

# **The Alphabetic Absolute**



How can we address different modes of plotting the ominous “all” as “comprehension” via narrative, calculation, and measurement? The main interest thereby regards how the apparent “Real Time” induced by the logistical infrastructures established by communicational media becomes articulable once we regard “Light Speed” as the tense-ness proper to spectral modes of depicting the real in its material instantaneity. The “real” in such depiction features as essentially arcane, and its articulation as cryptographical. The articulation of the real thereby takes the form of contracts. We suggest taking cryptography at face value, i.e., as a “graphism” and “script,” whose (cipher) texts we can imagine to be signed according to a logic of public key signatures: while the alphabets that constitute such a script are strictly public, a ciphertext’s “graphism” cannot be read (deciphered and discerned) without “signing”

it in the terms of a private key. This perspective opposes the common view that we live in “post-alphabetical” times and instead considers the idea of an alphabetic absolute. This bears the possibility for a novel humanism based not on the “book” (Scriptures or Law) but on the lawfulness embodied by things themselves. In this chapter, I trace and profile classical positions e.g., by Descartes, Leibniz, Dedekind, Cantor, Noether, and Mach, on the role of “script” in mathematics, the possibility of a general and/or universal mathesis, and the role of measurement in relation to conceptions of “nature”—in the public interest of “saving the technical object” through a generalized sense of “literacy.”

*Blessed Curiosity: Saving the Technical Object*

*Anita Kechickian:* In 1958, you wrote about alienation produced by non-knowledge of the technical object. Do you always have this in mind as you continue your research?

*Gilbert Simondon:* Yes, but I amplify it by saying that the technical object must be saved. It must be rescued from its current status, which is miserable and unjust. This status of alienation lies, in part, with notable authors such as Ducrocq, who speaks of “technical slaves.” It is necessary to change the conditions in which it is located, in which it is produced, and where it is used primarily because it is used in a degrading manner. [...]

It's a question of saving the technical object,  
just as it is the question of human salvation in  
the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

When Michel Serres was invited to give a talk in celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his college, the Lycée Saint-Caprais in Agen, France, he used the occasion to share what he calls “a confession.” It is a short and humorous text, full of tender memories about all sorts of more or less innocent mischief, but it also places a ruse that both supports as well as upsets the honorary frame of generational sequentiality in which he had been invited to speak: “God has given us the endless freedom to disobey him, and this is how we can recognize him as our Father,” Serres sets out, and continues, “Scarcely installed in the terrestrial Paradise, Adam and Eve quickly eat the apple and pips, immediately leaving that place of delights and fleeing towards hazy horizons. Only a few months old, the infant tries to say no; those among you who raise children will learn this and know it in overabundance.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Gilbert Simondon, “Save the Technical Object,” interview by Anita Kechickian, trans. by Andrew Illiadis, *Philosophy of Information & Communication* (blog), March 6, 2013, <https://philosophyofinformationandcommunication.wordpress.com/2013/03/06/is-not-all-creation-a-transgression-gilbert-simondon-interview-1989-save-the-technical-object/> (accessed February 22, 2023); first published in *Esprit*, No. 76, April 1983, p.147–52.

2 Michel Serres, “La confession fraternelle” in *Empan*, Vol. 48, 2002, p.11–16; originally a public lecture at Lycée Saint-Caprais, Agen,

The presumptuous ruse Serres has placed in this “boring preamble of mixed theology and natural history,” as he calls the story of expulsion, the ruse from which he wittily distracts also by the grandness of the opening address in the first sentence, is a small change in the setup of the Great Story. When Adam and Eve give in to their human and purportedly corruptive and non-natural inclinations for curiosities, he addresses them in the fact of the childhood they carry within, in Serres’s account. Thereby Serres purports nothing less than a naturalization of sexuality within God’s likeness—Adam and Eve have conceived and born as children before the disrespectful act was committed! This mischief introduces into the narrative of the Tree of Life nothing less than an abundance of directions in which it might descend and branch off. What presumptuousness, indeed! One that dares to set out, high-spirited, light-humored, and quick, for nothing less than the Total, the Ultimate Sum, by unsettling the earthly grounds in which the Tree of Life roots.

But how could such ground possibly be unsettled? Serres assumes that the Nature of the Hu-

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on the occasion of the school’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 2000. Here cited from the unpublished *Fraternal Confession*, trans. by Kris Pender, [https://www.academia.edu/11074066/Michel\\_Serres\\_-\\_Fraternal\\_Confession](https://www.academia.edu/11074066/Michel_Serres_-_Fraternal_Confession) (accessed October 24, 2023).

man must, as everything else as well, be thought to factor in a Universal Nature—a nature of the universe—whose path of descent is divine (omnipotent) and decided (lawful) *as being undecided*: it is a nature capable of developing in an uncountable abundance of directions, progressive ones as well as regressive ones. Such nature then must count as essentially arcane, a secret preserved only in a “crypt,” as Serres refers to it elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Of course, we know the term crypt from the architecture of churches, but it once meant more generally a “vault, cavern,” as derived from the Greek verb *kryptein*, “to hide, to conceal,” by nominalizing the adjective that was built from this verb.<sup>4</sup> For Serres, there is a path for knowledge to access universal nature, but never a plain, pure, and immediate one. All knowledge is a reduced model of universal nature, a model that does not seek to represent that nature, but rather a model that seeks to keep alive as best as it can that nature’s character: to be secretive. The entire *raison d’être* of such Knowledge is to serve and obey—unconditionally, absolutely—nature’s secretive character. Such obedience can only be performed

3 Michel Serres, “Noise,” trans. by Lawrence R. Schehr, in *SubStance* 12, No. 3, 1983, pp.48–60, here p.55. The article makes up chapter 1 of Serres’s 1982 book *Genesis*, trans. by Geneviève James and James Nielson, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999 [1982].

4 <http://www.etymonline.com/word/crypt> (accessed October 24, 2023).

through disobedience, through mischief, through the comic. It can be performed by inventing a reduced model of the Secret without the assurance of being initiated to it. Universal Nature's secretive character can count neither as private nor public, neither as esoteric nor established insight; rather, we can refer to it as constitutive for both in a manner of which Serres maintains that only Law can be.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge then embodies Law in the building of a Crypt. This vault is growing deeper and vaster, more intertwined and winding, from the act of being frivolously explored, challenged, tested, strained in the very solidity in which it is built. To keep the Secret that is Universal Nature demands Absolute Obedience without tolerating submission; its secret, indeed, has one vulnerability, namely that obeying it can be confused with doing so in a servile manner. Serres calls the Evangelist—the messenger that claims to bring the Good News with no mediation necessary for receiving it—“Satan the Master of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Other than she who strives to master the universe's secret by keeping it encrypted and who spends her time in that very vault that does not cease to challenge and take issue with the earthly grounds where the iconic Tree of

5 Serres, 2002, p.8.

6 Ibid., p.7.



Life is rooted, she who strives to master the world “leads you to a very high mountain, shows you all the kingdoms in all their glory and promises to give them to you on condition that you grovel before him.”<sup>7</sup> If knowledge of the Universe’s Nature is a Crypt, knowledge of the world is the crypt’s Flat Projection in terms that claim the authority to represent the crypt’s arcane. Such flat projection alone can claim to produce “positive” or “negative” knowledge; the crypt, on the other hand, embodies knowledge that is always already articulated, a knowledge that presents insight only by leaving absent what it has intuited. Serres’s seeker of articulate knowledge, whom he addresses as the Researcher, serves the Law; she is an “official” whose duty is to explore and challenge all the regularities stated as lawful—without ever claiming to represent those regularities with official authority. “We always save ourselves by the law. Freedom comes from laws,” Serres tells his audience.<sup>8</sup> Law binds and contracts the ambient terror of the jungle in a manner that allows “a balance between hunting and being hunted, between eating and being eaten.”<sup>9</sup> Law contracts violence. If those contracts are

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p.8.

9 Ibid., p.6.

sound, whoever is subject to them can afford to live and care for all that is vulnerable as the source of all that is improbable and precious. With these elaborations, we can perhaps better appreciate the radicality of Serres's confession: "I continue to make mischief in order to bear witness in the face of the world that we are not beasts, that therefore we have left or begin to leave the hell of violence, because we are men."<sup>10</sup>

In Serres's humorous Confession Story, giving in to the human inclination to be seduced by curiosity ceases to be a tragic act. Rather, it is the Researcher's Official Duty to enjoy masquerade, to be transgressive by engaging in the challenges that motivate desire and seduction, pleasure and satisfaction, pain, and relief. This is comic, yet it is serious: a researcher "cannot cheat."<sup>11</sup> For "to obey, here, consists in submitting oneself to the laws of things as such and to thereby acquire freedom, whereas cheating consists in submitting oneself to the conventional laws of men."<sup>12</sup> In Serres's inversive account, where the universe has an active nature, rather than being imagined as either static or dynamic, cheating becomes equivalent to being obedient (to the laws of

10 Ibid., p.6.

11 Ibid., p.7.

12 Ibid.

man), and disobedience comes to count as blessed rather than cursed:

Things contain their own rules. Less conventional than the rules of men, but as necessary as the body that falls and the stars that revolve; even more, difficult to discover. We can do nothing and should do nothing without absolute obedience to these things, loyal and hard. No expertise happens without this, no invention, no authentic mastering. Our power comes from this obedience, from this human and noble weakness; all the rest falls in corruption towards the rules.<sup>13</sup>

For the researcher and the comedian, disobedience, as it characterizes the tragic manner of acting, is not thought to be nourished by delusions, to produce regret, anguish, and guilt that can be relieved only by comfort derived from acknowledging the principal impotence to which such “acting” is always already sentenced. Quite inversely, the very possibility for disobedience comes to feature in Serres’s account as that which can preserve the possibility of salvation. Acts of comic disobedience replace the Scriptures as that which preserves and circulates that possibility. What, in the Scriptures, unfolds between the Two Covers of a Book (or the top and the bottom of an inscription plane, be it

13 Ibid., pp.7–8.

stone, clay, papyrus, or parchment) is thereby attributed a different status by Serres: the mediacy of what unfolds between the covers—on the limited inscription plane or the numerous sheets contained in a book—is attributed to be capable of capturing, conserving, and expressing a sense whose extension as meaning is *in principle* of vaster magnitude than that which the two covers (or the limiting ends of a plane) are Officially Entitled to contain.

In Serres's narrative, Adam and Eve are themselves children when they taste the pleasures of transgression and disobedience. With this, sexuality is decoupled and set free from being ascribed as the prime motive animating the play of sinful seductions. And suddenly, there is the possibility of a distance, a Genuine Mediacy capable of discerning a human world as a *Locus In Quo* that spans between the traditionally purported Covers of the Scriptures, the "original" act of *Divine Judgment* that is said to have predicated the nature of all that is, and the act that is consequential to Eve and Adam's frivolity of tasting from the forbidden fruit, namely the *Divine Sentence* with which the ancestors of humankind are sent into expulsion, the act that leaves the Disobedient Ones alone with the representatives of Official Generality as the sole placeholders for a source of comfort. If, on the oth-

er hand, the divine entitlement of the covers is to preserve the possibility for disobedience, then the titles with which they express what they capture and conserve must pass on the *virtually abundant activity of possible disobedience* that they are to guard in the service of the duty they are to represent. Just like the plane of inscription they limit, or the sheets they bind, the covers too need to be capable of capturing, conserving, and expressing a sense whose extension as meaning is *in principle* of vaster magnitude than that which the two covers are *officially* entitled to contain.

In other words—and this, again, is Serres’s adorable humor—if you hold respect and esteem for official representations, then never trust official representations, especially while paying service to the law they represent! In an admittedly twisted but not complicated way, as I have tried to depict, it is their entitlement as official representations to take care of their capability to compromise themselves. “To compromise,” here, is an important albeit dangerous term that I am using to translate the German word *Bloßstellung*, which means something like embarrassing exposure, a kind of personal vulnerability that comes from “lowering one’s guard” (*sich Blöße geben*). The guards of an official representation would, of course, be

the official order, and what Serres then tells us is that the official representation must, in turn, have “capabilities of mediacy,” namely the capability to transmit and pass on the *virtually abundant activity of possible disobedience*—which it is entitled to delimit and protect—to the official order that is predicated to guard and protect, in its turn, the official representations.

Like Eve and Adam’s innate childhood in Serres’s narrative, and like the unfolding mediacy between two entitled limits, the entitled limits must be respected in their divine nature, which consists of being endowed with the possibility for disobedience. This very possibility is being guarded in Serres’s narrative, and it is what renders it capable of still preserving the plot of a story of salvation, despite the frivolous masquerade of that plot’s prime characters in which Serres engages as the narrator of that story’s novel articulation:

Contrary to what is sometimes said, this blessed disobedience solves many problems. In accumulating black follies and an experience which helps nobody, each generation blocks history so that we no longer see, in a moment, how to leave it; only children sometimes unblock the situation by seeing things in another way. Animals rarely disobey; genetic automates, some follow an instinct programmed since the origin of their species: that

is why they have no history. We change, progress and regress, we invent the future because, deprogrammed, we disobey.<sup>14</sup>

If Eve and Adam themselves are children *naturally*, before their frivolous act, then all those humanisms would be mistaken that purport that humankind has been left alone in the world, with the sole and tragic spirituality of a Regulative Machinery (instead of an arcane architectonic body of laws) that operates obediently and reliably in official generality, and that it is the tragedy of humankind that the very possibility for comfort is a finite good that this machinery must administrate to as best as it can. Because if Eve and Adam were themselves naturally children once, the Tree of Life follows a sequential order too, which descends, and branches off, but doing so in many directions and no preset manner—history does not distance mankind from its lost original nature that had, purportedly, been corrupted when history begins. The sequential order now includes the possibility for Regression just as much as for Progression. Human nature now is not *good* nature—the spheres of “nature” and “value” are kept distinct now; they are kept apart by the Encryptions and Decipherments depicting the secret that is the universe’s nature, those Symbolical

14 Ibid., p.1.

Building Blocks of the crypt that embodies the law obeyed by the kind of universal human nature of which Serres speaks. But if Codes manifest those “building blocks” of the Crypt, the Great Story that knows the Age of the Tree of Life, what are those “codes” made of?

### *The Alphabetic Absolute*

I would like to suggest that we can think of this “materiality” as the Alphabetic Absolute. And I do not mean by this, of course, a particular linguistic alphabet to be now declared foundational and unconditional; I don’t even mean an alphabet of language in any restrictive sense. Rather, I mean alphabets in a generalized sense, as applied in coding—numerical, linguistic, probabilistic, or any. So, what then counts as an alphabet? It is important to distinguish what can be called an alphabet from an inventory of signs, for example. An alphabet does not ever relate to things themselves but to how one “speaks” when articulating something at stake. I put speak in quotation marks because with such a generalized notion of the alphabet as I am suggesting, we can say “articulate” instead of “speak,” and thus all kinds of practices that articulate something—by composing elements, caring for junctions, for flexibility and conjugation (interlinking),



practices that nest different hierarchies—can all be included in the kind of “speech” measured by an alphabet. This indeed may sound stranger than it is; it is well known that the letters of writing words and those with which we count and calculate share the same genealogy: both depend on an abstract place-value system within which they can operate. Numbers are depicted as numbers in terms of a particular numerical value taken as the base of that system—sixty in the hexadecimal number system, ten in the decimal one, and so on. On the other hand, the letters of a script are depicted within a finite set of characters arranged in linear sequentiality—the very name “alphabet” means exactly this: alpha and beta were the first two letters of the Greek alphabet. Thus, when speaking of an alphabetic absolute, I mean to think of whatever it may be to which one feels inclined to ascribe a status of being impartial and unconditioned (absolute) as an articulated crypt. The codes that can articulate such an absolute as a crypt need alphabets to build it from—rather than, for example, “notational systems,” because a notional system would already be too specific, for it would imply a set of rules according to how the letters that operate within a place-value system can be combined. It is the power of an alphabet that many such syntaxes—more

inclusively, such grammars—may be applied to it (there are very different languages coexisting, all using the Roman alphabet, for example). It seems that only an alphabetic absolute can integrate the kind of unconditional obedience Serres talks about, requiring as it does that one behaves wittily and mischievously. As a notational system would, an alphabet does not yet distinguish false from correct usage. We know the word Literacy in relation to the alphabet for precisely this reason: to be literate is pre-specific (undecided) regarding whether one speaks/writes poetry, lies, wants to convince with arguments, or persuade with plausibility and opinion. And still, literacy can be measured—in terms of power of expression, imagination, distinction, elegance, being informed, and so on. But there are varieties of different metrics. In this, the Masterful Literate is someone who is literate more or less masterfully, just as we are used to calling a musician masterful, an architect, or a doctor who cares for and masters whatever practice. That is why the kind of unconditional obedience Serres talks about ought to be granted to an alphabetic absolute, a total of any alphabet conceivable, including all possible “couplings” and “multiplications” that constitute the ciphers articulated in codes. What I have called Serres’s “Officer” is a literate person in

just this sense: she is the architect of articulated crypts that hollow existing standards.

There is another reason why the Alphabetic deserves a central role here. In all his writings, Serres hails a novel humanism where history is not the consequence of a terrifying act of punishment and expatriation.<sup>15</sup> Literally: “God has given us the endless freedom to disobey him, and this is how we can recognize him as our Father,” he maintains.<sup>16</sup> Hence, a stance is needed that allows for the co-existence of what is disparate.<sup>17</sup> If the Tree of Life descends without linearly and progressively distancing us “contemporaries” from our origin, then originality is always “there,” and the Universe’s natural kinds, we have said, are many. This pecu-

15 Here is not the place to elaborate on this, but some of Serres’s major books must at least be mentioned: *Hominescence*, Paris, Le Pommier, 2001; *Le tiers instruit*, Paris, Bourin, 1991; *Atlas*, Paris, Éditions Julliard, 1984; *Petite Poucette*, Paris, Le Pommier, 2012; *Le contrat naturel*, Paris, Bourin, 1990; *Récits d’humanisme: Bour*, Paris, Le Pommier, 2006; *L’incandescent*, Paris, Le Pommier, 2003.

16 Serres, 2002, p.1.

17 I borrow this expression of the “disparate” from Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of asymmetrical synthesis of the sensible: “Repetition is [...] the formless power of the ground which carries every object to that extreme ‘form’ in which its representation comes undone. The ultimate element of repetition is the disparate [*dispars*], which stands opposed to the identity of representation. Thus, the circle of eternal return, difference, and repetition (which undoes that of the identical and the contradictory) is a tortuous circle in which Sameness is said only of that which differs.” Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p.57.

liar “there-ness,” Serres suggests calling “noise”: “We must keep the word noise, the only positive word that we have to describe a state that we always describe negatively, with terms like disorder.”<sup>18</sup> For Serres, seduction, desire and pleasure, and the existence of sound and fury are natural forces that forever disturb pureness and harmony. They are the very conditions for the possibility of disobedience and hence, also for the possibility of a kind of beauty that is beautiful because it can be compromised, embarrassed, exposed, and vulnerable—in short, “naked.” In an article I will turn to shortly, Serres calls this beauty pure because it can be embarrassed, “la belle noiseuse,” the beautiful querulent.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Comic*

Let us first come back to this aspect of the coexistence of the Disparate. The possibility of salvation, in terms of “natural morals,” as Serres suggests, depends on the inversion of the idea of illusion and its opposite, truth. Disguise, masquerade, fashioning, and dressing up do not threaten truth; rather, they are the conditions for it to be self-engendering, alive, and sexual. A lot depends on recognizing

18 Serres, 1983, p.55.

19 Ibid.

reality as mediacy, and immediacy as an “active showing,” Serres seems to tell us. Curiosity now appears as a stance that is neither sinful nor just, but then what? Curiosity diverts the attention that can be granted. It animates a play of “amusement,” a playful devotion to the diversion of attention; it is quick and can never be at rest with what attracts it; it is a form of appreciation that depends on no intermediate didactic, an appreciation that is possible in an unexpected encounter. All of this binds curiosity to the Comic. Early forms of comedy are said to originate in pagan manners of emancipating from traditional cults of worship; in their rituals of thanksgiving, for example, where particular Gods were celebrated, they began to frivolously dramatize the characters of these gods in masquerade. They would still perform the rituals, but now in a challenging rather than entirely serious manner. Comedy is older than tragedy, and it is purported to deal with magnitudes one encounters as evidently “there” but disparate, non-fitting, without knowing how, why, or what else. The very possibility of thinking of repetition as something that does not reproduce the same depends on the comic; for example, in Serres’s manner of thinking of the

sequentiality of time in his Tree of Life.<sup>20</sup> Comedy shares its origin with the carnivalesque, and in many ways, it can be said to mark the early stages of coming of age—the youth going through comic situations when challenging the customs, expectations, and orders of their parents.

Serres's assumption of considering the nature and sexuality of the universe has an important and difficult implication: it involves the assumption of different kinds of natures and hence morals of nature, which are all considered "universal." This has consequences for science which considers a particular system of concepts universal (metaphysics), as well as one that considers physical nature as universal ("modern" science). In either one, the paradigm of a plurality of natural kinds translates into the assumption of categorically different and incompatible magnitudes that are strictly not to be experimented with because they are categorically different. Indeed, all attempts, however experimental, to disobey the rule of traditional hierarchies of subordination among the different magnitudes are then perceived outright as evil: we can easily remember the trials of Galileo or Kepler for assuming, in the case of the latter, an elliptic instead of

20 Gilles Deleuze devoted an entire study to such a notion of repetition; see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

perfectly round path of the planets (heavenly bodies), and hence addressing the course of the stars in the category of an imperfect circle. That was sheer frivolity and disrespectful not only in the eyes of the clerics at the time, for whom the orders of the heavens, locus of the divine, could not possibly be recognized publicly as a measure that captures imperfect movement because it would imply that what is moving, in the starry heavens, are magnitudes whose purity is corrupt and imperfect. It would imply that the most perfect and pure order imaginable, that of the heavens, would be the order of incommensurate magnitudes—holding on to an axiological correspondence between perfection and the divine in the light of a unity would require the recognition of miracles that are conveyed elsewhere than through scripture. But perhaps this consideration, often attributed to the dogmatism of the clerics, is as much or more perhaps an intolerable frivolity in the eyes of propagators of early ideas of “pure” science—science that would be independent of the mystic interrogation of the knowledge it provides in its relation to the infinite. When Galileo and Kepler might stand for an endpoint of the reign of a particular dogmatism, we can see perhaps in Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia* an early announcement of what was to come. If today media

apologetics are concerned with the Post-human, and a purported End of History, we can easily see a certain symmetry to the situation for which the names of Galileo and Kepler stand. Again, we have a much earlier literary work that seems to indicate such a development to come, namely Balzac's monumental *Comédie humaine*, whose idea, he tells us in the preface, "originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality."<sup>21</sup> Because "it is a mistake," Balzac maintained, "to suppose that the great dispute which has lately made a stir, between Cuvier and Geoffroi Saint-Hilaire, arose from a scientific innovation." At stake is the idea of a Unity of Plan: "the Creator works on a single model for every organized being." He insisted that this issue does not arise from scientific innovations; rather, from the "unity of structure" which, "under other names, had occupied the greatest minds during the two previous centuries."<sup>22</sup> He goes on to name references and their core concepts in addressing the issue at stake:

21 Honoré de Balzac, *L'avant-propos de la Comédie humaine*, 1842–48, here cited from the translation "Author's Introduction," Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1968/1968-h/1968-h.htm> (accessed February 23, 2022). There are no page numbers provided in this online reference.

22 Ibid.



As we read the extraordinary writings of the mystics who studied the sciences in their relation to infinity, such as Swedenborg, Saint-Martin, and others, and the works of the greatest authors on Natural History—Leibnitz, Buffon, Charles Bonnet, etc., we detect in the *monads* of Leibnitz, in the *organic molecules* of Buffon, in the *vegetative force* of Needham, in the correlation of similar organs of Charles Bonnet—who in 1760 was so bold as to write, “Animals vegetate as plants do”—we detect, I say, the rudiments of the great law of Self for Self, which lies at the root of Unity of Plan. There is but one Animal. The Creator works on a single model for every organized being. “The Animal” is elementary, and takes its external form, or, to be accurate, the differences in its form, from the environment in which it is obliged to develop. Zoological species are the result of these differences. The announcement and defence of this system, which is indeed in harmony with our preconceived ideas of Divine Power, will be the eternal glory of Geoffroi Saint-Hilaire, Cuvier’s victorious opponent on this point of higher science, whose triumph was hailed by Goethe in the last article he wrote.<sup>23</sup>

As Balzac announces, he himself had been convinced of such a scheme of nature (a unity of plan) long before his contemporaries raised its issue in terms of scientific innovations, and hence in a manner supposedly set apart from the spiritual-

23 Ibid.

ism entailed by the authors on natural history—as if now it wouldn’t imply unanswerable questions anymore. So, Balzac doesn’t refer to this scheme as a frame of reference for explaining particular postulates of scientific accounts. Rather he takes it as an inspiration for a kind of investigative storytelling: “Does not society modify Man, according to the conditions in which he lives and acts, into men as manifold as the species in Zoology?”<sup>24</sup> And further on: “If Buffon could produce a magnificent work by attempting to represent in a book the whole realm of zoology, was there not room for a work of the same kind on society?”<sup>25</sup> Somewhat surprising perhaps, his *Comédie* is all set up as a great project of taxonomy and categorization: “The differences between a soldier, an artisan, a man of business, a lawyer, an idler, a student, a statesman, a merchant, a sailor, a poet, a beggar, a priest, are as great, though not so easy to define, as those between the wolf, the lion, the ass, the crow, the shark, the seal, the sheep, etc.”<sup>26</sup> But “the limits set by nature to the variations of animals have no existence in society. [...] The social state has freaks which Nature does not allow herself; it is nature plus society. The description of

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

social species would thus be at least double that of animal species, merely given the two sexes.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, “animals have little property, and neither arts nor sciences; while man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his use. [...] The dress, the manners, the speech, the dwelling of a prince, a banker, an artist, a citizen, a priest, and a pauper are absolutely unlike, and change with every phase of civilization.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Balzac decides: “Hence the work to be written needed a threefold form—men, women, and things; that is to say, persons and the material expression of their minds; man, in short, and life.”<sup>29</sup>

But still, if this introduction is to set up Balzac’s project in clear distinction to a scientific account, how should it be possible to embark upon such an immense project of taxonomy and categorization *in the manner of storytelling*? For Balzac, the realist writer, such storytelling could only take the form of a natural history—yet a natural history of manners. Manners, if studied in a historical manner that works empirically, pose entirely new problems for a writer. They must be considered as what we

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

would call today perhaps “a population effect” or “property of a collective.” But how can we address abstract ideas such as a collective and its properties with enough intuitable distinction and common sense to work as a story? Balzac indeed asks himself: “But how could such a drama, with the four or five thousand persons which society offers, be made interesting? How, at the same time, please the poet, the philosopher, and the masses who want both poetry and philosophy under striking imagery? Though I could conceive of the importance and of the poetry of such a history of the human heart, I saw no way of writing it.”<sup>30</sup>

The writing he eventually found was one of categorizing the typicalities of entire scenes: “Not man alone, but the principal events of life, fall into classes by types. There are situations which occur in every life, typical phases, and this is one of the details I most sought after.”<sup>31</sup> And furthermore, he specifies that the possibility of his writing depended upon setting up a gallery: “It was no small task to depict the two or three thousand conspicuous types of a period; for this is, in fact, the number presented to us by each generation, and which the Human Comedy will require. This crowd of actors, of char-

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

acters, this multitude of lives, needed a setting—if I may be pardoned the expression, a gallery.”<sup>32</sup>

Balzac, the great realist author of the nineteenth century, pursued capturing the richness of reality by embracing typification, masquerade, and modeling as means to work out—against our established and well-tested intuition! —the truly fine distinctions that make reality “real.” Such storytelling ceases to lend its services to a representational paradigm; instead, it informs a new paradigm of writing and storytelling that doesn’t fit well with the modern categories of *either* fiction *or* documentary, *either* history *or* story. Balzac was fascinated by the novel methods of population thinking, statistics, and the analytical capacity of these methods to at once resort to gross generalizations and reveal infinitesimally fine distinctions. Furthermore, he was well aware that the invention of electricity would profoundly unsettle the order of societies: “In certain fragments of this long work I have tried to popularize the amazing facts, I may say the marvels, of electricity, which in man is metamorphosed into an incalculable force; but in what way do the phenomena of brain and nerves, which prove the existence of an undiscovered world of psychology, modify the necessary and undoubted

32 Ibid.

relations of the worlds to God? In what way can they shake the Catholic dogma?"<sup>33</sup> It was clear to him that there is something "heretic" about these interests in the kind of abstract possibility owed to technology and scientific innovation. This is why I have suggested seeing in this work an early premonition of the themes that preoccupy intellectuals today—themes like an end to history or post-humanism—that are rather straightforwardly tied up with a certain apocalypticism.

### *Mediacy and Real Time*

Gilbert Simondon, whom I cited at the beginning of this text, follows the same idea when he claims that the grand theme of alienation that haunts modernity, and the so-called industrialization of societies, depends upon finding ways to save the technical object:

I believe there are humans in the technical objects, and that the alienated human can be saved on the condition that man is caring for them [the technical objects]. It must in particular never condemn them. In the Old Testament, there is a sort of jealousy of Yahweh toward the creature. And we say that transgresses the creature. But is not all creation a transgression? I think transgression,

33 Ibid.

whose origin is the serpent, is the creation of a person. If Adam and Eve never left the Garden of Eden they would have not become human beings or inventors. Their one son was a shepherd, the other a farmer. Techniques were born there. Finally, technics and transgression seem to be the same. Blacksmiths were once considered as cursed.<sup>34</sup>

Simondon argues that “human alienation” cannot be separated from our custom to degrade the technical object to a passive and servile status. He maintains that the theme of alienation demands that the grand theme of salvation be articulated on new grounds. If, classically, the possibility for salvation is remembered, preserved, and articulated in the Scriptures—their theological and hermeneutic readings—we must make and reserve room now for an essentially arcane and enigmatic kind of possibility in new media. Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, and many other new media apologetics have suggested that with electronic media, we live in “post-alphabetic” times; this entails that it is not the Scriptures that preserve and communicate the possibility of salvation anymore. Without elevating the technical object (its unconcealed and naked “naturalness” alias “pure functionality”) from its servile and passive status, we continue to

34 Simondon, 2013 [1983], p.2.

live in a terrifyingly inhospitable and infinitely open universe, according to Simondon. Kittler, for example, but many others as well, see in this perceived inhospitality the pain of a narcissistic wound, which, nonetheless, turns into a new promise of salvation (although he would probably never say that) if only we were to lose our arrogant narcissism. This inhospitality could then be perceived as the true recognition of the human, existential predicament. The tortures of history would “end”: the post-alphabetic age that characterizes the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy is then conceived as the end of history. This end is at the same time its completion, its infinitesimal self-reference, a dynamic that completes itself by being infinitary. This is a logic we can find developed with subtle care in Giorgio Agamben’s writing. It is not that within history’s infinitary completion through self-reference, there would be no salvation possible—rather, the promise of salvation is now tied up in the burden of bearing an irresolvable paradox, namely that the object of salvation must be unsavable. Salvation does not concern the active recovery of what was lost or remembering what was forgotten. In Agamben’s argument, “the lost and the forgotten do not



demand to be found or remembered, but to remain such as they are, in their being-thus.”<sup>35</sup>

McLuhan takes a different path. For him, the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy does not mean the End of History according to the above logic. McLuhan remains more committed to physics and science, where the latter can be characterized as raising an anthropological stance to an absolute status by addressing history as a political subject. For him, the post-alphabetic means the implosion of the experimental stage for objective representation in models of a universal “All” that is to be both origin and destiny of any scientific symbolization. McLuhan insists that every medium adds something to reality in a quantum-magnetic, electronic universe. The new scale introduces units, meters, and measures that permit mediating magnitudes with magnitudes, open-ended and infinitarily so: “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”<sup>36</sup> With this view, McLuhan spiritualizes communicative activity such that communication takes on quasi-cosmic dimensions. Magnitudes are no longer the universal that allows for reliable measurement;

35 Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (eds.), *The Agamben Dictionary*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 2011, pp.193ff.

36 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994 [1964], p.9.

rather, in the mediacy that renders the real as real, measurement constitutes magnitudes, not the other way around: “Before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message. The message, it seemed, was the “content,” as people used to ask what a painting was *about*.”<sup>37</sup> So on the one hand McLuhan spiritualizes communication in relation to the human scope of action and, hence, in relation to existence, if not to Being itself. But on the other hand he discredits, on objective grounds (by referring to the quantum kind of physics that made possible electromagnetic communication technology that in principle, if not in fact, operates at the speed of light), the very possibility of a prophetic word that supposedly reaches one via artifacts from a categorical beyond of this world; rather, the message (prophetic or not) that *can* be received, he maintains, is virtually *any* message: “The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message.”<sup>38</sup> If virtually *any message is no message*, then any actual message is a particular modulation of the generic actuality—movement in infinitive form—something that McLuhan finds represented in the electromagnetic physicality of whatever it may be that moves

37 Ibid., p.13.

38 Ibid., p.8.

at light speed. His dictum that the message needs to be looked for as immanent to the medium can be seen as answering exactly this complex issue: in a quantum-magnetic, electronic universe, he tells us, every medium adds something to reality. This has hitherto been associated with the (potential) tremendousness of cosmic order, but certainly not with a (potential) prudence of an anthropological one: “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, any extension of ourselves—results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.”<sup>39</sup>

All technology counts, for McLuhan, as extensions of “man”—this cannot only be understood in terms of augmentation of corporeal strength and the perceptive faculties but also intellectually: technology incorporates mathematical principles invented or at least intuited by “the intellect.” With the herewith implied emphasis on the mathematical symbolisms that unlock novel scales of action, once they are externalized and embodied in technical “cases” and then reappropriated by our bodies in learning how to use them, McLuhan also insists that mathematics is an articulation of

39 Ibid., p.7; also see my book, *Die Nachricht, ein Medium: Generische Medialität, städtische Architektur*, Vienna, Ambra, 2014.

human intellect—however “natural” or “divine” one might specify the possibility of such “intellection.”<sup>40</sup> In this, Kittler parts ways with McLuhan. For him, mathematics is the *immediate* expression of “the real,” directly, in terms of physics. He sees no symbolism at work in it: “What distinguishes the post-Gutenberg methods of data processing from the old alphabetic storage and transmission monopoly is the fact that they no longer rely on symbolic mediation but instead record, in the shape of light and sound waves, visual and acoustic effects of the real.”<sup>41</sup> With this assumption, he can mock Balzac’s project:

Photo albums establish a realm of the dead infinitely more precise than Balzac’s competing literary enterprise, the *Comédie humaine*, could ever hope to create. In contrast to the arts, media

40 This is not a polemical remark. Regarding mathematics, the question really is unsettling: Why does mathematics work? Why can we fly to the moon and back with mathematical understanding (and everything that builds upon it)? Stephen Hawking edited an anthology on number theory, whose title features a citation by Leopold Kronecker who once said: “God made the integers; all else is the work of man.” (Cited in Eric Temple Bell, *Men of Mathematics*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1986, p.477. The Hawking-edited anthology is entitled *God Created the Integers: The Mathematical Breakthroughs That Changed History*, Philadelphia, Running Press, 2005.)

41 Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, “Translator’s Introduction: Friedrich Kittler and Media Discourse Analysis,” in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, xxvii–iii.

do not have to make do with the grid of the symbolic. That is to say, they reconstruct bodies not only in a system of words or colors or sound intervals. Media and media only fulfill the “high standards” that [...] we expect from “reproductions” since the invention of photography: “They are not only supposed to resemble the object, but rather guarantee this resemblance by being, as it were, a product of the object in question, that is, by being mechanically produced by it—just as the illuminated objects of reality imprint their image on the photographic layer,” or the frequency curves of noises inscribe their wavelike shapes onto the phonographic plate.<sup>42</sup>

For him, it is clear: “of the real nothing more can be brought to light than [...] nothing.”<sup>43</sup> With the nineteenth-century concept of frequency, “the real takes the place of the symbolic,”<sup>44</sup> and “literature defects from erotics to stochastics, from red lips to white noise. Marinetti’s molecular swarms and whirling electrons are merely instances of the Brownian motion that human eyes can only perceive in the shape of dancing sun particles, but

42 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p.11–12; he quotes from Karl Philipp Moritz, *Die Hahnische Litteralmethode*, in *Die Schriften in Dreissig Bänden*, ed. by Petra and Uwe Nettelbeck, Nördlingen, Greno, 1986, 1:157–58.

43 Ibid., p.15.

44 Ibid., p.26.

that in the real are the noise on all channels.”<sup>45</sup> The end of the Gutenberg Era marks for Kittler the end of storytelling because, as he puts it, once the real takes the place of the symbolic within the physics of electromagnetic spectrums, frequencies, and stochastic noise, time turns into “an independent variable”—a “physical time removed from the meters and rhythms” that could make harmony and music. Rather, such physical time “quantifies movements that are too fast for the human eye, ranging from 20 to 16,000 vibrations per second.”<sup>46</sup>

For both McLuhan as well as Kittler, media come to stand in for the Kantian forms of intuition, those “conditionings” supposedly innate to the human mind that, according to Kant’s transcendentalism, were the guarantors that everyone can intuit space and time uniformly if only they have already learned to discipline their faculties of understanding and reason.<sup>47</sup> Kant molded his forms of intuition according to notions of space and time informed by physics, not mathematics.

45 Ibid., p.51.

46 Ibid., p.24.

47 Regarding the problem of aesthetics and judgment for epistemology at large, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Time and Judgement*, ed. by Robert Harvey and Lawrence R. Schehr, New Haven (Connecticut), Yale University Press, 2001; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges van den Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1983].

Against the rationalism of Leibniz, for example, which cannot do without an idea of beauty that is harmonious and theological, mathematics had to be decoupled from theology for Kant: it should only be legitimate if its postulates can be made the object of physical experimentation. With this, Kant aligns closely with empiricist traditions. But against Newton, whose systematization of methods in physics, *The “Principia”: The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, anchors his Axioms, the Laws of Motion, in a notion of absolute space that he attributed to the cosmos itself, Kant’s transcendentalism introduced a level of mediacy between thought and the real. This “mediacy,” however, is entirely distinct from the “mediacy” thematized with reference to “new media.” While the former notion of mediacy was uniform and objective because Kant attributed Newton’s prime cosmological assumptions (linear and reversible time, and Euclidean, three-dimensional [plane] geometry) to the human mind instead of the cosmos (as the Forms of Intuition). Mediacy in relation to new media, on the other hand, is new because it makes so-called non-classical quantum physics its point of departure. With the crucial consequence that the notion of an objective and uniform process of mediation—arguably the key element in Kantian transcendental

philosophy, as well as for every epistemology that commits itself to the critical tradition—has lost its very base. When everything happens “instantaneously” and at “light speed,” how to maintain a critical distance to events then? How can a critical philosophy “base” itself on a notion of mediation that is manifold, variate, and unfolds in multiple linear sequences? How can we think about the linkages, the nodes? Mediality does not mainly affect the reception of a communicated message as if of an absolute historical force. It is certainly true that sequences do not link up in an entirely predictable manner within the domain of probability; but mediality affects the reception of a communicated message because like Balzac’s comedy, media tackle with “format”—the one term which, in Plato’s *Timeaus*, is reserved for the Demiurge. Even the most reformationist spirits of media materialism à la Kittler, stances which committed to a “pure” and “immediate” real, are bound to proceed—whether they want it or not— “by the carnevalesque;” especially if they emphasize their commitment to a notion of the real that draws from absolute space, or absolute time (History). How indeed can a critical philosophy come to reasonable terms with a materialist notion of mediation that is manifold, variate, and unfolds in chance affected manners?



Contemplating a notion of the real vis-à-vis such mediacy, McLuhan dares to consider a nonapocalyptic reversal in the direction of progress that inheres the paradigm of modern experimental science, whereas Kittler (as well as Virilio, Baudrillard, and many others committed to the project of a “general linguistics”) considers a self-referential implosion of the real and anticipate a novel kind of epistemic indisputability arising—somehow—from a totalized notion of mediacy. While their faith is in historical materialism: “Never trust the messenger if it is not a mechanism,” their keen attention to how “mediality” acts as an anonymous (non-addressable, non-answerable) *formatting* force and makes their outlook deeply pessimistic.

I want to ask again, and formulate a bit differently: how to stay committed to a certain autonomy of things, whereby “things” include “words”? How to consider with Simondon that perhaps it is not the technical object that is to save us (even if only from ourselves) but us who need to save the technical objects (even if only to keep with a possibility of salvation)? How to reconnect, in short, with this almost forgotten notion of realism that weighs more to the pole of a culture of epistemic modesty than that of self-righteous modes of self-legitimation—and

which does so, frivolously, by affirming a culture of comical plays in exuberance à la Balzac?

*Continentality: Containing Continnence*

So, what about Serres's *la belle noiseuse*? What about his idea of a kind of beauty that is not harmonious, not perfectly adequate or equal, but clamorous and querulous noise, a beauty that is universal, omnipotent, and yet "sexed" in the sense that it is "whole" only because it "desires" itself in all that it can be? A truth, a nakedness, whose beauty is pure only because it is vulnerable and can be embarrassed? Why hold on to the idea that truth must be beautiful, desirable, and natural?

Serres, too, engages in making sense of a reality that is counted as universal, in a manner that whatever happens, happens at light speed, and its understanding depends upon mediation by spectra. For him, spectra render the real, so to speak. But rather than imagining the universe as a Grand Vacuum, a container of a natural balance (Newton) or a Grand Harmony, the substance of God (Leibniz), or the locus where History can complete itself by referring, dynamically, to nothing but itself (Kittler), Serres inverts the perspective. The universe is ill-thought-out as a container because it is expanding, Serres argues in a key passage from

a recent lecture entitled “From Rotating Revolutions to an Expanding Universe.”<sup>48</sup> Unlike Kittler, he shares with McLuhan the view that mathematics works symbolically, not “immediately.” But if media are extensions of man for McLuhan, then this same relation is incomplete if we think of one as a function of the other. Rather, this relation must count as mutually implicative and reciprocal for Serres: one may regard media as extensions of man, but man, equally so, extends media. The real is real because it is mediate, for Serres, in the precise sense that if we want to consider a universe that is not only dynamic but also expanding, all relations must be considered mutually implicative and reciprocal. This is how Serres maintains, as previously mentioned, that physics itself is “communicational.” For him, “information circulates universally within and between the totality of all existing things.” He elaborates:

Bacteria, fungus, whale, sequoia, we do not know any life of which we cannot say that it emits information, receives it, stores it and processes it. Four universal rules, so unanimous that, by them, we are tempted to define life but are unable to do so,

48 Michel Serres, *Information and Thinking* (manuscript of the keynote address, conference of the Society for European Philosophy and Forum for European Philosophy, “Philosophy after Nature,” Utrecht, September 3, 2014), here p.1.

because of the following counterexamples. Crystal, indeed, rock, sea, planet, star, galaxy: we know no inert thing of which we cannot say that it emits, receives, stores and processes information. Four universal rules, so uniform that we are tempted to define anything in the world by them, but are unable to do so because of the following counterexamples. Individuals, but also families, farms, villages, cities, nations, we do not know any human, alone or in groups, of which we cannot say that it emits, receives, stores and processes information.<sup>49</sup>

The real must count as a noisy totality of communicative circulation among all existing things. It is to this noise, then, that the witty ruse he placed in the Great Story's beginning responds to—the ruse that universal nature itself is sexed and that the first act of transgression and pleasure (the disobedience to the father by eating from the forbidden tree) is natural and blessed; the ruse that keeps the beginning of the great story open in its development, indeterminate and yet natural, and contemporaneous to every generation anew. Isn't this the essence of modernity?

There is one key moment that Serres's inversion depends on: light speed may well be “real-time,” but it is not “instantaneity” or “immediacy.” Rather, we must assume a universal “tense-ness” (*Zeitlichkeit*)

49 Ibid., p.1.

proper to the totality of quantum-physical matter. Light speed then must be understood in relation to this tense-ness: it manifests the tense-ness proper to the totality of quantum-physics matter in its proper activity. The physical nature of the universe is neither static, mechanical, nor dynamic; it is radiating and active, which today's science refers to with the term "radioactivity." Galaxies are born from, and bearers of, radiation emitted from the activity of nucleosynthesis. From a quantum-physics point of view, this radiation is what we call "light." In each of the myriad galaxies, light-matter is emitted from a star. And it is this radiation of light that contemporary physics depicts in the technical image of a spectrum. In the totality depicted as a (whole) spectrum, light is called white—the sum of all the colors it distinguishes according to variable frequencies of white light.<sup>50</sup>

Now, if real time refers to the tense-ness of light speed proper to the universe that is not only dynamic but also expanding, Serres insists that there must be a kind of storytelling that corresponds to such universality. There must be a kind of storytelling that "locates" itself in the peculiar tense-ness of this fourfold universal activity. For Serres,

50 See Michel Serres and Nayla Farouki (eds.), *Le trésor: Dictionnaire des sciences*, Paris, Flammarion, 1997a.

thinking itself is this storytelling: “What is thinking, in fact, if not at least carrying out these four operations: receiving, emitting, storing, processing information?”<sup>51</sup> Thinking is all of the attributes philosophy has endowed it with in the past: judging, reasoning, understanding, conceiving, imagining, remembering, discerning, delineating, measuring, expressing, articulating, et cetera, but it never strives to master an object (or a subject matter, a theme) by revealing its bare identity. Thinking is storytelling for Serres because its dignity (power) consists of preserving and transmitting truth, not possessing or subjecting it. She who is a masterful thinker, then, is she who knows how to masterfully not know what she preserves, transmits, and keeps in circulation.

I will try to show that such storytelling, for Serres, is intimately tied up with painting: a spectrum is the totality of all colors—the Eigenvector, the generic characteristics of all colors. Thus, the question becomes how to “paint articulately” the noisiness that is matter-in-terms-of-a-spectrum. If there can be a kind of storytelling here, it is because, unlike for Kittler, a spectrum counts for Serres as the “elementariness” of geometry, as constituted by symbolism and not immediate physical expression.

51 Serres, 2014, p.1.

Its form is, ultimately, mathematical. The spectrum is a *topological homology in time*, while a technical image that depicts a spectrum via an apparatus is *a snapshot of an apparatus's dynamics at a certain point in time*. Images of spectra do not, properly speaking, *represent* anything specific, instead, they facilitate the transmission and exchange of something arcane that is being conserved and invariant in circulation; they facilitate a “technical fiction” that conserves and transmits a “physical plot.” This is not merely a metaphorical manner of speaking, for light in today’s astrophysics indeed facilitates the exchange and circulation of energy quanta (light in quantum physics has particle-like properties because the “packages” [photons] in which light is discerned, measured, and depicted in spectral analysis are distinguished according to varying frequency rates that depend upon the “energy load” they “carry”). And energy is ultimately not defined qualitatively at all, but solely as a quantitative invariant whose assumption allows for qualifying matter in its specific forms (“matter” as the Other of “light”).<sup>52</sup> All one assumes to know about energy is that the total amount in the Universe is invari-

52 See Richard Feynman, *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985.

ant—energy cannot be created nor can it decay or be destroyed.<sup>53</sup>

The storytelling Serres envisages must be considered as symbolic or mathematical storytelling, a type of storytelling that works according to what the information-technological paradigm of communication suggests to which Serres reverts. But how can it be tied up with painting? Serres wrote an article entitled “Noise” on Balzac’s 1845 short story “Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu,” translated as “The Unknown Masterpiece.”<sup>54</sup> I will try to elaborate on this relationship between Serres’s kind of storytelling and painting by discussing the plot of this story. This discussion itself will be “communicational” and “narrative” in the sense that it seeks to “actively” preserve the issue at stake in the plot “depicted.” “Actively” means that I will add something to how both retold that story; this is what each of them did as well. Balzac tells the story of two historical figures, painters, who both tried to tackle the same problem: whether perfect beauty can or cannot be discerned from the relation between nakedness

53 See Yvette Kosmann-Schwarzbach, *The Noether Theorems: Invariance and Conservation Laws in the Twentieth Century*, Vienna, Springer, 2011.

54 Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. by Ellen Marriage, Project Gutenberg, 2007 [1845], <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23060/23060-h/23060-h.htm> (accessed February 23, 2022).



and the model in nude drawing or painting. It may well be that “of the real nothing can be revealed but nothing,” as Kittler maintains, but this “nothingness” is screening and emissive with communicational vivacity.

### *Ichnographies of Nothing in Particular*

In his story of these two historical characters, Balzac “doped” the historical “data” to be documented by adding a fictional character, a third painter whom he calls Frenhofer, as a symbolical operator that acts upon and complicates the documented “plot” (of a real event) and that allows Balzac to dramatize that plot fictionally. With this “tactical move,” Balzac’s realist account turns into storytelling (rather than being documentary-like), and it raises a novel aspect from the historical “plot,” namely, the issue of a categorical difference between drawing/sketching (working with lines) and painting (striving to work with color alone).

Serres, in turn, retells the plot and how Balzac communicates it by once more applying a tactical move. That is, Serres, in turn, “dopes” the plot by endowing it with an aspect that neither Balzac nor the two historical painters raised. He introduces the element of a theoretical term from architecture— “ichnography.” Within the categorical

term of ichnography, the depiction of that same plot (how beauty can be discerned from the relation between nudity and the model) comes to “conserve” and “transmit” again all that has been told, and then some more. Balzac’s interest was in how this can be enriched in distinctiveness by extracting a notion of drawing from painting (rather than interpolating a notion of painting from drawing). For this, he goes from Balzac’s planarity to voluminosity (he introduces the architectural terms for planning that keep the three dimensions distinct from one another by introducing the infinitesimal into each one separately—namely, ichnography, orthography, and scenography).<sup>55</sup> In Serres’s account the notion of ichnography can establish a contractual kind of writing, as we will see. Painting affords a kind of writing that cannot be reduced to any other form of writing, because its encryption constitutes a graphism that is not “whole”—it needs to be doubly articulated to be a graphism. It needs to be articulated in terms of form to correspond to the substance’s expression of what the form contains, and it needs to be artic-

55 For a rendering of this classical triad into the paradigm of computational architecture, see Ludger Hovestadt, “Toward a Fantastic Genealogy of the Articulate,” in *Domesticating Symbols: Metalithicum II*, ed. by Vera Bühlmann and Ludger Hovestadt, Vienna, Ambra, 2014, pp.46–93.

ulated in terms of content to correspond to what the articulation of the form expresses.<sup>56</sup> It is a kind of writing that literally inscribes “nothing” by placing a signature whose subject does not, properly speaking, exist. In Serres’s account, the unknown masterwork is indeed a masterwork because it is both “unknown” and “signed.” It “has” a master, but no master can “own” it; by leaving the trace of something unknown that is absent, the signature marks a void that is universal not in the sense of a Great Vacuum, but in the sense of a vault or Crypt. It is a writing capable of remembering what has not yet happened, and even what might never happen. It is a kind of writing that transmits between generations without assuming a linear order of descentance and sequentiality.

With giving us this notion of ichnography Serres must not, as McLuhan does, spiritualize communication and announce a novel age of speech based on post-alphabetic presentism (the global village). And neither must he, as Kittler or Agamben do, totalize History and submit to it as the subject of an entirely generic kind of humanism. I will try to show in my retelling of the plot (if beauty can be depicted from

56 For the theory of double articulation, see Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1961 [1943].

the relation between nudeness and its model) that, with Serres, we can expect the dawn of an alphabetic absolute from exactly those developments that lead the former two to announce a post-alphabetic era. The storytelling Serres envisages, we said, must be considered as symbolic, or mathematical storytelling, as storytelling that works according to what the information-technology paradigm of communication suggests, to which Serres reverts. This mathematicness, this symbolism, Serres links to painting via this notion of ichnography. My point is that ichnography introduces a categorical aspect into how we can “paint,” how we can depict something entirely in terms of “color,” which links the canvas of a painting to the spectrality of light as color in its purity prior to the painting that takes a snapshot (a technical image) of this spectrality. Via the categorical aspect that ichnography introduces, both spectrum as well as painting are regarded as forms of writing in Serres’s peculiar “graphism” that is not “whole” without being “read;” a graphism that needs to be doubly articulated by both the writer and the reader; a graphism, hence, that is essentially contractual, a contract that expresses a mutually agreed assurance of what is not going to happen. To assure what will not happen, a contract tries to articulate all possible aspects of

something the parties agree (by signing it) will not take place. All the while, and this distinguishes a contract from an order, the parties of a contract are *not* subject to an external authority that is to be held responsible for guaranteeing that this “something” (which is not supposed to happen) be “represented” in an adequate manner. A contract is signed if both parties withdraw from the stance that could claim legitimate authority over the other. In this sense, Serres’s theory of the “light speed” of “real-time” that media reality is approximating with its electronic communication-technology infrastructures can be said to agree with what McLuhan and Kittler (and others) mean by characterizing our time as a post-alphabetic age. But we have to look carefully.

In the paradigm referred to as the Gutenberg Galaxy, writing was meant to have an authoritative status firmly tied up with and legitimated via the role of an author in relation to her statements, counting on her authenticity and sincerity with regard to *knowing how to render the representation of an object (of discourse) plainly*, in an uncorrupted, a-subjective manner. In science and philosophy, this author-driven legitimation framework manifests in argumentative discourse and the technical precision of experimental practice. But in art, it manifests—more straightforwardly perhaps than

in the latter two—in the attempted act of capturing in painting, drawing, or sculpture a model’s “neutral nakedness”—the very plot depicted and doped by Balzac and Serres in different manners. Instead of truth, it is nakedness that, here, ought to be called “neutral.” Just like an experimental scientist strives to capture truth in its nonbiased, uncorrupted quality, any artist is striving—against all odds—to encounter, to glance at, to capture and preserve, by drawing, painting, or sculpture, a model of purity in a manner that strips the pure off of the model’s live and finite body. Such a successful act of capture would preserve beauty in its pureness. Isn’t that why we call nude paintings/drawings/sculptures, at least in German, by the term *Akt*? Nudity cannot be worn; nudity cannot be represented—just like “actuality” in the Greek sense of infinitive activity, *energeia*, that can never be referred to without imposing form upon it (de-fining it), and hence corrupt its infinitive-ness by putting it into proportion, by applying regularity and measure. New media theory (as opposed to the theory of mediation that forms the backbone of transcendental idealism) readily declares the possibility of such an act of capture impossible. All acts of capture are mediated by either aesthetic categories, history, or a cruelty of the real itself, alias History.

Hence, this very notion of a legitimate authority is tied to an alphabetic order that Serres also wants to dispose of. But what characterizes Serres's stance as unique is that he suggests replacing the concept of authority with a concept of mastership whose subject, however, is indefinite because it is never wholly present nor wholly absent.<sup>57</sup> It is the subject of his novel humanism—a humanism whose dignity (power and nature) consists of how different generations succeed or fail in preserving their mark of distinction: the possibility for mischief and blessed disobedience. If generations indeed build together on a pyramid of shared knowledge, as the popular way of thinking about science suggests, then the “mastership” that organizes the subject of this humanism consists in *masterfully not knowing* what is being kept safe by this structure of collective ar-

57 That is why the law must remain undecided in how to address this subject of Serres's novel humanism. This aspect is worked out by Serres in his book *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995b, where he makes the strong case that the fragility of the earth, as we begin to experience it in our concern for the planet's climate, needs to be addressed primarily in the terms of law and philosophy together with logic and science—a constellation, he argues, that ecology does (can) not provide. See also my article, *Cosmoliteracy: The Alphabetization of Nature* (lecture manuscript, conference of the Society for European Philosophy and Forum for European Philosophy, “Philosophy After Nature,” Utrecht, September 3, 2014), <http://monasandnomos.org/2014/09/08/on-michel-serres-book-the-natural-contract-1990-cosmoliteracy-the-alphabetization-of-the-nature-of-thought/> (accessed February 23, 2022).

chitecture whose beginning—*arché*—never ceases to happen *in real-time* as long as this knowledge is considered to be universal knowledge in the sense discussed above—demanding obedience without submission, and embarrassed, humiliated, and exposed if being “served” in the submissive manner of false modesty that claims to merely represent it without contributing, by occluding its clarity or adding to it. For Serres, the pyramid of knowledge does not store a resource; rather, it is a crypt that keeps originality itself as the secretive well of a power of invention that can be sourced continuously without ever growing distant in time.

Thus, in my retelling of the story’s plot, I will further “dope” the way this plot can be told. I will attempt to endow Serres’s notion of ichnography with a grammatical case capable of addressing the locus in quo of the pyramid, the crypt, which is being built on the distributed and discrete base of ichnographical—architectonic—writing. I will call this grammatical case “the case of the cryptographic locative.” Of this locative, I want to postulate that it can address, and hence articulate, *the locus in quo* where the plots of Serres’s Great Story are being preserved—that is, the locus in quo of knowledge. Grammatical cases can be seen as categories that organize the instantaneity of a “real



time” that pertains to an alphabet—they articulate all possible relations that can be expressed in an alphabet based language (the possessive, the dative, the nominative, the accusative, or whatever cases a language may distinguish).<sup>58</sup> Cryptography now can be seen as articulating the space “in between” different “alphabets” in a “comical” way, not unlike light and colors articulate the space in between different things. Hence, we can imagine the totality of the cases expressed by the grammatical categories as building a spectrum, just like we think about the totality of all colors as building a spectrum. The cryptographic locative then articulates this spectral mediacy of the totality of grammatical cases. It articulates this mediacy (the “nakedness” of pure grammatical relations) by (1) depicting the sum total of the possible cases (the topological homological invariances) which specify in an “analog” manner—i.e., in the technical image that depicts a spectrum where frequency amplitudes are the sole criteria of distinction; and (2) by establishing “digital” communication channels on the spectrum basis of this totality of all cases. Like this, the cryptographic locative attributes a locus to what

58 There are languages in use today that distinguish as many as twenty-something different cases. See Louis Hjelmslev, *La catégorie des cas: Étude de grammaire générale*, Munich, Fink, 1972.

is real without ever having happened and taken place. In other words, it demarcates traces of an encounter between the real and the symbolic, and it can preserve a possibility that can never be fully known or exhausted. I would like to think of this grammatical case of the cryptographic locative as indexing what happens in the peculiar tense-ness proper to the radiating, emitting, and absorbing communicational activity of “real-time”—the universal activity that leaves on our planet traces of *some of all* that happens “at the speed of light” in the galaxy that the earth belongs to.

*At the Shore of Stochastic Noise:  
The Unknown Masterpiece*

Serres introduces his article “Noise” with the words: “The story I am going to tell happened in the beginning of the seventeenth century, a time of noisy quarrels whence came the body of reason, beauty, genius that we admire today.”<sup>59</sup> But at the same time, Serre’s storytelling has nothing to do with keeping records of events: “The story I am going to tell and that Balzac tells could not have happened, never happened.”<sup>60</sup> I would like to consider taking this setup for how Serres’s story

59 Serres, 1983, p.48.

60 Ibid.

will be encountered literally, assuming an alphabetic absolute. With such consideration, I want to ponder the possibility of addressing the fictional in a particular manner that neither opposes it to the real, nor subsumes either to the terms of the other, and hence effectively does not subject one to the regime of the other. My interest is moved by Serres's statement that in this story, we can witness a meeting between the real and the symbolic. He challenges our imagination: "Who has ever seen a meeting between the real and the symbolic in the story?" Balzac did witness such a meeting, Serres claims in the continuation of his text; he can know this, he says, because of how Balzac signed his text.

Let us first recall in broad strokes the plot of Balzac's story. There are three painters: young Nicolas Poussin, the middle-aged court painter Franz Pourbus (whom Balzac calls Porbus)—both of whom were real seventeenth-century French painters—and Balzac's invented older artist, Maître Frenhofer. Frenhofer visits Porbus at his lodgings, where he meets young Poussin as they are both arriving. Porbus lets both in, assuming on no particular grounds that Poussin was with Frenhofer. Frenhofer and Porbus realize only later that neither one of them knows Poussin. The conversation begins to ensue about Porbus's latest

work, a painting of the Virgin Mary, during which Frenhofer criticizes the painting for lacking life. When Poussin objects, the older artists grow aware of his anonymity and challenge him to prove his right to be in the studio with them by producing a sketch. This Poussin does in a manner that sustains their interest in him, and he is officially welcomed into the context. To illustrate his emphasis on life and movement, Frenhofer then applies his artistic touch of color to Porbus's Virgin Mary, making the figure appear live as he had insisted he could. Later, they discuss a painting by Frenhofer's own master, whose name is Mabuse, and who is absent from their meeting. It is a painting of Adam. Frenhofer makes the same critique of his master's painting: that it lacks liveliness. Then he begins talking about a painting by himself that he had been working on for ten years and that no one had seen. Like Porbus's own painting, it is an attempt at capturing perfect beauty in paint—beauty that is engendered without ever having been received in an act of conception: a Mary that will have been without ever actually being “here” or “anywhere”—i.e., beauty as pure nakedness, beauty in the temporal form of a future past that could only be real if it were capable of bracketing out the presence in a manner capable of preserving its actuality indefinitely, toward both

past and future—in other words, a present tense that never actually happens. The painters know well that pure nakedness cannot possibly be embodied by a model that poses for a painting.

Serres now stresses the generational setup of Balzac's story, while "anchoring" all protagonists in one shared spatiotemporal "climate": "Balzac depicts three painters, contemporaries and successors. It took place in bad times when stubborn men without any hope were keepers of the sacred flame, men who were certain that they had to keep it alive," Serres tells us.<sup>61</sup> Hence the continuity between the generations is established by "a secret flame"—all the protagonists knew that "they had to keep it alive."<sup>62</sup> Poussin is the young one, Porbus the adult one, Frenhofer the old one, and Mabuse, the Frenhofer's master, is absent. All of them are aspiring to achieve the same goal in their work, namely "to keep the sacred flame" without knowing how.<sup>63</sup> All of them find inspiration in their models, who are also their life partners. Poussin lives with Gillette, "a perfect beauty. Go to Greece or Turkey, go anywhere, you won't find her match."<sup>64</sup> Porbus,

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., p.49.

the adult, lives with Marie, “an image that is alive in spots and not others. A mixed set.”<sup>65</sup> Frenhofer, the old one, lives with Catherine Lescault, “a courtesan, that beautiful noiseuse who does not exist.”<sup>66</sup> All strive to keep the flame in taking their loved ones as a model for their painting. But: “The tree’s direction is one way for men, as the brush loses power as time goes by. For women, it is the other way as beauty wins its calm presence as time goes by. Time goes one way for the maker [*facteur*], the other way for the model. Nicolas, while drawing, lives next to being itself, the old man, the creator, has lost it. Porbus is in the middle, uneasy, undecided, floating around. His picture fluctuates and doubts, it passes the river of time.”<sup>67</sup> After this depiction, Serres stops and begins anew, inviting his readers “to forget the simplistic cascade in which what he makes visible in turn makes visible a picture that in turn makes visible what ...”<sup>68</sup> But what cascade:

The three men follow each other, according to the order of Mabuse, just as priests are consecrated time after time, according to the order of Melchizedek. The three painters follow each other, according to the order of representation,

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p.50.

the proper name of the dead man cannot fool us. All three have turned around to see their own pictures while, naked and forgotten, beauty cries behind them. As for the three women, they follow each other according to the order of being. Not according to the order of appearance but the scale of being.<sup>69</sup>

So how can we begin anew? How can one mobilize doubt, and the strength needed to live up to one's commitment to achieve (to keep the sacred flame) without knowing how? "The tree of life comes out of the picture, just as the tree of representations, obviously, goes into it. Why these two times, these two directions, these two ladders, these two trees, do they form a cross? Is this a very old, very absurd way of thinking?"<sup>70</sup> The story that Serres sets out to tell, and that he claims has happened in the seventeenth century, in the noisy quarrels of that time—while at the same time being a story that did not happen, and even more that could never have happened—introduces a manner of narration, of storytelling, that can do without these two times. It is a story of time in generational terms that does not mold the Tree of Life iconically into the form of a cross. According to Serres, the Tree of Life and the

69 Ibid., p.49.

70 Ibid., p.50.

tree of representations leave traces of an encounter in the picture. Traces in which *nothing* can be seen because *nothing* is being depicted: “But sooner or later he’ll notice that there’s nothing on his canvas!” Poussin will comment when glancing at Frenhofer’s completed masterpiece in the end of Balzac’s story.<sup>71</sup> And Frenhofer himself will despair: “I’m an imbecile then, a madman with neither talent nor ability. [...] I’ve created nothing!”<sup>72</sup> Nothingness cannot possibly be mastered according to Balzac’s story, hence Frenhofer cannot possibly identify with his masterpiece by seeing in it the completion he has achieved. Instead, he views it as a failure, destroys it with his entire oeuvre, and dies that night.

By suggesting to take this “nothing-at-all” in a literal manner, do I not, in my reading of Serres, positivize what needs, in fact, to be negated for the sake of any ethics that might once have been? If I may say so, itself a practice of keeping the sacred flame. The ethics we are looking for would have to be formulated in a strange tense that conjugates a kind of mightiness that *will once have been* without ever actually having been, as I specified earlier. That is, an ethics, a form of life, or rather: the temporal mode of a form of life that cannot possibly

71 Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*.

72 Ibid.



be inferred from something that did happen. Are we not asking for a practice that is, oddly, disembodied? In this peculiar story that Serres narrates, which centers around a painting he claims capable of somehow capturing “a meeting between the real and the symbolic”<sup>73</sup>—and this without being capable of actually depicting it—does Serres not lead us astray, leaving us behind somewhat lost, trying to grasp an empty center, dangerous and unsettling like the inner eye of a tornado. This empty center swallows up and noisily distributes what appears to have been relatively peacefully at rest? Is it not a particularly violent destruction that I am trying to contemplate here? Thinking along these lines, we would be forgetting that this painting at stake, just as its painter—*le chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, the unknown masterpiece, and its fictional master (Frenhofer is the only character in the story that Balzac entirely invents)—exists only as a fictional formulation. Is fiction then that strange locus in quo capable of hosting as its “cases” formulations in that strange tense which conjugates a kind of mightiness that *will once have been without ever actually having been*? In other words, what would it mean to say that the character of fiction does not apply to mightiness itself—thereby distinguishing fictional mighti-

73 Serres, 1983, p.48.

ness as false pretense, as fake at best and a crime at worst, because of its impotence due to its character as invention, against a kind of nonsymbolic mightiness that must count as “real” and therefore “true” and powerful—but to the temporal tense of a symbolic mightiness in which the fake actually exerts real power?

One cannot deny a sequential order of time, Serres seems to be saying, by foregrounding the generational setup of Balzac’s story. But its sequentiality does not follow directions: “The tree of life comes out of the picture just as the tree of representation goes into it.”<sup>74</sup> Serres seems to maintain that we would be capable of rethinking time in either a continuous or fragmented or linearly progressing manner if only we begin to value (discern, estimate, rate), in our stories (narrations), a life of the fictional, the ideated—of that which is invented or imagined in the mind, just as we value the liveliness of all things real. Balzac witnessed a meeting between the real and the symbolic, and he did so *in the story*. If we read this “in the story” as a *fictional locative*, it will be a locative that is not empty of meaning but rather one that can sustain *any* meaning. It would be a *cryptographic locative*, that is, because it is symbolic—empty neither in

74 Ibid., p.50.

the sense of demarcating, nihilistically, the reality of a non-place, nor in the sense of a determinate and defined positively locatable location, a place of the negative; but, such “emptiness,” I want to suggest, is the emptiness of a cryptological code that is pure capacity—relative strictly to the meaningfulness with which one is capable of endowing the symbolic any-structure of the meaning transmitted. A phonetic alphabet, like the Roman one, for example, can be viewed as such a code: it comprehends a finite stock of elements that are ordered in a particular sequentiality, the characters expressed by letters, and in terms of these letters all words that can *in principle* be uttered—meaningful once, now, in the future, or even never—can be expressed. There is a certain materiality to the utterances of articulated speech, and a distinction between literal and figurative speech, truth and fiction, argument and rhetoric, can be applied to them only retrospectively. In that sense, the formal character of the alphabet is that of a code system, just as the diverse and so-called probabilistic alphabets with which engineers are computing today, or the many phonetic alphabets that preceded the Greek one (which is usually referred to as “the first” phonetic

alphabet in history).<sup>75</sup> My claim, then, is that the cryptographic locative can express “nothingness” in a “literal” manner because the letters of the alphabets it uses are the atoms of a materiality of articulated speech—a materiality that presents itself in no form, a materiality that is furious, un-

75 There have been “phonetic alphabets”—meaning scripts that do not provide inventories of things with the letter series they express, but rather a metrical system to note how one speaks about the things one strives to inventorize—as early as 2000 BC. However, most of them wrote only in consonants, producing a kind of “extract-text” that can be read by many cultures even if the way they articulate and pronounce the read sequences of letters was so different that the people speaking it could not understand each other in speech—based on such scripts, however, they could in writing. For the political implications of different scripts and the different literacies they produced, see Harold Innis, *Empire and Communication*, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2007 [1950]. Still today, for example, the Arabic language struggles with its tradition as a pure consonant script. Mohammad’s prophecy has been recorded in the Koran in a consonant script, and already by the early Renaissance, there were many different ways of reading the prophecy—giving rise to different Islamic cultures. See the article by Suleiman Mourad and Perry Anderson, “Rätsel des Buches: Zur Geschichte des Korans und der historischen Dynamik des Islams,” trans. by Florian Wolfrum, in *Lettre Internationale* 106, Fall 2014, pp.118ff. Greek phonetic script introduced for the first time the means to write down explicitly a manner of speaking (vocalization) that has not actually been spoken by any one people in particular, but that is a script applying vocals together with consonants, and that has been invented artificially in order to establish a common tongue that can be learned easily by all parties contracted in networks of trade relations in the Mediterranean area. About the Greek vocal alphabet, see Innis, *Empire and Communications*; and Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982 [1963] for a discussion of how this prehistoric genealogy of the phonetic alphabet relates to the “mysterious” leap into new levels of abstraction produced and witnessed by the Greek culture in antiquity.

organized, yet not inarticulate, a materiality that Serres calls “noise.”<sup>76</sup> A cryptographic locative cannot possibly work within a scheme of representation because it calls for an *infinite* base, which, following Serres, we can learn to call “ichnography.” He seems to be telling us that the infinite base of an ichnography is narrated in fiction, and that constitutes fiction as a locus in quo where the real and the symbolic can meet. Let us now pursue this line with greater care.

The term “fiction” comes from the Latin *fictionem*, “a fashioning or feigning.” It is a noun of action from the past participle stem of *figere*, “to shape, form, devise, feign,” originally “to knead, form out of clay,” from PIE *\*dheigh-*, “to build, form, knead,” and also from the Old English source in *dag*, “dough.”<sup>77</sup> Since the late sixteenth century, fiction also demarcates “prose works of the imagination” in distinction to dramatic works of the imagination. From that same time onward, there is also a legal sense of the word, according to which law was characterized as “fiction.”<sup>78</sup> Related words include the latin *fictilis*, “made of clay, earthen,” as well as *fictor*, “molder, sculptor” as well as (ascribed to Ulysses)

76 See Michel Serres, 2001b.

77 <http://www.etymonline.com/word/fiction> (accessed October 24, 2023).

78 Ibid.

“master of deceit,” drawn from *fictum*, “a deception, falsehood, fiction.” What strikingly distinguishes the notion of “fiction” from that of “illusion” is, as we can see in this genealogy of the term, that it was used in a sense that could perhaps be characterized as “uncritical”: different from a fiction, an illusion makes plain that it operates within the realm of the apparent, and hence presumes, for its very identity, a certain distance and mediacy related to the faculty of understanding, and this faculty’s capacity for judgment. Such mediacy is inherently problematic in relation to fiction because fiction does not operate within a representational framework. This is exactly the point Serres so strongly makes in his narrative mode of “storytelling.” Let us carefully and slowly try to understand how this might work.

The masterpiece painting around which the plot in our story unfolds is Fernhofer’s painting of his imaginary mistress, Catherine Lescault, also called “the beautiful noiseuse.” This painting “is not a picture,” Serres tells us, “It is the noise of beauty, the nude multiple, the abundant sea, from which is born, or isn’t born, it all depends, the beautiful Aphrodite.”<sup>79</sup> In its pure nakedness, beauty is neither seen in a woman, a female God, nor in a feminized reification of nature that would characterize

79 Serres, 1983, p.54.

physics in its objectivity. Such beauty can only be imagined *in status nascendi*, born from the foam of a noisy sea, as the fictional impersonation of the anadyomene: “We always see Venus without the sea or the sea without Venus, we never see physics arising, anadyomene, from metaphysics.”<sup>80</sup> The schema of associating an active principle, form, or intellect that imposes itself upon receptive and nurturing nature, is thwarted in Serres’s account. Considering the fictional as distinct from the illusionary, he must not see a schema or outline of the true that needs to be substantiated—filled with materiality—to constitute knowledge. Rather, form itself is a figuration of the unknown rising as the anadyomene: form is “information that is phenomenal,”<sup>81</sup> and it “arises from chaos-white noise.”<sup>82</sup> He continues: “What is knowable and what is known are born of that unknown.”<sup>83</sup> Serres refers to “that unknown,” the anadyomene, also as “chaos-white noise”—with that, he separates what is unknown from an unknown that would merely host the impossible as the negative of the possible, or the improbable as the negative of the probable.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

In the unknown, Serres considers that “there is nothing to know.”<sup>84</sup>

I want to suggest that (1) if we consider Serres’s understanding of a story as the locus where the real and the symbolic can meet, then (2) we can reason and make sense of this “nothing” as something neither positive nor negative, but (3) as the any-capacity proper to an alphabet that constitutes a cipher. What I would like to read into and extract from Serres’s text is that the question of “mediacy” can be approached differently once we can develop a less counterintuitive and less disturbing idea of (1) such “nothingness” that is, essentially “anythingness”; (2) its communicability into “somethingness” through encryption; and (3) the “originality” of the “secret somethings” that are being sourced from such a symbolic nature as “nothingness/anythingness.” We can develop such an idea by looking at how mathematics deals with the zero. My assumption thereby is that the zero in mathematics entails all the problems we have encountered about the nothingness that Fernhofer has painted in Balzac’s story, that nothingness of which Serres, in his reading of Balzac’s story, insists (against Balzac) marks the completion of the unknown masterwork, not its failure.

84 Ibid., p.1.



So, what is a mathematical “cipher”? The notion designates, on the one hand, the zero in mathematics; on the other, it is a generic name for numerical figures (as *Ziffer* is in German).

Let’s begin with how we refer to the zero. Of course, we have an encoding for it with our symbolic notions of numbers. This may sound rather unspectacular, but we need to consider more precisely what it entails. In mathematics, or more precisely in algebra alone, we have an intermediate level of notational code and ciphering between “notational signs” and what they “indicate.” This intermediate level is introduced because algebra operates in abstract symmetries (equations): algebra is the art of rendering what terms a formula (an equation with unknowns) is expressed into the mappings of possible solutions for the unknowns. From a mathematical point of view, the mappings rendered by the articulation of a formula (an equation) are varying expressions of one and the same thing—while that “one and the same thing” itself remains “absent.” Neither of the articulable expressions of the terms (articulated in how the terms of the equation are factorized, partitioned) is ever capable of expressing explicitly and exhaustively all at once whatever it may be that is being articulated in a formula (the “identity” expressed in an

equation). There is a constitutive level of mediateness involved, which never lets the mathematician forget that what one seeks to express by stating its identity in terms of a formula must be considered as being of a vaster extension than any one discretion of its symbolic expressions can ever be. In other words: a function is always derived from an equation that has been rendered solvable. We can conceive of this “rendering solvable” as “mediation” that is peculiar to the relation of algebraic “idempotency” and its capacity to express “identity” *inversely*. And we can conceive of any version of algebraically articulated “identity” as the symbolic establishment of a tautological relation in a manner that is not “absurd”—precisely because of this tautological character that expresses one and the same thing differently. Like the allegorical elephant in the room full of blind people eagerly describing to each other what they perceive to be “present,” the algebraically articulated “identity” becomes more and more distinguished and rich in qualities as the quarrel of “getting it right” goes on. Every claim, if it is to persuade, must establish a code that can be shared.

Now in what sense can we say that every code is constituted by a “cipher”? Establishing a code requires a projection space in which a structure is

doubled up and mirrored around a neutral point, such that a fixed order of reference can be assigned between the doubled-up structures. Cipher is another word for this neutral point, which we commonly call the zero. A code is always participating in the game of encryption. An easy example to illustrate the cryptographic or cryptological relation between a code and a cipher is the codes for encrypting texts.<sup>85</sup> One takes a set of finite and ordered elements, in this case, the alphabet, duplicates it, and mixes up the order of the elements in the duplicate version. Perhaps one uses another notation system like numbers or figures, or perhaps one may also decide to introduce further elements to the duplicate version that are not contained in the duplicated one to raise the difficulty of “breaking the code”—that is, in figuring out the structure of the transformations applied between the two. The establishment of a code depends upon a place-value grid or frame within which it is possible to locate and correlate the positions occupied by values. This allows the one partition scheme that determines judgments (prime parts, *Ur-teile*) to remain undecided regarding the substance of

85 It depends on how we treat the relation, whether primarily analytically as in cryptology, or primarily synthetically as in cryptography.

the value, or algebraically. Thus considered, “values” have an essentially cryptic character—one that can only be clarified by giving “figure” and associating a “face” to their cryptic character as we learn to “enfamiliarize” and “decipher” it. I put decipher in quotation marks to highlight that here (as in the allegorical space with the elephant and the blind people), we are speaking about a mode of deciphering that has to invent the code that makes that very decipherment possible—a kind of deciphering that does not hack or intrude into a secret, but one that renders communicable what we might perhaps best call “an arcane regularity”—a regularity that remains arcane, even while being rendered communicable, sharable, public.<sup>86</sup>

As one comes to “master” such regularity, one literally “masters nothing,” in a manner in which “nothingness” must not be addressed in either positive or negative terms. We have to understand the secret at stake in a chemico-physical sense, as a secretion, from the Latin *secretionem*, “a dividing, separation, a setting apart.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, the secret is not something initially clear, pure, or plain

86 See my article “Arché, Archanum, Articulation: The Universal and Its Characteristics,” in Vera Bühlmann and Ludger Hovestadt, *Domesticating Symbols*, Vienna, Ambra, 2014a, pp.112–77.

87 <http://www.etymonline.com/word/secretion> (accessed October 24, 2023)

whose possibility of discretion has been rendered occult, difficult, or exclusive. What Serres suggests in his reading of “The Unknown Masterpiece” as the beautiful querulent is that such assumed purity, clarity, or plainness is, in fact, initially noisy—a mixture of heterogeneous factors, factoring in something that can never be known exhaustively and as whole. A secret, in that sense, turns into a well or source that is, essentially, public: no one can control all the articulations of how the secret circulates what can be “sourced,” set apart and rendered communicable, by learning to master the well—which, for Serres, is nothingness as primary noisiness.<sup>88</sup>

With this, we come close to the second genealogical lineage of the notion of the cipher, one which departs from and builds upon the first one (cipher as zero): in number theory, the cipher not only stands for the zero, but also for the numerical figures as they are expressed in the terms of a

88 This manner of thinking strikes me as so interesting because it suggests the counterintuitive or at least apparently paradoxical idea that there might be a kind of mastership that, through privacy, produces and renders distributable public goods—commons—rather than accumulating them and claiming them as private property, on the grounds that one (more so, or differently so) *masters* it. See also my article “Articulating a Thing Entirely in Its Own Terms or What Can We Understand by the Notion of Engendering?” in *EigenArchitecture. Computability as Literacy*, ed. by Ludger Hovestadt and Vera Bühlmann, Vienna, Ambra, 2013, pp.69–127.

common base like the hexadecimal number system, or today the decimal number system. Such positional systems are organized in what is today called logarithmic tables—a term introduced by John Napier in the seventeenth century, expressing what he called “ratio-numbers,” or numbers put in proportionate notation, from *logos*, proportion, and *arithmos*, number. The decision regarding which base the proportionality is set up characterizes the notion of numbers as a particular code. It is within algebraic number theory that the positional logic of such notational systems itself is being thematized, in a manner that in the nineteenth century usually took the form of placing numbers on one infinite line—the so-called number continuum. Richard Dedekind and Giuseppe Peano have introduced a general procedure of identifying numerical domains as number classes embedded and nested both within each other and within that continuum (the rationals, reals, integers, etc.) The application of this procedure (called the Dedekind Cut) requires further and further levels of *relative* abstraction attributed to the algebraic symbols in whose bonds or relations numbers are now being expressed—numerical values are here subjected to symbols used as jokers, as placeholders with a “naked” or “pure” capacity to render countable an

any-meaning that might not even yet be articulated. Algebraic symbols are at work in identifying the positional logics of these purely symbolic domains, up to the situation we have today where number theory is understood by many as the very object of cryptology/cryptography/cryptoanalysis rather than as part of natural philosophy; as Frege, Russell, Whitehead, Husserl, and others have regarded the advent of Universal Algebra.<sup>89</sup> Today, on an ordinary basis (in all electronic things and infrastructures), there are entirely abstract numerical bodies at work that are called “fields” in English,<sup>90</sup> as well as a great diversity of abstract constructs that build upon them—with beautiful names such as “rings,” “lattices,” “sheafs,” and so on. In the perspective outlined here, these “names” of “algebraic things” (symbolic “things”) name secretions of nothing-

89 Whitehead introduced this term to express that from the point of view of mathematics there is a multiplicity of systems of symbolic reasoning that cannot be decided in terms of supremacy on the basis of mathematical consistency criteria alone. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Treatise on Universal Algebra with Applications*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1910.

90 The term “field” is a rather unfortunate and, arguably, even misleading translation from the German term *Zahlenkörper*, with which Dedekind introduced these symbolic numbers. The translation is unfortunate because the notion of the field suggests that no local organization differentiates one against another; fields are subject to the uniform forces of electromagnetism, where all “locality” is but a function of this uniformness. The term “body of numbers,” on the other hand, puts all its emphasis on a certain “autonomy” or “self-maintenance” of such a local organicity.

ness—secrets rendered communicable *because they are extracted from the inverse* of what Western philosophy has been centering around for more than two millennia, namely the fantastic inception of the idea of universal, eternal, enduring, and persisting *essentiality*—that is, the notion of *universal substance*.<sup>91</sup>

If number theory could give us an inverse of universal substance instead of its axiomatic elements, as Frege, Russell, Whitehead, Husserl, and others were trying to establish<sup>92</sup>—would that not help in coming to terms with those developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century science that so trouble modernity's grand idea of a Natural Philosophy? I am referring of course to all the issues already discussed in relation to the notion of “mediacy” and “media”: (1) to the centrality of “radioactivity”

91 Especially interesting contemporary studies in relation to this: François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. by Anthony Paul Smith, London, Bloomsbury, 2014; as well as Jean Luc Nancy's interest in the notion of “exscription,” e.g., in “Exscription,” in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. by Brian Holmes et al., Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993, p.319–40; and *Corpus*, in *ibid.*, p.189–207.

92 See the lesser known and early writings of Edmund Husserl in his dissertation *Beiträge zur Theorie der Variationsrechnung* (1882), as well as his habilitation *Über den Begriff der Zahl: Psychologische Analysen* (1887); Gottlob Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik: Eine logisch mathematische Untersuchung über den Begriff der Zahl* (1884); Bertrand Russell's dissertation *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897); Alfred North Whitehead's *A Treatise on Universal Algebra with Applications* (1898); and Ernst Cassirer's *Descartes' Kritik der mathematischen und naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis* (1899).



in physics, and its counterintuitive understanding of a quasi-materiality of invisible light, or more precisely, the interactivity among particles in their emission and exchange of light that contains energy; (2) the therewith associated “birth and death” of countless galaxies in an expanding Universe in astrophysics; (3) the depiction and technical control of such radiating activity via technical images called “spectra”; and (4) the spectrum-based, quantum-physical “substrate” of our contemporary form of technics in communication and computation.<sup>93</sup>

Let us return to the plot of the story. We have already seen that Frenhofer’s masterpiece is characterized as depicting nothing-at-all. More concretely now, what does it, in fact, depict? “‘the old fraud’s pulling our leg,’ Poussin murmured, returning to face the so-called painting. ‘All I see are colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint.’ ‘We must be missing something,’ Porbus insisted.”<sup>94</sup> The “secret” is not something initially clear, pure, or plain, whose possibility of discretion has been rendered occult, difficult, and exclusive, as Porbus and Poussin consider ( “‘There’s a woman under

93 As a great overview and introduction to these topics, I suggest referring to the respective articles in Serres and Farouki, *Le trésor*.

94 Balzac, 2007 [1845].

there,' Porbus cried.")<sup>95</sup> What Serres suggests in his reading of "The Unknown Masterpiece" is that such assumed purity, clarity, or plainness is, in fact, initially "noisy"—a mixture of heterogeneous factors, factoring in something that can never be known as whole. But what, then, did Frenhofer depict? How could he possibly paint noise as noise? By producing a "fake" painting, a painting that lacks an original. "The Unknown Masterwork is a fake. It happens in a placeless space, is signed by a nameless author, is told in a timeless time. No, there is nothing beneath, not even a woman."<sup>96</sup> And Serres continues to spell out how he thinks of the unknown that he understands Frenhofer to have painted: "If the masterwork is improbable or impossible it is not unknown and there is nothing to know."<sup>97</sup>

But if Serres's reading maintains that this masterpiece is indeed a masterpiece because it depicts beauty stripped from any model that could "wear" it, instantiate or represent it, beauty in pure nakedness, beauty as unknown beauty, then these characterizations will surely counter his argument? If the masterpiece is declared impossible or improbable, then it would not be unknown—because the

95 Ibid.

96 Serres, 1983, p.1.

97 Ibid.

impossible is merely the negation of the possible, and the improbable is the negation of the probable. Both are statements uttered from the stance of the always already initiated, for whom there can be no genuine secret in the chemico-physical sense introduced above in which there can be nothing to know. For according to this sense of the unknown as a genuine secret(ion), there must always and still be something new to know, as Serres adds to his critique of impossibility and improbability as frames in which to refer to the unknown that Frenhofer has painted. “Or else: is there still something new to know now?” he asks.<sup>98</sup> But if neither a model, nor a frame in whose terms we might refer to the kind of Unknown Serres seems to be talking about, then what? Are we not at a hopeless loss with such purport?

“The picture that is discovered at the end of the story is the ichnography,” we are told by Serres—*the ichnography*, with a determinate article. But how can Serres’s proposed resolution, that of ichnography, mean something different from a frame of reference? Let us attend to the full passage that Serres continues with: “The picture that is discovered at the end of the story is the ichnography. The beautiful noiseuse is not a picture, is not a representation,

98 Ibid.

is not a work, it is the fount, the well, the black box, that includes, implies, surrounds, that is to say buries, all profiles, all appearances, all representations, the work itself.”<sup>99</sup>

The term “ichnography” is usually rendered into English as “groundwork” or “ground plan” and into German as *Grundriss*. It is a term that has played a crucial role in architectural theory ever since the first theoretical treatises on architecture (that we know of) had been composed by Vitruvius in the first century BC. It never comes alone, but always in association with two complementing terms: those of *orthography* and *scenography*. All three are terms that refer to kinds of drafting that help the architect to learn, develop, and refine building as a practice (or even as an art). In technical terms, the orthography means plans that elevate the schemata of the ground plan into an upright position (depicting the voluminosity of the building in profile), and scenography means plans of the multiple views on a building in profile. The German terms are respectively *Grundriss*, *Aufriss*, and *Seitenriss*. I mention this because the German terms, unlike the English ones, hold on to a distinction that keeps the practice of the draftsman, and hence the timelessness of geometry, separate from the dynamics

99 Ibid.

that unfold in time as is inherent to the notion of the “plan.” This is an important distinction, because it helps to understand that there has been a dramatic element in architecture ever since it has been theorized: scenography introduces storytelling and a quasi-rhetorical aspect of expression to building as a practice. There is a tension at work within architecture that is not unlike the one in philosophy between rhetoric and argumentation, whose vectors rotate around that big idea called Truth. Is there in architecture then also a kind of “truth” at stake? Surely it couldn’t be the same truth as in philosophy? But then, on the other hand, from the first treatises on architecture, it was all about a building’s “adequateness” or “proportionality”— a temple’s adequateness to the gods that are being worshiped; a villa’s adequateness to the social and political power of the master whose *oikos* (property) it is to accommodate; an aqueduct’s adequateness to its purpose (transporting water); and perhaps the most immense “task” to be fulfilled by architecture, namely to match a city’s adequateness in conforming to “the” order of “the” cosmos. The three different kinds of drafting, serve the architect to refine her able-ness as an architect, also thereby introducing a *contractual* dimension into the power relations that organized the practice of

“building in adequate and proportionate” manner. They each come with different kinds of categories that all allow to differentiate, discrete, compare, and argue about the “worth” of particular buildings via recourse to the work of the architect as draftsman. Thus, without necessarily being very familiar with the corpus of architectural theory, we can easily imagine the disputes about what exactly was meant by *ichnography*, *orthography*, and *scenography* (as well as the relations between them that could be derived from these attributed meanings together with the network of consecutiveness that results from those relations). It doesn’t seem to be overstressing the point to say that these three terms capture the invariant “topic” of architectural theory. Architectural theory encrypts and encodes its own “identity” in terms of these “categories”—not at all unlike metaphysics, which has been doing the same with the philosophical categories.<sup>100</sup>

In Serres’s account, the Unknown Masterpiece is “not a picture, is not a representation, is not a work, it is the fount, the well, the black box, that includes, implies, surrounds, that is to say buries, all profiles, all appearances, all representations, the

100 This arguably holds at least until the twentieth century, with Gottfried Semper and his notion of “style” in architecture perhaps constituting a (provisionally?) last re-articulation in an attempted systematic manner of this conceptual legacy.

work itself”—it is “the ichnography,” the crypt of the arcane source of all secrets that can be articulated. This is what Poussin and Porbus both do not expect to see in the painting:

[They] run toward the canvas, move away, bend over, right and left, up and down, they look for the habitual story-line, the usual scenography. And they stand so as to see an oblique profile. As if by chance, they shall have a spot where a straightform will appear. Scenography, orthography. And they look, as is their wont, for a space where there is a phenomenon, a space and an incarnation, a cell and knowledge. A representation. And thus, they do not see the ichnography.<sup>101</sup>

Because there is no habitual storyline depicted they too look for something that lies buried—“‘There’s a woman under there,’ Porbus cried”<sup>102</sup>—but they look for it as if there would have to be “a space where there is a phenomenon, a space and an incarnation, a cell and knowledge.”<sup>103</sup> But Frenhofer’s painting “is not a picture, is not a representation, is not a work,” Serres tells us, “it is the fount, the well, the black box, that includes, implies, surrounds, that is to say buries, all profiles, all appearances, all representations, the work itself.” The ichnography is the

101 Serres, 1983, p.54.

102 Balzac, 2007 [1845].

103 Serres, 1983, p.54.

crypt of the arcane source of all that can “secrete” only insofar as it must be *deciphered* from all profiles and perspectives—there is no continuous mapping from orthography and scenography to ichnography. “Once again, what is this ichnography? It is the set of possible profiles, the totality of all the horizons. Ichnography is what is possible, or knowable or producible, it is the fount of phenomena. It is the complete chain of the metamorphoses of the marine god Proteus, it is Proteus himself.”<sup>104</sup>

With his insistence that “the ichnography” be “the totality of all the horizons,” where no continuous mapping from the phenomena (profile and perspective, orthography and scenography) to the ground (foundation or reason, ichnography) is possible, Serres relates Balzac to Leibniz. “Balzac saw the ichnography. I think he figured out that he had seen it. Since he signed his name to it.”<sup>105</sup> I will come back to this role of the signature in a moment. In contrast to Balzac, Serres continues, “Leibniz never saw the ichnography. He undoubtedly demonstrated that it was invisible. He was aware of it, he demonstrated that it is unknowable.”<sup>106</sup> And furthermore: “Leibniz drowns everything in

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.



the differential and under the innumerable thicknesses of successive integrations. The mechanism is admirable. No one ever went as far in rational mastery, even into the smallest nooks and crannies. The straight direction of reason that must turn away from this chaos is the ascent of these scalar orders. The path is ahead, it is infinite, the perfect geometrizing remains inaccessible. It is divine, it is invisible.”<sup>107</sup> Porbus and Poussin followed the path that Leibniz had thought infinite, Serres maintains. “Having broken in, they contemplate the divine work of geometry without understanding.” Why? “Because they expected another picture, one that would have been like an extrapolation, part of the chain of forms. The last, the first representation, why couldn’t it be a representation too?”<sup>108</sup> But “ichnography is not harmony, it is noise itself.”<sup>109</sup> Leibniz’s system turns around “like an iceberg” in Serres’s purport of an unknown that is “the beautiful noiseuse [...] beauty denuded of her appearances, of the dress of representation.”<sup>110</sup> Like Leibniz, Serres too is after an infinite base. Yet, it “cannot be structured by rigorous and lucid reason.

107 Ibid., p.55.

108 Ibid., p.56.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

It is immersed in white noise, in the mottled clamor of the confused.”<sup>111</sup> The totality of the rational is not itself rational, Serres maintains.<sup>112</sup> And further, the culminating phrase: “Balzac paints the vision that is the opposite of divine architecture.”<sup>113</sup>

### *Signing as a Public Act*

But once again, how should such painting be possible? How can Serres claim that “Balzac saw it, knew it”?<sup>114</sup> Indeed, how can he? “I can show that he saw it. I can really show that he figured out that he had known it: since he signed it.”<sup>115</sup> We should now come back to this crucial notion of “signature,” and the role it plays in relation to the architectonic dimension of a “contract” the architect enters as the “draftsman.” For it is this very dimension, the contract the architect enters, that secularizes the role of the architect in the precise sense of this word: the secular means “living in the temporality of the world, not belonging to a religious order.”<sup>116</sup> The unknown as the fount of the possible that Serres pur-

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., p.55.

115 Ibid.

116 <http://www.etymonline.com/word/secular> (accessed October 24, 2023).

ports allows the architect, as well as the geometer, to preserve, within the contract that is the contract of the draftsman, the possibility for disobedience. For Serres, the spectrum—the totality of all colors, the canvas of the successful completion of a masterpiece (in Serres’s understanding of mastership the master is the subject of his novel humanism), is the element of geometry—it is metaphysics, and not physics. It is the crypt of physics, physics as encrypted reality of all that is “mediate:”

Geometrizing was the inaccessible object of metaphysics and still is. White noise is geometrizing. A field of inquiry thought closed is open. The noisy, anarchic, clamoring, mottled, striped, streaked, variegated, mixed, crossed, piebald multiplicity is possibility itself. It is a set of possible things, it can be the set of possible things. It is not strength, it is the very opposite of power, but it is capacity. This noise is the opening. The Ancients were right to think chaos a gaping abyss. The multiple is open and from it is born nature always being born. We cannot foresee what will be born of it. We cannot know what is in it, here or there. No one knows, no one has ever known, no one will ever know how possibilities co-exist and how they co-exist with a

possible relation. The set is criss-crossed with possible relations.<sup>117</sup>

Physics as encrypted reality of all that is “mediate” is physics as that which is computable. It is important to see that computable solutions—encrypted algebraic “identities”— *do not stand for* something, they are not *representation*. The articulation of a formula resolves the involved terms (their factorization) into mappings (functions) that *can stand in for* rather than *stand for*. It is true, that they demarcate a case, because they are inferred from a generalization, but they do not demarcate a case by representing it; rather, they demarcate a case categorically, by depicting the syntax of a function according to whose rules we articulate the terms of an equation. My point is that we can think of their categorial demarcation of a case according to the grammatical case of the locative. They demarcate a case whose place is “nowhere”— but this “nowhere,” being a function to “somewhere,” is locative rather than representative. They stand in for the unknown parts and aspects of *that which has been articulated in a formula*—not unlike in language, where words stand in for whatever absent thing they may present to our minds when we depict the sense of words. These mappings can stand

117 Serres, 1983, p.56.

in for their own “original,” so to speak—that is, they can articulate “the original” as an unknown, as something not mastered, because they articulate “the original” in a tautological manner (in the form of an equation). This does not need to be seen as an absurdity. The mappings rendered by the articulation of a formula (an equation) are varying expressions of one and the same thing—while that “one and the same thing” remains absent. Neither one of the articulable expressions of the terms (articulated in how the terms of the equation are factorized or partitioned) is ever capable of expressing explicitly all that is contained implicitly formulated in a formula *at once*. In other words, that which is being expressed is of a vaster extension than any one discretion of its possible symbolical expressions can ever be:

I can better explain what I mean. What is ichnography? What is this masterwork where the term “master” [*chef*] means less a unique and rare success than it does capital, stock, fount, I mean ichnography? Well, the Greek term *ichnos* means footprint. Moving toward the canvas, they saw, in a corner of the canvas, a bit of a naked foot that arose from the chaos of colors, tones, and vague shadings, a kind of form-less fog; it was a delicious, living foot! They stood there in complete admiration in front of this fragment that had escaped

from the unbelievable yet slow and progressive destruction. The foot appeared there like the torso of some Venus sculpted in marble from Paros, a Venus arising from out of the rubble of a city in flames. Here then is the signature with the very name of ichnography. The beautiful noiseuse is the flat projection.<sup>118</sup>

We can see from this how encrypted expressions always have a “transcendent” referent. Their power consists in “presenting” this transcendent referent symbolically while leaving it absent, just like words are capable of evoking something absent into presence. We can regard a cipher (an alphabet) as a symbolic body of a self-referential relation whose identity is being articulated, not represented—yet articulated in a split, linked, double, and parabolic manner, or more precisely, in a *symbolic* manner;<sup>119</sup> neither form nor content, neither substance nor expression can be considered without reference to each other. They stabilize each other rather like planets in the galaxy of a solar system than by occupying schematic positions that would be thought of as existing prior to the birth of a particular solar

118 Ibid., pp.55–56.

119 Literally “that which is thrown or cast together,” from assimilated form of *syn-*, “together” + *bole*, “a throwing, a casting, the stroke of a missile, bolt, beam,” from *bol-*, nominative stem of *ballein*, “to throw.” <http://www.etymonline.com/word/symbol> (accessed October 24, 2023).

system. The way that they refer to each other constitutes *natures* (in the plural) of *the universe*—the universe being, according to contemporary astrophysics, galaxies that differ in “kind” but not in “nature.” The astrochemical elements are considered by today’s science as the products of nucleosynthesis (the sun), and they are the main “referent” of whatever is organized in the technical “format” of a spectrum: what is being measured in a spectrum is the frequency rates of different types of light emitted by the sun (solar radiation).<sup>120</sup> All, in such a manner of thinking about the universe, is universal in character. And as such, Serres maintains, it is essentially *noisy*, or *in status nascendi*, anadyomene, as he says, physics born from metaphysics.<sup>121</sup> Serres chose a mythical manner of formulating here, but there is a sense to what he is saying that is empirically supported, and we can decipher it from his insistence that geometry depicts white light. If as nonexperts we turn to a thesaurus of modern science, we can read that the white spectrum depicts all that moves at light speed; all that moves at light speed is of a universal nature, in the sense that it is matter in its sub-particle “state.” Isn’t this what Serres calls “metaphysics”—that which “secretes”

120 Cf. the respective articles in Serres and Farouki, *Le trésor*.

121 Serres, 1983, p.54.

all that is sound and solid, as if out of the foam that is left behind by the furious clamor of incandescent and radiating matter (a sun)?

Let us recapitulate. The nature of the universe for Serres is secretive communication. Knowledge of the universe's nature consists in knowing how to keep its secretions secret, by building reduced models, crypts, which strive to duplicate it such that there can be communication—literally, “a sharing with, a making common”<sup>122</sup>—of the bare beauty of universal nature through its models, the crypts. While modeling, building the crypt, is a kind of contractual architecture (a contract whose basis is the work of draftsmen) that proceeds in terms of symmetry (the object agreed upon in the terms of a contract is articulated algebraically, tautologically, and what is agreed upon is the inverse of the thus articulated object—as far as the parties can imagine it). The communication of such bare beauty that can only be modeled, on the other hand, must proceed in terms that are asymmetrical. This is why I have suggested that the practice of modeling is an act of comic dramatization (it has

122 From the Latin *communicationem* (nominative *communicatio*), noun of action from the past participle stem of *communicare*, “to share, divide out; communicate, impart, inform; join, unite, participate in,” literally “to make common,” from *communis*. <http://www.etymonline.com/word/communication> (accessed October 24, 2023)



to deal with incommensurate magnitudes). The asymmetrical communication that models afford in turn affords the nature of the universe to be universal; that is, capable of descending and branching off in all sorts of directions. Such asymmetrical communication affords a universe that is expanding, but in no preset manner. It is important that keeping the secret in a crypt requires *asymmetrical* communication—or else there would have to be a Master Code(x), and those who serve its law would have to keep the channels of communication “safe” such that the Master Key could be shared solely among those initiated to that master code, while excluding whoever is not. Those who keep the secret then would not articulate Universal Nature, rather they would act as Universal Nature’s representatives. Within Serres’s narrative, instead of a Master Code(x), we have Code in whose terms the totality of all colors (a white spectrum) has been depicted. And this “code” is not a “codex.” Rather than referring to the universal nature as (immediate) law, by duplicating the authority of universal nature to claim to be acting as its representative, the code at stake refers to universal nature only mediately, in the terms discernible from a spectrum. A code that has thus been depicted (as a spectrum, a painting of the ichnography) carries the signature

of someone who serves that law by obeying it without submitting to it. Because the subject of such a signature must be authenticated as one who obeys the (unknown) rules of things themselves. And someone like that acts disobediently, comically, toward all official representations.

But could there possibly exist such a signature, for its subject could not possibly be “one” or “whole,” or could it? Wouldn’t such asymmetrical communication require of the subject of such a signature to be of a split personality? A symbolic persona? An animal whose sex would be universal?

If Serres dopes Balzac’s story by introducing into it the notion of “ichnography,” I want to dope Serres’s story by introducing into it the notion of “a public key signature.” The subject of such a signature indeed is a “split” subject, a “sexed” subject that desires and is never fully “whole;” it is, on the one hand, “anyone,” and on the other hand it is “me.” Let us see the principle behind it:

Public-key cryptography, also known as asymmetric cryptography, is a class of cryptographic algorithms which requires two separate keys, one of which is *secret* (or *private*) and one of which is *public*. Although different, the two parts of this key pair are mathematically linked. The public key is used to encrypt plaintext or to verify a digital signature; whereas the private key is used to

decrypt ciphertext or to create a digital signature. The term “asymmetric” stems from the use of different keys to perform these opposite functions, each the inverse of the other—as contrasted with conventional (“symmetric”) cryptography which relies on the same key to perform both.<sup>123</sup>

With this, we could inverse our usual perspective, and consider that all “text” be, naturally so, ciphertext; encryption then doesn’t obscure “plain text,” rather plain text is what “secretes” from ciphertext.

Whatever message any private key can unlock from a message transmitted in ciphertext that is being transmitted distributively, and signed by a public key signature, would be strictly private. Such decipherments, then, appear to be plaintext—but the plainness of such a decipherment is but that of a model. The apparent plaintext that is contained in a ciphertext can only be articulated “authentically” by placing it in the locus where that peculiar mightiness of a possible future past (will have been) can be conjugated. We can refer to this locus by ascribing the practice of cryptography its own

123 Wikipedia, s.v. “Public-key cryptography,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-key\\_cryptography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public-key_cryptography) (accessed March 20, 2015). For an accessible introduction, see the online lecture by Raymond Flood, *Public Key Cryptography: Secrecy in Public*, held at Gersham College, London, November 11, 2013, online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3WS-5\\_IbnM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3WS-5_IbnM) (accessed March 20, 2015).

grammatical case, the case of a locative. The locus of a cryptographic locative is fictional, but that doesn't mean that it is an illusion. Quite differently, the locus addressable by the grammatical case of a cryptographic locative is the territoriality of the subject of Serres's novel humanism. Fictitiously, it builds a reduced model of universal knowledge, a model that is official not because it represents a lawful regularity (with lesser or greater authority) but rather because it serves the law by helping to keep the secret that is the essence of universal knowledge. If the subject of a public-key signature is humanity at large, which guards its own nature and origin in the care with which it articulates the reduced models—the plaintexts, the private because deciphered “message”—of the ciphertext (universal nature as it manifests in all things existent and/or object to thought), then this subject never ceased to become what it already is.

Let us recapitulate: what an alphabetic absolute and its ichnographic bases—the Crypts—would oblige a researcher to is modeling. But the relation models maintain to ideas is not one that would “realize” them. The authenticity of models does not depend on their capacity to represent. Rather, it depends on their obedience to the laws of things themselves, laws that can be deciphered only after they have been encrypted, laws whose statements are ultimately arcane. The obedience that makes a model authentic is an obedience that doesn’t develop strength and concentrate power; but it still produces capacity. It develops *the capacity to source phenomena*: “ichnography is what is possible, producible, knowable.”<sup>124</sup> This capacity is the very opposite of power and strength,<sup>125</sup> for it is capacity in dealing with sums and products of infinite terms.

Every model generalizes. But if the Genus is a spectrum rather than a common denominator, then the discretion of “data” points must be rationalized and proportionalized discretely and fictitiously, and data “points” must be treated as many-valued indexes into numerous possible en-

124 Serres, 1983, p.54.

125 Ibid., 56.

cryptions of the ichnography: the set of all possible profiles, the totality of all horizons. Every model informs a genus and is informed by a genus. How so? Because the genus is a sum of infinitely many terms (the genus as a spectrum) only because the model is universal in kind. Regarding the universality of its kinds, the genus can be considered real without ever being born or existent. A model's kind is universal, self-sufficient, and hence also circular, but actively so: it strives to complete itself in comprehending all that it encompasses. Hence the model is not only kindred but also sexual (the symbolic "markedness" that endows the model with "inclinations" (desire and potency)). But it is the nature of this sexuality to be *modal*. The contingencies and necessities that determine a model can do so in *n* amount of manners—constrained only be the ichnography. In other words, as a model is conceived, the sex of its universal kind is omnipotent and undecided. It is an "organ" of the universal kind. The genus is what specifies models—what limits their strength in developing a capacity that is the very opposite of power. Every model generalizes. But if the researchers that raise them are committed to the alphabetic absolute, the models continue to maintain an intimate relation with the singularity of ideas regarding the great secret that

is the universe's omnipotent nature. These ideas are singular in how they demand to be encountered intimately, with pride and grace, in a play of seduction and conquer that never strives to possess the secretive sense—precisely because as a secret sense it is “private.” An encounter between the real and the symbolic, between the generic and the singular, is possible if the plots of stories are told in the cryptographic locative where no one can find their ways by being shown “the right path.” Our researcher committed to the alphabetic absolute *learns to masterfully not know* the meaning of this sense. This obliges her to assume two things: That the design of models is always pre-specific and that it needs to focus on the witty and polite eloquence in which the model is articulated, such that it is then capable of *raising* the wealth of that in what the specific is richer than its genus: namely differences. And furthermore that the genus of universal kinds exists only in the conjugatable tense-ness proper to a fictional locus; the genus is the “temporalizer” of “real-time,” that is, “reality at the speed of light.”

This theme of the summation of infinite terms has indeed been central in the philosophical discussions that accompany the modernization of science; that is, the attempt to decouple science via a natural philosophy from its theological back-

ground. It is time to recapitulate its complexities to prevent secular science from turning into a religion that lacks an accompanying discourse: a *philology* in the terms of an alphabetic absolute.





