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Michel Serres' Angels, a Modern Myth

By Jim Flint

James Flint talks to Michel Serres about his latest book

Michel Serres called my friend an angel, and my friend was very chuffed. "In my new book about angels," he said, "I try to put a short circuit between the very ancient tradition of angels in monotheistic or polytheistic traditions, and the jobs now about message, messenger and so on. I think that this connection between ancient time and new time is very interesting to understand. In one hand the ancient forms and ancient traditions and in the other hand the new and the real jobs about medias. Because our job - your job is to receive messages, and to send messages in some respect. Your work is about messages. You are a messenger. I am a messenger. I am a professor. You are a journalist. You are an angel. We are angels. Our job is about messages.

We were in Hazlitt's house, in Soho, some strange way to spend a foggy Sunday afternoon. I suppose you'd call Serres an old man, though his eyes don't betray it. "Angels, a modern myth", is his twenty-fifth book. "I was not so sure about this particular piece of translation," he confessed to the audience during a lecture at the ICA. "I would have preferred 'Angels, a legend.' It gives better the double meaning of 'story' and 'caption.'" The pun is particularly apt, because the text in Serres' book fulfills both functions. Written for the most part as a modern version of a Platonic or Berkeleyian dialogue, it is also highly illustrated with quality reproductions of everything from Medieval paintings to satellite montages of the earth as it appears at night. In the main the conversation takes place between airport nurse Pia and airport inspector Pantope. As they chew over various philosophical topics other characters - a child, a tramp - come into the story, and the book completes its circle from morning to night, from death to birth.

It is a book which wears its learning very lightly. The language is straightforward, not at all elliptical, very "unphilosophical"; it is the pictures which in many ways tell the more profound story, that of Serres recapitulation of the Scholastic tradition of angelology. 'If you read the amount of books about angelology in the middle ages, if translate certain words into modern languages, you see that all the problems were about translation, about messages. These are exactly our problems today.' Serres sees in this tradition a thorough attempt to read the world in terms of channel and flux, message/message-bearer and noise. But although not elliptical, he is oblique about making his point. We are presented with a photograph of Concorde taking off; on the facing page a cherub from Rembrandt's *The Angel Leaving Tobias and his Family* is hovering aloft at the same angle. It seems to have become Serres' style to present a point or answer a question not with an answer but with an apparent non sequitor - a throw-away line, an image. It seems a harmless enough technique, and can make him seem slightly dotty, but it can be used to devastating effect. Witness the defeat of interlocutor Simon Critchley at the ICA during that same lecture. Critchley: "Coming from a background in phenomenology, I'd like to ask you about you relationship with modernity." Serres: "Maturity! Why do you ask me about that?" What better way to deal with a phenomenologist than to creatively mis-hear one of his most beloved buzzwords. The audience got the joke and Critchley's question was left, not unanswered, but suffocating in the dust.

But in what kind of historical framework are we to place the relationship between angelology and current philosophical endeavour? "There are three steps," Serres explains. "In the beginning our parents, our ancestors, were working with physical energies, with the body, with their muscles, as - these are figures of the first type of work. The second step is transformation of metals by engines and machines - the industrial revolution. I use three words which are the same word: form, transformation, and information - the three steps. In the first step this form was solid as a statue - Atlas, the caryatid. In

the second it is involved that the metal becomes liquid. In the third step we are living in the volatile transmission. This word 'volatile' is angelic form. The transmission of message, of code, of signal is volatile. We say now about money that it is volatile, it is turning into the transmission of codes, of messages." It is history conceived as changes in relative speeds, rather than as Marxist-Hegelian progression. For Serres, the basically feudal structure of society has persisted almost up to the present day, only having recently been supplanted by a new world made up of "gods" and "mortals." It is an understanding of society as fundamentally global, urban, and two-tiered. There are those who travel through the air, who have access, who adorn magazines and who flow through shops; there are those who live on rubbish heaps, who die of hunger, who subsist and who make up the majority. For Serres the epoch of bourgeoisie/proletariat never crystallised; rather the millenia-long aristocratic substratum has morphed - along the flight lines of increased international communication - into a distributed society that resembles the Greek legends or Dante's Divine Comedy more than Das Kapital.

There is no origin, no point of departure for Serres. "We have always been travelling. I think that the human species is always travelling - we are the Dasein in the sky, not in the land. Do you see what I mean? We are wandering. We are nomads. This is not a new state of things. It is a very ancient state of things. I think the Dasein is in the atmosphere." And this kind of thought carries all the way through Serres' thinking. One of the book's most fascinating images is a satellite picture of clouds over the top of which Serres has scrawled the various parts of speech. It is a grammar of the weather, a grammar of flows and currents, rather than of rules and tables. A vision of language as a dynamic system, self-organising and yet stratified. The idea is strongly reminiscent of Deleuze's work, and we ask Serres about their relationship. "Deleuze was - I lost my best friend last month, because Deleuze was my best friend. I admired him. I loved him. When we were young, we were very separate. Together we invented the term 'amis de vieillesse' - you know the expression 'amis de jeunesse'? We were not amis de jeunesse. We became amis de vieillesse. And why? Because we are a little bit brothers. I think that Deleuze is a geographer, and I am too a geographer. We are not historians. I think for instance that Deleuze's philosophy is full of fluxes. And what fluxes? Prepositions in my case! I have a chapter in my book about prepositions. Prepositions are the algebra of fluxes. I don't think he committed suicide. He had had an operation some time before, removing most of his lungs. It was impossible to breathe - he opened the window - and ...' It wasn't in his character to commit suicide? 'Not in his character. Not in his philosophy. It was impossible.'

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Quotes taken from an interview conducted by Hari Kunzru.

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