Serres. As a belief in the senses as well as an enthusiasm for the world, it keeps turning up – and thus it defends itself against the resumptive forces of a language that remains *logos* and puts ‘-logies’ into gear. Against doctrines of abbreviations, against doctrines of direct connections between two or more points, but also against doctrines, which deny the difference between language and non-language. “Empiricism”, says Serres in the second part of “Birth”,

is a tailor, working locally, basting, thinking in extensions, from near vicinities to vicinal proximities, from singularity to singularity, from seed to layer, from well to bridge. It draws detailed maps as it traces paths, maps the body, the world and dressmaker’s patterns: cuts out, pins, sews. Subtle and refined, it loves detail, its creations fragile. It is a topologist, having a sense for borders and threads, surfaces and reversals, never assuming that things and states of affairs are the same, more than a step in any direction, a weaver of varieties, in detail. Language on the other hand does not go into detail, instantly occupying a homogeneous space: voice carries and echoes afar. A cymbal within the resonating thorax, it rises like a column above the throat, a whirling cone out front, its base planted behind the uvula, trumpet, clarion, announcing itself and flying into the surrounding volume, unifying it. through the mastery of its vibrating force, lending the body a hasty and wide-ranging synthesis, global and urgent, dominant. Acoustics, through its harmonies, erases the seams that came before it and makes us forget them. [...] Empiricism, tailor of our skin, has the same relationship to topology as the sonorous word has to geometry. The latter pair dominates and hides the former.²⁸

Topology on one hand, geometry on the other – the one rationalises experience, the other the word. In this cross-table, two formalisation strategies suddenly face each other. Furthermore, language finds its place in the senses and in corporeality. So, once again, we have no dualism and no clear separations

28 FS: 227/CS: 245 f.: „L’empirisme, couturier, bâtit localement, pense par prolongements, de proche voisinage en proximité vicinale, de singularité en singularité, de germe en nappe, de pits en pont, dessine des cartes fines par chemins de chèvres, cartographie le corps, le monde, les patrons: découpe, épingle, coud. Subtil et raffiné, il aime le détail et fabrique fragile. Topologue, il a le sens des bords et des fils, des surfaces et des retournements, jamais assure qu’à moins d’un pas d’ici les choses ou états de choses demeurent les memes, tisserand de varieties, au détail. Le verbe au contraire ne fait pas le détail, il occupe instantanément l’espace homogène: la voix porte et retentit au loin. Cymbale dans son thorax de resonance, elle monte comme une colonne au-dessus de la gorge, cône tourbillonnant, devant, pointe plantée derrière la lurette, trompette, clarion qui s’annonce et vole dans le volume tout autour et le rend unitaire sous l’emprise de sa force vibrante, donnant au corps une synthèse hâtive et large, globale et pressée, dominante. L’acoustique pas ses accords efface les coutures precedents et les faits oublier. (...) L’empirisme couturier de peau a la même relation à la topologie que le verbe sonore entretient avec la géométrie. Les deux derniers nommés dominant et cachent les premiers.”

before us, the situation is complex. Thus, Serres' prose looks again for a deviating, a dissident path.

The last pages of *The Five Senses* revolve around the paradoxical position that thinking has between the senses, the words and the necessity for abstraction. They also deal with the paradoxical position of philosophy between body, language and manuscripts. The Sciences have changed everything: the world, objects, history. And they also uprooted language:

We can no longer speak the common language. Precision and rigour have definitively abandoned it to emigrate towards knowledge with its countless disciplines [...].²⁹

Serres' advice amounts to freeing language from discursive commitments – and start anew with that which was “once the primary object of traditional philosophy” – the “given”³⁰. “To the things themselves!” This was the not identical but electively related appeal, stated by phenomenological philosophy a century ago.

Neither a religion of the senses nor a thinking without words can be the answer to the situation evoked by empiricism. But it would be a matter of reestablishing our linguistic relation to the world – and this in conscious distance to science. According to Serres, the good news is that we have a firm base to start from. There is always already something that supports language. Formal knowledge, however isn't enough anymore – “[n]o matter how powerful it makes us“ Serres adds, and elevates music to a metaphor not only for “structure” but also for the movement of thought itself „the universal musicality of language, beneath our utterances, seems to speak to our senses more than the sense of the words themselves”.³¹ Thus the adventure of philosophy begins afresh – as a kind of multilingual music in writing.

References

- Henri Bergson, Henri (2003), *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion (1932)*, Quebec: Chicoutimi [Edition électronique].
- Foucault, Michel (1969), *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard. [dt. *Archäologie des Wissens*, Ulrich Köppen (transl.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973].
- Gehring, Petra (2004), Art. „Wissen VII“, in Gerhard Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Gottfried Gabriel (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 12. Basel: Schwabe, Sp. 900–902.

29 FS: 339/CS: 376: „Nous ne pouvons plus parler en langue usuelle, precision et rigueur l'ont à jamais quittée pour émigrer vers le savoir aux mille disciplines [...]”

30 Cf. FS: 344: “[...] the given. Once the primary object of traditional philosophy [...]”; CS: 381: “[...] le donné. Objet traditionnellement premier de la philosophie [...]”

31 Cf. FS: 195/CS: 212: „Moment où le savoir formel ne suffit plus, quelque pouvoir qu'il donne, où la musique de la langue, par exemple, universelle sous les phrases, semble en dire plus aux sens que le sens des vocables meme [...]”

- (2006), „Politik der Prosa. Schreibverfahren bei Michel Serres“, in Reinhard Heil, Andreas Hetzel (eds.), *Die unendliche Aufgabe. Perspektiven und Kritik der Demokratietheorie*, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 169–183.
- (2010), „Der Parasit: Figurenfülle und strenge Permutation“, in Eva Eßlinger, Tobias Schlechtriemen, Doris Schweitzer, Alexander Zons (eds.), *Die Figur des Dritten. Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Paradigma*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, pp. 180–192.
- (2020), „Liebeserklärung ans Universale: Serres' Musikphilosophie“, in Reinhold Clausjürgens, Kurt Röttgers (eds.), *Michel Serres: Das vielfältige Denken. Oder: Das Vielfältige denken*, München: Brill/Fink, pp. 89–101.
- Latour, Bruno; Serres, Michel (1992), *Eclaircissements*, Paris: François Bourin.
- Latour, Bruno (1999), *Politiques de la nature*, Paris: Le Découverte.
- Serres, Michel (1968), *Hermès I – La communication*, Paris: Minuit.
- (1977), *Hermès IV – La distribution*, Paris: Minuit. [dt. Serres, Michel (1993), *Hermès 5: Verteilung*, Michael Bischoff (transl.), Berlin: Merve.]
- (1980a), *Hermès V – Le Passage du Nord-Ouest*, Paris: Minuit. [dt. Serres, Michel (1995), *Hermès 5: Die Nordwest-Passage*, Michael Bischoff (transl.), Berlin: Merve.]
- (1980b), *Le Parasite*, Paris: Grasset.
- (1985), *Les Cinq Sens (=CS)*, Paris: Grasset. [engl. *The five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)* (=FS), Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (transl.), London: Continuum Books 2008].
- (1990), *Le contrat naturel*, Paris: François Bourin.

Petra Gering

Empirizam Mišela Sera

Teorija čulnosti između filozofije nauke, fenomenologije i etike

Apstrakt:

Rad nam predstavlja filozofiju francuskog filozofa Mišela Sera, sa akcentom na njegov radni metod, te krajnje neuobičajenu metodologiju. Polazeći od teze da empirijska crta Serove filozofije ostaje nedovoljno eksponirana ukoliko se njegova dela naprosto recipiraju kao dela epistemologa strukturaliste, prelazi se na detaljniju analizu Serove monografije *The Five Senses* (1985). Tu vidimo i radikalni empirizam, sam za sebe, ali i bliskost sa fenomenologijom. Pa ipak, percepcija i jezik, kod Sera nisu suprotstavljeni. Umesto toga, njegovo radikalna misao o povezanosti telesnih čula sa svetom i podjednako dosledno razumevanje osećajnosti jezika – a takođe i filozofske proze – duboko su isprepleteni.

Ključne reči: Mišel Ser, empirizam, parkur, strukturalizam, fenomenologija