

Angela Last

## **“Less a juncture to control than an adventure to be had”<sup>1</sup>**

### **Working with Michel Serres and Mikhail Bakhtin**

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mutablematter.wordpress.com

Author correspondence: mutablematter@gmail.com

## OPENINGS

What is it like to work with the ideas of Michel Serres and Mikhail Bakhtin? How might reading their texts affect your research? And why, of all the philosophers there are, have I chosen these two philosophers for my work – or did it leave me no other choice?

My research is about the creative potential of encounters with other people, about the potential of physical experience, about the possibilities of sensual encounters giving rise to thought and vice versa. But I would not always have expressed it this way. I am already under the influence of Serres/Bakhtin.

In this essay, I will focus on the themes of their work that have a resonance with my own project: communication, invention and responsibility. I will discuss the kinds of internal conversations Bakhtin and Serres prompt in me and on the extent to which this has an effect on my research practice. But first, I will outline what started the conversation with those particular philosophers and how they appear in my research...

## COMMUNICATION, INVENTION, RESPONSIBILITY

Communication, invention, responsibility are threads that run through both Serres' and Bakhtin's work. These themes are symbolised by two different gods who symbolise their ideas of 'how things work': Hermes (Serres) and Janus (Bakhtin) respectively.

'Hermes...constitutes the unity of my work' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 110), says Serres. For him, Hermes is communication, Hermes is invention. An unusual god who is also a messenger, a medium, a conduit, a shifter, a trickster. Such characteristics signify a boundlessness or transition of boundaries, an obstacle to categorisation. They are mirrored in Serres' idea of communication, which is inseparable from his critique of the erasure of spaces and possibilities for invention. Serres evokes Hermes, because the god is notorious for not following 'rational', linear ways, in temporal as well as spatial terms, 'passing through folded times, making millions of connections' (Serres and Latour, 1995: 64). Serres believes in multiplicity, which implies that for one object, there cannot just be one meaning, not even only several. 'Reason has optimally landscaped the earth until it has become stagnant, monotone, death-like in its absolute stability and totality' (Assad, 1999: 47). This is what makes him worried: 'reason' is eliminating invention, 'language' is replacing sensory experience (see Assad, 1999: 66), 'language' is suppressing 'noise', the basis of invention. 'Transport' (mediation) is unpredictable, therefore, 'transport' is dangerous. As he puts it:

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres on his idea of 'interdisciplinarity' (cited in Brown p. 189)

‘Metaphor, in fact, means ‘transport’. That’s Hermes’s very method: he exports and imports; thus, he traverses. He invents and can be mistaken – because of analogies which are dangerous and even forbidden – but we know of no other route to invention...’ (Serres and Latour, 1995: 66)”

Serres likes chaos... but also order – as ‘islands’<sup>2</sup> in a sea of ‘noise’ (Serres, 1982: 83). That is what, according to him, the relationship of order and chaos should be. Assad writes that Serres ‘assigns to chaos an equally productive source of possibilities’ (Assad, 1999: 6), but it sounds as if chaos, for Serres, is the precondition for order to arise. Chaos is raw potential, chaos is a wealth of possibilities, chaos is intriguing – but how do you handle chaos in the context of academic research, especially when Serres explicitly cautions against the rigidity and exclusionary violence of the academy?

Enter Janus, two-headed, guardian of ‘gates, doors, doorways, beginnings, and endings’ (Wikipedia, 2005). In many ways connected to Hermes (Mercury in the Roman pantheon), Janus also personifies change and transition. Like Serres, Bakhtin believes in multiplicities (Holquist, 2002: 24). However, in contrast to Serres’s obsession with Hermes, Bakhtin pictures experience and communication as ‘Janus-like’ (Bakhtin, 1993: 2). Like the double-headed god, we are never ourselves without the other. What follows from this in terms of practices is that we, by our sheer condition that we exist in the world - create or ‘author’ one another (Haynes, 1995: 4). Relations shape us and shape objects in a field of mutual transformation. Bakhtin thus creates a universe of ‘elastic environment[s]’, in which relations not just constantly, but inescapably take place (Bakhtin, quoted by Lähteenmäki, 1998: 79). And these relations are not only spun across space, but across time - chrono-topic-ally.

At this point, we have two gods that these thinkers are offering as guidance, and two images I have formed from their work to visualise their concepts: the Serresian sea of noise with its islands of creation, and the constant traffic of Bakhtin’s universe of time-space relations. These are the images that will guide through the following three parts and through the stages of my research...

## PART 1 – A QUESTION OF INVENTION

‘But you who judge, you who wield critical exigency, you, what have you invented? What have you done except recopy? If you had gotten your hands dirty, you would no doubt be aware that there is some dirt’ (Serres, 1995a: 132).

Branded a non-philosopher by many (Webb, 2003: 236), Michel Serres expresses his frustration at the distance of theory/methodology from the world: millions of connections, millions of possibilities - one ‘theoretical straightjacket’ (Assad, 1999: 19). Like Derrida, Serres fears that we are becoming impoverished by the reliance on ‘methodological rigour’ (see Clark, 2003: 37). Like Luce Irigaray, Serres fears the solidity of concepts<sup>3</sup> and attempts to shake these ‘well-constructed’ (solid) ‘forms’ (Irigaray, 1977, quoted in Rose, 2003: 61), by making open-ness and physical, sensual experience a central ‘methodology’ to his work. Deliberately unsystematic, Serres texts feel ‘alive’, with their many intertwined layers, meaning arising from, and bouncing back and forth between author, words, context and readers. The ‘noise’ of Serres’ texts seems immune to being stripped to reveal something that is manageable as a tool. The richness and messiness of his texts reflect his ‘horror of the violence of exclusion’ (Yates, 2005: 192).

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<sup>2</sup> ‘To be or to know from now on will be translated by: see the island, rare or fortunate, the work of chance or of necessity.’ (Serres, 1982: 83)

<sup>3</sup> Serres & Latour, 1995: 112

Serres himself describes his method or 'anti method' (Harari & Bell 1982: xxxvi) as being 'fertilely inventive in the middle of chaos' (Serres & Latour, 1995: 117).

Chaos. Michel Serres sounds very comfortable with using this word. But what am I, a novice researcher, to do in the face of chaos? What questions can I ask? Is there really no method? Should I even desire one? Perhaps to shape the chaos, but keep the noise? I am reminded of what Serres tells his interviewer in the magazine 'Angelaki': 'I have just one piece of advice for you: take the university model and chuck it into the sea' (Serres in Webb, 2003: 235). At this point, I should really think about abandoning Serres. Yet his work is far less hostile and mystical than it is often presented or made to appear at first sight. There are patterns, and there are metaphors that serve as guidance. For instance, Hermes, as a metaphor, incorporates something very encouraging. In Serres' work, he becomes an affirmation of creative possibilities, an appeal to aspire to invention, to think outside of categories. There is not concrete method for proceeding, but a responsibility to lead the way: to be inventive we must interfere in the perpetuation of exclusion (see Assad, 1999: 6).

Encouraging words indeed for an interdisciplinary research student like me, who has to find her voice between subjects. 'Between categories' now seems a valid path to pursue, one that may even open other avenues, questions. The task Serres has given me is not to take off all the structures with which we have shaped the world. Rather, he wants me to develop a sensitivity to these structures, and a wish to use my creativity to introduce turbulence into and around them. While Serres is advocating complexity, he alerts me to the reality that I do not have to do something as 'messy' myself. Serres would not want you to copy him, in fact he would probably very much dislike this<sup>4</sup>. He wants you to see that he is just one possibility. There are millions of others. If you want to follow his 'method', be another one of them. Think yourself into the role of a baker kneading a dough (which is not that difficult for me, as I have worked as one), he would say, as 'the most simple and mundane gestures can produce very complicated curves' (Serres & Latour, 1995: 65).

One gateway to invention that Serres actually suggests is that of sensory experience, especially the sense of touch. Serres writes, 'the sense of touch is the fractal boundary that opens up a creative process, where objective reality and subjective intellect invent together' (Assad, 1999: 76). With this statement he reflects Deleuze who writes that 'body, passions, sensuous interests are not diversions' but 'real forces that form thought' (Deleuze quoted in Clark, 2003: 43). Bakhtin expresses the validity of enquiry through sensual experience even more strongly with the provocative suggestion that 'theories encounter walls that practice helps us move through' (Haynes, 1995: 7). Interactions with the world, physical as well as non-physical (if there is such a boundary), also play an important role in Bakhtin's work. Bakhtin's work is full of references to transformation of bodies and the crossing of boundaries between the body and the world. In *Rabelais and His World*<sup>5</sup>, it is the 'transgressing body' which is able to '... merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents' (Bakhtin, 1995: 320) that takes centre stage.

The idea that sensory experience leads to the opening up of possibilities, of new questions, and the openness of the body itself to the world, is something that Bakhtin, even more strongly than Serres, helps me think about in relation to my research. Is sensory experience a valid mode of enquiry?

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<sup>4</sup> Serres emphasises that he does not want any disciples. (Paulson, 2005: 36)

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the whole of *Rabelais and His World* is a critique of not only of totalitarianism<sup>5</sup>, but generally of exclusion, of the prohibition of sensual experience (Bakhtin, 1984b: 380/81) and of 'theory isolated from action' (Haynes, 1995: 6).

Bakhtin also opens up an ethical dimension to the physical and intellectual interactions that are taking place in my project, through his ‘dialogic feeling for the world’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 265). He writes that to ‘author’ (think, say, produce) is always the result of interactions. In contrast to Serres, he places an emphasis on acknowledging the input of others, of another person, of the world. The possibilities that Serres writes about have a concrete image in Bakhtin’s relations between ‘participants’ in a dialogue: in my case, myself (the researcher) and other people/the world. How much of others is in my questioning? And: are my participants actually the ‘researched’ or are they also ‘researchers’ (see Whatmore, 2003: 93)? Have I thought about the risk of exposing myself these other potential ‘researchers’ - or am I taking a greater risk by not acknowledging what and who is having an influence?

Nigel Thrift writes about the benefits of mutual exchange, which can also be seen in a symbolic way for exchanges between the researcher and the world:

‘In fieldwork, it often happens that the best exchanges come from encounters in which the participants have to exercise their imagination, thereby producing something hybrid that very likely did not exist before; new hybrid ‘interface cultures’ can blossom, however briefly, bringing insight to both parties’ (Thrift, 2003: 114).

A moment that *can* happen, but might not happen. As relations are hardly ever even and stable, this process inevitably produces risk<sup>6</sup>, in the shape of unpredictability<sup>7</sup> and openness. On the other hand this risk is limited by the dialogue in which I have always been involved: no one will have had the same interactions with people/with the world that I have had and thus I will never end up exactly with someone else’s ‘thought’. Indeed a prospect for invention.

Invention. The questioning of categories, the multiplicity of meanings and the importance and ‘creative risk’ of interactions with the world and other people. For Bakhtin and Serres this is what surrounds invention. As a ‘team’, Serres and Bakhtin force me through a stage of questioning myself and my ‘geography of thinking’ - to borrow Dagmar Reichert’s (1992) image – before I can set out to formulate my research aims. They make me think about how knowledge is produced and how categories came to be established as valid categories. They make me think about what it is that maintains those categories and how far I am prepared to question them. They make me think about the threads that lead from encounters with others to my questions and the responsibilities and risks that are involved in those encounters. In short, at this point, these philosophers are offering me an important provocation in the early stages of my project.

## PART 2 – A TWO-WAY ENGAGEMENT<sup>8</sup>

‘What language do the things of the world speak...?’ – Michel Serres (2003: 39)

... or does the world speak at all? For Michel Serres, the world not only speaks, but he also knows *how* it speaks. In his book *The Natural Contract*, he criticises the deafness of humans to its language. By this he means the self-reference of human thinking (based on what he thinks of as

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The process of sharing requires the construction of new things: there is no world of already defined things there for the mirroring, but rather the forces of bodies – bodies as understood in the Spinozan sense – heading off for unknown and risky destinations’ (Thrift, 2003: 115).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Creation...produces not a finished world, but a range of possibilities, of potentials for interesting and unpredictable histories’ (Bakhtin quoted in Haynes, 1995: 12)

<sup>8</sup> ‘If you take a position that the world out there, or more specifically your object of study, can speak back, that it too is an active agent in this process of research, then what is at issue is a real two-way engagement’ (Massey, 2003: 86).

traditional scientific thinking) and its ignorance of non-human surroundings<sup>9</sup>. Serres urges us to see the Earth as a partner rather than as an object. He compares the relationship we should have with our planet to a marriage contract (Serres, 2003: 110). In order for a partnership to take place, the Earth must be seen as an articulate subject. In Serres' eyes (and ears), the Earth fulfils this criterion: it has its own language; it talks through 'forces, bonds, and interactions' (Serres, 2003: 39). Despite its ability to communicate, nature is treated as a 'backdrop to human affairs' (Serres, 2003: 11, Serres & Latour, 1995: 180, Brown, 2003: 188), and is degraded physically in the process.

Reading Serres, I have often wondered, how far this 'listening to the world' can be taken and be integrated into my research. How much voice can I give the world in my interrogations and reporting? Again, Serres does not present a very encouraging prospect of how to deal with the world as a novice researcher. In the very same book, *The Natural Contract*, he writes that most of us are not equipped anymore to deal with nature. We do not physically work with it or in it, and thus any engagement with our natural surroundings happens, if it happens at all, in a 'clumsy, arcadian way' (Serres, 2003: 28). Serres cries out: 'We have lost the world. We [have] transformed things into fetishes or commodities...' (Serres, 2003: 29).

Despite such laments, Serres does not seem to have given up entirely yet. Within his polemic, he gives the impression that he is making an appeal to me and others to listen to the world. In fact, this is the effect he has on me: Serres makes me not want the world to be 'mute' in my research (see also Whatmore, 2003: 99). He makes me want to make these inquiries into the world's articulation. But it is less his polemical attacks on humanity's life-style that have this effect than his particular depiction of the world. It is the kind of voice he gives the world, the disruption of familiarity (see Massey, 2003: 80) when he talks about our interactions with it, that make me reconsider my position in the 'field' – the field in terms of my relationship with what I am researching and which consequently becomes the field in terms of my philosophical position.

Working intimately with Serres excludes the possibility that I close myself to the world and deny it a voice. I may have difficulties giving it a voice, but I will be searching for a way – with the limited means that are available to me. Serres impels me to find a personal mode of engagement. What he also does through his critique is force me to track back on how much I am rooted in 'scientific thinking' and on how much I believe in his caricature of it. I have to make up my own 'contract' with the world. Here Serres warns me: this bond can be 'for worse and for better' (Serres, 2003: 110): it does not guarantee benefits for both parties involved. One effect that I have observed is, that this relationship tends to make my research a lot harder: a constant revision of 'marriage terms' and complicated ethical considerations are just two examples. But I have also found that the benefits lie in exactly this revisiting and re-envisioning that is prompted by interactions between the Serresian voice and the vocality of the 'field'.

Bakhtin's idea of the world's 'vocality' is slightly different. One of the consequences of the dialogic worldview is that one cannot be deaf to the world in the first place: we are in constant engagement with it<sup>10</sup>. However, these dialogical encounters are hardly ever as friendly as they may sound. As Lynne Pearce explains, they rarely take place between equal parties (Pearce, 1994: 102). The impression that Bakhtin gives in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin is that not only are we not aware of the dialogical influence of the world, but that this ignorance and the inequality of encounters stems to a significant degree from a fear and loathing of the world - or of certain

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<sup>9</sup> 'We imagined that we'd be able to live and think among ourselves, while things around us obediently slumbered, crushed by our hold on them...' (Serres 2003: 39)

<sup>10</sup> 'The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we are answerable, i.e. to the degree that we can respond to addressivity. We are responsible in the sense that we are compelled to respond, we cannot choose but to give the world an answer' (Holquist, 2002: 30).

parts of it such as death and disease (Bakhtin, 1984b: 39) - and from the wish to control the 'unfinished' aspect of the world (Bakhtin, 1984b: 320), for instance through the restrictions that 'scientific thinking' imposes on our interactions with it.<sup>11</sup>

If I do or do not agree with Bakhtin's critique of scientific thinking (which is also Serres's critique) does not matter to such a degree. What matters is that if I agree with the image of the Bakhtinian time-space relations, I cannot be without the awareness of the influence of the interactions between me, the researcher, and the world in my research. I have to make a decision how I envision others and the world, but how I deal with their relations with me. Also, I cannot aspire to the production of an 'accurate representation' of the world (Massey, 2003: 77). In dialogism, nothing has an essence that can be represented in a detached way. Nothing is in a fixed state. Everything is in a state of becoming (see Pearce, 1994: 48).

Whether the focus is on the interactions between people and the world or between people and other people, central to both philosophers' work is the idea of relations<sup>12</sup>. Certainly, Bakhtin presents a more optimistic view of the system than Serres, who at his angriest, states: 'exchange does not take place and will never take place' (Serres, 1987: 17). But provocation and exaggeration are part of both Serres's and Bakhtin's rhetoric, and are also used to create a questionable image of man's past relationship with nature. If taken literally, their romantic portrayal could lead to a simplistic vision of a 'natural' and 'unnatural' relationship of man and nature, and more generally to a simplistic distinction between natural/artificial, nature/culture. This seems to run contrary to Serres's/Bakhtin's sensitivity to categorical thinking. But maybe that is their point: if I notice this 'fault' in their explanations, I have made a step away from unidirectional thinking and start to examine the relations behind different images of nature. And if I can do that, I can start to imagine the relations between, around and beyond myself and my 'field'.

### PART 3 'THE ADVENTURE OF WRITING'<sup>13</sup>

'We have been in need of fuzziness for thousands of years...henceforth my book is rigorously fuzzy.'<sup>14</sup> (Serres, 1987: 89)

Stories. Metaphors. Transformations of metaphors. Contradictions. One image is looked at from several different viewpoints to serve different purposes. What is fable, what is philosophy?

Troubadours, Plato, battlefields, pyramids. Parasites, gods, oceans, Tin Tin.

In his writing, Serres is not trying to make sense but 'non-sense'. Non-sense for an audience which is used to a specific type of sense-making, where meaning 'flow[s] in a linear, laminar fashion' (Paulson, 2005: 28). Serres is not interested in 'disciplining'<sup>15</sup> his materials (Crang, 2003: 133). He is challenging the necessity to present his work to the academic community in a prescribed framework by confronting his readers with multi-directional metaphors (see Paulson,

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<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin contrast the scientific approach with the 'popular conquest of the world' which 'destroyed and suspended all alienation; it drew the world closer to man, to his body, permitted him to touch and test every object, examine it from all sides, enter into it, turn it inside out, compare it to every phenomenon, however exalted and holy, analyze weigh, measure, try it on.'

<sup>12</sup> That 'what remains essential is the system of relations' (Serres, 1987: 19)

<sup>13</sup> 'He who surfs on the work forgets what the body can do and know when it puts its faith, madly, in the adventure of writing.' (Michel Serres quoted by Paulson, 2005: 35/36)

<sup>14</sup> Own translation from the German edition.

<sup>15</sup> see also Paulson, 2005: 32

2005: 28), an unpredictable framework of chapters and the addition of as much ‘noise’ as he can get away with in order to make his point.

With this account I may have pictured Serres as a simple angry rebel who is delivering an incoherent rant against a ‘two-dimensional scientific worldview’. Yet Serres’ delivery is not without a system or deeper intention. There is something he wants us to see: the apparent gap between the world and our accounts of it and the distance we seek to create by purging our texts of ‘worldly’ expressions or materials. Serres’ translator William Paulson offers a very good analogy: he compares Serres’ texts with Bruno Latour’s description of an expedition into the Amazonian Rainforest (Latour, 1999). Like Latour, what Serres wants to make visible are the ‘series of steps’ or ‘passages’ (Paulson, 2005: 32) between the world and our arrival at theories. The unusual array of images and genres he draws on represents these transformations - whereby he does not treat these ‘mediators’ as inferior to the theory they lead to, as it would be the case in other theoretician’s writing (in his opinion). Like Latour, he is critical of the disrespect that is shown towards these other ‘forms of explanation’<sup>16</sup> (Latour quoted in Paulson, 2005: 33 and Bingham, 2003: 159).

And it is this critique that Serres is transferring to me: he presents me with the challenge to find my own<sup>17</sup> relationship with other ‘means of transport’ for the messages I want to convey. What do I make of his suggestion? Do I want to, can I integrate ‘other forms’ into my writing? How daring can I be? For instance, I happen to be the author of a rather unsophisticated cartoon diary. Is he asking me to try to work in this medium in my essays? Can I get away with it as an Open University student?

For help I turn to Bakhtin. Bakhtin is also concerned with relating different voices in textual accounts. His dislike of what he calls ‘monologue’<sup>18</sup>, an authoritative voice that dominates an account<sup>19</sup>, is very similar to Serres’ dislike of an authorial voice that drowns out everything that is perceived as an ‘obstacle’ to a ‘clear’ account. Yet Bakhtin’s monologue also has additional associations. For Bakhtin, communication cannot just work in one direction. In Bakhtin’s universe, monologues are ‘fictional’: the speaker/author and the listener/audience always have the ‘double role’ of speaker/listener, author/audience due to their constant dialogue with previous utterances/texts from the each other (Lähteenmäki, 1998:79). This does not mean that I cannot have my own voice. On the contrary. For Bakhtin, every observation and rendition is strongly subjective. The relation between the ‘observer’ and the world in Bakhtin’s dialogics has often been compared to Einstein’s theory of relativity<sup>20</sup> which serves as a very good illustration as it emphasises the importance of the observer: where/who I am and what I do (‘how I move’) is influencing what I can see and describe. Like the Janus-head, two people in dialogue are not two separate entities, but they are not one person either as they are forced to see the world from their respective positions that the other person can never inhabit.

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<sup>16</sup> ‘To the few wooden tongues developed in academic journals, we should add the many genres and styles of narration invented by novelists, journalists, artists, cartoonists, scientists, and philosophers.’ (Latour quoted in Paulson, 2005: 33 and Bingham, 2003: 159).

<sup>17</sup> Serres: ‘No disciples then, but translators swimming the channels of communication; no followers on the same path, but a thousand readers and writers whose own paths changed course when they wandered into the mountains, gorges, beaches, and waters of his texts.’ (Paulson, 2005: 36)

<sup>18</sup> ‘A monologic artistic world does not recognize someone else’s thought, someone else’s ideas as an object of representation.’ (Bakhtin quoted in Nielsen, p. 51)

<sup>19</sup> ‘firm and stable monologic framework’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 17)

<sup>20</sup> Every ‘observation of the world is considered as a dialogical action that takes place from a certain spatio-temporal position’ (Lähteenmäki, 1998: 88).

‘...dialogism is a version of relativity... In Bakhtin’s thought experiments, as in Einstein’s, the position of the observer is fundamental.’ (Holquist, 2002: 20&21)

On the basis this image, Bakhtin tells me that I cannot say things that are generally valid. Everyone understands something that I may believe to be the same to everyone, differently. My influences by all previous dialogues that I have entertained lead to the result that there is an ‘impossibility of identical interpretations’ (Lähteenmäki, 1998: 82). Whatever I say or write will contain a ‘multiplicity of meanings’ (Voloshinov cited by Lähteenmäki, 1998: 83). As mentioned earlier, Bakhtin believes that:

‘...no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and its speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same objects [...]’ (Bakhtin, quoted by Lähteenmäki, 1998:79)

This links up with Serres’s project to permit and support this ‘elastic environment’, to ‘use words so as best to evoke what is outside them’ (Paulson, 2005: 34).

So, no need for wonky cartoons (unless I want to), but for a recognition of different relations to my words – and for an imagining of those spaces and their possibilities for other people. Here is a helpful similarity with Walter Benjamin who believes that meaning is not inherent in an object, but is ‘developed... only in the tension between their own framework of intelligibility and that brought by the researcher’ (Cragg, 2003: 139). His ‘collage’ work is an example of a different way of creating an equal relationship between the voices of the world, the audience and the author. In fact, it is a good representation of Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony that may help me further in thinking about representation.

What is polyphony? Like the ‘muting of the world’, monologue, or what Bakhtin associates with it, is always attempted. In our communication, according to Bakhtin (and Serres for that matter), the unfinished world, the openness to interpretation, the interference by other voices is shunned<sup>21</sup> in favour of ‘thinking in separate rounded-off and self-sufficient thoughts which were purposefully meant to stand independent of their context’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 96). Bakhtin’s counter-concept to monologue, his ideal rendition of the world (and multiple views) can be found in his concept of ‘polyphony’ (Pearce uses the word ‘multivocality’ (1994: 14)). To Bakhtin, a text is ‘polyphonic’ when not only dialogue, but an equal co-existence of voices is (deliberately) attempted in a text. Bakhtin names Dostoevsky’s novels as one example, where other voices appear with the same amount of authority ‘alongside the author’s word’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 7).

How do I give ‘the same amount of authority’ to other voices, and is that something I should aspire to as a researcher? In what way could I do this? These are difficult questions Bakhtin provokes, questions I have not resolved for myself. It is a step further from merely acknowledging others in your work. Lynne Pearce writes that polyphony does not necessarily result in fair and equal representation<sup>22</sup> (Pearce, 1994: 15). This suggests that polyphony is not a lofty ‘ideal’ of communication that I have to aspire to. But it also suggests that ‘fair’ (or any kind of) representation is far more difficult than it appears.

In his last chapter to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin offers some very encouraging words. All he wants is for me to comprehend that I am very active in the construction of others and of the world. He wants to show me that I am dealing with other voices, and not with ‘mute’ (Serres) or ‘dead’ (Bakhtin) things. I imagine this relationship like that of Gayatri Spivak and her ‘audience as co-investigator[s]’ (Spivak quoted in Pryke, 2003:178). As a writer, Bakhtin also wants me to understand that authoring is a ‘questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity’ (Bakhtin, 1984a:285). With a dialogical understanding of authoring, I can become ‘orchestrator[...]’ (see Holloway & Kneale, 2000:77) rather than oppressor.

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Monologue assumes it has the last word. Dialogue assumes no last word, no finality.’ (Nielsen, 2000: 51)

<sup>22</sup> ‘The dialogical approach by no means denies or understates the possibility of conflict.’ (Lähteenmäki 1998: 91)

Having listened to both Serres and Bakhtin, I am reminded of Michael Pryke's comment on Mike Crang's chapter: 'Do we really need to be in total control of the materials we are analysing?' The answer would be 'no'. Bakhtin/Serres' thinking seems very much orientated towards a representation of the messiness of the world and an 'orchestration' of the components that make up this world. But what about the audiences that read/hear their work? Although Serres and Bakhtin are dealing with audiences (the academic audience or relations with the audience) they make it very difficult to think of readers/audiences in the traditional sense. That the materials will find their way to the audience in many forms and that they are already part of them does not facilitate thinking about issues such as accessibility. This is obvious in the two philosopher's texts: neither Serres' nor Bakhtin's work, no matter what forms of expression they integrate or write about, can be called accessible. Both could be accused of being concerned with representation of relations rather than with the actual 'dirt' of relations<sup>23</sup>.

Is 'accessibility' something I have to construct for myself from the ideas they have given me? I have noticed that I have trouble asking questions such as 'who am I writing for?' and 'how should I write for my audience?' The assumptions of a categorisable entity called 'audience' and the idea to write 'for' this audience-entity, seems in contrast with the images of relations/invention. The image that appears instead is the audience as a mess of indescribable relations from which strands reach towards an overly elastic common sphere. Can I leave it to these elastic environments, to chaos to reach other audiences? May I even consider reaching out (can I even delineate my motives?), or should I simply not care about this kind of impact?

Bakhtin recognises groups or 'circles' of people in his concept of 'heteroglossia' (see Pearce, 1994: 65) - the only 'help' I am given. Heteroglossia is the 'diversity of social speech types' (Bakhtin quoted in Pearce, 1994: 65), a representation of social groups in language. This means that social groups exist. However, he does not seem intent on building bridges to or between them. Or is he? Maybe, if he is promoting diversity, one should not conform to other groups? Is accessibility not also endangering my creativity as I seek 'liberation' from the other? (Pearce, 1994: 65)

The tension between accessibility and invention do not seem to be resolved in Serres and Bakhtin's work. There are hints that conflict between a piece of writing and its audience reception may be a creative struggle taking place 'in the real world', but nothing is expressed in more concrete terms. Only at one point does Bakhtin admit that, in the end, apparently, everything depends on the reader's recognition of my intentions (Pearce, 1994: 66). Since this particular relationship is something Bakhtin and Serres can perhaps only provide limited help with, this may be the moment where one needs, to recall Bruce Braun's suggestion, to 'inform philosophy through... practice' (Assignment Handbook, p. 17).

## ENDINGS

Openings. Relations. Non-Linearity. Possibilities. Fuzziness. Chaos. Multivocality.

Bakhtin and Serres offer inspiring ways of thinking through the different stages of the research. At the same time, they are more than providers of inspiration if you are prepared to take on and play with their ideas. While their writings bring up questions that are particular to their work, they can not just raise the same questions in other work, but generate new directions. These emerging

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<sup>23</sup> See Pearce on 'the dialogic relationship that is least explored in Bakhtin's work (...): that between the text and the reader' (Pearce, 1994:67).

questions are what I have to deal with and answer for myself when I read their words. Through the nature of these questions, Serres and Bakhtin are not 'shaping' the process of research into a distinct form, but instead are turning it into an unstable 'dough' – to come back to Serres' baking metaphor - that is subject to 'shapers' which are not only myself, but everything and everyone I come and have come into contact with – depending on how much control I am prepared to give away, how much I can do without a mould to cast it in.

I would like bring back Bruce Braun's image of the 'volume' control. I like this image, because it suggests that I, the researcher, am somewhat in control of the influence a philosopher has on me. On the audio-cassette for this assignment, Braun states that we are not philosophers, but social scientists. Philosophers work with 'abstract knowledge and ideas' (Pryke, Rose & Whatmore, 2003: 1), while geographers try to work with their ideas in the 'real world'. This suggests that philosophical thinking, because it is abstract, should not be able to have a 'total' impact on our doing.

It is hard to believe that philosophy is totally abstract. Philosophical questions must be shaped through 'mundane' events<sup>24</sup> and vice versa. That is why they can be so seductive: because they refer to the world and not only sound plausible, but even applicable. Different philosophies have different problems that they make as their object, and some offer more opportunities for worldly application than others. If I chose one particular philosopher or group of philosophers as an influence, I would have to identify with something they say about the world that relates to my research. A problem may have directed me to a particular philosopher/theorist - or maybe my research was triggered by a concept, an issue a philosopher highlighted that had not occurred to me as a problem?

Whichever situation is the case, there is an interrelationship between me and the philosophy, and it never seems quite clear whether the philosophy is shaping the research or whether the research is determining the choice of theorist: as a social scientist, or any other person, you cannot be without a 'philosophy' (see Pryke, Rose, Whatmore, 2003: 6) of how the world works, and, to use a Bakhtinian image, while this view may have been constructed through something at the beginning, it will remain open to the influence of the ideas you encounter, whether this is underlying or openly acknowledged. Philosophy is not an innocent 'sets of tools', devoid of (personal/general) history (Pryke, Rose, Whatmore, 2003: 3).

On the basis of this lack of 'innocence', I think that the influence of a philosopher is indeed fundamental ('pertaining to a foundation') in the sense, that a philosophy makes me question my foundations: my 'ideas, values and assumptions' (Pryke, Rose, Whatmore, 2003:2). It does this before I embark on my research, even before I even write my proposal, and it will continue to do so during all stages of the research process.

On the other hand, I do not think that the degree of influence of a philosopher is so fundamental, that it is 'total'. Serres' and Bakhtin's fear that their concepts are turned into 'instruments of power and control' (Paulson, 2005: 31)<sup>25</sup>, suggests that there is a latency for 'fundamentalism' in a philosopher's work, especially if concepts are interpreted too simplistically<sup>26</sup>, but it also implies that I as a researcher, maintain an influence on how 'fundamentally' philosophical ideas are expressed in my research. As I tried to show with the

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<sup>24</sup> e.g. Michel Foucault's Chinese dictionary experience in 'The Order of Things' (1966) or Vicky Kirby's lightning experience (Kirby quoted in Clark, 2003) to name but two examples.

<sup>25</sup> As a comparison, Holquist says about Bakhtin that he offers 'no totalities' but 'manifold possibilities' (Holquist, 2002: 181).

<sup>26</sup> Holquist criticises that Bakhtin's ideas have been interpreted too naively by many authors. Bakhtin's 'dialogism' is not only an appeal to open-ness and creativity, but also points out the down-sides of the inescapability of dialogue and the responsibilities that come with it (Holquist, 2002: 181).

Bakhtin/Serres example, philosophers' concepts are not rigid 'entities' (Reichert, 1992: 92), but suggestions, pointers, appeals or 'open questions' (Reichert, 1992: 96). Other researchers will diverge from my interpretation of the philosophers I have chosen to work with: there is never one Bakhtin or one Serres<sup>27</sup>. I might even end up with an interpretation my chosen philosopher had never intended.

Philosophers cannot clarify a position (see Pryke, Rose, Whatmore, 2003: 3) - they can offer guidance, but only in line with their own philosophy. And I, the researcher, have to decide, how much of this guidance and in what for I want to accept it.

Linear. Scientific. Exclusive.  
Chaotic. Sensual. Open.

I have the choice between one way of thinking and the other. Or any degrees in between. This, in itself, constitutes a 'fundamental' decision. The fact that I feel the need to make this decision, to choose my position, is their impact. A set of tools, and yet I also use my own tools. Not only the volume control, but a whole mixing desk of filters - my personal filters, constructed through previous experiences - to amplify or mute certain aspects of their 'noise'.

Thus, rather than an ending, an opening: Bakhtin and Serres invite experimentation, but this experimentation perhaps carries more responsibility than freedom. I am responsible for 'mixing' my own philosophy from their differences, dissonances and seductive harmonies. The freedom I have could be described as 'productive discord'<sup>28</sup>: I have to fill in the 'gaps' with my own interpretation, my own music, because they have not 'solidified' all of their concepts. Following their sounds, I will have to keep listening and keep moving - different controls up and down as they 'prompt that thinking over and over again'...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> There is a debate around which works of the 'Bakhtin circle' can actually be attributed to Bakhtin (see Holquist, 2002 or Pearce, 1994). Also, as I have remarked in this essay, there are 'contradictions', different 'Serreses' in Serres's texts.

<sup>28</sup> Pryke, Rose, Whatmore, 2003: 6

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Braun on D834 Audiocassette.

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