

THEORY ON TV MAKING A KILLING

LAURENCE A. RICKELS TALKS WITH MICHEL SERRES

Since the late '50s Michel Serres has been attending to the latest in systems of communication, and to their repetition and rehearsal of problems that still spill out of the archives or lexica of philosophy, literature, and myth. Technology isn't only about machines; it's built out of discursive building blocks that are also blockages, aporia that just won't go away. Such is the problem of murder, which Serres sees as the initiating event and advent of representation. Is there anything new about the rep or rap given murder in our most current, media contexts of serial repetition? Or are we still stuck in the age-old context or contest between iconophiles and iconoclasts that right from the start of our mass culture has mixed the sense of "mass" as group, and as metonym for the media, with the word's destined meaning of Christian Communion?

This was already the program in Serres' first book, *Hermes, 1957*, and it has continued right through *Atlas*, a new work (coming soon in English translation) reflecting his hands-on investment in the technologization of pedagogy. For four or five years now Serres has been in charge of mapping out a how-to report on the organization of France's projected "open university," a university, in other words or worlds, that would stay open to and through all possible networks (telephone, fax, Minitel, television, cable, E-mail, the Internet), reorganizing itself as a system of teaching capable of keeping in touch even with those who cannot afford to plug into the traditional system or transmission of education. This opening of the university across all the networks embodies both a crisis in the teaching profession and an outside chance for its survival.

At the University of California, Santa Barbara, last fall, Serres summarized his immediate reflections on the network messages or broadcasts he's been surveying and surveilling. The talk was about television, about its *enchantment*, the enchantment that chains, which lies, ultimately, in the telling of the "meta-ile," a new dimension of transference or nontransference emerging out of the alternation between the news and advertising. (A recap appears as a chapter in *Atlas*.) Free-associating from Serres' lecture, it seemed to me that there has indeed been very little serious thinking about television to date: Is TV the safety catch in our ongoing technologization and mass-psychologization, or is it the catch (like a catch in the throat) in our recent turns to computer technology for supersavings in and through the wide-open-spacing of information access and excess? I thought it was time—primal time—to collect the inside views or news of theory on TV. —LR

LAURENCE A. RICKELS: *You have encountered on television, it seems, a certain primal limit or block in the building of the so-called open university, the internet of wide-open teaching.*

MICHEL SERRES: There are limits set to teaching on every type of channel—television, radio, etc.—and my thoughts on this are that we cannot teach everything on every channel. Some disciplines beam up better on television, others are diffused best on other channels, still others can only be transmitted via the text. We see, for example, that geometry, geography, topology, and the like cannot be taught without a schema, an image, whereas other disciplines can be broadcast intact on the radio.

One of the issues around this question is the idea of the larger-than-life presence of the professor. I discuss this problem in the second part of my last book, *Atlas*, saying, for example, that the presence of the teacher is very useful for teaching but it also sets up blocks. We used to have young people who couldn't learn math because they hated their math professor, or who liked their philosophy professor so much that they became fanatics and lost their freedom of thought. There are limits to the big idea of presence, and they rival those said to beset the new channels of information.

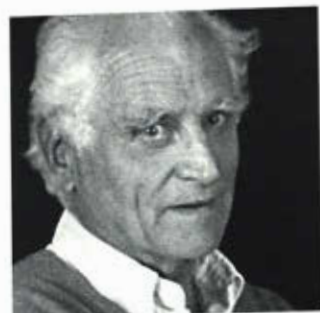
LR: *So what Freud called transference is just another channel?*

MS: I don't know if the issue is Freudian transference. What happens between students and professors was addressed way before Freud—Plato said it quite well in the *Phaedrus*, where he remarks that between teacher and student there is a relationship like that between *erastes* and *eromanes*, the lover and the loved—a moving, emotional relationship, then. Have you never fallen in love with a film star? A rock star? These mass transferences may be of a different nature, but they exist.

LR: *Yes, but where does the haunting, the essence of Freud's take on transference, go? If we relocate the transference to the TV setting of its transmission, it would seem that we're tuning in a new displacement of or immunity to haunting. You have suggested that the pile-up of corpses on TV represents murders without the haunting. Serialized, the mass of murder, its supersavings economy of sacrifice, comes down to what we call killing time in front of the tube.*

MS: The experts say that a child of 14 has seen 20,000 murders up close on TV. This is new in history. A Greek soldier, or a soldier in World War I, had something of this experience, but not in this quantity. This is such a quantitative rise that it creates a new threshold, and we don't know what the results will be.

It seems to me impossible to speak of catharsis here in Aristotelian and



Michel Serres. Photo: William Stern.

Freudian terms; we've gone beyond the limits of the drawing board, and have nothing to refer to, no previous experiment to consult. We need to admit that we're in a new state, and that, secondly, the step we've taken is a pedagogical one. This seems the most important issue. It's not catharsis I want to talk about in this setting, but mimesis. At the same time that we saw a rise in this type of representation, we saw a rise in the number of child murders in high schools. This is a fairly significant problem. And that our literary, tragic, historical, psychological/psychoanalytical experience permits us to master it—that is also something new. What I dream of is television that is aware or conscious that it truly is a pedagogical channel, so that there is no longer a separation between television's job and the teacher's job.

LR: *So television's division and confusion between advertising and information can somehow be overcome?*

MS: I don't know where to begin this analysis. Simply to make visible the new status of the lie, simply to define the difference between the message and the channel, already forces us to conduct a new analysis—an analysis in which the lie implicates the message but the meta-lie concerns the whole channel. Lying refers only to content; with the meta-lie a preceding discourse intervenes, and what comes out is publicity, advertising. The messages that travel on the channel depend enormously on who owns the channel, who is in charge of it. The truth of the lie must be analyzed in a new way according to the channel's owner. I make a strong distinction between the technology and the communication, the message.

LR: *You've talked about AIDS as somehow analogous with your idea of the lie and the meta-lie.*

MS: There is certainly an analogy. With an infectious disease, there is a microbe that produces antibodies in the body, and there's a direct battle between the body and the antibodies—a battle with content. But AIDS is not a conventional infectious disease, for the person with AIDS risks many diseases—not one, but many. All infectious diseases are possible. Imagine a box, with the question being what is inside it and what is outside. AIDS is a "box" sickness: the AIDS virus attacks the immune defenses of the box itself. And if the box is broken, anything can get in. Because AIDS attacks the immune defense system, the box, it is not just a disease but a meta-disease. It's a new strategy or tactic. I don't know enough about AIDS to speak wisely on the subject, but the analogy seems a good one to me.

LR: *It's also suggestive in the context of television constantly broadcasting all these murders, which overwhelms a certain ability to control violence—overwhelms a certain immune system supported by inoculative shocks or shots of the catastrophe of violence.*

MS: I didn't intend that type of analogy; the analogies I made were simply local. I would merely say that the newness of the situation doesn't allow me to dislike its consequences. I have nothing to say in this regard, because I come from a generation that didn't know about this formation and information but that nevertheless produced millions of dead, World War II, etc. The generation that precedes you has nothing to say on this point. The question of AIDS is a long-term investment; we need to be very attentive to it. The real question is the question of education.

LR: *With the invention of audio- and videotape, both certainly part of television, complete surveillance was possible—everything was opened up to a kind of live transmission. At the same time, though, all evidence could be tampered with: the same tape that permits surveillance also admits the possibility of simulation. We're constantly taking in these TV or live murders, but they are not admissible as evidence, and I'm wondering if this has something to do with the kind of*

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murder you were talking about, and with the crisis you tuned in on television.

MS: One needs to be careful with this issue: the people who watch TV are smarter than we think. But there's something they can't see. Last year, 18 months ago, all the TV stations in the world showed the murder of a woman in Somalia. (I saw it on TV in America and in France.) Everyone was shocked by these images—very indignant. I'm talking about murder, not violence. Violence is vague but murders are countable, we can come up with statistics. The scene was very well filmed; someone figured out that there were three or four cameras. Imagine a dialogue with one of the cameramen. I want to ask him, "Look, the woman who was killed, was it your sister?" "No! It wasn't my sister," replies the cameraman. "I'm from the U.S., and this is a Somali woman, so it's not my sister." "Excuse me, but if it had been your sister, what would you have done? Would you have filmed her?" "No! If it had been my sister, I would have put the camera down and defended her." "So, it's not your sister?"

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looking forward from it (to the '70s gay-liberation movement and its '80s and '90s outgrowths) Weber looks back before Stonewall, to lives like those led by some of the characters whose lives were chronicled in the famous documentary of that name. His intriguingly twisted coming-out story remains caught in the brambles of his nostalgia for, mainly, the '50s. And despite his enormous commercial success, which demonstrates his understanding of the icons our moment desires, his nostalgic vision necessarily brings him into conflict with a younger gay generation for whom, for better or worse, Maria Callas is just a name.

The other great generational divide for gay men, however, is AIDS, and this backdrop to *Gentle Giants*, paradoxically, starts to give the film a subtle strength. "Yet for all its wildness," Weber intones in a not unpleasant voice, "that was a real innocent time and nobody thought about getting hurt. I made a lot of friends then, but sadly most of them aren't around anymore." It is in this moment of *Gentle Giants*, with its longing for "a real innocent time," that the heart sides with Weber. The ironies of the film multiply. Weber's hypocrisy regarding his own homoeroticism, a hypocrisy rendered ludicrous in his substitution of dogs for dicks, commingles strangely with his far more sympathetic nostalgia for a freely indulged yet somehow still innocent sexuality. It is the force of that contradiction and its unraveling of the expected that give *Gentle Giants* the flavor of real art. □

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Very few moral principles exist, but there is at least one: anyone in danger of dying in front of me is my brother or sister. If you were in danger and in front of me, you would be my brother. That's the definition. Now consider the men who were filming, one holding the camera, one holding the cord, one holding the battery, another for sound—there must have been ten of them there, filming her without defending her. Who killed this woman? Who killed her? It's a real question.

There are variants on simulated murder, real murder, etc. But we always forget that there is an intermediary in the image. I want to address this intermediary. He's transparent, invisible, we don't see him.

LR: *And he becomes visible in advertising?*

MS: In some ways yes, because he announces himself and says ridiculous things. It is still a critique of the visual when we ask just what are we watching. Are there intermediaries in the image? What do these intermediaries do? These are the questions we need to ask. They're very interesting questions, and they'll be asked by more and more people as education spreads through other networks. Who owns the channel? These questions will be asked again. An entirely new epistemology is created on these new channels of transmission, and some day it will be very useful. Education will finish by leaving the campus altogether rather than just crossing over from a base inside its walls.

I made a mistake in the story of the Somali woman—I should have said "your daughter," not "your sister." If I had said "your daughter" you would have recognized Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, his son. There was an early-19th-century German artist who painted the sacrifice of Isaac, and he called the painting *The Birth of Representation*. And he was right. We are not at all far in this discussion of the Somali woman from the discussion in Byzantium between the iconophiles and the iconoclasts, the discussion that forever separated Muslims and Jews on the one side and Indo-Europeans and Christians on the other. For most of the people who engaged in this discussion in Byzantium, representation was a crime. And if you follow the evolution of representation, it becomes fatally more like murder. Murder is the essence of

representation, the birth of representation.

The problem for the iconophiles and the iconoclasts was, "What do we do? We're murderers." The iconoclasts said there shouldn't be any images because there shouldn't be any murders. We should only have arabesques on the wall. The Christians said, No, we will take this murder upon ourselves, but it will be the last—it will be the Crucifixion. The question of iconophilia and iconoclasm proved decisive for Western philosophy.

LR: *And the Christian stopgap solution was the beginning of the serialization of murder?*

MS: It was the beginning of the philosophical study of representation. The television image understands how images work. But the same old question returns of what should be represented. It is both a new problem, since it's shown on technically advanced networks, and an age-old one at the same time, once again bringing together the histories of philosophy, religion, and science. □

Laurence A. Rickels is the author of *The Case of California* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), *Aberrations of Mourning* (Wayne State University Press, 1988), and other works, and is about to complete two new books, *The Vampire Lectures and Nazi Psychoanalysis*. His conversation with Michel Serres is the first of a series of interviews he will publish in *Artforum*, "Theory on TV."

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rather than a soapbox for my views on them. It is still a small regret, easily rationalized away, that I went ahead and did it anyway.

Remorse, of course, is necessary for a critic. All criticism, good and bad, has an edge of inhumanity to it, which is tolerable only if we can rest content that the critic is the biggest loser of all. Hazlitt's miseries license Hazlitt's dogmas. Think of poor Dr. Johnson's pain when Boswell painted an alternate fantasy life in which Johnson might have ended up a judge: "Why torment a man with these things when it is too late!" the Great Cham cried, full of despair. Imagine wanting to be a judge, hanging Georgian small fry, instead of being Dr. Johnson!

My disappointment is smaller: I wanted to be a songwriter. I would rather have written "Two Sleepy People" than *To The Finland Station*. (The record shows that I wrote neither, but you get my point.) The songwriting side of my work—the little things, the valentines and poems—are still the side that gives me the most pleasure. I have been working for years on a musical with my friend the novelist Meg Wolitzer. We will finish it, someday.

Having said that, I should also say that I don't think it matters, much. Mary Gordon once carried on in the presence of a couple of good critics that since they must have wanted some other fate, theirs was a debased, secondhand profession. Actually, what makes criticism interesting as a form is the fact that it isn't too overloaded with heart's desire. It is talk, rather than confession, and benefits from being snappy, cosmopolitan, rather than deep. I enjoy reading criticism—the collected essays of Clive James or James Agee—more than I enjoy reading anything else. So my disappointment is largely notional, abstract. There may be pathos in a critic's life, but it is the pathos of life itself. Criticism is a happy form, best practiced by sad folk. The reviewer, poor guy, may be one suffering oyster; the pearls, if any, are pearls.

CI: *You paint a pretty, pathetic picture. Yet you are a quick man with a mean line, no?*

AG: Aggression is the dirty secret to which we must give way. I have written a few mean things in my day, and wish I hadn't, though I think that on the whole the toxic level is tolerable.

CI: *Your style has been described as a kind of anthology of New Yorker writers. From whom do you, uh, borrow?*

AG: Too many to list, though if I had to name two, they would both be writers whom I have had the good luck to edit for most of the past decade. Whitney Balliett is, as Philip Larkin said, a critic who raises jazz criticism to the status of poetry; his constant feeling for the little inner beats of sentences—when to decorate, when to slow down—is an endless lesson. He hardly needs editing, of course, but pretending to edit him was a way to learn to write. Once, in a piece about Sarah Vaughan, I saw that he had carefully whited-out a line. I held it up to the light of my 43rd Street office and read, "She leaned over a song, like a voluptuous woman leaning over a book." I saved that. It is my only noble achievement as an editor.

Wilfrid Sheed, who isn't strictly a *New Yorker* writer—except in a self-made, ham-radio-operator way—but whom I have edited as a critic and novelist, is the best reviewer this country has produced. I slink away from his stuff, even when I've edited it, in wonder at its apparent ease, profundity, and constant flow not of wit—which would be tiresome—but of humor, which is rare: a real sense of proportion, set dancing. He is the only American critic who regularly manages to use an idiomatic and racy style while remaining intellectually aristocratic. Write in a racy style and sooner or later the racy style starts writing you (viz. Pauline Kael). Sheed is saved from this, I have sometimes thought, because, being neither quite English nor quite American, none of his idioms is really idiomatic; even his demotic is a self-conscious instrument of style.

Among those closer to my own stuff the list is probably not too surprising. When I came on the scene, Robert Hughes took up all the air in the room, just by breathing in and out. His lungs are that strong. If I had an ambition, I used to say, it was to play Max Beerbohm to his Bernard Shaw—to find a little wry voice to play against his booming and robust one. You could preface his remarks with "Sir,"—in fact they ought to be prefaced with "Sir." Feigning Boswellian ignorance, I once asked him what the difference was between him and Hilton Kramer. "It is the difference between an alligator and a jackass: one bites, the other brays." That needs a "Sir," in front. Now that he takes up less air—just because he's gone on to other and bigger arenas—I've been more relaxed about taking up his subjects. Perhaps my lungs have expanded. Or maybe the room has just gotten smaller.

Hughes' gifts as a satirist, and his capacity for outrage, can sometimes swamp one's consciousness of his deeper and greater gift, which is for a kind of robust sensual description—of Eric Fischl's paint surface as a marriage of semen and barbecue sauce, for example. Art criticism ought to be rooted in sensual experience, or else who needs it? It ought to be a nearer relation to wine-tasting than to dialectic-bending. The wine-tasting can turn into logic-chopping—most wine-tasting does; have you ever heard two wine-tasters argue?—but it ought to begin there.

Don Shula once said that winning is the ethic of football, meaning that nothing else mattered if you didn't win, to which Roy Blount added that credibility is the morality of fiction; it doesn't matter how noble, sensitive, or fair a story is if it doesn't sound as though it happened just like that. In the same way, description is the ethic of art criticism. It is not the frosting, the little bit extra, the "tap-dancing on the typewriter," as one fond critic of my work has called it; it is the only guarantee of seriousness the reader has. An art critic is only as good as his or her descriptions. The pressure that's required to describe—sheer, physical pressure, by the way, which leaves the describer dripping at the armpits—is the proof of a real, rather than a merely ideological, engagement with whatever's being looked at. An object well described pays a double compliment, *continued on page 122*