

*The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*

By Michel Serres

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The English translation of *Les Cinq Sens* has been a long time coming. After publication in 1985, *Les Cinq Sens* was awarded the *Prix Médicis* in Paris. Since then, Michel Serres has grown in popularity and standing. Some may claim that Serres's works are impossible to translate due to their complex word play, neologisms and erratic style. Despite this, Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley should be commended for their mammoth efforts and superb translation. The translation has certainly done justice to the rhythm of the French work and the subtle associations embedded throughout; the countless inter and cross-textual references.

In *The Five Senses*, Serres's aim is to show that the development of language has both veiled and overtaken the primacy of the senses; or in the translators' words, the "glories of our initial sensuous perception of the world" (xi). The cataloging nature of science and information technology has marginalised our relationship with the empirical and the authenticity of the experiential. Similarly, in certain philosophical circles, especially within the analytic tradition, the philosophy of language currently dominates over phenomenological accounts. Serres believes that the goal of philosophical inquiry is not to develop formal languages. This does not mean that logic is a useless endeavour, rather that it is not what constitutes philosophy as a whole. In this sense, Serres's work is a defence of the empirical, the qualitative, and a rejection of the reductive tendency of logic. In an interview in 1991, Serres stated that he "would go so far as to say that a form of knowledge has been lost, an empirical form, blotted out by the linguistic and virtually algebraic revolution". (Raoul Mortley, *French philosophers in conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*, Routledge, 1991, 54–5. "Interview" from here on).

*The Five Senses* is not only a reaction against the importance of the philosophical question of language, but against language itself. “The linguistic school is a school with no sense of smell, and no taste” (Interview, 53). But this is more literal than figurative. “We refer to a thing, but there is no name for the smell” (Interview, 53). This is one of Serres’s main points about human beings—we have forgotten that as *Homo sapiens* we are “he who knows how to taste. Sagacious: he who knows how to smell. All of these things are vanishing under the weight of logic and grammar” (235).

*The Five Senses* is a work heavily laden with metaphors and allegories. Serres’s command of literature and mythology is extensive, he references antiquity, modernity, science and myths; from Orpheus to Socrates, the Last Supper to the *Odyssey*. He incorporates these links because, for Serres, “the difference between philosophy and literature is a product of the University” (Interview, 48). Serres argues that the “foundation of philosophy is the encyclopaedic, and its goal is synthesis” (Interview, 59).

In *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* with Bruno Latour, (University of Michigan Press, 1995), Serres speaks of his contempt for phenomenology and hermeneutics. He is especially critical of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation . . . What you can decipher in this book is a nice ethnology of city dwellers, who are hypertechnicalized, intellectualized, chained to their library chairs, and tragically stripped of any tangible experience. Lots of phenomenology and no sensation—everything via language . . . My book *Les Cinq Sens* cries out at the empire of signs.

(*Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, 131-2)

In *The Five Senses*, Serres is attempting to save the body from the addiction of language—the transformation of the world into one governed by the word. For Serres, the body is not simply an extended object. It is a fleeting experience and something which can

remake itself through the avenues of the senses. Serres wants to separate out the senses but also show how they interconnect. He knots them together as mingled bodies. Each sense, in a sense, contains the essences of the others. *The Five Senses* which Serres describes are moulded into unorthodox categories with familiar correlates—Veils, Boxes, Tables, Visit and Joy. A brief description of these five categories is necessary in order to understand Serres's metaphorical argument. Indeed, the complexity of the work requires some elucidation here.

In the chapter "Veils" Serres primarily examines touch. He parodies the Cartesian question concerning the location of the soul. For Serres, "the soul resides at the point where the I is decided" (20). This gives the impression that the soul is located in the contingencies of the body and its relation to the environment. Skin is the principle of contingency; a mediator. For example, the pilot of the ship feels at one with the vessel; the driver cruises down the freeway with the feel of his fingers. "Body and soul are not separate but blend inextricably, even on the skin. Thus two mingled bodies do not form a separate subject and object" (26).

The chapter "Boxes" critiques sound and hearing. The hard is, for Serres, the given, the physical. The soft refers to cultural and conceptual constructions. For this reason, the metaphorical link with hardware and software in computer terminology is revealing. In hearing, we take the hard (the given sound waves) and convert it into the soft (sentences with meaning). This conversion is the domain of information—sensations are converted by the senses and the black boxes in between, into sensory information. That is, we make sense of the senses through transformations. "A black box is ignorance, interrupting a chain of knowledge or creating a void in a transparent volume" (138). Hearing is the knotting together of these processes. The notion of silence is underscored as an important facet of thinking. "Solitude releases silence from the control of language" (88). "Linguistic philosophy overlooks this to the extent that thinking, in this perspective, is the same as speaking. Thinking in my view is first and foremost being silent" (Interview, 56). For

this reason, Serres has much respect for silence as opposed to the word.

The idea that language contaminates our senses runs throughout the text. Although “language gave us the sciences, and they made possible a thousand different techniques”, language generates “so much noise that we can finally say that the world is riotous with language” (88). Both language and knowledge are treated as drugs. “Language dictates. We are addicted” (92). Language is “the hardest of hard drugs” (59). Serres offers the anecdote of being stung by a hornet while lecturing, he gallantly continued on—such is the anaesthetising nature of language.

In the chapter “Tables”, taste and smell are considered at the same time, through the example of the appreciation of a bottle of 1947 Château d’Yquem. “Fine wine works on the tongue, awakening it from its narcotic slumber” (155). Serres argues that this is because these senses are the most despised by language. From Plato’s symposium, to the Last Supper, and the banquet of Don Giovanni, the idea of the word-become-flesh is posited and subsequently entertained. The point here is that, when drinking or eating, we should actually taste, rather than read what is on the label. “Smell and taste differentiate, whereas language, like sight and hearing, integrates” (156). As a general principle, Serres propounds that we need to “return to the immediacy of the senses” (169). He tries to describe the sensations of the glass of wine to “show how defective language is in the case of sensation” (Interview, 54).

Sight is treated in the chapter “Visit”, but this sense is more about voyaging; it becomes related to direction. The French verb *visiter*, although meaning sight or seeing also refers to the idea of traveling over some distance. *Visiter* can mean seeing or viewing something or someone, or simply to ‘visit’ like the English counterpart. Serres emphasizes this distance aspect because human beings are never static. We travel around the world, but also constantly move as the earth turns, and the galaxy rotates, and so on. We are mobile, navigating and orientating ourselves.

The chapter “Joy” details the ecstasy experienced by the body as a whole, as a type of sixth sense. Serres examines the pleasures of running, swimming, dancing and the trampoline, amongst other things. The body is mingling, a complexity, a multifaceted mixture of sensations. However, “We have lost, without recourse, the memory of a heard, seen, perceived world, experienced by a body devoid of language” (339).

Serres finishes by stating that, in recent times, language is no longer paramount. Information/data has superseded it. Scientific codification has “gobbled up” language (341). This does not mean that language has been completely destroyed, rather that another form of codification and categorisation, perhaps more sophisticated than mere words, is conditioning our experience of the world. For example, the body is now a genetic body, well codified.

Language is threefold dominant: administrations rule through the performative dimension of the word; the media dominate through its seductive dimension; the sciences enjoy mastery through its truth dimension. Trisemiotic language produces an abstract dominant class, drunk on codes: legislative, computerized, rigorous, thrice efficient, and in this manner producing a whole world (234)

Language has been superseded, the word has died, and *The Five Senses* is a celebration of this fact.

Now there is a new imperative for a new way of knowing. Language has finally become redundant. This gives us new possibilities for our relationship to the world. The world is opened up to us as the word is closed off. For Serres, our senses are once again able to play in the phenomenal experiences and primordially givenness of the world in their original, authentic manner. “The adventure of philosophy is beginning anew, in exactly the same place from which it has always sprung.” (343).

*The Five Senses* intends to provoke a sense of the radical possibilities open to us when we overcome the constraints of language. Serres's motif seems to parallel Nietzsche's in *Daybreak*. However, the erratic nature of Serres's work elicits a Nietzschean charge: "Those who know they are deep strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem deep to the crowd strive for obscurity. For the crowd takes everything whose ground it cannot see to be deep: it is so timid and reluctant to go into the water." (*The Gay Science*, Cambridge, 2001, §173). Nevertheless, on closer reflection, Serres's method is closer to Nietzsche's own—one of disjointed aphoristic writing with common rubrics interweaved throughout. Serres wants to subvert the form of philosophical discourse that progresses logically to certain conclusions.

Serres's work aims to defy the usual laws of literature, of causality, of understandability. Furthermore, his use of language is meant to illustrate just how inadequate language is. However, some will see this line of argument as inherently paradoxical. His language is purposefully provocative, harsh, unclear at times and rhythmic, in an effort to manipulate the toxicity of the word in its most sterile form. It is a deliberate effort to both show and attempt to overcome the limits of language. Unfortunately, Serres waywardness can, at times, hinder rather than enrich the text. This may well be his original intention, but it will not convince all readers. It may draw the reader away from the thrust of the message, a message which may only become clear to some if they explore other works by Serres, such as *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy and The Parasite*.

Another problematic aspect of Serres's work can be found in his discussion of fine wine. His essential idea is to remove the linguistic mediation veiling our experience. Thus, it should not matter whether we are drinking an underdeveloped clean-skin over-dosed with tartaric acid as opposed to a 1947 Château d'Yquem, so long as we are open to the purity of the sensations. But for Serres, "anyone who drinks one of those industrial concoctions which are flooding the market and the planet, is swallowing terminology" (221). "It moves through the mouth like a language: written on a small

label” (221–2). Here, it seems that Serres is implicitly belittling the lower echelons of society in their choice of alcoholic beverage. In the very description of such mass-produced, homogeneity, Serres goes against the grain of his argument—that substances of taste should not be mediated by the veil of linguistic descriptions. Serres could be charged with offering an insidious hierarchy of taste. Regardless of their quality, all beverages should be drunk blindly. Furthermore, Serres employs language itself to great effect here, offering rich descriptions of fine wine in stark comparison to its less prestigious counterparts. For example, the mingling in the cellar ensures that “alcohol and acid are balanced against sweet-smelling ester, suspended in water and sugars” (158).

Many new questions have been raised since the publication *Les Cinq Sens* in 1985. Serres states that “Language has taken the place of the given, science is taking that of language” (333). This prophetic trajectory is evidenced by the overarching grasp of technology today. It also provokes many new questions for the legitimacy of sensation. Is the permeated internet the new drug that is dulling experience? Is the ubiquitous nature of internet porn a degenerate struggle of the senses to regain their lost antique grace? Are commuters escaping their senses by listening to music on their headphones on the train, or returning to them?

It is difficult to say where the senses should be placed; the extent to which they are primordial and before time. Nevertheless, the five senses must be considered holistically, as a complex, interwoven web of multifaceted hybridity. As Serres has written elsewhere:

Once words come to dominate flesh and matter, which were previously innocent, all we have left is to dream of the paradisiacal times in which the body was free and could run and enjoy sensations at leisure. If a revolt is to come, it will have to come from the five senses!  
(*Angels: A Modern Myth*, Flammarion, 1995, 71)

Now, freed from the constraints of the linguistic world, free from the categorisation of the word, it is time for a rejuvenation.

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