



(Re)-discovering the sacred in the material universe: An exploration of cosmic spirituality in the works of Malcolm de Chazal and Michel Serres

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Abstract

The purpose of this comparative study is to probe the common threads that exist between the relatively unknown Mauritian author Malcolm de Chazal and the underutilised philosopher of science Michel Serres. In *Sens-Plastique* and throughout Serres's diverse oeuvre, both authors clearly valorise life and all it has to offer despite the apparent absurdity of the human condition. Although Chazal and Serres's passion for scientific inquiry leads them to the conclusion that existence has no predetermined meaning *en-soi*, both writers unwaveringly assert that life can be extremely meaningful and worthwhile. However, in order to access terrestrial, ontological remedies that are capable of effacing existential anguish, the modern subject must (re)-establish a primordial connection to elemental matter. According to Chazal and Serres, (re)-connecting to the biosphere that tossed us into the chaos of existence also (re)-awakens our dormant senses. Serres and Chazal maintain that our senses are vital organs that open up a spiritual pathway which allows us to catch a small glimpse of the divine universe and our minute place in it.

Keywords

Malcolm de Chazal, cosmic spirituality, existential pantheism, Michel Serres, science and literature

Introduction

The purpose of this comparative investigation is to explore the cosmic spirituality that pervades the works of Malcolm de Chazal and Michel Serres. At first glance, these extremely divergent writers

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might appear to have little in common. However, these unorthodox authors, who both unapologetically blend numerous genres and transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, have similar spiritual affinities linked to the universe. Moreover, this study endeavours to contribute to the dearth of criticism dedicated to Chazal and Serres.

Although the Mauritian author Malcolm de Chazal enjoyed a few fleeting moments of international accolade from highly influential artists including André Breton, this recognition would be rather short-lived. Chazal is a veritable legend and a source of immense pride in his native country of Mauritius, but he is relatively unknown outside the confines of this multicultural island nation. For this reason, Robert Furlong adamantly asserts, 'il est grand temps de se saisir l'intégralité de ses richesses' (2010: 548).

Despite the fact that Michel Serres is widely considered to be one of the most important contemporary thinkers, numerous scholars such as William Paulson (2005), Steven Brown, Matthew Wraith, Pierpaolo Antonello, and Ian Tucker have noted that the philosopher of science 'remains underutilised across the social sciences' (Tucker, 2011: 149). This provocative philosopher who often scoffs at the shortcomings of traditional intellectual paradigms has 'never really acquired the status of his peers' (Brown, 2005: 218). Hence, this study attempts to shed light on Serres's complex, interdisciplinary philosophy, thereby encouraging other scholars to delve into the diverse works of this prolific philosopher.¹

Contextualisation of *Sens-Plastique* and Serres's unified philosophical project

The 1948 edition of *Sens-Plastique*, published by Gallimard, would briefly toss Chazal into the spotlight as one of the most promising Francophone authors of this era. This collection of aphorisms was originally published with the seventh volume of an eclectic work entitled *Pensées* three years earlier. The Gallimard version, which would result in ephemeral stardom, was based on the second edition of *Sens-Plastique* that initially appeared in 1947. In his preface to the Gallimard version, the writer and director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Jean Paulhan, lauds Chazal as an aspiring artist who 'mérite ... le nom de génie. Ce nom, et aucun autre' (Chazal, 1948: xv). Amina Osman notes that *Sens-Plastique* deeply resonated with leading intellectuals of the time because this highly original text defies dominant literary conventions (Osman, 1993: 94). Jean-Louis Joubert offers the following description of *Sens-Plastique*: '*Sens-Plastique* est composé de plus de deux mille pensées, occupant entre une ligne et une page: banales ou surprenantes, dans une langue parfois maladroite, abrupte, voire incorrecte' (Joubert, 1992: 189). Regardless of the hermetic, experimental nature of Chazal's writing highlighted by Osman and Joubert, many themes emerge in *Sens-Plastique*, including a different conception of spirituality.

From 1968 to the present, all of Serres's works are best understood in the context of a unified philosophical project that continues to evolve. Similar to Chazal, Serres's writing is difficult for many readers to grasp for thematic and stylistic reasons. The 'maverick' philosopher melds philosophy, literature, religion, science, and mythology in his efforts to answer fundamental questions that have haunted us since the first human beings appeared on this planet (Walls, 1997: 111). As Maria Assad explains,

Serres has become an excluded other for some in the academic world who are uncomfortable with his meandering discourse that consciously ignores traditional boundaries between the disciplines ... in his search for a nonexclusionary thought system that globally would represent our entire episteme. (Assad, 2000: 217)

Serres's ambitious goal is to create an all-encompassing philosophical paradigm capable of telling the story of the entire cosmos. In this vein, the 'Grand Récit' to which Serres often refers is the master narrative of the biosphere into which the individual saga of every organism is woven.

An evident passion for scientific laws and theories undergirds Serres's zeal to explore what life entails for a sentient being that is thrown into the chaos of existence in an interconnected and interdependent planet which predates our species by billions of years. Serres strives to conceptualise a type of cosmic philosophy that refuses to cover its 'ears to the sensible world' which surrounds us and to which we are inextricably linked (Salisbury, 2006: 43). Given that Serres attempts to convey the beauty, fragility and complexity of all the strands that connect the biotic community of life together, his epistemological quest knows no bounds. Serres's philosophy represents a daunting challenge because it cannot be appropriated or compartmentalised into pre-existing systems. For Serres, knowledge appears to be like water which flows in all different directions.

Philosophical materialism, the absurdity of human existence and a different conception of the divine

Similar to Serres, Chazal's predilection for scientific explanations of the universe and our place in it is clearly evident in *Sens-Plastique*. First, it should be noted that this relatively neglected Mauritian author was an engineer with a solid background in science. Thus, it is no surprise that scientific theories informed his philosophical and spiritual worldview. Furthermore, Chazal eliminates any meaningful distinction between the spiritual and the physical in *Sens-Plastique*. Although Chazal was initially enamoured with the mystical thought of Emanuel Swedenborg, he would gradually distance himself from this unorthodox form of Christian spirituality (Osman, 1993: 95). In *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal has already begun to embrace a sort of pure mysticism that reflects the basic tenets of philosophical materialism and existential pantheism.

Revealing that 'la science, avec son outil, le cerveau, nous mène de plus en plus profondément dans le domaine de la matière', Chazal posits that nothing else exists besides matter and its modifications (1948: 8). Since every organism is comprised of the exact same material particles that randomly surface in a given form before being recycled into another ontological shape, Chazal asserts that the path to spirituality entails reducing the distance that separates us from other material entities to the greatest extent possible. Christian theology encourages believers to seek redemption from the poverty of the human condition and a sense of meaning in the form of an imaginary paradise that allegedly exists in an exotic elsewhere after our death. In stark contrast, Chazal espouses a pantheistic *Weltanschauung*, predicated upon scientific logic, which compels the subject to (re)-integrate himself more fully into the cosmic mystery of which our species is merely a minute part. By (re)-establishing an intimate rapport with the remainder of the universe, the Chazalian narrator tries to comprehend his small role in the larger scheme of life. This direct correspondence with the terrestrial divine leads to a stoic acceptance of fundamental material realities from which there is no escape, in addition to a type of serenity.

Highlighting the importance of this spiritual communion with matter itself, the narrator hypothesises, 'Tout l'art de vivre consiste à s'évader de soi pour n'être pas seul, à se fuir en se cherchant, à retrouver son moi perdu dans le monde et à le réintégrer à soi, à mettre tous ses œufs dans le même panier, à être un seul esprit, corps et âme' (Chazal, 1948: 169). In an absurd universe that has no pre-determined meaning *en-soi*, the first step to self-actualisation and the creation of meaning is to (re)-discover one's material essence. Further explaining what this philosophical, scientific and spiritual quest encompasses, the narrator states in reference to 'les Lois du Monde', 'Vivre, c'est éplucher l'oignon de la Science, inscrite en nous de toute éternité bien avant le ventre de notre

mère. Apprendre, c'est se retrouver' (Chazal, 1948: 226, 227). In this passage, Chazal reminds the reader that the biosphere predates humankind by billions of years. By exploring the intricate threads which continue to shape all abundant life on this planet, Chazal affirms that the subject will understand his symbiotic relationship to the larger object to which he belongs more fully.

In *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal exposes unfounded notions of anthropocentric, existential hierarchies as chimerical illusions.² From a scientific perspective, all organisms were arbitrarily tossed into existence by cosmic cycles from which each life form initially surged. Moreover, the planet is still in a constant state of evolution because of these same organic cycles which were originally set into motion by a big bang. Debunking the appealing notion that the earth revolves around the needs and desires of *Homo sapiens*, Chazal declares, 'ne devons-nous pas conclure que l'Univers visible finira lui aussi un jour par exploser de même façon' (1948: 90). Given that the ecological forces which sustain and incessantly reinvent life from recycled particles do not cater to the needs and desires of any single species, Chazal theorises that the universe will one day continue its indifferent trajectory without us. In other words, the 'big crunch', or another cataclysmic event similar to the one which eventually gave birth to humanity, could efface everything in its path and start again from scratch yet again.

Throughout *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal reiterates that salvation from the apparent absurdity of life in all its divergent forms is not to be found from any external source. Chazal underscores that there are no exceptions to the aforementioned universal laws. Given that nothing can be unequivocally proven to exist independent of evolutionary forces,³ Chazal beckons the subject to search for ontological significance and self-actualisation in the material world. In a passage that confirms Osman's assertion that Chazal would eventually abandon any variation of Christianity, the author equates God with the biosphere. As the narrator reveals, 'Tout sur terre passe par des phases alternées de repos et d'activité, sauf le soleil, qui ne se repose jamais, comme Dieu qu'il incarne' (1948: 53).⁴ After outlining the gratuitous nature of human existence, Chazal insists that a viable path to salvation exists on this physical plane. Far from drowning in despair due to the existential implications of scientific knowledge, the Chazalian narrator embraces life for what it is and takes advantage of everything that it has to offer in his current ontological shell of being.

Like Chazal, Serres's conception of the divine cannot be removed from the larger context of his profound reflections concerning the philosophical ramifications of scientific inquiry. Based on his understanding of the laws of thermodynamics, the theory of evolution, chaos theory and quantum physics, Serres reaches the same conclusions as Chazal. Like Chazal in *Sens-Plastique*, Serres asserts that the *point de départ* for projecting meaning upon our existence is to confront 'the initial absurdity of fate that has thrown us in a given spot on Earth' by dismissing comforting, homocentric logic (Hénaf, 2005: 181). In a passage that is reminiscent of *Sens-Plastique*, the Serresian narrator of *Biogée* muses,

Et alors, le récit reprend, tout au début. En route. Le monde explose, commence, s'expande, je peux raconter son Grand Récit, du commencement, au big bang, à sa fin ... dite big crunch ... Où va-t-elle? Qui le sait? (Serres, 2010: 132)

Like Chazal, Serres affirms that modern science has disproven any notions of human exceptionalism. According to Serres, it would be more accurate to describe our fleeting appearance in this form as the result of a cosmic accident that began taking shape long before the first people roamed this planet. For Serres, human life is merely the product of a 'carrefour accidentel' that initially thrust our species into being (Serres, 2010: 133).

Illustrating that the story of the human race is intertwined with that of the entire cosmos, Serres explains,

je préfère dire que les choses se mêlent entre elles et que je ne fais pas exception à cela, je me mélange au monde qui se mélange à moi ... tout se rencontre et se noue en ce lieu complexe, en ce nœud où tout passe, comme dans un échangeur. (Serres, 1985: 82)

Instead of conceiving our species as somehow being different from the rest of the planet in spite of nearly irrefutable scientific evidence to the contrary, Serres urges the subject to accept his material essence. Anthropocentric delusions of ontological grandeur promulgate the idea that transcendence from elemental matter is possible. Serres refutes these outdated notions inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment with contemporary scientific theories.

Furthermore, Serres also proposes the same remedy as Chazal to dissipate the existential angst of an enlightened subject who is cognisant of the absurdity of his existence. As opposed to denying our connection to the universe and seeking salvation and meaning in a hypothetical, celestial paradise that supposedly awaits us after our demise, the Serresian narrator often euphorically plunges himself into the cosmos as deeply as possible. These efforts are indicative of an insatiable *joie de vivre* that compels numerous Serresian narrators to (re)-establish an intimate, sensorial relationship with the earth. It is in this context in which the enigmatic ecstasy of the Serresian narrator at the end of *Biogée* should be understood. Like Chazal in *Sens-Plastique*, Serres unwaveringly maintains that life can be replete with meaning and happiness in the face of absurdity. As the last sentence of *Biogée* explains, 'Joie: matière dont est faite la Biogée' (2010: 170).

A close reading of Serres's entire body of work reveals that the ending of *Biogée* has several connotations. In addition to affirming that ontological significance and deep inner contentment are attainable in a biosphere that has no predetermined meaning, this nuanced dénouement is also a reflection of philosophical materialism. Given that the unconventional philosopher underscores 'the primary materiality of the human condition' throughout his diverse philosophical repertoire, it is not by chance that he uses the word 'matière' (Tucker, 2011: 150). As Hanjo Berressem notes, the principles of 'intelligent materialism (a materialism that considers matter as autopoietic)' are omnipresent in Serres's philosophy (Berressem, 2005: 51). In *Biogée*, Serres asserts that Biogea, another name for the biosphere, is comprised of one substance: matter. Nevertheless, Serres does not minimise the complexity of the 'infinite cords of reciprocity' that 'unite the local and the global' (Walls, 1997: 111; Polizzi and Marmarelli, 2000: 253). For Serres, the path to salvation entails communing with a self-regulating cosmic whole that we will never fully comprehend. This autopoietic shell to which we are connected has created an infinite number of extremely diverse combinations from one finite substance. Although definitive knowledge related to matter itself is destined to be fragmented, the cosmic euphoria experienced by the narrator of *Biogée* when he rediscovers his materiality represents a true remedy for the human condition.

Reflecting upon all the intricate links that bind us to the great chain of being triggers what could be described as intense moments of pantheistic inebriation for the Serresian narrator. As Brian O'Keeffe highlights, 'There is an ecstasy to being in relation, a joy to be had in contemplating the magic of relations ... Leave aside God, says Serres, but retain the adjective *divine*' (2009: 28). In *La Légende des anges*, Serres openly reveals his spiritual sensibilities that are inseparable from his understanding of the inner workings of the universe. Before literally thanking the earth for the free gift of existence in the chapter 'Puissances, Trônes, Dominations', the narrator states, 'Or si Dieu existe, il est la vie, le vent, le feu ... l'essence de la vie, le créateur, le commencement, l'apex, le sommet, l'excellence et l'amour de la vie' (Serres, 1999a: 187). The unquenchable thirst for life expressed in *La Légende des anges* echoes the instants of pure elation experienced by the narrator of *Biogée*. Moreover, this elemental ecstasy, which is a salient feature of Serres's philosophy, underscores the splendour of this world. For Serres, it does not matter if this realm is the only one that exists. The ubiquitous, life-affirming joy that the subject experiences when he or she

communes with Biogea is more than adequate to fill the existential void left by the realisation that indifferent, chaotic forces undergird life itself.

Re-awakening our dormant senses and corresponding with elemental matter

In *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal also suggests that a deep and lasting appreciation of one's fleeting existence on this planet, at least in this specific ontological shape, is rendered possible when the subject corresponds with other material particles. However, Chazal and Serres posit that the modern lifestyle has alienated much of humanity from the remainder of the biosphere. Given the realities of the interconnected processes of urbanisation and globalisation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a space that has not been significantly altered by a heavy human footprint. Additionally, the vast majority of the earth's human inhabitants now spend nearly every waking hour in almost complete isolation from other organisms with which we share this common space. Incessantly immersed in a filtered reality behind our walls of brick, wood, concrete and steel,⁵ both authors claim that our senses have become dulled. For both writers, this loss is catastrophic because our sensorial faculties are vital organs that help us to *make sense* out of the world and to comprehend our small place in it. Furthermore, how can we communicate with the cosmic divine thereby transcending the banality of existence if we are painfully unaware of the material threads that connect us to the sacred, gigantic uterus?⁶ Since edification hinges upon keen sensorial perception in an existential, pantheistic worldview, Chazal and Serres affirm that a crucial aspect of spiritual (re)-awakening is to restore our senses to their initial vigour.

Puritanical Christianity cautions believers to be 'wary of the flesh' because the 'flesh is weak'. In stark contrast, the elemental spirituality that pervades *Sens-Plastique* and Serres's entire oeuvre maintains that our body is the divine vessel which facilitates redemption and feelings of ontological meaning in an absurd universe. Given that it is our corporality which defines our essence and attaches us to other sacred variations of matter, Chazal and Serres assert that we should venerate our bodies rather than shun them. Instead of trying to diminish or limit carnal pleasure, both authors affirm that ardent senses represent a spiritual pathway. After declaring that 'Dieu est partout dans la nature', Chazal explains, 'nous avons cinq sens' that allow us to touch, taste, hear, smell, and feel the God of material reality (1948: 102).

Illustrating the importance of our senses, Chazal encourages the reader to live his or her life to its fullest (Osman, 1993: 94). In a passage which reflects the spiritual aspects of this valorisation of corporal ecstasy, the author states,

La nature tout entière est une seule bouche qui veut boire la vie, l'enfant dans l'utérus ... ne fait pas exception à cette règle immuable. Ne pouvant téter le sein dans l'utérus, sa bouche, dans les ténèbres de cet organe, esquisse malgré tout ce geste essentiel de boire la vie. (Chazal, 1948: 51)

The message that Chazal is attempting to convey with this sensual metaphor of a child in the womb who still 'drinks life' despite the limitations of being trapped inside of his mother's body is rather transparent. In *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal beckons us to hone our numb senses in order to attune ourselves to the divine, cosmic whole.

On the first page of *Sens-Plastique*, Chazal describes the cosmos as an onion with many different layers that must be peeled back in order to understand this entity more fully. It soon becomes apparent that this epistemological quest opens up into scientific, philosophical and spiritual dimensions. Moreover, the overtly sensorial nature of this exploration immediately strikes the reader.

Affirming the grandeur of existence for those who are willing to taste all of its succulent fruits, the author declares,

La nature est le plus beau livre d'images, mais nous ne nous arrêtons, hélas! qu'à la couverture ... il faudrait pouvoir décortiquer la plante, la fleur et le fruit comme un oignon qu'on épluche, ou procéder comme avec un orchestre, dont on goûte en détail les composants, tout en conservant pleinement l'audition de l'ensemble. Ainsi, pour apprécier la beauté de la fleur à plein, il faudrait pouvoir goûter, tour à tour, de la fleur des stries ... les marbrures élastiques ... l'orchestration des couleurs et le mariage des formes; l'architecture et le tableau. (1948: 1)

Dismissing any puritanical notions that pleasures of the flesh are to be avoided or only to be experienced in a particular context, Chazal implores us to not be satisfied until our palates have consumed everything worthy of being devoured. Additionally, this passage contains the first direct reference to the enigmatic title *Sens-Plastique*. The meaning of the title is open to many divergent interpretations as Jean Paulhan highlights in his preface to the 1948 edition. Nonetheless, it appears that 'Sens-Plastique' is an elaborate metaphor for the strands that link all material beings together in an interconnected and interdependent universe. Perhaps these are the 'plastic' or 'elastic' bands to which the author refers throughout the text. Regardless of the precise significance of the name *Sens-Plastique*, the opening lines of the work are paramount to this investigation of Chazalian spirituality. From the very onset, Chazal identifies the senses as the key to our comprehension and appreciation of existence. The author also indicates that a close relationship to the larger object (i.e. the universe) is what induces powerful moments of euphoria for the subject.

Similar to Chazal's, Serres's conception of the sacred places a considerable amount of emphasis on the dire importance of the senses. Like Chazal in *Sens-Plastique*, Serres also summons the subject to (re)-invigorate his or her sensorial faculties in numerous works including the aptly named *Les Cinq Sens* (1985) and *Variations sur le corps* (1999b). For Serres, part of the aforementioned disconnection related to the modern lifestyle is the emergence of new technologies which continue to exacerbate this issue even further. Even though Serres undoubtedly recognises the utility of recent inventions that have improved the quality of life for billions of people on this planet, the philosopher at times seems to wonder if the nefarious effects of these devices outweigh their usefulness. It is obvious what global society has gained from technological advances, but Serres ponders what we have lost in the process. The philosopher is hardly anti-technology since he 'allies himself with those who see enormous educational potential in distance learning and networked access to information' in *Atlas* (1994) (Paulson, 2000: 223). Yet, Serres often wonders if certain inventions and the social changes that they engender come with an unexpected price. In a public forum entitled 'Les nouvelles technologies: révolution culturelle et cognitive', Serres endeavours to answer this question: 'Les nouvelles technologies auront-elles des répercussions sur notre manière de vivre et surtout sur nos manières de connaître' (Zimmerman, 2007: n.p.). Serres does not purport to have any definitive answers to this multifaceted question.

However, he does express his disquieting anxiety related to how technology has replaced many tasks that used to be performed by the human body. As the philosopher theorises, 'L'homme est un animal dont le corps perd. Chaque fois que nous inventons un outil, l'organisme perd les fonctions qu'il externalise dans l'outil' (Zimmerman, 2007: n.p.). In *Variations sur le corps*, Serres uses the term 'évolution exo-darwinienne' to describe this phenomenon (1999b: 105–7). In addition to the philosophical and social ramifications of exo-Darwinian evolution, the spiritual repercussions of losing our material bodies cannot be overstated. Serres's theories concerning this ongoing process implore the reader to ask whether we are losing a part of ourselves that we may never be able to recover. For Serres, it is our material essence that connects us to the divine biosphere and that permits us to find our small place in the sacred.

In the aforementioned discussion, Serres proposes a simple solution to this quandary. The philosopher suggests that we can restore our dormant senses to their original vitality by making a concerted effort to remove all the barriers that prevent us from experiencing unfiltered material reality. As Serres maintains, ‘Et si vous avez perdu le corps ... il faut marcher deux heures par jour’ (Zimmerman, 2007: n.p.). By momentarily eliminating the obstacles that separate us from the rest of the universe on a regular basis, Serres contends that our sensorial faculties can be renewed. For the Serresian narrator of numerous works, this deliberate effort to escape the confines of human artifice leads to greater self-actualisation, serenity and the creation of meaning. Serres and Chazal both argue that our five senses are a conduit through which we are able to catch a small glimpse of the divine and our relationship to it. Thus, these faculties must be developed to their full potential and shielded from the deleterious effects of exo-Darwinian evolution.

In the opening pages of *Variations sur le corps*, Serres offers a concrete example of how (re)-establishing a direct, sensorial connection to the planet can heal the cosmic alienation to which he often refers. As the philosopher muses, ‘Je marche sur un sol dont la pente se relève doucement ... je me souviens de qui nous fûmes ... Comment avons-nous pu oublier ce rapport élémentaire et animal au monde?’ (1999b: 1, 3). Serres asserts that we have forgotten who and what we are because we no longer have a meaningful relationship with the cosmic forces that thrust us into being and which sustain our existence. In several works including *Le Contrat naturel*, *La Guerre mondiale*, *Le Mal propre*, and *Biogée*, Serres decries the environmental toll of this ecological disconnection. However, not only has this estrangement resulted in an environmental catastrophe of epic proportions, but it has also led to an existential and spiritual crisis.

Compelling the reader to taste the fruits of life, similar to Chazal in *Sens-Plastique*, by distancing himself temporarily from modernity and all its gadgets designed to maximise comfort, Serres poses the question, ‘dans combien de niches vivons, dormons-nous, marchons et travaillons-nous avant de concevoir le courage de nous livrer au monde’ (1999b: 18). Noting the spiritual consequences of the fact that our sensorial facilities are now rarely ever in contact with the ‘world of things’ to which the human race belongs, Serres advises the reader to ‘Pratiquez l’exercice du corps comme préparation à la montée au ciel. Il faut du jarret pour l’ascension de la paroi où vous expérimentez la fête mystique de l’Ascension’ (1999b: 14). In this passage, Serres directly identifies the body as the pathway to spiritual transcendence and redemption. Moreover, the philosopher also encourages the reader to explore the capabilities of his or her body without any inhibitions. According to Serres, this sensual experimentation allows the subject to rise above the absurdity of life by refortifying the instruments through which we taste, touch, smell, hear and see the sacred. Additionally, the author’s intertextual references to the Christian mystic St Francis of Assisi in *Variations sur le corps* and *Musique* reveal that the rediscovery of our senses is an essential part of a spiritual renaissance.⁷

Fusing with the divine universe and embracing material immortality

In *Sens-Plastique* and in Serres’s philosophy, the revitalisation of our senses also reflects the spiritual concept of ‘fusion’. Due to their heightened senses, the Chazalian and Serresian narrators appear to be able to meld into the world around them. As Chazal explains, ‘toucher est fusion’ (1948: 41). In essence, the Chazalian and Serresian spiritual quest is an attempt to become one with the one or to (re)-unite with the cosmic whole from which our species has progressively become displaced.

Highlighting what this spiritual voyage could encompass, the narrator states, 'l'homme perd son individualité, et se fond dans le Tout. Tel est le processus de l'Extase colorée, haschisch de Dieu' (Chazal, 1948: 261–2). The narrator tries to lose himself during these intense moments of elemental ecstasy in an effort to (re)-connect himself to primordial cosmic forces. The significance of this spiritual exercise is best understood in the context of Chazal's comprehension of the physical laws of the universe. In the accompanying postscript to the Gallimard edition entitled 'Comment j'ai crée *Sens-Plastique*', Chazal pinpoints his 'études scientifiques' as one of his main sources of inspiration for this work (1948: 311).

Furthermore, the author reveals that his understanding of the interconnectedness of the universe is what drove him to espouse fusion as an existential remedy. Underscoring the spiritual importance of this sensual fervour to (re)-integrate oneself into the sacred 'uterus', Chazal imagines that he can

se mêler, se fondre en un tout indivisible, comme si je m'étais mêlé à la vie des choses et comme si le monde des choses était entré en moi-intégration totale du monde vivant au monde de l'âme, d'où allait jaillir comme un volcan de son cratère de boue, cette exposition divinatrice de l'*unisme*, qui est l'intégration totale de la vie, et le reflet le plus palpable de la Divinité. (1948: 315)

Like Serres, Chazal is fully aware that a complete fusion, which would necessitate him being able to break out of his material shape or escape from his ontological shell of being, is impossible. The total (re)-integration to which Chazal refers could only happen after death when his energy is recycled to generate new life. Yet the Mauritian author strives to recover a lost sense of cosmic harmony. The Chazalian narrator tries to sync the movement of his body with the cyclic rhythms of the earth. These efforts are motivated by a spiritual conviction that the biosphere is a sacred entity that should be worshipped. The goal of this elemental communion is to form a more perfect union with the forces that came together with a big bang approximately four and a half billion years ago to create all life on this planet.

In *Sens-Plastique*, the Chazalian narrator's attempts at fusing with the natural world to which he realises he is linked facilitate a profound state of inner peace related to a different notion of eternal life. This conception of eternity, based on scientific logic, illustrates the greatest existential paradox of all. Although mortality is inscribed in the genetic code of each species from birth, a type of immortality is also paradoxically unavoidable given that nothing ever completely dies in a universe that recycles material particles and energy to conceive new life. This epiphany is a source of consolation for the Chazalian narrator. It also provides a deeper sense of meaning. As the author maintains, 'le Cosmos est éternel en tant que principe en Dieu, comme l'âme est immortelle' (1948: 158).⁸ The author reiterates, 'La Vie est le rhizome de l'Éternité' (1948: 180). In numerous passages, Chazal equates God with the 'eternal', cosmic forces that eventually paved the way for human life. For Chazal, to know the biosphere is to understand the face of God. The Chazalian narrator takes solace from the realisation that a small part of him will continue long after the last human being perishes. As the author underscores, 'nous ne pouvons pas abdiquer notre immortalité' (1948: 226).

The notions of fusion and material immortality are also omnipresent in Serresian spirituality. Given the sheer amount of explicit references to the spiritual concept of fusion in several works including *Nouvelles du monde*, *Les Cinq Sens*, *Variations sur le corps*, *Musique* and *Biogée*, it is surprising that this element of Serres's vast philosophical project has yet to be investigated systematically by the academic community.⁹ In Serres's recent work *Musique* (2011) fusion is directly associated with the primordial musicality of the universe. In *Musique*, the philosopher describes the universe as being 'musical' because rhythmic cycles govern the universal physical laws of the

biosphere. Serres even speculates that the first songs created by human civilisation might have been the result of an attempt to emulate these cosmic sonorities (Serres, 2011: 23).

One of Serres's reflections concerning the 'philosophie de la musique qui incarne le vrai langage du monde et des vivants'¹⁰ closely resembles the elemental matrimony advocated by the Chazalian narrator during his sensual encounters with the earth. When he is attempting to (re)-integrate himself into the cosmic whole near the end of the narrative, the Serresian narrator of *Musique* listens to the organic vibrations of the planet before trying to harmonise his body with these musical tonalities. As the author hypothesises,

Voulez-vous dire, alors, que les signes des codes décident des choses du monde, de leur existence, de leur réalité ... Que signifient ces mélanges, ces alliages ... Où chercher la goutte de vin mêlée à l'eau de l'océan ... Ce livre dit mille choses de la musique ... la Musique opère un alliage entre dur et doux. Se montre, se cache, s'égare, se perd dans cette fusion. (2011 : 156)

In addition to adding another potential layer of complexity to Serres's theories related to the 'hard' and 'soft' meticulously examined by Steven Connor (2010), this passage illustrates the spiritual importance of the subject's quest to lose himself momentarily into the greater object.

In *Variations sur le corps*, the narrator expresses this same zest to melt into the sacred, cosmic whole. Reiterating scientific principles that stress unity, the philosopher explains,

Sans doute, tout ce monde et tous ces doubles ne font qu'un; sans doute, l'interne et l'externe se soudent pour fusionner en une seule variété: tous sont moi, je suis tous les hommes qui ne sont qu'un, qui sont le monde et le monde m'absorbe. (1999b: 56–7)

Serres's reflections concerning ecological unity appear to trigger a sort of philosophical reverie during which he realises that there is no separation from the world of things. In a similar way to Chazal, fusion represents a spiritual pathway in Serres's works. Both authors endeavour to rediscover a lost sense of harmony that was fractured when various modalities of matter began to differentiate themselves from each other in a drastic fashion after the big bang. For this reason, the elemental euphoria actuated during these efforts to fuse with the biosphere also induces cosmogonic revelations in *Sens-Plastique* and throughout Serres's oeuvre. Chazal and Serres are cognisant that the erudition and edification that they seek are buried deep inside of the material layers of a cosmos whose origins date back billions of years. Hence, the only way to approach this knowledge and the terrestrial incarnation of the divine is to plunge oneself as deeply as possible into the pulsating heart of matter itself.

In *Biogée*, the ecstasy which engulfs the subject during the spiritual exercise of fusion is also associated with a different concept of eternal life which is reminiscent of the immortality celebrated by Chazal in *Sens-Plastique*. During these instants of sensual intoxication, the narrator affirms, 'Mêlée à la perfection de l'Univers, mon âme neuve n'a plus taille ni âge. Immense comme l'espace, elle dure, douce, plus que la durée' (Serres, 2010: 159–60). Like the Chazalian narrator, the Serresian narrator seems to derive a form of serenity from the knowledge that he will live on after his death, albeit in a different ontological shape. The notion of eternity outlined by Serres in *Biogée* also corresponds to his critique of widely accepted ideas concerning time in Western society. Serres's 'materialistic' view of time emphasises the 'endless wheel of deaths and resurrections' (Ma, 2006: 242; Girard, 2005: 13). Since energy is constantly being transferred and matter is endlessly reinventing itself, Serres asserts that time is 'folded and crumpled' as opposed to being linear (Clayton, 2012: 241).¹¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chazal and Serres incessantly underscore the materiality of the human condition. Their ecocentric worldview is supported by contemporary scientific theories which highlight unity. Chazalian and Serresian spirituality is also firmly grounded in ecological realities. As evidenced by the veritable force of the aforementioned sensorial privileged moments which inundate the subject with intense feelings of bliss, both authors clearly valorise life and everything that it has to offer. Chazal and Serres assert that despite the fact that existence has no innate meaning for a sentient being tossed into an absurd universe, life can be extremely worthwhile and purposeful for those who know how to taste, touch, feel, smell and hear the so-called ‘world of things’ to which everything is connected. The ontological remedies proposed by Chazal and Serres for diminishing existential anguish and living life to the full rely on a subject having keen senses which allow him or her to (re)-establish a primordial link to the larger object or cosmic shell. The existential pantheism espoused by both writers reflects a viable alternative to dominant religious paradigms in addition to a less anthropocentric way of thinking that is crucial for the survival of humanity and the imperilled planet as we know it. Nonetheless, although this suggested paradigm shift and all of the philosophical, ecological, social and spiritual ramifications that it entails is inspired by scientific theories, the cosmic alienation decried by both writers could likely prevent this vision from ever coming to fruition. The blueprint highlighted by Chazal and Serres for (re)-discovering matter and ourselves in the process has the potential to help us lead more fulfilling lives and to have a healthier, more sustainable relationship to the planet. However, have globalisation, urbanisation, the modern lifestyle and exo-Darwinian evolution already numbed our senses to such an extent that the spiritual pathways for accessing these divine correspondences will soon be forever blocked?

Notes

1. Researchers have proposed several theories to explain why Serres, designated as an ‘immortel’ by the French Academy and awarded the prestigious Dan David Prize, has yet to receive the recognition that he truly deserves. Perhaps, the most common explanation is that reading an author who incessantly transgresses academic divisions requires a rather extensive base of knowledge from multiple fields. In an intellectual climate epitomised by overspecialisation, very few individuals are educated in this fashion. For a more comprehensive discussion concerning Serres’s inability to penetrate the mainstream, see Paulson (2000: 215–28).
2. In a recent article about Malcolm de Chazal, Adelaide Russo affirms, ‘l’emploi de la personnification souligne ... [une] vision anthropomorphique du monde’ (2010: 565). However, Chazal appears to employ personification to emphasise human smallness in *Sens-Plastique*. In short, humans are compared to other animals because ‘les animaux sont tous les mêmes’ from a scientific perspective (1948: 246). Moreover, Osman notes that Chazal clearly stipulates that ‘l’homme vit dans un monde absurde’ just like every other sentient and non-sentient being (1993: 94).
3. Although Chazal seems to accept nearly all of the basic principles of evolution, he also discusses the importance of involution in *Sens-Plastique*. However, this significant nuance transcends the limitations of this study. Additionally, Amina Osman has already sufficiently examined this phenomenon (Osman, 1993).
4. In several other passages, it becomes evident that the ‘God’ to which Chazal is referring is the universe. Clearly explaining his spiritual convictions, Chazal declares, ‘Le Dieu collectif et immanent dépasse notre jugement, comme la goutte d’eau ne peut voir l’océan ... on ne peut additionner ou soustraire Dieu. Dieu est l’universel Quotient’ (1948: 96–7). Noting that Chazal would indeed break from the Swedenborgian church adopting a more pantheistic vision, Jean-Louis Joubert asserts, ‘il a très vite élaboré sa propre conception, très originale’ (2007: 37).
5. In numerous works, Serres also laments the nefarious effects of television which he blames for the inception of hyper-reality that has taken the place of the real. According to Serres, the modern subject is

constantly being bombarded by a deluge of meaningless information from a myriad of digital screens. This proliferation has lulled our senses to sleep.

6. Both authors use the term 'uterus' to describe the cosmic whole which they often identify as being sacred. See Chazal (1948: 167, 289) and in addition Serres (2010: 45, 123).
7. Although the spiritual convictions expressed by Serres clearly fit into the mould of a type of existential pantheism inspired by contemporary scientific explanations, his admiration for St Francis of Assisi is quite evident. In *Musique*, Serres calls 'le troubadour d'Assise' his 'seul maître vénéré' (2011: 59). Serres does not conform to the dogma of any organised religion whatsoever, or to the rigid confines of any thought system, but he respects this Catholic saint because of his deep cosmic sensibilities.
8. Expressing similar sentiments in a later passage, Chazal declares, 'Le soleil se recrée en permanence, comme Dieu est en naissance perpétuelle, et comme l'immortalité est la renaissance à perpétuité' (1948: 271).
9. Although several researchers such as Abbas (2005), Assad (2000) and Brown (2005) have briefly broached the subject of what Serresian spirituality could encompass, more systematic analyses related to this complex topic are warranted. Thus, this study aims to start a meaningful dialogue about the spiritual aspects of Serres's philosophy.
10. This quotation is taken from the front cover of *Musique* (2011). In the absence of critical studies dedicated to this recent work, this citation serves as an accurate description of this interdisciplinary project.
11. A comprehensive exploration of all the nuances of the Serresian concept of time transcend the pragmatic limitations of this essay. However, for a more systematic discussion of this subject, see the researchers cited above.

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