

# Rethinking Relations: Michel Serres and the Environmental Humanities

**Veranstalter** Universität Konstanz

**Veranstaltungsort** Universität Konstanz

**Termin** 11.11.2021 - 13.11.2021 ganztags

Conference from November 11-13, 2021 in Konstanz, Germany

So forget the word environment, commonly used in this context.  
--Serres, *The Natural Contract*--

Few contemporary thinkers have explored the passages between the sciences and the humanities as poetically and vigorously as Michel Serres. Spanning from 1968 to 2019, his work presents an evocative cartography of the interstitial spaces that connect mathematics, philosophy, physics, myth, history, religion, literature, technology, media, ecology, and art. The baseline of his thinking is an appreciation of complexity, of the ways in which contingency generates newness and form emerges as a function of unforeseen translations, ruptures, and linkages. With a penchant for the poietic processes of the natural world, he derives epistemological insight from the dynamics of oceans, mountains, clouds, storms, whirlpools, and tectonic plates—objects that are “multiple in space and mobile in time, unstable and fluctuating” (*Genesis*). Bridging the two cultures for him entails a ceaseless journey from “us to the world” (*Hermes V*), from the human to an environment that is never reified as an ontological outside. He recognizes that the production of knowledge is “always linked to an observer submerged in a system or in its proximity,” an observer who “is structured exactly like what he observes” (*Hermes*). Perceiving the communication flows among human and nonhumans as reciprocal and turbulent, his work describes how “[l]iving things and inert things bounce off each other unceasingly; [how] there would be no world without this interlinking web of relations, a billion times interwoven” (*Angels*). Thus understanding the world as “a confluence not a system, a mobile confluence of

fluxes" (*Conversations*), Michel Serres leaves a legacy that marks him as trailblazer of the environmental humanities.

Serres speaks of his own work as the composition of an "assembly of relations" (*Conversations*). The modalities of connection in his work are rarely unilateral or linear; rather, they subscribe to the logic of spatial as much as temporal bifurcations, percolations, and morphisms. Recognizing relationality as a key concept of the environmental humanities, how may his writings be put in dialogue with contemporary ecological theory and science studies? What types of exchanges could be envisioned with relational onto-epistemologies and frameworks of more-than-human entanglements? How does his work lend itself to a consideration of art as a source of ecological insight? What are the rapports between his ecopoetics and the role of environments in the literary tradition from naturalism to climate fiction?

With the aim of facilitating interdisciplinary exchanges, this conference invites scholars to "think with Serres" and mobilize his work in relation to contemporary formations in the environmental humanities. We envision contributions that explicitly attend to the ecological paradigms that inform both his polyphonic prose and hybrid subject matter, tracing his "philosophy of prepositions" (*Conversations*) in the prominence of material communication channels and the multiplication of relational operators like Hermes, parasite, or the instructed third. Whether with respect to his promotion of a "global model of fluid mechanics [that] makes us recognise how nature functions, and how we ourselves function as nature in nature" (*Birth of Physics*) or his proposal of a natural contract that dislocates anthropocentric distributions of agency and envisions Earth as a political actor, we encourage engagements that follow his circuitous pathways between the local and the global, "nature" and "culture," archipelagos of order and oceanic noise.

Confirmed Keynote Speakers:

- William Paulson (University of Michigan)
- Jeffrey J. Cohen (Arizona State University)
- Julian Yates (University of Delaware)
- Laura Dassow Walls (University of Notre Dame)
- Stephanie Posthumus (McGill University)
- Jussi Parikka (University of Southampton, FAMU Prague)
- Paul Carter (RMIT, Melbourne)
- Petra Gehring (TU Darmstadt)

full name / name of organization: University of Konstanz

contact email:

moritz.ingwersen(at)uni-konstanz(dot)de

**Organizers:**

Moritz Ingwersen, American Studies, Konstanz

Beate Ochsner, Media Studies, Konstanz

Further Information (LINK)

---