TRAVELLING ON PLANETS OF RESONATING CONCEPTS. IDENTIFICATION AND DIRECTIONALITY BETWEEN COMPUTATIONAL AND ARCHITECTONIC SELENA SAVIĆ

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At any given moment of the day, the breeze plays on your cheek,
and since it carries codes from everywhere,
it's telling you about the state of the body of the world.

—Michel Serres, *Angels. A Modern Myth*

When the night train departs from Zurich main station, the conductor in the sleeping wagon collects the passengers' tickets and keeps them for the night. He holds on to what used to be a unique copy of one's entitlement to travel, allowing him to keep track of people on board, both to make sure they do not overstay and to wake the passengers up before their station. Tickets are digital today, and can be printed in as many copies as we wish, but a stamped ticket is still a proof of travel. It is the key to the trip, something with which we can track somebody's movement.

Unlike the movement of passengers between two places, which requires energy to move the body and is usually intentional, concepts turn up in distant disciplinary discourses without much effort and without a plan. Between domains of thinking, concepts appear to move and propel novel articulations, new ways of thinking. But ways of thinking are always augmented if we really are thinking, because thinking is inventing, observed the French philosopher Michel Serres.¹ When concepts 'travel' between discourses, for example between computer science and architecture, they store information on directionality that propels this movement. Instead of tracing particular travels of concepts, for which a ticket and a unique identity is needed, I propose to look at concepts as message-bearers, which let messages propagate almost transparently, almost without effort. This text articulates a proposal for a sort of travel agency on a planet of resonating concepts. On this planet, concept-passports open up communication between different arguments and positions. The agency proposes itineraries by indexes of similarity, such that one can experience the excitement of an intellectual adventure or the pleasure of familiarity with provincial ideas; the joy of engaging with the local or the comfort of travelling globally.

How could we demonstrate, and reflect upon the indexes of important concepts and phrases that store information on their different meanings? Disciplinary discourses tend to concentrate and homogenize,

1 Serres makes his argument about thinking (inventing) and information (rarity) by putting these two notions in a relation: "What is thinking, if not at least carrying out these four operations: receiving, emitting, storing and processing information like all existing things? [...] This information circulates in the world of things and between living things as well as between us—humans—and it constitutes the bedrock of thinking. [...] thinking means inventing: getting hold of rarity, discovering the secret of that which has the huge and contingent chance to exist or to be born tomorrow—*natura*, nature, means that which will be born" Michel Serres, 'Information and Thinking', in *Philosophy After Nature*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn, trans. Joeri Visser (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 14.

inclined towards increasing precision of technical terminology at the cost of having a systemic overview. Treating concepts as vessels made up of the ‘stuff’ through which they navigate could potentially open this jargon and homogeneity of discourses to self-organized vectors of meaning. Engaging with secluded disciplinary discourses can be confusing or downright dangerous at times—it means confronting contradictory arguments, challenging those that one holds unchallengeable. Concept-passports could serve as a way to identify the terminology, document the conditions for coming in and going out, and establish this space as an organized and public space. The vectors lend themselves to be navigated by a sort of a travel agency—an agency that could make one care for concepts, to be interested in articulating thought precisely.

IDENTIFICATION AND PASSAGE OF CONCEPTS IN HUMANITIES AND NATURAL SCIENCES

In a disciplinary discourse, concepts act as vectors that give direction and facilitate identification of meaning. We could observe intentionality in the movement of individual concepts if we were to focus on the intentions of authors who used them, or imported them from different discourses. For example, Johnathan Culler traced the movement of the concept of *performative* between philosophy and literature.² He documented prominent use of the concept, starting with J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he claims that language not only reports, but performs. Culler then explains the ‘mutations’ the concept of performative went through when picked up by literary critics who discussed literature *as* performative; by Derrida and de Man who focus on the iterability of language; and finally by feminist theory and cultural studies, where the question of gender is addressed through the notion of performativity. This interest in gender, coupled with the attention given to semiotic materiality, propels an articulation of an onto-epistemology in new materialist tradition, a way of looking at meaning as always/already coming from somewhere.³ For Culler, the travel of the concept of performative is a series of generalizations of specific aspects—that of utterance or iterability—which result in sometimes contradictory interpretations of Austin’s treatment of *speech act*. We can take notice then of how Culler chooses to emphasize the difference in what is at stake for Austin and Butler, or for Austin and Derrida. He observes and makes us see the disparities. Although he claims not to look for the ‘right’ use, his gesture is diagnostic, analytical, looking for anomalies and

2 J. Culler, ‘Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative’, *Poetics Today* 21, no. 3 (1 September 2000): 503–19, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-21-3-503>.

3 Iris van der Tuin, ‘Diffraction as a Methodology for Feminist Onto-Epistemology: On Encountering Chantal Chawaf and Posthuman Interpellation’, *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (3 July 2014): 231–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927631>.

misunderstandings. Culler's analysis treats travel as 'rare' while in fact, the movement of concepts, just as speech is abundant.

Mieke Bal promises us no such journey. In her book *Travelling Concepts*, she tries to capture the movement of concepts on a more abstract plane: She proposes a kind of a "rough guide" for specific interdisciplinary endeavours.⁴ Bal's chapter, *Performance and Performativity*, is a discussion on productive confusion, starting from the common root of the two words and the fact that they rarely appear together. Performance is prominent in art history, which never speaks of performativity; when performativity is discussed in humanities, performance is not mentioned. Bal proposes a look at artworks as theoretical objects that foreground the performativity of performance. Bal focuses on *intention* confirmed in the separation of the two concepts, and the way *performativity* breaks the dogma of intentionalism in cultural studies. Bal approaches anti-intentionalism from the context of authorship ('to mean something'), challenging the position of authority that comes with it. She specifically addresses her criticism towards the treatment of artworks in art history, which focuses on authors' intentions to give the meaning to objects. Bal's approach treats artworks as theoretical objects, replacing intentionalism with a different voice of subjectivity.⁵ We cannot own knowledge, Bal insists: Truth is in the many meanings of the cultural object. Operating within and addressing the problems of cultural analysis, she uses concepts in cultural analysis as a way to understand the object on the object's own terms.⁶ Bal's continued attention to the object's participation in the production of meaning points in the direction of Serres' objective knowledge, the impersonal agency of thinking seeking instructions from its object⁷, but her ambition to analyse culture parts ways with the possibility to treat contingencies objectively.

Concepts, Bal insists, need to be explicit, clear and defined so that they can do what they do—they mean something and facilitate invention—while at the same time needing to be flexible, so that they can move. *Travel* suggests that these qualities—being explicit, clear and defined and at the same time flexible—are the basis for an intellectual adventure. Bal's gesture produces a map of this trip. Her *Travelling Concepts* therefore operates topologically, it maps the territory travelled by concepts.

We can sense in the work of Culler and Bal the interest in movement as something that opens more interesting perspectives than scrutiny of individual words or concepts as methods. Informed by, but not continuing these efforts, the interest of this text is to consider ways

4 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Green College Lectures (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

5 Ibid., 181.

6 Ibid., 8.

7 Vera Bühlmann, *Mathematics and Information in the Philosophy of Michel Serres*, Michel Serres and Material Futures (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

to work with concepts, which is outside of tracing their use in specific contexts (such as literature studies, cultural analysis, philosophy, or computer science and architecture). It is about a spectrality of sense, about letting concepts radiate the abundance of information that they collect by being present in different discourses.

Mieke Bal's take on the movement of concepts between science and culture relates to Stengers' gesture of probing travelling concepts in natural sciences. Stengers observes a certain disinterest, Bal tells us, propelled by the realization of the loss of neutrality in scientific discourse. She thus proposes in her book *d'une science à l'autre*, to think of concepts as issues of debate. Bal discusses how the normative epistemology of natural sciences gets imported and incorporated in humanistic inquiries. She presents the way these two nevertheless share a concern with concept *propagation*—*diffusion* or *contamination*, depending on the seriousness and interest in the concept's application. Bal asserts: A good concept is capable of founding a scientific discipline or field.

In her treatment of language, Mieke Bal emphasizes the distinction between words and concepts—concepts are theoretical tools and words are ordinary, we use them every day.⁸ But this distinction blurs the most important claim about the way concepts appear in discourses: Their directionality is generic, undecided. Instead of carefully tracing how concepts travel in specific instances throughout literature and scientific writing, I propose to use concepts to transport ourselves to a planet of arguments. A travel guide organizes stories around places where they happened. A travel agency, on the other hand, proposes places to enjoy based on indexes of liking.

Michel Serres makes a different gesture with the apparently similar movement. The similarity is in the attempt to articulate the movement between the two domains of intellectual inquiry. Both Serres and Bal talk about the communication between natural sciences and humanities. Bal takes an analytical approach, proposing two types of propagation: one that is productive of meaning and the other which is somehow destructive of it. Serres, on the other hand, places no judgement as to how this movement is supposed to happen. Using the shipping passage in northern Canada connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific as a metaphor, he shows how unstable the passageway between the natural sciences and the humanities is: The Northwest Passage changes every year with freezing water and melting ice.⁹ Providing maps does not help. There can be no general map or method that secures the passage; one has to find a way each time, whenever one wants

8 Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 23.

9 Michel Serres, *Le Passage Du Nord-Ouest*, Collection 'Critique' 5 (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980).

to travel these dangerous waters. The passage opens with communication. Communication, though possible and vital, is always difficult and unique.¹⁰ Translation is what bridges and connects the opposing sides.

Unlike Bal, who is concerned with demonstrating concepts as a methodological basis in cultural analysis and humanities in general¹¹, Michel Serres seeks specifically to address concepts that travel between the humanities and natural sciences. Serres is not concerned with characterizing propagation in terms of productiveness (what Bal characterizes as diffusion and contamination in the way concepts propagate) but in letting them be undecided, to be decided upon each use. The passage requires thinking, and this implies reflection rather than original brilliance. Let us now have a look at the passage between the domains of architecture and computation, and how terminology here informs and brands thinking.

THE PASSAGE BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND COMPUTATION

The connection between the domains of architecture and computer science is apparently more stable. Import and export are traced with relative ease. We can observe two dominant ways in which computational terminology has been used to propel new ways of thinking in architecture. On one side, theorists examine how computer software affects the practice of architecture, mainly in terms of generative morphology. They document how computational concepts change (or not) the thinking about geometry and morphology¹², form and structure¹³ in the practice of architecture. This fascination with structure points towards an assumption that there is an underlying logic or order, one that can give form to a building or arrange nodes of a network. Architecture as a formal structure lends itself to such interpretation in terms of grammar and style. The connection between computation and architecture, in this theoretical tradition is made in terms of structure. The fascination with non-standard, perceived irregularity appears as the key indicator of objects and projects of interest. The role of the computer here is pragmatic—it is able to compute and represent complex geometries efficiently and clearly. One more thing typical of this thinking is that its considerations are past-oriented, looking at practice in an interpretative way. It projects as a mainstream future vision that which is already happening in marginal practices—the gesture is to extrapolate and then spread, distribute.

10 Michel Serres, *Hermes. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). (See the introduction, *Journal a plusieurs voix* by editors Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell.)

11 See Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 5.

12 Frédéric Migayrou, ed., *Architectures Non Standard: Exposition Présentée Au Centre Pompidou, Galerie Sud, 10 Décembre 2003 – 1er Mars 2004* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2003).

13 Rivka Oxman and Robert Oxman, eds., *Theories of the Digital in Architecture* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

On the other side, some authors contemplate the connection between algorithms and architectural design in terms of similarity, rather than causality. This promotes the use of metaphors of computational processes to describe contemporary reconfigurations of structural, organizational and spatial experiences. These descriptions, informed by culture studies and media theory, take up a topic from the professional domain of architecture—such as urban design, or building form—and map its contemporary practice to computational processes. Keller Easterling's active form (a way to address algorithms that orchestrate urban design)¹⁴ and Benjamin Bratton's layer in the 'Stack' (discussing the way global and pervasive computation inhabits and (re)organizes space)¹⁵ are vivid examples of this approach. Spatial experience is thus a consequence of the operation of these concepts, a passive, given material upon which they act, or is an abstraction that organizes its activity.

In both these ways, the treatment of computational concepts and processes discussed stays on a highly instrumental level, where technical terminology is simply appropriated and pragmatically put to use. There is a lack of deeper engagement with concepts. The dislike of concepts amongst some popular architects can be likened to Stengers' disinterest and loss of seriousness. Computational concepts, such as algorithms and software stacks are left to *diffuse* in their propagation, precisely because they serve to rebrand the thinking about form-giving processes, but not inform them.

We cannot know what will happen when concepts appear in places where they are unfamiliar, what the concept of algorithm will bring to the table for discussing urban policy. Simply propelling novel ways of thinking with strange concepts does not necessarily make thoughts more precise or productive. How could we think about computability architectonically? How could we think about architecture computationally?

The distinction between architecture as a way to organize matter from architecture as a way to organize information is blurring in recent years. Architecture seems to be the paramount concept to address buildings as well as the organization of computer software and hardware components, information structures and arrangement of cells—cytoarchitecture. The use of the term 'architecture' in these different contexts propels, if nothing else, many new job descriptions.¹⁶ And while we could apply the approach

14 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014).

15 Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Software Studies (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015).

16 See, for example, the job descriptions for Information Architect job description: <https://www.jobhero.com/information-architect-job-description/> [Accessed 01. 04. 2019] and Architectural Designer <https://www.jobhero.com/architectural-designer-job-description/> [Accessed 01. 04. 2019]. The JobHero page contains many other 'architect' job title overviews, namely Infrastructure Architect, Software Architect, Application Architect, Architectural Drafter, Cloud Architect, Data Architect, Database Architect, Design Architect, IT Architect, Network Architect, Project Architect, Solution Architect, etc.

proposed here with the planet of concepts to any discourse, it is specifically in the frame of the interest in thinking about computation architectonically (or the other way around) that such an effort should be understood. Architecture seems to have more in common with coding and information than with what is articulated as computer-aided design software: the use of computers to conceptualize an architectural project.¹⁷ Architectural thinking could give access to materiality of code, and formality of computation.¹⁸ The planet of concepts is an architectonic articulation of abundant information on directionality of words. Conversely, treating this information with algorithms of self-organization is a way to think about architecture computationally. How might we generalize these sometimes secluded domains of thinking without destroying meaning, but caring for concepts?

IDENTIFYING AND CHARACTERISING CONCEPTS, TOURISM BASED ON INDEXES OF SIMILARITY

In the 1950s, John Rupert Firth suggested that a word can be known by the company it keeps, demonstrating, with his distributional hypothesis, a way to communicate the information words keep about their context.¹⁹ Differing from formal linguistics and the Chomsky tradition, the distributional hypothesis was fundamental for the development of distributional semantic model or word embeddings—a computational way to work with words as vectors whose relative similarities correlate with semantic similarity. These techniques are used by researchers to produce continuous vector spaces, where words that share common context are located in close proximity to one another.²⁰ Thus, there is no need to distinguish *a priori* between concepts (theoretical tools) and (ordinary) words, as Mieke Bal does explicitly. With computational power we have at our disposal today, we can let the discourse inform us on the words that comprise it.

17 See the work of Nikola Marinčić: thesis dissertation 'Towards Communication in CAAD: Spectral Characterisation and Modelling with Conjugate Symbolic Domains' (ETH Zurich, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000216502.2017> and his text in this volume, in which he discusses and models of natural communication from the perspective of architectonics and the architectural ability to abstract in order to integrate on a higher level. See also Ludger Hovestadt, 'Elements of Digital Architecture', in *Coding as Literacy: Metalithikum IV*, ed. Vera Bühlmann, Ludger Hovestadt, and Vahid Moosavi, Applied Virtuality Book Series (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015), 28–116; and Ludger Hovestadt, 'Cultivating the Generic: A Mathematically Inspired Pathway For Architects', in *EigenArchitecture*, ed. Ludger Hovestadt and Vera Bühlmann, Applied Virtuality Book Series (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014), 7–67.

18 Vera Bühlmann, 'Vicarious Architectonics, Strange Objects. Chance-Bound: Michel Serres' Exodus from Methodical Reason', in *Architectural Materialisms: Nonhuman Creativity*, ed. Maria Voyatzaki (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 267–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7n093b>.

19 J. R. Firth, 'A Synopsis of Linguistic Theory 1930–55.' 1952–59 (1957): 1–32.

20 Tomas Mikolov et al., 'Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space', *CoRR abs/1301.3781* (2013), <http://arxiv.org/abs/1301.3781>.

The planet of concepts is a whole lot of words. I open up a socket, and let in all the speech I am interested in. The words store information on lots of opinions. The more company, the better we will know those many words. We can then treat this speech—the coded text—with an algorithm of self-organization, which clusters concepts by similarity. This forms a sphere, a continuous travelling space. A planet. The planet of concepts forms a continuous, self-organized vector space.²¹ It can always be travelled again, and differently. Movement here is not determined by necessity, but by the contingency of opinions.

CODA: ALWAYS COMING FROM SOMEWHERE

In *Angels: A Modern Myth*, Michel Serres presents planes and passengers as angel-messengers.²² This *Modern Myth* is a setup with two poles: the contradiction between the *myth*, which relates to an origin; and the *modern*, which is contemporary. It begins with death and ends with birth at the airport. It is an encounter of a fixed (doctor) and a moving (inspector) figure, a double articulation of movement, passing. The inspector is down-to-earth in the way he speaks, the doctor is ‘in the clouds’ in how she speaks, yet it is he (the inspector) who is always in the clouds physically and she (the doctor) who is on earth. Between them, a conversation takes place. In a single day at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, Serres demonstrates through the conversation of Pia and Pantope, the directionality of messengers: They are everywhere and yet, they have situated encounters wherever they converse. Informedness implies portage—the holding up of unmoving forms. But informedness is more than that: It is the transformation resulting in information: communication, interference, transmissions and messengers. Halfway through *Angels*, Pia says: ‘You’ll soon end up talking like me’. Their inversion, the down-to-earth-ness in speech and in presence makes the full circle of the story.

With *Angels*, Serres talks about quasi-objects that create relationships between living and inert things in this circulation that is expected to always happen in transparent mediation. Quasi-objects are not merely passive, they create relationships between living and inert things. They are at the same time quasi-subjects: We take objects that write and think and make others that can think for us.

21 For more on how to deal with a lot, see Roman’s dissertation *Play Among Books. A Symposium on Architecture and Information Spelled in Atom-Letters* as well as his chapter in this volume. Working with online discourse on architecture, its different weathers and atmospheres, Roman suggests, in a similar gesture to the way I envision the travel agency, using taste as a digital filter to enjoy the different flavours of information.

22 Michel Serres, *Angels. A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

This in-between-ness, between first beginnings (architectonic) and contemporaneity (computational) is the space to travel with concepts. The interest in such a material-discursive setup proposes concepts as matter of the planet. In *The Story of Semiconductors*, John W. Orton discusses inventive ways of working with and processing matter.²³ Control of materials means mixing them—creating alloys, or doping such as to increase the conductivity of semiconductors. Conditions in the material change with heat, which creates conditions for charge to move through the material in an organized and directional flow (conduction). With semiconductors, this flow can be controlled—an invention central to all kinds of applications of information and communication technologies.²⁴ Information is transmitted quantum-physically. Serres identifies this as the soft age—ours is the age in which we finally understand that everything emits, receives, stores and processes information; this circulation is the bedrock of our thinking.²⁵ With softness, Serres refers to energy scales in terms of information rather than mechanics—all communication uses energy, it has a price.

Angels hide themselves in things that are transparent, from an epistemological point of view that reasons. There is no message without resistance, no message without noise. Noise is that which is not communicated. Information, on the other hand, is negentropy—rarity²⁶ “If a transmitter does his job properly, he disappears.”²⁷ Information constructs the universe, by means of networks. Message-bearing systems encompass the world and the world in turn is constructed by them. Wind, water, climate, networks. The constant breeze.

...

On a planet of concepts, movement is abundant. Concepts facilitate travel through areas of argumentation with which they have affinity, to which they are similar. One can move between areas they know well and those they do not. One can have multiple passports. The travel agency recommends itineraries one might like, areas where one might experience adventures, or simply enjoy the familiar. Travelling in the night without a ticket.

The night brings favourable conditions for thinking. Serres picks up Jules Verne’s portrayal of the cave from his *Star of the South* to develop a metaphor for thinking: a dark vault with a thousand objects that reflect light. Usually, we consider light to be the model for knowledge (as in Enlightenment). But the sun as a single source of light is totalitarian: It stands for only one possible truth, Serres argues, while the night can

23 John W Orton, *Semiconductors and the Information Revolution: Magic Crystals That Made IT Happen* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), <http://international.scholarvox.com/book/88812047>.

24 Bühlmann, *Mathematics and Information in the Philosophy of Michel Serres*.

25 Serres, ‘Information and Thinking’.

26 Ibid.

27 Serres, *Angels. A Modern Myth*.

concurrently host many: “where every star shines like a diamond, where every galaxy flows like a river of pearls, where every planet, like a mirror, reflects the light it receives.”²⁸ Truth-stars stand out against black background of non-knowledge. Night is a better model for knowledge, which is multiple, precise and ever-evolving, Serres asserts. In the beginning, I introduced an interest in identification through grounding directionality, not as a gesture of *policing* speech—telling right from wrong about the way concepts are used or telling one where to go—but facilitating tourism, so we can travel into different customs of speaking without being an offence. Mieke Bal characterized tourism as both destructive and productive: Scholars doing cultural analysis are tourists—superficial visitors who destroy the culture they admire; their position is embarrassing and it is in this embarrassment that they can be potentially effective.²⁹ She stays cautious of affirming tourism, as she later describes it as a form of gaining knowledge-as-possession³⁰, which is conclusive, pertains to ownership, tyrannical in the way of Serres’ Sun-Ego. On a planet of resonating concepts, concepts do not orient but they transport us, they facilitate a kind of tourism on a planet where arguments cast shadows. A travel guide would provide orientation, but an agency promises adventure and entertainment.

When travelling, our identities need to be confirmed in all clarity and uniqueness whenever we cross borders or physical environments (e.g. board a plane). Having an identity enables us to travel. Concepts, however, resonate with meaning. They need no prior identification; they *are* the passports. The two stand for the two sides of communication: the subjective, where we need identity, and the objective, which turns into the concept planet. Concepts move with the breeze, like angel-messengers.

While interested and invested in architecture and computation to begin with, the proposed treatment signals a gesture for working with concepts as always coming from somewhere. It is a gesture that is situated (in the discourse?) and generic (across discourses?) at the same time. Without trying to judge them as good or bad, appropriate or strange, whether they bring something or not. We do not make the concepts travel. We travel with them. The tourism on a planet of concepts offers a way to afford being interested in concepts we are not familiar with; it produces novel vernaculars. It offers a way of being ‘friendly’ with discourses, without taking part in a community.

Discourses import words, concepts, expressions, they are like the common land with political regimes, built on mythical origin. Existential import and export—concepts always come from somewhere. Like the wind.

28 Serres, ‘Information and Thinking’, 17.

29 Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 247.

30 *Ibid.*, 327.