# Michel Serres' Messengers

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## Abstract

Although central to his philosophy of communication, the figure of the messenger in Michel Serres' thought has so far received little attention in English speaking media and cultural theory. This essay explores the characters of messengers that Serres develops throughout his philosophical project, focusing on the way that they allow him to develop topics such as the ethics of exchange, interdisciplinarity, pedagogy, rituals of communication and what he sees as the violence of dialectics. The discussion of Serres' work then leads to a discussion of the messenger figure in terms of the interruptions that they can introduce to systems of exchange, ending with an exploration of what Serres' thought may offer as we try and grapple with a new culture of miscommunication.

## Keywords

Michel Serres, philosophy of communication, messenger theory, media philosophy, miscommunication

*At the beginning of every play, a comic or a tragic author presents a list of dramatis personae. Given millennia of farces and dramas, guess which character is cited most often: the messenger, whatever name he may carry.*
Michel Serres, *Branches:* 130

Michel Serres has left us a philosophical project told through stories of relationships, travels and communication. In these stories, the figure of the messenger usually features somewhere: 'he surprises, overturns actions, disrupts equilibriums and destinies by means of crises and peripeteias' (Serres, 2020: 130). As a character that he calls on throughout his books, the messenger is a figure that is not very talkative but that nevertheless plays a major role in allowing Serres to draw out philosophical

problems by first understanding them in terms of systems for the transmission of information. In the early Hermes work, in his work on noise and the parasite, in his book on angels, and in his extraordinarily productive later period, the procedures for the transmission of information from one person, disciplinary branch, context or localisation to another, are at the centre of Serres' thought. They have allowed him to think through diverse issues such as the movement from the local to the global, the relationship between the self and the other, the constructed hierarchies of knowledge, the ethics of communication, and the relationship between the arts and sciences. The messenger character also underpins the way Serres thinks of time and history and the relationship between humans, technology and nature, which often exists at the fringes of order and disorder.[1] In this essay I unpack Serres' philosophy of the messenger as developed throughout his work and particularly in the stories he tells about Harlequin, Hermes, angels and parasites. More than just a close reading, I try and push Serres further, motivated by the contemporary media context, where miscommunication, bad messengers, heightened divisions and noise have started to take on a new role in the public sphere.

This essay starts with my interpretation of the character of Harlequin and begins to show how the concepts that he embodies of mediation and exchange offer to Serres a way to overturn what he sees as the violence of dialectics and the limitations of disciplinary perspectives. The essay then extends this with a focus on Serres' earlier Hermes works and his use of translation as a way to think about interdisciplinarity. The essay then looks at the use of the figure of angels and the manner in which Serres thinks about transmission as a philosophical concept. This then leads to a discussion of the messenger figure in terms of the interruptions that they can introduce to systems of exchange.

In terms of his reception in English speaking media theory, Serres work on noise and the parasite is probably the most well-known (Crocker, 2013; Brown, 2013; Kennedy, 2021; Sutherland, 2021), as well as his work on the body in *The Five Senses (Les Cinq Sens)* (Tucker, 2011; Connor, 1999). In general, the field has received Serres as a figure that provides a means to overturn the emphasis on signification, language and representation that has previously permeated media and cultural theory, and instead to think through questions of materiality, intermingling and sense experience (Tucker,

2011; Watkins, 2020). As yet though Serres' use of the figure of the messenger has received far less attention. When it is addressed, usually Serres himself is seen as the messenger – as the Hermes figure introduced in his early works – that traverses modes of thought and historical time periods (see, for instance, Sandoval, 1995: 108). However, there is more at stake in his re-introduction of the figure of the messenger into contemporary philosophy in terms of the ethics of transmission, particularly in the writing on angels and parasites that follow on from the Hermes books. Serres asks those of us interested in a theory of media to focus on the incommunicable aspects of communication, the dynamics of message transmission systems, including the visible and invisible messengers and the roles that they play in delivering their errands and making possible relations between local, fragmentary events. This, it has to be said, remains difficult. The means of communication have become less apparent on the surface of messages, disappearing behind apparently 'immediate' communication. After all, the once visible mailman has been overtaken by packet switching, the operators on phone lines replaced by software, and, thanks to the proliferation of social media, the official accounts from journalists are no longer the only way that events are broadcast around the globe. In this paper I ask what is to be gained from philosophers and media theorists thinking again about messengers, which now seem to be obsolete given the realities of faster than lightning message exchange and distributed, participatory communication networks. *Why should we think about messengers at all?*

## Openings/middles

In the opening of *Troubadour of Knowledge* (*Le Tiers-instruit*, 1997a), Serres tells a story that describes a messenger, one that I repeat here because it not only pertains to the aspect of boundary crossing in his work, but also because it could be seen to introduce his entire philosophical project. Harlequin, the emperor of the moon, has just returned to earth and called a press conference to communicate his findings from the inspection of his lunar lands. When asked about the beauty of the moon, Harlequin replies: "everywhere everything is just as it is here, identical in every way to what one can see ordinarily on the terraqueous globe. Except that the degrees of grandeur and beauty change" (xiii). An obvious lie, but one that Harlequin seems to believe. The crowd expected eccentricities, but he has just given them banalities; only a matter in a change

of degree here or there, some things bigger, some smaller, some more colourful, some less. The crowd are not impressed. How could that be! They become irritated. Cruelly, they demand he remove his cloak, with its patchwork of brilliant colours. The multiplicity of the cloak, the way different fabrics and textures are stitched together, its beauty, seems to be at odds with the report that Harlequin has offered of his trip. He takes off his cloak only to reveal more and more layers of fabric, which he continues to remove, until he is left standing on stage naked, revealing his tattooed body.

When Harlequin speaks, he speaks with the voice of reason. He speaks with the kind of logic that Serres detests; a logic that stems from Descartes and that provides one of the main poles that Serres' project works against. Harlequin gives voice to what Christopher Watkin calls an 'umbilical thinking' (Watkin, 2020: 38-42), where all the world is made to pass through one uniform, universal, unifying discourse. As Serres writes, '[w]hether royal or imperial, whoever wields power, in fact, never encounters in space anything other than obedience to his power, thus his law […]. Thus reason never discovers, beneath its feet, anything but its own rule' (Serres, 1997a: xiii). Because everything is reduced to the single concept, made to pass through a single point, everything is said to be the same in the harlequin's eyes, only different in degree. But the travels and experiences that are written on Harlequin's cloak and written on his body, like stickers on a traveller's suitcase, the mixture of colours that make up every rag that he wears, offer the very possibility of communicating the multiple. It seems that to be a good messenger Harlequin simply had to appear and then disappear, before speaking. The trouble only started once he imposed himself (and his established ways of seeing the world) on the message.

Most interpretations of this story are that Serres uses Harlequin to demonstrate the relationship between the local, multiple singularities of the Harlequin and the white totality represented by Pierrot, a figure that Harlequin transforms into at the end of the story (see for instance Watkin, 2020). However, a different interpretation is possible: Harlequin is a traveller-messenger. He is a figure that is constantly in-between. In fact, it is not properly correct to refer to Harlequin as 'he' or 'him'. Revealed as he strips down, Harelequin mixes genders, both male and female. In

addition, he is also both left and right-handed, displayed to the crowd by the dexterity with which he takes off his cloaks.

Harlequin is the relation between elements. For Serres, this type of messenger is used as an in-between figure to describe the transmissions and tensions between those things that the tradition of logic would usually separate, such as the moon and the Earth. The harlequin for Serres is a tool, a method, a way of inventing a figure to make possible a description of the way the creation of knowledge takes place and the ethics of exchange. And it is this figure of the messenger that makes Serres important in terms of philosophy, and, more specifically, in terms of any process-oriented theory of media. For Serres it is transferral that matters, not staid objects – and the messenger gives him a new way of describing these transferals, a new way to elucidate what A.N. Whitehead once called 'prehensions'. From particles that exchange genetic information to human conversations to historical epochs that format one another, life emerges, Serres argues, from the relationships between entities, from the transferal of information from one to another. In a way that is in accord with Whitehead's earlier process philosophy, Serres uses the messenger to show us these figures as the relations between elements, as the phenomena that precede being.[2]

Harlequin, the traveller, occupies an in-between space. He has travelled to the position of the other, to the moon, and returned. The press, the audience, has assembled to hear him speak. But when he speaks using the earthbound voice of reason, he lies; the difference between the earth and the moon is flattened. But when he is made to strip by the crowd, when reason is silenced and he displays the events of his travels, written on his body, the audience, apart from a few, cannot understand anything. His multiplicity shocks them. They are used to singular concepts, to binary oppositions, to categories that can be imposed on the world from above – the very things that Serres continually opposes in his writing. It is in Harlequin's cloak and in Harlequin's body that his message is inscribed and that his identity as a messenger is located. For Serres it is only by paying attention to the multiple, to the differentiated events of the world, rather than reducing everything to a predefined concept, to one side or the other, that we can arrive at what could be called a philosophy capable of invention, capable of moving beyond the received wisdom of the humanities. In the story of Harlequin, what became important for Serres is a way to make it possible – *to set up the conditions* – to

think about the intermediary spaces for communication and exchange, the spaces that are represented on the harlequin's cloak and tattooed on his body, spaces that are in-between the two sides of dialectics. At the beginning of this section, I suggested that the Harlequin story could be read as a stand in for Serres' entire philosophical project. This is because in Serres the role of philosophy becomes about the setting of the conditions for knowledge, like the cloak of the Harlequin, rather than the dismantling, dividing or undoing of previous knowledge in a kind of adversarial battle, like that which the crowd at the press conference engages in. As Serres states,

> The work of a philosopher, if and when it takes place, establishes a ground that will found local inventions to come. It carries generality, the earth or the atmosphere of the history of science itself and the liberty of art, the opening of knowledge and the house of pity. Far from being produced, as it is today, by the divisions of previous knowledge and as one among them, philosophy thus has the function of engendering the next knowledge in its global culture (Serres, 1997a: 99).

For Serres, it is not for philosophy to set itself up as a 'queen-science', or as 'a pole of knowledge' or a 'theory of theories' (Watkin, 2020: 109) with a meta-language that can be used to understand any and all phenomena. Nor is it the task of philosophers to hold fast onto a position, which then can be argued, fought out with another. For Serres, even when philosophy takes the form of a debate or an argument between two positions, the two interlocutors are always from the first word addressing the same problem – even if they are arguing about it – and they thus always end up within the same domain. Instead for Serres, philosophy should go everywhere, it should act as a connecting tissue, as a method of exchange between multiple ways of seeing the world, without imposing an imperialist language (whether this be psychoanalytic, Marxist or semiotic) (Watkin, 2020: 111). In short, Serres opposes the idea that philosophy should establish frameworks with which to see the world, with events shoehorned within its domain and reduced to the language that it uses to describe itself. Instead, the role of philosophy for Serres is to act as the quasi-discipline that can draw connections between the sciences and the arts, between events in time, between technology, nature and humans and between the self and the other. For Serres, philosophy's role is synthesis.

## In the middle of things

Like a messenger himself, Serres often begins his books in the in-between spaces. *The Five Senses* (2008) opens at sea, on a burning ship, Serres stuck in a porthole, his face freezing, whipped by the hard winter wind, and his lower body on fire, still inside the ship. Serres moves between the hot and cold, the inside and the outside, brute experience of the world and the language by which it is described. Likewise, *The Incandescent (L'Incandescent)* begins in the outdoors, on a farm, surrounded by forest and glaciers. Serres looks at his granddaughter playing with a doll, the farmhouse with its flaking paint, the mountains, seemingly permanent, the flowing stream, always moving. In this scene time flows around him, different rhythms of life playing out on levels that the philosopher synthesises together: the time experienced by the young girl, his own oldness, the seasonal cycles of the alpine pastures, the long duration of evolution, the geological time scale of the mountains, the time of the house, with its decaying paint. Serres stands at the instant, within his *grand récit* of the world,[3] moving between these times like a messenger, connecting together differences. *The Parasite (Le Parasite),* perhaps his best-known book to readers interested in media theory, opens in the middle of a space for communication: The city rat and the country rat sit on the tax collector's Persian rug, in the middle of the room, eating leftovers from the dirty dishes left on the banquet table. They are in the open, exposed, between the spaces they usually inhabit. Then a noise startles them. *Angels: A Modern Myth (La Légende des Anges)* opens in an airport. The characters Pia and Pantope begin a dialogue amongst the comings and goings of air travellers. The *milieu* for Serres, the place where his thinking most often begins, as Steven Connor (2002) has pointed out, is *in the middle of things,* rather than on any one side of a division. He establishes in these openings a condition for thinking as though a mise-en-scène. By starting in the middle of things – in the midst[4] – Serres asks us to consider the messengers that inhabit these spaces, the go-betweens, the intermediaries, the envoys and their effects on exchange.

Throughout Serres' philosophical project, he begins in these local, intermediary settings in order to draw attention to the movement of information through these spaces and the dynamics and difficulties of communication and border crossings. As the character of communication changed throughout his life, so did the characters change in Serres' project. During the Hermes period, beginning around the 1960s, most communication systems operated based on messages being sent one-way along

a line, in either one-to-one or one-to-many systems. A message might be sent or received either by post, telephone, radio, print or television. An envoy, like Harlequin, is sent and comes back with news from a faraway place. The importance of Serres' work in this period lies in his attention to the complexities of these process with recourse to cybernetics and thermodynamics, recognising the complexities of information exchange in a way that predates developments in media theory that would come decades later. During the period of Serres' work on angels, the exchange of information became faster, multiplied, more dispersed and decentralized. The line became multiplied into a network. Whatever their name, the singular Hermes or the singular Harlequin, as he put it, was replaced by flocks of angels, transmitting messages all over the globe. As Serres says to Bruno Latour, 'what differentiates angels from Hermes is their multiplicity, their cloud, their whirlwind. I was about to say their chaos, since their collectivity is similar to it' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 119). In the later period, starting around the early 2000s, there was yet another change; these networks of communication became not only multiplied, faster and more accessible but also much more participatory; the internet introduced the possibility for a 'many-to-many' computing model. Children started walking around looking down at their phones, as though they had an external mind, able to answer any question with a device they held in their hands.[5] This condition was reflected on explicitly in his book *Thumbelina* (*Petite Poucette*) (2015) and the broader questions about humans and contemporary technology were explored in *Hominescence* (2019) and *Branches (Rameaux)* (2020).

Since the publication of his books on twenty-first century technology, there has been yet another change in communication. The obstacles to communication, as noise, lies, conflict, hate and misinformation, have taken a new place in the contemporary world. Serres' work often addresses noise, but this new type of miscommunication system seems to extend the parasitic model of communication in new ways. Serres showed that forms of noise and interference could never be excluded completely from systems of information exchange, either by technical means or by legislation. He argues that noise is the primary condition for information: for any communication to take place, signal has to first be discerned from noise. For the system to function it paradoxically seeks to filter out that which it necessitates. Any dialogue, as Serres writes, involves two interlocutors united against a third, who would introduce noise into the channel (Serres, 1982: 66-67). The difference now is that the transmission of noise itself takes

the place of communication. Messengers now often become parasites. Miscommunication has taken on a new political significance through its inclusion within the communicative sphere. As Serres would say, the parasite of systems of communication has become the host, they are now at the centre of the exchange. But the parasites have also multiplied and become more overt in the unevenness of exchange. Serres' parasites once survived by covertly living off a host, by reworking a system to suit themselves, rather than the participants. Parasites continue to operate like this, but now they live off the noise that they themselves make, which for a moment captures attention. They have become more confident, more brash. They exchange noise for attention.

After looking further at the development of Serres' messenger characters we will return at the end of this essay to what these figures for thought can offer to media theories of miscommunication in the contemporary world.

## Hermes, Parasites, Angels

Hermes was Serres' first messenger and marked a radical difference between his philosophical project and that of his peers. When other French philosophers continued to write in the orthodoxy of Marxism, often citing the primacy of the means of production, Serres instead suggested to none other than Louis Althusser that the traditional idea of the production of material goods was being overtaken by information and communication and that a new paradigm was needed. Although many of us in the field would say that Serres was eventually proved correct, this initial statement, he said, led to him being called a fascist (Watkin, 2019: 38). In a way that pre-dated many of the central concerns in media theory, Serres argued that Hermes had replaced Prometheus, the paradigm of communication was replacing the paradigm of production.

One of the major aspects that this emphasis on communication offered to Serres was a new way to think about the relationship between knowledge and exchange, which could be understood with recourse to information theory rather than dialectics. In particular, Hermes gave to Serres a way to think about the transmission of knowledge between the disciplines of the sciences and the humanities – what he calls the 'hard' and the 'soft' (see Mercier, 2015). Communication between these two disciplinary

poles is difficult; it is a distance that does not need to be merely bridged, but rather navigated like the North-West passage, as he writes in volume five of the *Hermes* books; it is a channel susceptible to noise. By putting Hermes at the heart of his project, Serres was able to focus on the way information was moved between domains of knowledge, which through this passage would constitute different variants and transformations. In this respect, Hermes is Serres' god of synthesis. But, as Paul Harris writes, 'his interest is not fixed identities but the *transformations* that are possible on a given set of materials' (Harris, 2005: 114 [emphasis in original]). When Serres uses Hermes as the god of exchange, he also emphasises the transformation of the message as it moves across a divide into different disciplinary configurations and the way that this transformation itself connects usually distinct sets of practices and knowledge. Serres, as he puts it, pours himself into the character of Hermes and stitches together science and its poetic other. Serres, as Harris shows, uses the science of topology to read Guy Maupassant's 'The Horla', arguing that Maupassant produces the first text to discover the unstable subject as a figure capable of occupying multiple topological spaces at once. The artistic in Serres gets turned into a reorganisation of the history of scientific discoveries. The message gets reformatted by the messenger. Another example is Paul Verlaine's sonnet from *Sagesse*, which is claimed by Serres to intuit scientific theories of background noise (Perloff, 2005: 101). Yet another example is the painting of J.M.W. Turner, which, we are told be Serres, is actually a practice that explores thermodynamics and the industrialisation of heat in a way that translates the discoveries of Sadi Carnot.[6] The figure of Hermes is important for Serres because he is the mythological figure that allows these moves in the first place. For Serres, he is the god of all networks of relations; he is the god that produces a world from all kinds of relations.

The literature and paintings that Serres sees as translation of scientific phenomena are produced by messengers, moving information from one domain to another. But importantly, this does not simply mean the *illustration* of physics by literature or art, but, as Watkin (2020) puts it, an indication that 'there is something in physics deeper than physics' (117). What's more, nowhere is it suggested that Turner, Verlaine or Maupassant actually read the scientific theories that they are said by Serres to translate (and often they even predated the discoveries of the phenomena). Instead, for Serres, these works are examples of variants of the flow of the universe, given form in a

particular disciplinary setting. They are translations from the world itself. They are the other of science. And this is why Serres often begins in the middle, carefully describing these spaces and stitching together events in order to understand the world that expands from this middle ground, in myth, in science and technology and in art. Sometimes Serres does this by articulating together contemporaneous practices in art and science, as is the case in the above. Other times it is done by stitching together apparently out-of-date historical eras to show how they offer new ways to understand our own technological era. The book that most obviously inhabits this middle ground is *Angels: A Modern Myth*. In this book, Serres no longer himself acts as the messenger, nor does he show how artists can act as translators, but instead he replaces Hermes with the figure of the angel (and the cultural practices of flying by plane) to address head on issues of message exchange.

## Following Angels

*Angels* opens with two seemingly anachronistic images on opposite pages. The first is Rembrandt's *The Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family* (1637), which shows the departure of Raphael after he has led Tobias back from his journey to Media. The second image, mirroring the flight of the archangel, is a photograph of the Concorde taking off: 'a supersonic messenger'. These two images set the background for the book, as a relation between two seemingly opposed historical eras: one the high-tech world of contemporary global society, one based on the archaic belief in angels. The book is primarily about these relations, making overt the underlying polychronic nature of Serres' writing. For Serres, our most up-to-date technologies, gestures and ways of relating to others are based on much older rituals, beliefs and ways of doing things. In *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time (Éclaircissements)*, Serres tells Bruno Latour that 'every historical era […] is multitemporal, simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 60). It is then obvious – at least if you are Michel Serres – that to begin to do any philosophy of contemporary networked communication media, one needs to start with angels and religious myths.

*Angels* is an illustrated dialogue between Pia, an airport doctor, and Pantope, a travelling inspector for Air France, recently returned from a business trip to Asia. For Pia, the

doctor that sees to the medical needs of travellers before they set off, the angels fly around her. She waits at the gate. Pantope's flight has landed. He emerges through the bustling crowd at the arrivals gate and materializes, as though an angel, before Pia. The conversation between Pia and Pantope begins with the question about the possibility for belief in angels and ends up going through the ethics of communication, birth and death, the politics of contemporary technologies, globalisation, and the power and hierarchies formed within networks. The illustrations that feature on almost every page work with the dialogue to unfold Serres' arguments about the relationship between the culture of angels, mostly seen in the Renaissance paintings that depict stories from scripture, and the contemporary movement of people and messages over the globe. 'While Pantope travels the world, on his own, Pia has the travelling world flow around her: between the two of them a whole universe flows' (Serres, 1995: 8). Air travel, post-cards, letters, radio transmissions, emails, messages of all kinds sent and received, in Serres writing, act like angels.

For Serres, the figure of the angel offers an analogy for the channels of information that encircle the globe. Angels are, after all, carriers of the Word, they fly around the world, occupying their own strata, carrying communication between heaven and the world of mortals. In short, angels transmit messages; they take on the function of a communication channel. As Serres writes,

> *Between* designates precisely the space in which angels operate, the angels who create links between networks: between freeways and channels of sound and image…goat paths and computer circuits…rich magi and shepherds…the balm of death, myrrh, perfumes the new born child! As beings with a double nature, pedagogues, guides and cherubim enable us to see the difference between worlds, and in so doing they stitch together the unity of the new universe. With them we are able to put together things that are disparate (Serres, 1995: 165-16).

For Serres, teachers can be angels, political envoys can be angels, reporters can be angels and philosophers can be angels. These people act as functions, as switches, as connecting tissues that allow different worlds to be articulated and different disciplines of knowledge and different experiences to move across domains. When angels do what they should, Serres sees the potential for putting different worlds together and creating

new possibilities for new conditions for collective life in the world. This is because to focus on the angel asks us to focus on *exchange,* on what is given and what is taken from one domain to the other.

If we follow Serres down this path, we might start to extrapolate certain details of his argument, filling in some of the gaps that he leaves in Pia and Pantope's conversation. If we think about angels as a historical idea, we could connect their emergence with a certain pre-enlightenment fear of God, associated with the rituals and beliefs that originated in this period. The angel was invented as a messenger to both insulate oneself from an unknowable God, creating a space of angels between heaven and earth, and also in order to establish the conditions for communion with God. In Serres' book, this seemingly archaic belief is given new life to show his readers how it continues to organise our practices of communication. One can feel a resonance here between Serres' writing about angels and Saint Thomas Aquinas' thought on angels. Interpreting Thomas Aquinas, Joad Raymond states,

> [Thomas Aquinas] needed to write about angels, as they were a means of understanding God. God was ineffable, and Christ's nature, despite the Incarnation, lay beyond the human intellect, since he had been made co-eternal. Angels, however, were created beings, and were therefore an indispensable mediating concept, halfway between man and God. Their structural position in the *Summa*, between heaven and earth, reflects their intellectual position in Aquinas' system. Without them the *Summa* does not work. Whatever their role in the liturgy, or as figures of comfort and protection in the popular imagination, angels were intellectually necessary as a way of grasping the divine (Raymond, 2010: 30-31).

For Serres, writing about messengers and writing about Hermes has the same function as Thomas Aquinas' angels – they provide a way for him to write about both care and transmission. They care for the message and also provide care in terms of comfort and protection.

As Sybille Krämer writes in her commentary on Serres, the manifestation of angels does, quite obviously, facilitate communication with God. But, less obviously, this same manifestation also implies the impossibility of *direct* communication with God

(Krämer, 2015: 15). In Krämer's extrapolation of Serres, communication becomes creative rather than destructive. It creates distance, rather than destroying it. It gives distance a form and allows it to be represented within the communication system as a by-product of the sending of messages. In a sense, it makes the inbetween spaces, the milieu as Serres would have it, perceptible. Krämer writes that a generalizable characteristic of transmission is that 'transmissions presuppose a difference that is not reducible to spatial or temporal distance' (165). In addition, the transmission of messages traverse difference and that 'media – as seen in the functional logic of the messenger – thus make it possible to deal with difference' (165). For Serres, this is precisely the role of angels, who carry a message across a divide, whilst simultaneously preserving that divide. The invention of angels both makes the divide between the world of mortals and the world of the divine perceptible, they bring this intermediate space into existence for the culture that believes in them. They create this divide in the cultural imagination by occupying the imaginary space between heaven and earth.

Krämer's use of Serres provides a way of thinking about communication as productive of distance and difference, rather than aimed at its overcoming through dialogue. In *Angels*, distance and the power to traverse distance are indeed key concerns. There is though, for Serres, also an emphasis on the angel leading one across a divide, acting like a pedagogue leading a child to school, which is not always forefronted in Krämer's transmission model. Some angels do indeed preserve distance and make divisions, but others are tasked with navigating and leading people, as well as messages, between different domains, transmitting people along their way, creating synthesis, as well as delivering messages. Others still are involved in translating messages and others introduce noise and misunderstandings into the communication chain. There are both good and bad messengers in Serres' thought.

Krämer is more focused on techniques of distancing than communion and dialogue, so she is disposed to thinking of transmission as a type of insulation between the sender and the receiver. The manifestation of angels, she writes, produces just this space between God and mortals. In Krämer's words, '[i]n religion, myth, legend, and above all in the arts there is an imaginary space populated with messengers: It is the world of angels, of placeless mediators between heaven and earth' (Krämer, 2015: 87). As has already been mentioned, the very idea of angels as a concept with which to

understand communication assures both distance (between heaven and earth) and difference (between sender and receiver). But what we are starting to see here is, in Serres, how transmission takes on a ritual appearance as a *cultural technique* – a *technique* that forms a *relation* that produces what we think of as cultural routines – making possible new ideas about the relationship between heaven and earth and the divide between the ideas of God and mortals.

Serres writes that we should be interested in angels because 'our universe is organised around message bearing systems, and because, as message-bearers, they are more numerous, complex and sophisticated than Hermes […]. Each angel is a bearer of one or more relationships; today they exist in myriad forms, and every day we invent billions of new ones' (Serres, 1995: 293). As Saint Augustine once wrote, the angel appears, delivers the message and then withdraws, without expecting any payment for the message received. Once they have delivered the errand they disappear from the space of mortals into the space of messengers. But there are other sides to angels. They are not all working in the service of the message. Some work for themselves. The bad angel, the miscommunicator, is the figure that drives a wedge between difference, that does not allow differences to be bridged, that maintains binaries and adversaries. The bad angel is the figure that puts themselves ahead of the message. I would argue that this is precisely the figure that Krämer sees as promoting divisions, where citizens, as senders and receivers, have to try and live within these conditions produced by noisy and divisive transmissions of information, which tend to reconfigure the entire system for exchange: The politician that is more egotistical than political; The envoy that is more concerned with their own identity than that of the message; The teacher that makes the lesson about them, about their own identity, rather than the content; the scholar that is interested in fame rather than ideas and the creation of conditions for thinking. For them, the debate, in classroom, meeting rooms and on social media, is made to revolve around their own identity and their place in the world, rather than the message that they are tasked with delivering.

## Fallen angels

When messengers act as fallen angels, when the envoy, the politician, Harlequin, the teacher or the theorist gets in front of the message they act like a parasite. They parasite the message, engaging in unbalanced exchange, feeding off their role, rather than

delivering their message. Pia says 'the bad angels – those who occupy space and history – fall. We meet them everywhere, and we speak unceasingly of them, because we suffer from them' (Serres, 1995: 214). The dream of communication by technical means is that the medium, whether this be print, the telephone, the telegraph or the internet, or any other messenger should withdraw and not alter the meaning of the message. They should deliver the message and then vanish, like Saint Augustine's angels. In the case of fallen angels, the message bearing system, rather than the sender or the receiver per se, interrupt and impose themselves on the message. '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' (Serres, 2007: 38-39).

In *The Parasite*, Serres presents a philosophy of communication built around parasitic exchange, rather than dialogue, which is, as he puts it, always mediate, always based on mediation. As already described, in a relation between one and another there always exists a third party that is capable of reconfiguring the entire system for exchange. We read in Serres that the master never encounters the slave face-to-face (Serres, 2007: 58). Instead, those that occupy the master position send intermediaries, who then, at certain points in history, learn that they have the power to impose themselves on the exchange. Serres gives another example, this time from a fable told by both Aesop and La Fontaine: the horse cannot catch the stag to drive him off his land. 'The horse calls man, who saddles the horse, who invents, shall we say, hunting, and who doesn't let the stallion go after the kill' (Serres, 2007: 64). The horse is now domesticated, kept in the stable. In this story, man acts as the third figure, reconfiguring the relationship between the horse and the stag. Man plays the third position to become the master: he arrives at the centre by playing the periphery. The entire relation is shifted. This is one of only a number of exchanges that Serres describes in *The Parasite* that call for a reconsideration of the diagram of communication: The old model of balanced two-way exchange is reconfigured by Serres as a one-way cascading of parasitic relations. The parasite plays the periphery, then makes a lot of noise, then reconfigures the system around themselves, until a new parasite disturbs the system.

As well as reconfiguring systems around themselves, the parasitic relationship is an unbalanced one. The parasite takes and gives back something else. Serres (2007) writes

of guests at a banquet as parasites that exchange food for words, in essence, offering up information and getting energy in return. 'The parasite is invited to the *table d'hôte;* in return, he must regale the other diners with his stories and his mirth. To be exact, he exchanges good talk for good food' (34). So this is not like a gift exchange. It is not an exchange at all, the host is being duped! According to Serres, 'the parasitic relationship is […] a single arrow which goes in one direction but not the other, because the parasite is a creature which feeds on another, but gives nothing in return. There's no exchange, no balance sheet to be drawn up; there's no reciprocity in the relationship, which is one-dimensional' (Serres to Mortley, 1991: 57). However, the parasite that blocks this even exchange is also responsible for creating the new, whatever form it might take: According to Serres (2007), 'the parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic. He crosses the exchange, makes it into a diagonal […] he cheats us but he invents anew' (35). In the contemporary world it seems that we are forced to suffer from parasites and that we need to learn to live within disordered political and ecological systems that threaten to become even more disordered. To 'cancel' a parasite is impossible. They cannot be excluded from the system because they will always reconfigure the system for their own benefit. Serres writes about this return of the repressed or the excluded extensively in *The Parasite*. The system always forms around them. 'The white noise is always there' (Serres, 2007: 78). At the time of writing, Donald Trump has just been permanently suspended from Twitter. We will need to wait and see what new systems are built by the parasite and how they try to rearrange the system of information exchange. We might say though, following Serres, that the presence of the parasite invents the system, it is now at its centre. The parasite has replaced the messenger and this constant threat of parasitism is one of the new obstacles to the synthesis, as one parasite replaces another. Serres (2007) states:

> 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. […]. For parasitism is an elementary relation; it is, in fact, the elements of 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 (182).

We have now ended this essay where we began, with the messenger that causes disquiet, that moves the drama along; in this case, though, the messenger-as-parasite is more talkative, they impose themselves on the message that was never theirs. Harlequin has changed appearance again, he now becomes a parasite. The parasite is a messenger but one that manipulates the exchange, obstructs it, tricks us into an exchange on his own terms. The parasite can thus control the relation and this is why we suffer from them.

## Conclusion

Serres' messengers are often figures that obstruct a fair exchange (like the parasite), create hierarchies (like angels) or otherwise lie or mislead either in the service of the sender or for their own gain. I have to admit, this statement may draw focus to the darker side of Serres' thought. Afterall, as has been discussed, he often celebrates the messenger as the source of knowledge and privileges the exchange that they can facilitate between the disciplines. This is one of the aspects that is difficult to reconcile in Serres' thought: he always seems to push toward synthesis, but at the same time introduces the disruptive figures of Hermes and parasites (Watkin, 2020: 86). Certainly, N. Katherine Hayles (1988) has argued that Serres' thought bears the contradiction of seemingly attempting to describe the fragmentary, individualised nature of the world, while always trying to develop general, universal theories of the world of fragmentation. But a different reading is possible. Rather than a paradox of competing voices in Serres' thought, what we see is the tension between the local and the global and between the self and the other. Serres is not a thinker that is content with fragmentation. As was stated earlier, for Serres, the role of a philosopher is directed towards synthesis, procedural thinking and creativity, to incrementally move from the individual to the global through the description of events, maintaining a sense of the whole that does not reduce local differences. Reading Serres this way, at the end of this essay I have focused on those things that make this synthesis difficult. From here, motivated by the current climate of miscommunication, my own modulation of Serres' philosophy of communication is one developed through my reading of the figures of angels, Hermes and parasites. This is an approach that puts emphasis on the obstacles for communication, on the obstacles for coming together, but also emphasises the potential of the messenger to act as an intermediary, as a way of maintaining difference

whilst facilitating synthesis. By doing this, we might start to ask if the messenger is a figure whose role is to care for the message and smooth out differences or if these figures actually have now taken on lives of their own, beyond what Serres described, and can be used by media theorists and philosophers to describe those techniques now so common for ensuring difference and upholding the boundaries that the messengers themselves alone are able to cross.

Or perhaps there is a different response. Perhaps Serres' messengers have been invented in order that we can illustrate the struggles and difficulties between the self and the other, the tensions between the local and the global, that need to be overcome. In media theory we have known at least since Carey's (1992) work and Krämer's (2015) more recent work that communication as transmission by messenger maintains difference and distance between a sender and a receiver. But a question to finish this essay, *have we lost touch with the idea of the messenger as a care giver that can cross this divide?*

Toward the start of this essay, I asked a different question. I asked why philosophers and media theorists should think about messengers at all. The answer that I can now give, at the end of the essay, is that thought about messengers changes the way we are able to think of communication and miscommunication and the relationship between transmission and ritual. Carey told us to focus on rituals as those things that give society its character and allow it to persist in time. However, must the transmission and ritual model be opposed? Perhaps it is possible to think of the two at the same time, as entwined within cultural history. Communication acts as more than a means of *communion*, but also as a movement of information that may enable the *separation* between sender and receiver or a complete reconfiguring of their relation as they unite to exclude noise. The messenger that transmits messages between time, space and other divides, enacts a ritual of transmission that can be understood, as Serres shows us, with reference to much older myths. If we lose the figure of the messenger as a conceptual tool for thought, if they become obsolete in the face of extremely fast networked communication and promises of immediate communication, we lose a method by which we can unpack and become critical of the role of information transmission and its effect on culture, including the maintenance of divides and the introduction of noise and miscommunication by bad messengers.

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## Notes

1 For more on this see Bruno Latour (1987) 'The Enlightenment without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy' pp. 94-95.

2 Serres also writes about the importance of messengers in education and the construction of knowledge. He points out that 'pedagogue' was once the name for a slave in Ancient Greece that was responsible for walking a child to school. He argues that this figure acts as a type of intermediary, moving the child along the passage from home to the school door. For Serres, all learning takes place in such crossings where one moves with the other towards alterity (Serres, 1997a: 48-49).

3 For more on the Grand Story in Serres see Christopher Watkin (2015) 'Michel Serres' Great Story: From Biosemiotics to Econarratology'. As Watkin explains beautifully, the *grand récit* or Grand Story is for Serres a narrative of the universe that is told by the universe itself, rather than by humans. It has four chapters, each being told at the same time. These are 1) a chapter beginning with the emergence of human life on earth; 2) a chapter beginning with the emergence of life itself, as the first RNA begins to duplicate, told over around 3 billion years as multi-cellular organisms emerged along with systems of orders, families and species; 3) the birth of planets as the universe begins cooling, where matter begins to become concentrated into galaxies; and 4) a chapter beginning with the birth of the universe itself.

4 In *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (1995), Latour says to Serres, 'everything that you do is 'in the midsts' […] The fact that you innovate, that you take so many risks, is a result of this position' (p. 146)

5 In this period, Serres exhibits a connection to McLuhan in his description of exo-Darwinism and the technical extensions of humans.

6 Serres has recently revised his interpretation of Turner's painting, suggesting that Turner was instead responding to atmospheric conditions caused by the eruption of the Tambora volcano. Serres' reinterpretation was prompted by the discovery of core samples for glaciers in Greenland, which he argued were examples of the natural history written in the pages of ice. See Serres, 1997b.

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