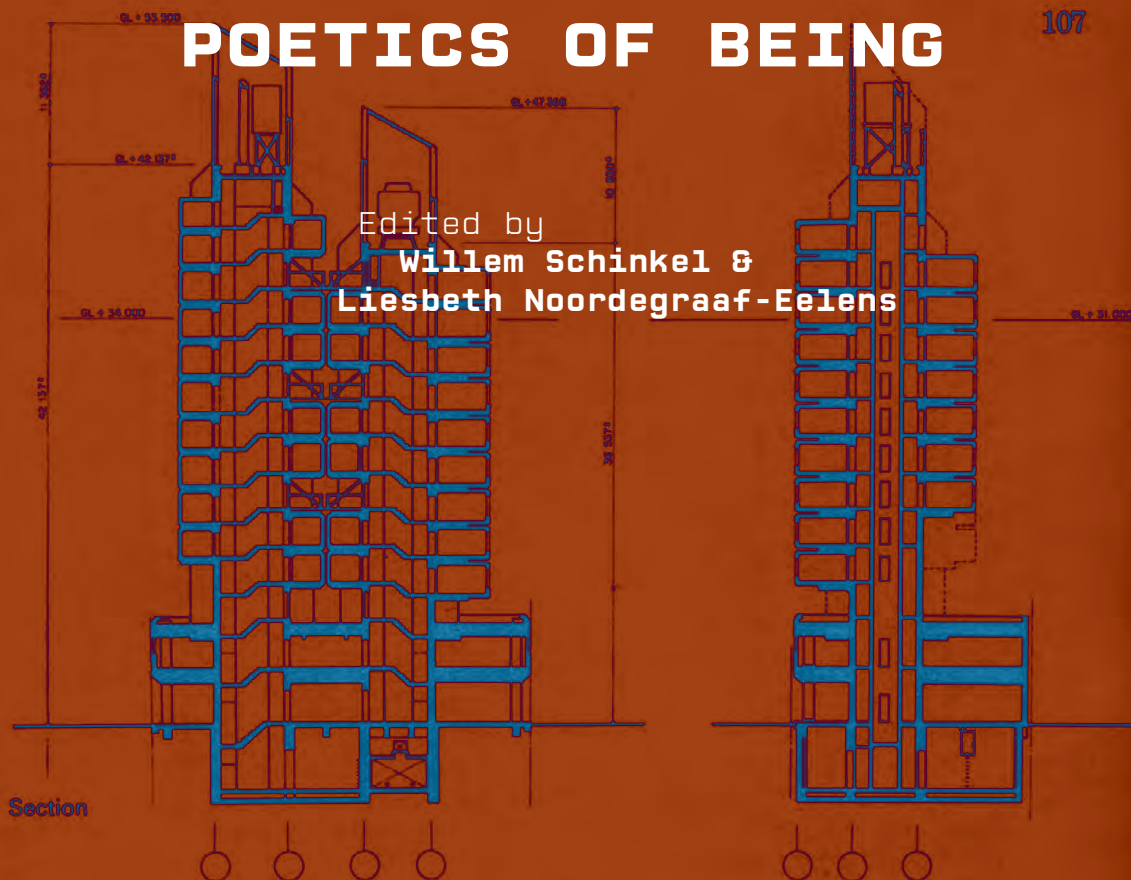


# In Medias Res

## PETER SLOTERDIJK'S SPHEROLOGICAL POETICS OF BEING

Edited by  
Willem Schinkel &  
Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens



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# 1. Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Acrobatics: An Exercise in Introduction

Willem Schinkel & Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens

Peter Sloterdijk is a morphological thinker. He thinks morphologies and his thinking continually morphs. He is interested in life forms, in the forms of collectivity, and in the collective forms of individuality. He just as soon analyzes the intra-uterine life of the unborn child as he does the space of the apartment-dweller. He finds in Ficino's rendition of the visual field just as many indications of a being-in-spheres as in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century discovery of the sea as the primary medium of modern being. Sloterdijk's work can be said to have a certain cosmogonic character. After the Fall, man stands naked and in need of inventing life forms that cover him, in which he can be immersed. The great metaphysical buildings of antiquity and Christianity were life forms providing existential shelter in the form of spheres of socio-spatial co-existence. But they have lost credibility, and we are back out in the open, naked. According to Sloterdijk, the topological message of modernity is: "that people are living beings, living at the edge of an uneven round body – a body which, as a whole, is neither a mother's body nor a container, and which has no protection to offer".<sup>1</sup> In Sloterdijk's diagnosis, if one could call it that, something of the existential despair of Pascal shines through: we realise we are afloat in a meaningless universe, crawling a tiny globe that has been dethroned, cast from centre to periphery. But there is also Voltaire's scepticism and humour: the same situation can be described in terms of the *Micromégas*, arrogantly roaming the globe. Then again, there is in Sloterdijk a Nietzschean energy, a positive affirmation of this situation, and a continuous call to invent new ways of forming life. For like in Hannah Arendt's conception of 'natality', being is a continuous coming-into-the-world (*zur Welt kommen*). In his recent work, that is accompanied by a constructive call: Sloterdijk turns Rilke's 'du mußt dein Leben ändern' into the positive challenge of an existential acrobatics. The art of life is a morphological art, an acrobatic act of constituting collective spheres whilst balancing over a crevice on Nietzsche's rope between animal and overman.<sup>2</sup> And it is in such intermediary zones that new life forms come to be constituted through practice and training.<sup>3</sup> In working through a range of examples and exemplars drawn from history, from philosophy, from art and literature,



Sloterdijk has never sought to build a 'systematic' philosophy. Any autological closure in his work is likely to be undone in the next work, and Sloterdijk is rather a trainee trying new forms, new combinations, reaching out and philosophically embodying an *ek-sistenz* rather than a closed set of propositions.

And yet there are definite recurring themes in his work. They are the existential acrobatics of a being that finds itself on a globe that, paradoxically, constitutes a horizontal plane of existence. This being finds the other at the same time as it finds itself, and it engages in the building of collective worlds, the constitution of socio- or psychospacial forms of immunization. Immunizations exist in cosmological and social forms, and they are optimized by cultural forms of what Sloterdijk calls anthropotechnics: forms of mental and physical training or exercise in the face of ambiguous risks.<sup>4</sup> The title of his latest substantial work, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, is indicative of a call for the practices of the self that such anthropotechnics entail. Likewise, his small book on the three monotheistic religions deals with religion as forms of anthropotechnics, of building immunizing spheres that are currently contested.<sup>5</sup>

It is in such engagements with the key political questions of our age that Sloterdijk continuously manages to produce new insights and to feed public debate with what Niklas Luhmann would no doubt have called 'irritation', in the very positive sense which resembles the German concept of *Herausforderung*. At times Sloterdijk's interventions, which are never exclusively targeted at a public of professional philosophers, have given rise to heated debate in the public sphere. Such became clear for instance in the reactions, most notably by Jürgen Habermas, to Sloterdijk's lecture *Regeln für den Menschenpark*. More recently, another inheritor of the Frankfurt School style of thought, Axel Honneth, has fiercely engaged Sloterdijk in public debate in Germany. Below, we shall dwell on such public debate surrounding Sloterdijk a bit longer. For now, it goes to show that Sloterdijk's work, and also the style of his work, repeatedly leads to irritation, which, again, we mean in the positive sense of being moved, having to respond. What this book attempts is not an academic overview of Sloterdijk's work, relating it to the philosophical traditions in which it might be situated. We are not interested in a hermeneutic form of *Kaltstellung*, of neutralizing Sloterdijk's work by properly situating it in the ongoing canon of philosophy; for one, because his work is not situated (only) in philosophy. A second reason is that Sloterdijk's work has a strong evocative character. It is meant to bring about new thoughts and practices. In line with this evocative character, we have chosen to ask specialists in various fields to relate aspects of Sloterdijk's work to practical subjects and/or cases in the fields of philosophy, social, political and cultural theory and theology. Precisely because Sloterdijk uses so many perspectives and emphasizes the importance of training, of practice, this book engages with his work in a practical manner. It thus aims at introducing Sloterdijk's thought to an international audience not in a biographical or chronological way. Instead, it takes a

selection of sites as entry points to a versatile oeuvre that will thereby, hopefully, be opened to the reader, ready for further exploration. In *Regeln für den Menschenpark*, Sloterdijk quotes Jean Paul's comment that a book is an extended letter written to friends.<sup>6</sup> He argues that humanism and philosophy, more broadly, are thus forms of befriending through the medium of writing. This book aims at the further mediation of such friendship. That does not mean it is not critical of Sloterdijk's work. In fact, in many instances amendments are proposed. But such critique will be aimed not at theoretical hair-splitting but at the invention of new thought styles and new practices. To begin with, this introduction aims to sketch the outlines of Sloterdijk's oeuvre, so as to provide the reader with signposts in the chapters of the book, which all zoom in on particular aspects of Sloterdijk's work.

## The philosopher and the dog

An early reference point in Sloterdijk's work is provided by Diogenes. Diogenes, the cynic, got his name from drinking water like a dog (*kyon*). In Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Diogenes is the model of a lived practice that refutes Socratic idealism. For Sloterdijk, that means a 'kynical' attitude is the preferred antidote against a 'cynical' reason prevalent mostly in what was and still is known as 'Critical Theory'. *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* is to a large extent a discussion with Frankfurt-style critique, which Sloterdijk sees characterized by doom and gloom, founded on a procedure of finding truth through pain. Critical Theory, Sloterdijk explicates, gains knowledge through *Weltschmerz*. It is based on an 'a priori of pain'. Sloterdijk sees Critical Theory as characterized by bitterness. It seeks to unmask that which has already unmasked itself. The postmodern condition is characterized by a mass-scale debunking, a generalized irony. The joke is on Critical Theory for thinking it still contributes to the enlightening of false consciousness. Cynical consciousness, Sloterdijk states, is 'enlightened false consciousness'.<sup>7</sup> Critical Theory's *Weltschmerz*, which is due to its resentment against power, is helpless in the face of a generalized cynicism that Enlightenment helped spawn but that is at the same time testimony to the inability to complete Enlightenment. Critical Theory's only answer lies in negativity – in negative dialectics, in negation, refusal, saying 'no', et cetera. In *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, the point is not that Sloterdijk would not share in the idea of utopian futures. His critique of Critical Theory is much more aimed at its having become 'theory'. What is forgotten is the lived practice, the 'kynical' attitude of Diogenes, that does not proceduralise resistance (for instance in Habermasian argumentative procedures) but that embodies it. Indicative is Adorno's startlement when in 1968 several of his students stood up during his lecture and revealed their breasts. At their response that resistance against authoritarian institutions was precisely what he had always taught them, Adorno could only stammer that that was a mere 'thought experi-

ment'. 'Critique' here turned into idealism, cynically reducing truth to an insincere exposure of wrongs and injustices. While, as Sloterdijk proclaims, *Ideologiekritik* originated from a satirical tradition, it has lost its capacity for laughter in the post-World War II era.<sup>8</sup> This *Ideologiekritik* has no idea how to deal with postmodern generalized cynicism,<sup>9</sup> as it only has 'ideas' and 'theory' to counter it.

Sloterdijk posits a 'kynical' attitude that, in classical times, denoted the urge of the individual to maintain reason over societal unreason. The kynical provocation is countered with cynicism on the part of the ruling culture, and cynicism in the end is to cynicism what resistance is to repression.<sup>10</sup> Phenomenologically, cynicism is the desire for the 'naked truth', the truth behind appearance. For Sloterdijk, this emphasis on the body and its unsettling powers constitutes a Nietzschean 'dionysian materialism'.<sup>11</sup> Sloterdijk posits the kynical attitude as less cut off from 'life' against this cynicism, which Critical Theory has been unable to escape from. In Diogenes, the laughter over philosophy (as in Diogenes Laertius' account of the woman laughing at Thales falling in a pit) has become philosophy itself. His kynicism is a form of critical existentialism, a source of satirical consciousness but one that melds nature and reason and orients itself not towards philosophical truth but towards a lived experience. Whereas cynicism separates reason from life, kynicism unites them. Kynicism is thus a form of embodied reason. In this 'vitalist' impulse Sloterdijk finds footing (among others) in Nietzsche. Yet throughout *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, it becomes clear that Sloterdijk is not a self-declared 'postmodernist' but rather a defender of reason against its self-proclaimed torch-bearers. He even goes so far as to say that the enlightened idea of a dialogue free from coercion is, in the end, what philosophy will have to return to,<sup>12</sup> even if much of *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* is meant to dispel the idealist overtones present in many enlightened formulations of that ideal.

## The Dao of Europe

*Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* contains many seeds of Sloterdijk's later preoccupations. His latest work is again concerned with practices of the self, at which Sloterdijk this time arrives, among others, via his *Sphären*-trilogy, which we discuss below. Bridging his early work on kynicism and his later work on spherical morphologies of sociality are a number of smaller works, of which *Eurotaoismus* can be considered most influential. Here, Sloterdijk deploys Ernst Jünger's concept of 'mobilization' (*Mobilmachung*) to describe the way in which man has tended towards expansion of knowledge and mobility. Sloterdijk is critical of this 'mobilization', as he thinks it contributes to a 'loss of cohesion'. This general mobilization of the world by the worker is in a sense prefigured by what Sloterdijk discusses much later, in *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, as the push forward by which the Spanish and Portuguese ships in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century ventured into territory unknown to them. Modernity is characterized by an ever-growing

‘kinetic’ sense of moving-forward, of maintaining positions that make themselves impossible – for economic and ecological reasons: “the project of modernity is grounded (...) in a kinetic utopia: the entire movement of the world is to be the performance of our design for it.”<sup>13</sup> This kinetic utopia, Sloterdijk holds, has failed, and yet it has not ceased to incite a continuous mobilization. Sloterdijk finds a possible way of opting out of the kinetic urge in a reflection on the Tao. He does not seek to counter the kinetic mobilization with a Frankfurt-style critique,<sup>14</sup> but with a possible rest-in-movement, which he finds in Taoist thought. It is such a rest-in-movement, which resembles Heidegger’s conception of *Gelassenheit* (‘releasement’),<sup>15</sup> that Sloterdijk deems hopeful in providing the possibility of opting for an anti-movement. Against kinetics as the ‘ethics of modernity’,<sup>16</sup> Sloterdijk again seeks Diogenes’ kynetic pre-metaphysical wisdom as an alternative to the metaphysical tradition of subject-philosophy, which he deems responsible for the modern kinetic predicament.<sup>17</sup> A true critique of the kinetic mobilization, Sloterdijk contends, can only arise out of the ‘self-absorption’ of that mobilization when it reaches its critical threshold.<sup>18</sup> This indeed involves a form of *Gelassenheit*, one which “resembles loss in a battle that would have been catastrophic to win.”<sup>19</sup> Against an ‘autogenetic’ mobilization, Sloterdijk posits an anti-kineticism that only stands a chance once the kinetic mobilization reaches near-catastrophic proportions.

## The spheres project

In *Eurotaoismus*, Sloterdijk therefore again seeks a diagnosis of his time, and he finds it in a ‘kinetic mobilization’ of the world. In that sense, the book prefigures much of what his later work will be concerned with. Sloterdijk’s critique of idealist philosophy and Frankfurt-style critique runs parallel to two developments in social theory: the ‘discovery of the body’ and the ‘spatial turn’.<sup>20</sup> While the former was central to *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, the latter comes to the fore in *Eurotaoismus*. But it will be fully developed only in later works, most notably the trilogy entitled *Sphären* (‘Spheres’). Again, Sloterdijk’s increasing preoccupation with the spatial and morphological indicates a critique of the schema of Critical Theory, which is primarily focused, in a more traditional Marxian way, on time.<sup>21</sup> Another reason for the inaptitude of Critical Theory lies in the fact that today’s world lacks an Archimedean point of view that could serve as the source of critique. This idea finds expression in Sloterdijk’s later work, culminating in his *Sphären*-trilogy, in which he attempts a morphological analysis of being-in-spheres.

This trilogy can be regarded as the *Raum und Zeit* that Heidegger never wrote. It asks not the question ‘who or what is man?’, but ‘where is man?’ and it finds the answer in the creative building of spheres as psycho-social containers in historically varying shapes. Being-in-the-world is being-in-spheres.<sup>22</sup> That is to say that it is always already both spatial and social. Sloterdijk’s work thus ranges from the

interpretation of the placenta – as the form of Ur-accompaniment in the mother’s womb as the first sphere – to the analysis of the discovery of the sea and the New World as part of the ‘terrestrial globalization’. Sloterdijk finds the representation of spheres to be historically differently conceived, starting with the acoustic sphere of the band of hunter/gatherers<sup>23</sup> and ending with the foam-like structure that global communication networks are characterized by. In order to fully grasp Sloterdijk’s current writings, it is important to discuss what we shall call his ‘spheres-project’ in some more detail.

### Being-in-spheres

The ‘theoretical core’ of the spheres-project finds its bearings in Heidegger’s thesis that “im Dasein liegt eine wesenhafte Tendenz auf Nähe.”<sup>24</sup> Although Heidegger, in *Sein und Zeit*, was primarily preoccupied with the temporality of Dasein, Sloterdijk argues that in Heidegger’s work lie the seeds of a ‘revolutionary’ treatment of Being and space. Dasein according to Sloterdijk is not an autarkic affair but first of all a spatial design. With Sloterdijk, ontology becomes ontotopology, as Jeff Malpas has argued, and was to a significant degree already the case in Heidegger himself.<sup>25</sup> Sloterdijk emphasizes the ‘in’ in Heidegger’s being-in-the-world. For Sloterdijk, man always designs itself as a correlate to a spatial mould that is itself the product of design. Moreover, for Sloterdijk being is never an isolated being. Much more than is true for Heidegger, being is social. Spatial being is always a co-existence. Sloterdijk therefore critiques Heidegger’s limited analysis of being-with in *Sein und Zeit* – which immediately retreats to the analysis of ‘fallenness’ in ‘das Man’, but he is also critical of what he calls a certain blindness for space in being.<sup>26</sup> What Sloterdijk seeks is to draw from *Sein und Zeit* the ‘hidden’ project of a *Sein und Raum*.<sup>27</sup> Being-in-the-world, which Heidegger spoke of as ‘spacing’ (*einräumen*), is described by Sloterdijk as a ‘being-in spheres’.<sup>28</sup> In taking up the concept of spheres, Sloterdijk would appear to take on board an ancient metaphysical concept, figuring most influentially perhaps in Aristotle’s treatise on the celestial spheres.<sup>29</sup> Sloterdijk largely ignores Aristotle even in his discussion of Greek concepts of *sphaira* in *Sphären II: Globen*.<sup>30</sup> There, it is ‘Parmenides’ moment’ he chooses to discuss.<sup>31</sup> Sloterdijk’s preference for pre-Socratic thought is deliberate in that he finds in Parmenides a thought of immanence that Aristotle’s metaphysical treatment lacks. Yet it is also indicative of the evocativeness of his selections. The three parts of *Sphären* are full of discussions, most of them historical, that can be read as case-studies but whose selection oftentimes appears contingent.

To return to the concept of spheres, Sloterdijk takes up a classical concept yet imbues it with new meaning. For Sloterdijk, the concept of ‘sphere’ alerts to the ‘da’ of ‘Dasein’: “when men are ‘there’, then first and foremost in spaces opened up to them because they have given them form, substance, extension and relative duration by inhabiting them.”<sup>32</sup> Spheres are “the original product of human

being-together,” and they are such in the form of “atmospheric-symbolic places,” of “climate installations” enabling a “symbolic climatization of shared space.” As such, they are always “morpho-immunological buildings.” Spheres are therefore shared spaces of perception and experience.<sup>33</sup> Sloterdijk’s *Sphären*-project starts, in part I, with the most intimate spheres (the intra-uterine co-immunity between unborn child and placenta) and moves on to a “general theory of autogenous vessels.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, he moves from ‘micro-spheres’ to ‘macro-spheres’, only to find, in *Sphären III: Schäume*, that today’s ‘society’ consists of many networked, foamy micro-spheres.<sup>35</sup> A sphere is thus a shared psycho-spatial immunological edifice. It might be positively compared with Latourian actor-network chains or with Deleuzian assemblages. It has elements of a Foucaultian dispositif in its mesh of discourse, practice and objects and in its potential of shaping man. And it has elements of a social system in Luhmann’s sociological theory, both in its separation of a systemic inside from an extra-systemic outside and in its immunizing potential and perspectivist epistemological character (although it declines Luhmann’s anti-spatial conception). Most simply put, spheres are “shared spaces, stretched out through a shared living in them.”<sup>36</sup> What Sloterdijk gains with his description of ‘spheres’ is, ontologically, a way to conceptualise social life as consisting of the precarious building and break-down of spatial collectivities. Epistemologically, he gains a polycentric perspective that allows him to avoid both a naive realist position and a ‘post-modern’ version of perspectivism. In his trilogy devoted to their analysis, Sloterdijk traces the evolution of spheres along the path of what is commonly called ‘globalization’ and up to today’s pluralist universe of rhizomatic co-isolation – Sloterdijk’s spherological redescription of ‘individualization’.<sup>37</sup>

### Spherological evolution: from bubble to foam

In his *Sphären*-project, Sloterdijk combines world history and the history of thought.<sup>38</sup> Part I can be regarded as laying the philosophical groundwork for his conception of spheres. Part II traces the history of globalization as an expanding spherological consciousness, while Part III deals with the contemporary world, deemed characterized by ‘globalization’. In each part, Sloterdijk deploys a different morphological figure. Part I is concerned with micro-spheres and hence with what Sloterdijk dubs ‘bubbles’. Part II concerns the discovery of the geometrically conceived *sphaira* or globe and its terrestrial conquering. Part III, as stated, uses the figure of ‘foam’ to designate a multiplicity of simultaneous connections and isolations. The *Sphären*-project in its entirety can then be regarded as a way of tracing a ‘history of extraversion’. Sloterdijk sees the historical emergence of ever more inclusive spheres. And he sees a development from a ‘Uranian globalization’ (which began with the Greek conception of the world as a globe) to a ‘terrestrial globalization’ (consisting of the rounding of the world by means of ships and capital) and finally to a ‘globalization’ that extends into ‘virtual net-

works' (although Sloterdijk critiques the concept of 'network' as too much focused on singular nodes).<sup>39</sup>

*Sphären I* is thus concerned with micro-spheres, and in fact one might see it as a discussion with a subject-centred Western metaphysical tradition. Years earlier, Sloterdijk described the Arendtian notion of 'coming into the world' as 'coming into language', of course with a view to Heidegger's idea that "language is the house of Being."<sup>40</sup> There he already departs from a solipsist conception of man. In *Sphären I*, he contends (pushing Arendt's concept of natality even further) that even in the very beginning, man has an 'original company' (*Urbegleiter*): in the micro-sphere of the uterus, the placenta is a form of being-together-in-spheres. The problem of the subject is in being cut off from this original form of coexistence, and of then having to search for new immunological forms of spatial togetherness forever. In certain passages, Sloterdijk appears to claim that all ensuing micro- and macro-spheres are the product of the cutting of the umbilical cord. Being-in-spheres then appears to be the productive result of an original trauma of separation, and not unlike the Judeo-Christian Fall it constitutes a 'spherological original catastrophe'.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to the metaphysical tradition, and also counter to Heidegger's insistence on an original loneliness of *Dasein*,<sup>42</sup> Sloterdijk to think *Dasein* as a spatial being-together. And so, again contrary to the metaphysical tradition, Sloterdijk is not interested in the question 'what?' but in the question 'where?' It is not the 'identity' of man that interests him, but man's 'place'. That place is always a shared space, a sphere. Likewise, all universalist claims are disrupted in Sloterdijk's analytics of spherological being, since there is no overlapping super-sphere. Sloterdijk's own sweeping statements are likewise to be read in full acknowledgement of the lack of Archimedean position. There is, for Sloterdijk, no 'outside', there are only the *topoi* of man, and these are always inside and outside at the same time. Not only is modern man characterized by the fact that his 'inside' is wholly 'outside' – and here Sloterdijk would appear to allude to notions of the spectacle<sup>43</sup> – but being-in-spheres itself always means being in-between inside and outside: "We are in an outside that carries inner worlds."<sup>44</sup> *Dasein* is a form of 'ecstatic immanence': it is its place, but that place is always already a shared place.<sup>45</sup> And at the same time, it is the 'strong relations' of coexistence that shape the *topos* of man.<sup>46</sup>

*Sphären II: Globen* starts with the Greek geometric conception of the globe. In it, Sloterdijk finds the beginning of a 'cosmological enlightenment', which is also the beginning of an original form of 'globalization'. It means that the original, 'intimate sphere' is extended into a cosmological domain. 'Globalization', then, is for Sloterdijk another word for 'Western metaphysics'.<sup>47</sup> This 'Uranian globalization' is then followed by what Sloterdijk calls a 'terrestrial globalization'. From Palaeolithic campsite to Hellenic and Christian *oecumene*, and from Greek *sphaira* to modern society, Sloterdijk sees the expansion of terrestrial spheres. In the end, tacking on to his analysis in *Sphären I*, "every society is a utero-technical proj-

ect.”<sup>48</sup> In this historical narrative, one sometimes gets the feeling that everything that has a certain roundness fits into Sloterdijk’s macro-spherological theory, but in the end one must decide for oneself whether or not the evocations in his writing are inspiring. In 2005, after finishing his *Sphären* trilogy, Sloterdijk published *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. This book can be considered an extension of the (already lavishly conceived) second part of his trilogy. Taking Joseph Paxton’s *Crystal Palace* (1851) as a starting metaphor, he there discusses the advent of capitalism through the conquering of the terrestrial globe. He visits the colonial ships, spurred on by Charles V’s motto *plus ultra*,<sup>49</sup> and pays attention to the emerging role of credit in capitalist enterprise, and he again discusses a multitude of cases. Capitalism upholds a crucial link with terrestrial globalization: “the capitalist world system established itself from the start under the combined auspices of globe and speculation.”<sup>50</sup> The *Crystal Palace* in the end gives Sloterdijk a metaphor for the exclusive luxury of the prevailing model of capitalist globalization, but the book also discusses the normalization of rounding the world, as when Phileas Fogg travels the world in 80 days but with the curtains of his carriage closed.<sup>51</sup>

Near the end of *Sphären II*, Sloterdijk likewise discusses the sociology of globalization and concludes that the macrospherological edifices of modernity have lost their immunizing power. The nation-state specifically is considered problematic, as is the traditional conception of ‘society’.<sup>52</sup> That conclusion sets the scene for *Sphären III*. Here, the pluralist world of foam is subject of inquiry. Foam consists of “agglomerates of bubbles.”<sup>53</sup> Typical of foam is, according to Sloterdijk, that many connections exist that multiply a shared isolation. In foam, many bubbles can border the same wall of separation.<sup>54</sup> Under these conditions, ‘society’ becomes “an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, federations) of differing formats, that, like individual bubbles, border each other in a mountain of foam and order themselves under and above each other without ever really becoming either within reach nor separable from each other.”<sup>55</sup> Similar to Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’, society loses older forms of stability, as foam does not coagulate.<sup>56</sup> Sloterdijk claims that modern mass media, (virtual) infrastructural networks and consumption patterns have given rise to households in which each room constitutes an introvert micro-sphere, in which, as Benjamin once remarked, the goods collected constitute the person living there. Hence Sloterdijk’s attention to what are, according to him, the productive powers of luxury. He accords luxury a ‘constitutive’ role, and thereby takes a position opposite both conservatives that worry over the loss of former macro-spheres and critical theorists that can only dismiss what has replaced them. *Sphären III: Schäume* offers analyzes of modern apartment living in *Foam City*, of the nine ‘topes’ that inhere in foam bubbles and through which they carry their environment with them,<sup>57</sup> of the discovery of ‘air’ in warfare and elsewhere, and of a multitude of other subjects.



In the end, the foaming individual lives by consuming himself, and he marks the endpoint of humanism.<sup>58</sup>

### The thinker on stage: a medium of *Zeitgeist*

Sloterdijk has been called, and has reportedly called himself, a medium of the *Zeitgeist*.<sup>59</sup> As such, Sloterdijk is a controversial thinker, for the contemporary *Zeitgeist* is claimed by a multitude of media. Sloterdijk gained some international renown with the English translation of *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*,<sup>60</sup> but his fame rose dramatically after what was at the time called a ‘scandal’ and a ‘controversy’. The ‘scandal’ had to do with the reactions to Sloterdijk’s lecture at Schloss Elmau entitled *Regeln für den Menschenpark* (*Rules for the Human Zoo*). This lecture, which was later published as a small book, deals primarily with the contemporary fate of humanism, but it turned out to have an explosive meaning to some in the German intellectual scene. Humanism, Sloterdijk analyzes, was premized on the cultivation of man through reading. The book was, for the humanist, a medium of man-breeding. Humanism, though unaware of it, constituted a form of ‘anthropotechnics’: it produced what could be properly called humans.<sup>61</sup> According to Sloterdijk, today’s era is an age after the book, which has seen the emergence of new forms of human breeding in what was, already for Plato, a ‘human zoo’. Sjoerd van Tuinen’s chapter in this volume delves deeper in the philosophical consequences of Sloterdijk’s analysis here. What is important at this point is that Sloterdijk’s lecture gave rise to what is now known as the ‘scandal’ surrounding his work. By some commentators, Sloterdijk was interpreted to advocate the breeding of the Overman through genetic engineering. His discussion of genetic engineering, combined with references to Plato (the polis as a site of human breeding and selection) and Nietzsche (the Overman) was, for some, evidence enough of a disqualification of Sloterdijk’s ideas in general. Sloterdijk’s lecture, as he himself explicates in a brief afterword to its published version, was directed mostly at a group of Heidegger scholars and was initially calmly received.<sup>62</sup> Then, two articles appear in July 1999 – apparently by journalists present at the lecture in the same month – in two different German newspapers. Sloterdijk is accused of anti-Semitism, of proposing human breeding, and then, in an article in *Der Spiegel*, of fascism.<sup>63</sup> As Van Tuinen argues, all the German post-war traumas were levied against Sloterdijk.<sup>64</sup> After another piece in *Die Zeit*,<sup>65</sup> Sloterdijk responds, first of all by pointing at the selectivity of his critics’ reading of his lecture, and secondly by underlining the fact that ‘critique is dead’.<sup>66</sup> Journalism has turned into alarmist agitation, focused on scandals, as the entire affair illustrates. At the same time, Sloterdijk critiques Jürgen Habermas, who had been shown to influence Sloterdijk’s critics, most notably Assheuer, behind the scenes. And he points at the dangers for democratic debate of a Critical Theory with hegemonic characteristics (and with intricate links to journalism and academic careers). He moreover

unmasks Habermas's liberalism of communication and discourse ethics as manipulative behind the scenes, even as pressuring others to ill-conceived critique, without so much as starting a dialogue with Sloterdijk himself. The entire affair, which did not confine itself to the German press, was in a sense indicative of Sloterdijk's diagnosis of Critical Theory, and it at once secured his place in the upper echelons of the German public and intellectual scene.

Twenty years later, new heirs to the Frankfurt School (not dead after all?), among which most notably Axel Honneth, critiqued Sloterdijk for wanting to abandon social democracy. In an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sloterdijk discusses the future of capitalism, and he especially questions the rate at which the state's expenditures on social provisions have grown. Over leftist critiques of big companies as 'thieves', the state is the biggest spender of public money, Sloterdijk argues. He also proposes thought should be given to a system of philanthropy, of gifts to society instead of coerced premiums to the state. We live, he writes in a brief collection devoted to the topic, in a 'late-absolutistic state kleptocracy' in which the 'beauty of giving' has been forgotten – especially by the left.<sup>67</sup> In doing so, Sloterdijk reiterates some of the more familiar libertarian critiques of the welfare state, and he literally sides with the idea that the unproductive feed off the productive, over the leftist idea of the exploitation of labour by capital.<sup>68</sup> Given the fact that, worldwide, the poor work under overwhelmingly deplorable conditions to produce what the rich buy for next to nothing, Sloterdijk's plea is not difficult to interpret as a form of ideological 'desolidarization' – a process he himself fears. Yet he opens a discussion hardly ever heard today in the public sphere, a discussion which might have been fruitful were it not for the uncontrolled anger (knowledge through *Weltschmerz*, as Sloterdijk diagnosed in 1983) that Axel Honneth's devastating critique bespeaks.<sup>69</sup> Honneth provides a critique of Sloterdijk's (recent) work, not just of Sloterdijk's intervention in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and diagnoses it as the ideological legitimation of a new conservative political and economic elite. Such a characterization is a reminder of Habermas's epithet for Sloterdijk in 1999: 'Jungkonservativ'. For Honneth, once again, Sloterdijk appears a danger to democracy. Apparently, a democracy offers a ground for public discussion in which only Frankfurt-censored opinions qualify as 'democratic'. Yet Honneth's rhetorical yet unelaborated sociological 'field analysis' à la Bourdieu fails to provide ground for discussion on the themes offered by Sloterdijk, who, in a final response, indicated he "simply wanted to open discussion" – a retort perhaps not entirely convincing given the subject matter and his repeated distinction between the 'productive' and the 'unproductive', as well as his moral siding with the former. However, this latest 'affair' is indicative of Sloterdijk's position as a public intellectual. Frequently characterized as the 'odd one out' in the German intellectual scene, his interventions are able to incite fierce debate and, at times, place crucial themes on the public agenda. It would appear that one permanent goal Sloterdijk sets himself is the incitement of the

public sphere,<sup>70</sup> which is one way to interpret his provocations. The very fact that his theses are provocative is to be attributed at least in part to the status of (German) public debate. This would explain his comments in defence of Thilo Sarrazin's statements in *Deutschland schafft sich ab*. In an interview devoted to the matter, Sloterdijk speaks of opinion-makers in Germany as 'a cage of complete cowards'. However, Sloterdijk then reiterates Sarrazin's remarks on the lack of will on the part of German Turks to 'integrate', thereby taking on board a policy-vocabulary that puts Sloterdijk on a par with not so eminent thinkers as David Cameron and Angela Merkel. Between defending the openness of public debate, then, and the furthering of productive views therein, there may yet be a difference Sloterdijk doesn't always seem to realise.

### **Anthropotechnics in an erotic age: from *Zorn und Zeit* to "Du mußt dein Leben ändern"**

In *Zorn und Zeit* (2006), Sloterdijk provides an analysis of the shift from a thymotic to an erotic (political) culture. It deals with politics and the demise of the thymotic impulse, ranging from rage and resentment to revolution. He argues that the modern 'anger banks' such as revolutionary communism and trade unions, may be replaced by extreme Islamism in a desire for 'genocide'. At the same time, as in *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite*, he feels the move towards an erotic society has led to a left-induced resentment that in fact only strengthens the neo-liberal consensus of greed.<sup>71</sup> Against the backdrop of the strong political and economic character of the analyzes in *Zorn und Zeit*, Sloterdijk's latest substantial work takes its title from Rilke's poem 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern' ('You must change your life'). It constitutes a further step in his analysis of 'anthropotechnics'.<sup>72</sup> He directs his attention to what Foucault called 'practices of the self'. Indeed, Sloterdijk's work appears to move through similar phases as Foucault's, moving from macro-spheres to micro-spheres and practices of the self. But Sloterdijk's latest book is at once a continuation of a line of inquiry started in his *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*. There already, practices of the self become apparent as anthropotechnics. In order to provide such techniques substance in a more individualized form, Sloterdijk discusses (among others) the rise of the Olympic Games and the modern sports mentality. He finds in the figure of the trainer a general model for life.<sup>73</sup> In a variety of analyzes, Sloterdijk illustrates the anthropological character of man as practicing. The most productive practice of the self is indeed a 'practice', an exercise. It ranges from sports to Cioran's abolition of the goal of exercising, to living despite physical handicap, as the cripple Unthan did, whom Sloterdijk calls an exemplary 'virtuoso of existence'.<sup>74</sup> Examples of trainers range from the sports trainer to the figure of the guru and the Buddhist master to the sophist or St. Francis.<sup>75</sup> The starting point in this book is the idea that the symbolic life of man consists of 'psycho-immunological practices'. Next

to biological immune systems (not directly discussed by Sloterdijk) and social immune systems, which the *Sphären trilogy* analyzes in detail, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* analyzes those immunological practices that enable man to assert him- or herself against fate by means of imaginary harnesses. Sloterdijk intends to offer “materials for a biography of *homo immunologicus*.”<sup>76</sup> His anthropological concept of exercise, Sloterdijk claims, can bridge the gap between natural and cultural immunological phenomena. Sloterdijk seeks such an analysis departing from the idea that man exists in ‘vertical tensions’, as does Nietzsche’s cord dancer. That is why, Sloterdijk argues, one finds acrobats where one searches men.<sup>77</sup> The Overman is a being that is subjected to continuous moulding, and that manages to bodily adapt to the improbable.<sup>78</sup> His entire book is devoted to an analysis of anthropotechnical acrobatics. Anthropotechnics is defined as “the mental and physical forms of exercise with which men of various cultures has endeavoured to optimize their cosmic and social immune status in the face of vague risks of life and acute certainties of death.”<sup>79</sup> In its most metaphysical sense, Sloterdijk is concerned with life as a form of ‘explication’, an unfolding and refolding of physical and symbolic forms in ever new topologies of exercise. Many of the forms of exercise he discusses are already contained in the religions, and indeed the religions themselves are primary forms of anthropotechnics.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, though, Hubbard’s successful attempt at marketing scientology as a new religion illustrates, according to Sloterdijk, that there never were ‘religions’, only “anthropotechnical procedures.”<sup>81</sup> The idea that antiquity is characterized by exercise, while labour and production are typical of modernity is refuted by Sloterdijk. Modernity is full of exercise, and if the concept of ‘Renaissance’ has meaning, then it first of all means the reintroduction of exercise.<sup>82</sup> Yet philosophy lags in realizing this. Sloterdijk recalls that philosophy is only after Foucault reminded that it is an exercise in existence.<sup>83</sup> Yet whereas Foucault sought to outline a care of the self (*souci de soi*) that he found only in antiquity,<sup>84</sup> Sloterdijk sees a world full of what Pierre Hadot called ‘exercizes spirituels’.<sup>85</sup> Today, to know man means to have “insight in the complexities of [a] strategically folded and artistically enhanced life.”<sup>86</sup> Near the end of his book, Sloterdijk returns to the great modern political projects, as well as to the Crystal Palace. Resignation has turned into greed, and this constitutes the postmetaphysical pragmatics of modernity. It no longer entails asceticism as a form of existential acrobatics, but the technical advancement upon a former *conditio humana*.<sup>87</sup> While the modern subject chose to rely on itself and, in doing so, withdrew from the world, modernity provided shelter in the form of a being-in-the-world from which no escape is possible, and which comes guaranteed with human rights.<sup>88</sup>

Sloterdijk’s latest books thus illustrate a strong continuity in his work. Despite the fact that many of his books appear to stand alone, his engagement with a post-critical analysis of immunological practices as a continuing ‘explication’ of the world runs from his *Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft*, through *Sphären* and *Regeln für*

den Menschenpark to his latest works. In the process, he has offered (among others) analyzes of Europe,<sup>89</sup> of the nation-state,<sup>90</sup> and of the mass and the mass media,<sup>91</sup> and all can, in one way or another, be seen as concerned with collective immunological forms. As he states, his is a morphological way of thinking. It departs with traditional forms, either idealist or materialist, transcendental or not.

## Contributions in this book

It should be clear by now that Sloterdijk's work, which is philosophical but also highly literary in character, spans a host of disciplines and covers a broad range of themes. It is always characterized by its evocative style and innovating reading of received works (theoretical, historical and/or aesthetic). His philosophical *maîtres* are, as is Sloterdijk himself, typically 'non-professional' philosophers, such as Diogenes, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze as well as Thomas Macho and sociologist Niklas Luhmann are among his most important influences. That first of all means that it occupies a place somewhat outside the rather bureaucratically organized mainstream of theoretical and philosophical work.<sup>92</sup> This has for a long time hindered a wide reception of his work in Anglo-Saxon circles – if only because actual inter-disciplinarity is difficult to market. Second, it means that his work is indeed meant to be a *work*. It is evocative and is not meant for exegesis only, but it is meant to be *put to work*. That is what this collection of essays on his work intends to do. It is at once a collection of attempts at *working with* Sloterdijk's work. It does not aim at pure interpretation, but at application. Where it does interpret, it seeks not philosophical hair-splitting, but a clarity that enables possible ways of working with his work or a starting anew on the basis of it.

In the next chapter, Christian Borch argues that Sloterdijk's theory of foam sociality (developed in the third volume of *Sphären*) can be applied in analyzing organizations. According to him, organizations are seen as compositions of foam bubbles, i.e., as co-isolated associations. The chapter briefly introduces Sloterdijk's theory of foam and its general organizational implications. It then proceeds by utilizing the perspective on a specific case study, namely, the use of corporate bathrooms. Borch argues that especially new-hires may use corporate bathrooms as an immunity bubble in the organization if the latter appears incomprehensible and chaotic. He also argues that the specific atmospheres which the architectural setting of the bathroom stimulates may be transmitted to other parts of the organization. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the politics of organizational atmospheres and how this relates to the theory of foam.

In Chapter Three, Sloterdijk's highly influential recasting of humanism is discussed by Sjoerd van Tuinen. Van Tuinen asks: "how does an author who writes after Nietzsche's biopolitical challenge of the *Übermensch*, Heidegger's ontological

upgrading of the *humanitas*, Foucault's structuralist decentering of man, Derrida's deconstruction of anthropocentric discourse and Deleuze & Guattari's anti-humanist machinic constructivism, relate to the ideology of emancipation through *Bildung*, i.e. the discipline of reading and writing?" What are the biopolitical insights of an "anthropo-phenomenology" that starts not with the classic question of "what is man?" but with that of "where is man?" And what does Sloterdijk mean when he claims to write from the Outside of the humanist tradition, i.e. when he claims to practice an "anthropology beyond humans"? Can a positive understanding of 'humanity' still be found in his work? Van Tuinen thus engages with the 'scandal' we briefly introduced above, and he distinguishes three 'layers' in it: (i) Sloterdijk's actual text on humanism and *Bildung* in the age of genetic engineering; (ii) the scandal and the mass-medial dynamics of 'normalization'; (iii) the hyper-morality and dogmatically conservative humanism of the last generation of Frankfurt School theorists. Van Tuinen then demonstrates and elucidates how for Sloterdijk a non-conservative, contemporary concept of formation (*Bildung*) depends on a third principle, which Van Tuinen calls 'natal difference'.

In Chapter Four, Robert Pfaller seeks to understand the sources of contemporary resentment by taking his cue from Sloterdijk's analysis of resentment in *Zorn und Zeit*. He argues that by focusing on forms of resentment, Sloterdijk teaches a crucial political lesson to a certain culture-based leftism, which in recent decades has more and more mistaken resentment and victimization for actual emancipatory political struggle. Resentment has imposed itself as the voice of the weak in the world. Yet it has to be recognized as a massive force of actual *de-politicization*: resentment always takes sides with the weak. At the same time it goes to great pains to ensure that the weak remain weak. It never allows the weak themselves to become strong or proud or to make substantial claims that would bring about a change in society's structure. Only exemplary individual victims who stick to their status as victim are granted small individual advantages which provide a Western petty bourgeoisie with a considerable amount of good consciousness. In his description of contemporary culture, Sloterdijk has touched upon a neuralgic point: our culture is actually a culture of resentment – resentment taken as an envious aggression "against the ego and its inclination to assert itself and what belongs to it." Where resentment rules, as we can learn from Nietzsche, the rule is: *The weaker you are the better you are*. Cultures of resentment therefore do not allow anyone to show signs of elegance or greatness but, on the contrary, engage in competitions of presumptuous modesty. However, Pfaller argues, *pace* Sloterdijk, that psychoanalysis (which Sloterdijk dismisses) can help us illuminate the sources of contemporary resentment.

In Chapter Five, Peter Weibel seeks to understand Sloterdijk's writings on aesthetics and their specific singularity. Weibel notes how Sloterdijk, in his explorations, touches on all classical and modern genres of art, from music to architecture, from the art of illumination to the art of movement, from design to

typography. In other words, Weibel argues, Sloterdijk approaches the practice of 'visual culture' while at the same time revealing an affinity to the institutional theory of art. He reflects on the conditions of current art production, from the world of sponsors to the museum system, from the development of the media to the metamorphoses of aesthetic subjectivity. He likewise addresses the classical problems of a philosophy of art, namely its reference to ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, society, politics, and subject, from Aristotle to Adorno, from Kant to Kierkegaard. Familiar questions arise about the status of the autonomy of art, on its truth content and its social role. Seen through the prisms of Sloterdijk's thought, Weibel argues we can experience art as a heterodox form of knowledge. Through the author's elaborate language as well as his art of changing position and perspective, we are confronted by surprising and convincing insights and vista. Moreover, Weibel illustrates how in Sloterdijk's work the dividing lines between philosophy and literature, argumentation and narrative become fluid. And he concludes by arguing that Sloterdijk's key contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics may well consist in offering a key contribution to solving the problem of Modernism/Modernity.

Laurens ten Kate, in Chapter Six, investigates the meaning of 'place' in Peter Sloterdijk's work, in particular in his spheres-project. He critically studies Sloterdijk's thesis that contemporary sciences, art and philosophy should shift from the classic Western paradigm of existence that privileges essence and identity ('what?', 'who?') towards a topological thinking focusing on the topos of human existence ('where?'). Ten Kate does so by confronting Sloterdijk's theses with Heidegger's account of Dasein, as well as with the traditions of (especially Christian) monotheism that have stamped Western culture. Ten Kate recalls that Sloterdijk argues that modernity cannot be considered without taking its Christian foundation into consideration. Sloterdijk even takes one normative step further. Modern humans need protective 'spheres' they can experience as virtual, but nonetheless meaningful and reassuring 'spaces' that distinguish them from, and immunise them against, the infinite, spaceless, fragmentary world in which they have to live: the globe called Earth. Ten Kate notes how religion, and particularly Christianity, has invented and offered numerous 'tools' to form these temporary spheres. However, according to Sloterdijk, Christian religion has detached itself from this vital role by transforming the intimate God of early Christianity into an 'infinitized' God. Whereas the God-in-Christ of the incarnational narrative formed a topos in which humans could live (the community of Christians is 'in Christ'), the late-medieval God would be a radically distant God, representing an infinite void in which humans are left to themselves, exposed to nothingness. This condition of exposure is, as Sloterdijk considers it, a Christian prefiguration of secular modernity. Ten Kate critically engages with the 'Verfallsgeschichte' Sloterdijk depicts here, by presenting different views on the historical roots as well as the historical persistence of monotheism, like that of the French philoso-

pher Jean-Luc Nancy. To embed his discussion in contemporary discussions, Ten Kate illustrates how several works of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek are relevant here, in as far as they all present innovative views on the traditions of monotheism.

In Chapter Seven, Rudi Laermans argues that Peter Sloterdijk's recent work is a clear specimen of universal history, of the kind that was thought to have become impossible after the postmodern critique of 'meta-narratives'. The spheres-project and its off-shoots on globalization are fragile writings in which the author tries to defend the plausibility of various 'weak concepts & insights' with a general scope by means of countless micro-stories and anecdotic evidence. In his reading of Sloterdijk's work, Laermans focus is on his mainly implicit media theory (and this notwithstanding for instance his more explicit musings on 'Media-Times'). The main idea is that in his universal history/histories, Sloterdijk again and again invokes the idea that money, means of transport and language simultaneously produce distance and nearness. Thus, one may detect in the heart of his thinking a concept of 'medium' that circles around the paradoxical unity of the difference between disconnection and connection. A medium allows transportation, also in the meaning of 'trance', but at the same time one does not move but only encapsulates the world from/within a particular place.

In Chapter Eight, Yana Milev undertakes a critique of the prosperous *Crystal Palace* habitat of urban global life. It discusses a dialectic between purchasing power-based civil exclusivity and what Emile Durkheim called anomie, and it aims at the hermeneutics of the figure of the *Crystal Palace* as a cultural catastrophe (emergency). *Emergencies* are understood in this context as the logical consequence of the catastrophilic disposition of societies (worlds of immersion). The chapter discusses the question in what sense societies produce their emergencies autogenetically and in what sense these are even indispensable for the future existence of the social system. According to Milev, Sloterdijk's answer to the question of the autoimmune pressure of societies is found in *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* as a theory of inhibitions and the suspension of inhibitions. When this is consistently thought through to the end, in terms of his plea for the suspension of inhibition of the cultures excluded from the *Great Installation*, then that can be read as a plea both for the sustenance of autoimmune pressure of the *Crystal Palace*, and for a postmodern terror. Both combined make for the paradoxical climate on which the markets of media, design and politics feed. Next to this, the chapter discusses a proposal on the basis of Dostoyevsky's figure of the underground as a symbolic counter player to the figure of the *Crystal Palace*. Sloterdijk has called Dostoyevsky's book the first essay critiquing globalization, as it is a direct answer to the world exhibition hysteria in Europe. Against this background, as well as on the basis of Deleuze/Guattari's concept of nomadism, Milev sketches the contours of a societal anti-type that Sloterdijk himself calls 'cosmic misfit'.



In Chapter Nine, Bruno Latour argues that “if it is true that the present historical situation is defined by a complete disconnect between two great alternative narratives – one of emancipation, detachment, modernization, progress and mastery, and the other, completely different, of attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care – then the little word ‘design’ could offer a very important touchstone for detecting where we are heading and how well modernism (and also postmodernism) has been faring.” He argues that “design is one of the terms that has replaced the word ‘revolution.’ To say that everything has to be designed and redesigned (including nature), we imply something of the sort: ‘it will neither be revolutionized, nor will it be modernized.’” For Latour, the word design is “a little tracer whose expansion could prove the depth to which we have stopped believing that we have been modern. In other words, the more we think of ourselves as designers, the less we think of ourselves as modernizers.” It is the weaknesses of the vague concept “design” itself that gives him reason to believe that we can take it as a clear symptom of a sea change in our collective definition of action. In the process, Latour provides an introduction to Peter Sloterdijk’s philosophy of design, and he ends with a brief conclusion on how to *draw* things together, that is, to design.

In Chapter Ten, Erik Bordeleau takes the question of power and its political elaboration as the central theme. He starts by noting that in his *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Sloterdijk establishes a crucial polemical distinction that takes on a programmatic value: “Psychological and political enlightenment are, in fact, opponents in that they not only compete for the free energies of individuals but also often come into conflict at the heart of the matter.” Stigmatizing “the psychological naïveté of the old concept of politics” and stating that, “the depth psychologies are, as it were, the thinking heart of the modern,” Sloterdijk gradually develops a theory of therapeutics that, Bordeleau argues, can be described as the most determining feature of his work. He illustrates how, for Sloterdijk, therapeutics literally encompasses the domain of politics or, to put it another way, Sloterdijk seeks to counter the universality of politics with a “generalized therapeutic concern” that “queries the individual as to his capacity to endure his innate cosmopolitanism.” For Sloterdijk, therapeutic theory is from the outset located in a cosmopolitical context, and the apparent strangeness of the expression “innate cosmopolitanism” merely anticipates the later development of his “theory of the spheres” and his remarks on immunitarian processes. Bordeleau thus examines the way Sloterdijk develops a non-metaphysical conception of power and its political elaboration, and in doing so he seeks to outline the contours of an anti-metaphysical critique of power.

The chapters in this book thus constitute an effort to – as much as is possible in a necessarily limited collection – encompass the main themes of Sloterdijk’s musings. The chapters cover the spheres (literally, in Sloterdijk) of politics, religion, aesthetics, and they are applied to analyzes of both micro-spheres (in Chap-

ter One) and macro-spheres (for instance in Chapter Eight). Further illuminating the main facets of his recent work is Chapter Eleven, which is an interview with Sloterdijk himself, and which centres on his concept of ‘sphere’ and its application in his analysis of global capitalism. As a whole, this book intends to be an explication of Sloterdijk’s theory of spherical explication of the world. But that means it first and foremost is an introduction to exercising with Sloterdijk.

## Notes

1. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 54.
2. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 184.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. Sloterdijk, P. (2007): *Gottes Eifer. Vom Kampf der drei Monotheismen*. Frankfurt/M.: Verlag der Weltreligionen.
6. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 7.
7. Sloterdijk, P. (1983): *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 37.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 400.
11. See also: Sloterdijk, P. (1986): *Der Denker auf die Bühne: Nietzsches Materialismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
12. Sloterdijk, P. (1983): o.c., p. 50.
13. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): *Eurotaoismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 23.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
15. See, for a discussion of Heidegger’s comments on the Tao and his concept of *Gelassenheit*: Stambaugh, J. (1987): ‘Heidegger, Taoism, and the Question of Metaphysics’, in: Parkes, G.: *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 79-91.
16. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 33.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
20. See, on the body in social theory, for instance: Shilling, C. (2003): *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage. On the ‘spatial turn’, see for instance: Döring, J. & T. Thielmann (eds.) (2008): *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
21. See, for instance, the critique of the social geographer Edward Soja on the role of history in Marxist theory: Soja, E.W. (1989): *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso.
22. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): *Sphären I: Blasen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 46.
23. See also Sloterdijk’s discussion of ‘paleopolitics’ in: Sloterdijk, P. (1993): *Im selben Boot. Versuch über die Hyperpolitik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 14-26.
24. Heidegger, M. (1993 [1927]): *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, p. 105.
25. See: Malpas, J. (2006): *Heidegger’s Topology. Being, Place, World*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Similar ideas can be found in Edward Casey’s comments on the role of place in Hei-

- degger. See: Casey, E.S. (1997): *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 243-284. Casey recalls that Heidegger, despite a certain ‘temporocentrism’ (Casey), speaks of a “topology of Being” (p. 284).
26. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 341. However, here, as in many cases, Sloterdijk does not fully incorporate secondary literature that might illustrate the topological elements in Heidegger’s analysis. While Sloterdijk only deals with *Sein und Zeit* in his critique of Heidegger, his style permits more freedom than would be allowed in the more bureaucratically organized world of academic philosophy.
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 345. See also: Jongen, M. (2008): ‘Sein und Raum. Scholien zum “ungeschriebenen über-Buch der abendländischen Philosophie”.’ In: Jongen, M. (ed.): *Philosophie des Raumes. Standortbestimmungen ästhetischer und politischer Theorie*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 59-88.
  28. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 46, 343.
  29. Aristotle (1936): *De Caelo*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
  30. But see: Sloterdijk, P. (1999): *Sphären II: Globen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 410.
  31. *Ibid.*, ‘Einleitung’ (see esp. pp. 72-96).
  32. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 46.
  33. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.
  34. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
  35. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): *Sphären III: Schäume*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 59, 302.
  36. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 1011.
  37. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., pp. 250-260.
  38. See: Tuinen, S. van (2004): *Sloterdijk. Binnenstebuiten denken*. Kampen/Kapellen: Klement/Pelckmans, p. 61.
  39. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., pp. 66-68. For his critique of the concept of ‘network’, see: Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 257.
  40. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): *Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen. Frankfurter Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
  41. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 51.
  42. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
  43. See, for instance: Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 640, 643.
  44. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
  45. *Ibid.*, p. 641.
  46. *Ibid.*, p. 621.
  47. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 47.
  48. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
  49. Sloterdijk, P. (2007): *Das Ästhetische Imperativ. Schriften zur Kunst*. Hamburg: Philo & Philo Fine Arts, EVA, p. 139.
  50. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 74.
  51. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-67.
  52. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., pp. 995-1005.
  53. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 55.
  54. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
  55. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
  56. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
  57. *Ibid.*, p. 497.
  58. *Ibid.*, p. 833, 824.
  59. Jongen, M. (2009): ‘Wir sind nie zur Welt gekommen: Peter Sloterdijks Maieutik der Eksistenz’. In: Jongen, M., S. Van Tuinen & K. Hemelsoet (eds.): *Die Vermessung des*

- Ungeheuren: Philosophie nach Peter Sloterdijk. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, pp. 144-162 (p. 146).
60. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
  61. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., pp. 42-43.
  62. Ibid., p. 59.
  63. See: Mohr, R. (1999): 'Züchter des Übermenschen.' *Der Spiegel* 36 (6 August).
  64. Tuinen, S. Van (2004): o.c., p. 157.
  65. Assheuer, T. (1999): 'Das Zarathustra-Projekt'. *Die Zeit* (2 September).
  66. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): 'Die Kritische Theorie ist tot. Peter Sloterdijk schreibt an Assheuer und Habermas'. *Die Zeit* 9 September.
  67. Sloterdijk, P. (2010): *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, p. 29, 30, 33, 46.
  68. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): 'Die Revolution der gebenden Hand'. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 13 June.
  69. Honneth, A. (2009): 'Fataler Tiefsinn aus Karlsruhe. Zum neuesten Schrifttum des Peter Sloterdijk'. *Die Zeit* 25 August.
  70. In somewhat similar vein one might interpret Sloterdijk's collaboration with publisher Diederichs to provide an 'alternative history of philosophy'. See: Sloterdijk, P. (2009): *Philosophische Temperamente. Von Platon bis Foucault*. München: Diederichs, p. 7.
  71. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): *Zorn und Zeit. Politisch-psychologischer Versuch*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 310-320.
  72. See also: Sloterdijk, P. (2010): *Scheintod im Denken. Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
  73. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): o.c., pp. 91-93.
  74. Ibid., p. 70.
  75. Ibid., pp. 434-444, 451-457, 484-487.
  76. Ibid., pp. 22-23.
  77. Ibid., p. 29.
  78. Ibid., p. 182.
  79. Ibid., p. 23.
  80. Ibid., p. 139.
  81. Ibid., p. 166.
  82. Ibid., p. 330.
  83. Ibid., p. 245.
  84. See, for instance: Foucault, M. (2001): *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982*. Paris: Seuil, p. 83ff.
  85. Hadot, P. (2002): *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris: Albin Michel, pp. 21-23.
  86. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): o.c., p. 515.
  87. Ibid., pp. 666-669.
  88. Ibid., p. 692.
  89. Sloterdijk, P. (1994): *Falls Europa erwacht. Gedanken zum Programm einer Weltmacht am Ende des Zeitalters ihrer politischen Absence*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
  90. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): *Der starke Grund, zusammen zu sein. Erinnerungen an die Erfindung des Volkes*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
  91. Sloterdijk, P. (2000): *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
  92. See, for a discussion of Sloterdijk's style of writing and his position vis-à-vis the 'scientific community': Hörisch, J. (2009): '“Der Mensch ist ein denkender Meteorit” Peter Sloterdijks Werk als Tractatus poetico-philosophicus'. In: Jongen, M., S. Van

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## 2. Foamy Business: On the Organizational Politics of Atmospheres

Christian Borch

### Introduction

One of the most intriguing parts of Peter Sloterdijk's recent work is undoubtedly his trilogy on spheres, *Sphären I–III*.<sup>1</sup> In this spheres project, Sloterdijk offers a grand theory of our spatial embeddedness in the world. Being is simply being-in-spheres, as he puts in an unmistakably Heidegger-inspired fashion, and which means that all life takes place within membranes that protect us (give us immunity and meaning). According to Sloterdijk, such membranes are always spatially situated and often even take physical spatial forms.

The three volumes of the spherology unfold life's spherical constitution on different scales. The first volume is devoted to micro-spheres, more specifically to so-called bubbles, i.e., dyadic relations that make up the tiniest possible forms of sociality. Examples of such bubbles include pair relations such as that between placenta and fetus.<sup>2</sup> One of the key ideas in the analysis of bubbles is that the pair or couple is always primary to the individual. Put differently, co-subjectivity is the basis for subjectivity. The second volume in the trilogy studies macro-spheres, or globes. This part of the spherology effectively offers a history of globalization, as it demonstrates how, from Greek mythology to subsequent Christian theology, the notion of the One Sphere (the One Globe, or God) formed a predominant thought-figure.<sup>3</sup> Yet God's death implied the implosion of the One Sphere, which was replaced, Sloterdijk argues, with a plurality of minor spheres. The third volume of the spherology investigates this spherical diversity under the name of foams. In effect, the transition from the second to the third volumes amounts to a modernization theory; it shows how, in modern society, the belief in a grand unity has dissolved and how, in its stead, a heterogeneous social order has emerged which has no centre and which is characterized by no overarching logic. Indeed, when faced with a world of foams, we are confronted with an image of a rather fragmented society where life forms are only scantily related to one another. This is also the key message Sloterdijk conveys when he defines foam as 'co-isolated associations' or as 'connected isolations'<sup>4</sup>: A certain association can

be identified, but in the social foam we live our lives as isolated bubbles that only share membranes with our neighbours.<sup>5</sup>

In the present article I wish to draw on and further expand Sloterdijk's reflections on foams. For while the notion of foam society offers a very original and thought-provoking view on contemporary sociality and its spatial embeddedness, one may argue that Sloterdijk tends to ignore the organizational realm in his fascinating analyzes. To be sure, he does present a theory of conventions and includes in this context pictures of the bubbling Lingotto conference room at the roof of the Fiat headquarters in Turin.<sup>6</sup> Yet, there is not the same general appreciation in Sloterdijk's analysis of the increasing societal significance of formal organizations that one finds in, for example, Niklas Luhmann's discussion in books such as *Organization und Entscheidung* (2000). This article aims to remedy Sloterdijk's ignorance toward the organizational realm by demonstrating that the theory of foam sociality can in fact be applied to the organizational level and that organization theory may indeed profit considerably from observing organizations as foam structures.

This chapter has four parts. I begin by briefly outlining some of the crucial foam-theoretical notions, thereby adding flesh to the sketchy remarks above. I then proceed by examining the analytical potentials that arise from observing organizations as compositions of foam bubbles. As a part of this, I outline a research agenda for organization theory which builds on the insights provided by foam theory. Among other things this research agenda addresses the question of how organizational foam atmospheres are managed. The third part of the paper offers an illustration of the foam perspective by studying a specific organizational case, namely, the corporate bathroom. Finally, I argue that to be faithful to Sloterdijk's analysis also implies to go somewhat beyond it. I do so by elaborating on one of his intuitions, namely, that the contemporary politics of atmospheres is concerned with sensory manipulations: our actions today are governed through the use of smells, sounds, light, etc. I follow this idea by arguing that social and organizational theory should take seriously the senses and how they are strategically employed.

## Living in foam

Although it only constitutes one part of the entire sphere project, Sloterdijk's foam theory is very complex and multifaceted. I shall merely emphasise three aspects of it. One relates to how foam is composed, the other is broader and regards the atmospheric conditions of foam bubbles, finally the third aspect concerns the architectural dimensions pertinent to foam and atmospheres. As mentioned above, Sloterdijk develops a modernization-theoretical argument according to which the globe as an all-encompassing meaning sphere has imploded and been replaced by a plurality of co-isolated foam bubbles. The theoretical no-

tion of foam clearly alludes to its physical counterpart, as it appears in, say, a wash tub of soap bubbles: Each bubble is a singular entity which is at once separated or isolated from other bubbles and connected to its neighbours through the membranes they share. The shared membranes imply co-fragility. If one foam bubble bursts, this will affect the neighbouring bubbles.

Foam bubbles are related in other ways than through shared membranes. But contrary to, for example, Luhmann's systems theory, which emphasizes communication as the social bond, Sloterdijk claims that '[i]n social foam there is no "communication" ... but instead only inter-autistic and mimetic relations'.<sup>7</sup> In order to account for this mimetic relatedness, Sloterdijk draws on Gabriel Tarde's sociology of imitation. Tarde developed a very original theory of society, which was based on the assertion that, '[s]ociety is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism' (1962: 87, italics in original).<sup>8</sup> By highlighting the somnambulistic character of imitation Tarde argued that imitation should be understood as a basically hypnotic relation where imitations are a result of contagious hypnotic suggestions. Not least affect is transmitted imitatively, Tarde believed.

Against this background, Sloterdijk is able to reject usual conceptions of society and to launch his own alternative:

By 'society' we understand an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats that are adjacent to one another like individual bubbles in a mound of foam and are structured one layer over/under the other, without really being accessible to or separable from one another.<sup>9</sup>

One might pause here to compare very briefly Sloterdijk's account of foam bubbles with the notion of social systems that Luhmann has presented. Put in Luhmann's systems theoretical terms, the membrane of the singular bubble is similar to what Luhmann characterizes as the system's difference to its environment. Yet, whereas Luhmann acknowledges the constitutive importance of the environment for the system, but then goes on to focus strictly on internal systemic dynamics, Sloterdijk is keen on emphasizing how the *environment* may affect internal systemic operations. This is what is implied by his concern with atmospheric politics, which is the second important dimension of his foam theory that I want to address here.

The emphasis on atmospheres (or 'air conditions') is one of the most original aspects of Sloterdijk's theory. Briefly put, Sloterdijk demonstrates how, from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, the environment has acquired an increasingly prominent place in the conception of and approach to life. This is the case both physically-biologically and in a more psycho-social sense. Thus, both climate control systems and media manipulation are examples of how life is managed through interventions in the atmosphere or air conditions. In both cases



foam bubbles are affected by the management of the environmental conditions. According to Sloterdijk, this atmospheric aspect merits close attention in current social theory. At one point he even asserts that if one were to take up the thread of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in a contemporary context, this would have to take the form of an *Air Conditions Project*.<sup>10</sup>

The final point that I wish to draw attention to here is Sloterdijk's interest in the architectural dimensions of foam and air conditions. This interest in architectural matters is a reflection of his concern with the spatial embeddedness of foam and spheres. Most importantly for the present purposes, architecture is a crucial way of establishing immunity, whether this is done by creating thick, stable walls or by living in mobile architectures that allow for pre-emptive escape.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the immunity created by architecture leads Sloterdijk to describe the '[r]evidence as a spatial immune system'.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as we shall see below, architecture may also work as an immunity stabiliser in non-residential contexts.

After this brief outline of Sloterdijk's foam theory, I now wish to explore how it may be applied to the organizational realm. How can we observe organizations in a foam vocabulary, and what are the implications of such an endeavour?

## Analyzing organizations as foam structures

To begin with, it may be worthwhile to recall Sloterdijk's definition of foam society as 'an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats'.<sup>13</sup> This quote suggests that an organization (say, a company or association) is merely one bubble in the overall social foam. Taking such a view on organizations would severely underestimate the complexity they present. I will therefore argue for observing organizations not as singular bubbles, but rather as foam composites in their own right. This would mean, for example, that an organization is seen as a foam structure composed by a number of co-isolated bubbles. Such bubbles emerge whenever a membrane is established which provides immunity and meaning. Divisions, buildings, offices, etc. could be examples of organizational bubbles. What does such a view of organizations as foam structures entail? I claim that it allows us to analyse five interrelated dimensions, which I will briefly go through in the following.<sup>14</sup>

First, the notion of foam implies a rejection of the idea of hierarchies and a stable, centred order. In the social foam, there is no centre. No bubble has primacy, no bubble is more important than the others. Applied to the realm of organizations this means that no part of the organization (no organizational bubble) is seen as more significant than others. They are not necessarily on the same level (bubbles can lay over and under one another), but no one is per definition more important or plays a more central role than the rest.

Second, each organizational bubble is preoccupied with its own immunity strategies and not with realizing some overall organizational objective. As an example

of this, one may point to Samantha Warren's study of 'hot nesting'.<sup>15</sup> Warren here examines the inventive strategies employees pursue – by bringing teddy bears, family photos, etc. to their workplace – so as to create minor personalized bubbles in the organizational foam that imitate the domestic sphere and its immunity. Third, the relations between organizational bubbles are understood in terms of imitation and contagion. That is, contrary to Luhmann's (2000) focus on organizational decisions and the premises they install for future decisions, a foam-theoretical perspective argues that the organization is maintained through imitations.

Fourth, foam theory argues for taking seriously the spatial and architectural dimensions of organizations and their atmospheres. Sloterdijk is not alone in combining an interest in architecture with an atmospheric perspective. Not least Gernot Böhme has investigated architectural atmospheres.<sup>16</sup> Böhme defines atmospheres as 'tuned spaces' or 'spatially discharged, quasi-objective feelings'.<sup>17</sup> According to Böhme, the very staging of a room generates a specific affective state, and such affective states may be transmitted imitatively to other co-present persons, as Teresa Brennan has convincingly demonstrated.<sup>18</sup> Böhme strongly emphasizes the ability of the architect to create atmospheres:

Exactly architecture produces atmospheres in everything it creates. Of course, it also solves specific problems and fabricates objects and buildings of all sorts. But architecture is aesthetic work in the sense that it always also generates spaces with a special mood quality, i.e., atmospheres. ... The visitor, the user, the customer, the patient are met with or seized by these atmospheres. The architect, however, creates them, more or less consciously.<sup>19</sup>

Combining Böhme and Sloterdijk, we may say that air conditions can be designed, i.e., it is possible to manage architectural atmospheres. Böhme is particularly attentive to how odours, sounds, colours, etc. generate specific atmospheres. This introduces an entire field of managerial intervention, but also urges social and organizational theory to take seriously the ways in which moods and affective states are manipulated through architecture and material devices. I will come back to this issue and especially to how the senses are employed in contemporary atmospheric politics in the final part of the article.

Finally, as a fifth dimension, a foam-theoretical view on organizations entails a new conception of management. It follows from the above points that management can no longer be reduced to a question of managers. We should not look for the organizational 'headquarters',<sup>20</sup> nor should we focus on the alleged skills of individual leaders. Rather management becomes the name for the attempt to regulate organizational rays of imitations and to generate specific organizational affects through atmospheric interventions whether these take material or psychosocial forms.

Of course, I do not claim that these five dimensions are entirely absent in existing organization theory. For example, DiMaggio and Powell discuss mimetic isomorphism and thereby seemingly come close to the notion of imitation.<sup>21</sup> However, what is unique about a foam-theoretical approach to organizations is that it provides a terminology that is able to integrate *all* (and not just one or two) of these dimensions and that it can relate them to one another.

It is now possible to outline the research program for organization theory that I derive from Sloterdijk's foam theory. It consists of an 'explicitation' of five major questions:

1. What does the organizational foam composition look like? That is, in what ways is the organization structured as co-isolated cells that give meaning to the members of the organization?
2. What immunity strategies are at stake in the organizational foam? How, for example, is architecture used to protect the foam and its bubbles?
3. What are the air conditions of the organizational foam and its cells? That is, what are the foam atmospheres?
4. What are the relations between cells? That is, how is affect transmitted in the organizational foam through contagious imitations?
5. How are organizational air conditions managed so as to generate specific affects? That is, what attempts are made to manipulate atmospheres and hence foam?

These questions are intimately linked to architecture: The air conditions and atmospheres of organizational foam are generated not least by architecture, and the relations between organizational foam cells are therefore affected by the staging of organizational architecture.

## **The corporate bathroom bubble**

How might the research agenda outlined above be put into action? In the following I will offer one attempt to apply Sloterdijk's work by focusing on the role that corporate bathrooms play in the organizational foam. This might seem a rather unusual choice, but since organizational foam has no centre, and no bubble is per definition of greater significance than others, the corporate bathroom bubble may well merit attention. The following analysis is based on Nicholson Baker's original observations on the topic in his novel, *The Mezzanine*; a novel which describes familiar but only scantily researched micro-sociological aspects of corporate life.<sup>22</sup>

Baker portrays the special atmosphere and sociality that characterise corporate bathrooms, more specifically the men's room. Both this atmosphere and the sociality that is linked to it demonstrate the role and workings of organizational foam bubbles. To begin with, the architecturally distinctive and separate bubble, which the men's room marks in the organization, provides an immunity comparable to

the one that, according to Sloterdijk,<sup>23</sup> is offered by the residence in the greater social foam. As the protagonist in Baker's novel explains, this immunity is particularly appreciated by people who are new in the organization:

For new-hires, the number of visits can go as high as eight or nine a day, because the corporate bathroom is the one place in the whole office where you understand completely what is expected of you. Other parts of your job are unclear: you have been given a pile of xeroxed documents and files to read; you have tentatively probed the supply cabinet and found that they don't stock the kind of pen you prefer; relative positions of power are not immediately obvious; your office is bare and unwelcoming; you have no nameplate on the door yet, no business cards printed ... But in the men's room, you are a seasoned professional; you let your hand drop casually on the flush handle with as much of an air of careless familiarity as men who have been in the company for years.<sup>24</sup>

Put in foam terms, upon entering the organization new-hires tend to see it as a composition of only very few bubbles, or they even conceive of it as just one big bubble in the general social foam – and a bubble in which they are not fully included. As one huge bubble, which perhaps includes a great number of employees and extends to several countries, the organization seems to offer only little immunity to the new-hire. This is the reason why the corporate bathroom is attractive, for it provides a clearly defined meaning bubble in an organizational space which, for the new-hire, lacks meaning. Alternative strategies to create meaning can be maintained through bubbles that cross the organizational membrane. For example, in the beginning the new-hire may talk a lot on the telephone or use email and the Internet to sustain meaning and immunity. However, such activities are at risk of being perceived as not related to the organization, and the physical visits to the men's room therefore possess a comparative advantage, as they are at least a full and legitimate part of organizational life.

This perspective on the role of the corporate bathroom bubble introduces a framework for analyzing organizational foam. Quantitatively speaking, an employee is likely to be part of an increasing number of organizational bubbles during his or her time of engagement, and soon the initial immunity granted by the corporate bathroom will be supplemented by other organizational bubbles. This means, in qualitative terms, that the character of the meaning bubbles takes new forms. When the employee has been accustomed to the pens offered by the organization and has decorated his or her office, the creation of new meaning bubbles – new associations, immunities, and co-subjectivities – becomes important. Foam theory provides a vocabulary for analyzing how these organizational bubbles emerge and multiply: It focuses on how co-isolated spaces of resonance are cre-

ated and protected by a membrane, and it examines how these co-isolated associations relate to one another within the organization.<sup>25</sup>

We have seen that corporate men's rooms are bubbles in the organizational foam which, similar to residences, are 'built immune systems'.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, since corporate bathrooms are multi-person rooms, they provide different degrees of immunity, depending on whether one uses the urinals that are placed openly next to one another or the toilet stalls that offer a greater physical protection. Baker's protagonist struggles; he is at the urinal when a colleague, Don Vanci, enters and positions himself two urinals over from the protagonist. There is silence in the bathroom and that causes problems:

in this relative silence Don Vanci would hear the exact moment I began to urinate. More important, the fact that I had not yet begun to urinate was known to him as well. I had been standing at the urinal when he walked into the bathroom – I should be fully in progress by now. What was my problem? Was I so timid that I was unable to take a simple piss two urinals down from another person? We stood there in the intermittent quiet, unforthcoming. Though we knew each other well, we said nothing. And then, just as I knew would happen, I heard Don Vanci begin to urinate forcefully. My problem intensified. I began to flush. Others did not seem to have any trouble relaxing their uriniferous tubing in corporate bathrooms. Some were obviously so at ease that they could continue conversations side by side. But until I developed my technique of pretending to urinate on the other person's head, the barren seconds I spent staring at the word 'Eljer' [the urinal manufacturer, CB] and waiting for something I knew was not going to happen were truly horrible: even at times when I needed to go badly, if someone else was there, my bladder's cargo would stay locked away behind scared and stubborn little muscles. I would pretend to finish, clear my throat, zip my fly, and walk out, hating myself, sure that the other person was thinking, as his porcelain resounded from his own coursing toxins, 'Wait, I don't think I heard that guy actually going! I think he stood there for a minute, faked that he had taken a piss, and then flushed and took off! How very weird! That guy has a problem.' Later, I would sneak back in, painful with need, and crouch in a toilet stall (so that my head wasn't visible) to urinate without risk.<sup>27</sup>

These are not the only immunity dimensions that are pertinent to the bathroom, however. For example, the immunity generated by the bathroom is secured architecturally by separating it clearly from other parts of the organizational architecture: 'consider the architectural mazelet you must walk in order to arrive in the bathroom proper after going in the door – an enormous improvement over the older double-door system – intended to keep passing eyes from seeing in'.<sup>28</sup>

The physical separation of the bathroom enables the emergence of a distinctive atmosphere. Given the function of the bathroom, smell is an obvious candidate to produce affects, and air designs are invented to decrease the possible discomfort of entering a bathroom. But sounds also play an important atmospheric role. Baker's protagonist recalls: 'From the men's room came the roar of a flushed urinal, followed immediately by "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" whistled with infectious cheerfulness and lots of rococo tricks'.<sup>29</sup> This whistling both reflects the domestic immunity character that is specific to the bathroom and establishes a (co-subjective) imitation of affect:

[Whistling is] a display of virtuosity forgivable only in the men's room, and not, as some of the salesmen seemed to think, in the relative silence of working areas, where people froze, hate exuding from suspended Razor Points, as the whistler passed. Tunes sometimes lived all day in the men's room, sustained by successive users, or remembered by a previous user as soon as he reentered the tiled liveness of the room.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, not all sounds contribute equally positively to this 'tiled liveness of the room'.<sup>31</sup> But that is not the crucial point for now. More important is the fact that the cheerfulness of one person is transmitted to other persons in the bathroom, and that this affective state is maintained long after the first whistler has left the room. Yet the tune need not only stay in the bathroom; an imitation of it may also take place in other parts of the organization, thereby creating the mimetic infiltration between co-isolated cells that Sloterdijk describes. For example, Baker's protagonist whistles a tune in the men's room and later on experiences 'a stylishly embellished version of my tune whistled at the copying machine by someone who must have been in one of the stalls during my earlier' visit.<sup>32</sup> Here the affect generated by the architectural staging of the corporate bathroom is transmitted through imitation to other bubbles in the organizational foam, affecting the atmosphere of these bubbles. As the previous quote makes clear, however, the whistling is not appreciated in all parts of the organization. This suggests the existence of foam bubbles that are protected by acoustic membranes which should not be punctuated.

This brief analysis has addressed four of the points from the proposed research program for an organizational foam study. Thus, I have described how, following Nicholson Baker's account, the corporate bathroom constitutes a cell in the organizational foam; how it provides immunity to new-hires; how it constitutes specific atmospheres; and how these are transmitted in the foam. As indicated, the corporate bathroom is only one among many bubbles in the organizational foam, and organizational foam studies should pay attention to how other cells work and are organized as well. There are plenty of topics to be investigated. For example, do single-person offices create greater immunity than open-office land-

scapes? Do rooms and offices without windows and with only artificial lighting generate foam atmospheres that differ from those of naturally illuminated spaces? Such questions touch upon the one aspect of the proposed research programme which was not addressed in the corporate bathroom analysis, namely, the management dimension. This dimension is crucial for understanding how, say, a common team spirit or an affective corporate unity is fabricated through psychosocial manipulation of atmospheres. It is important in other words for understanding the organizational politics of atmospheres. And as the just-mentioned topics on lighting and climate control systems suggest, such politics of atmospheres may well revolve around sensory manipulations. I shall discuss this kind of senso-atmospheric management in the following section.

## The senso-politics of atmospheres

It was mentioned above that Böhme pays great attention to how atmospheres are experienced through the senses. Specifically, Böhme argues, odours are crucial to how we familiarise ourselves with spatial settings. Similarly, Teresa Brennan's discussion of how affects can be transmitted to co-present individuals emphasizes the role of smell. Even if we do not consciously perceive this, affective moods produce pheromones that are emitted by the body and are so to speak consumed with the nose by other people, whereby the affect is transmitted.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Sloterdijk too discusses the role of the senses when examining air conditions. While air conditioning was initially a matter of modifying the climate of specific indoor settings, today an intensive olfactory modification has evolved alongside the climatic concerns. Indeed, states Sloterdijk, we are witnessing an increasing "aroma-technical modification of the atmosphere by which the transition into offensive air design is accomplished".<sup>34</sup> Such aroma-technical modifications can be identified in much contemporary marketing where products, shopping malls, etc. are added particular odours so as to make them more attractive to consumers.

To be sure, the concern with odours has a longer and more political history. As Alain Corbin has demonstrated in his brilliant study of *The Foul and the Fragrant*, French society was much occupied with odours in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among other things, odours were attributed a class-related accent, as the working-class masses were associated with foul odours.<sup>35</sup> The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, employed deodorization and argued that public spaces be ventilated so that the bad smells would disappear. This class-related framing of odour was not specific to the French society, but can be identified elsewhere as well.<sup>36</sup>

Yet if we look to the organizational realm, strategic olfactory concerns are of a more recent date. One example of how the sense of smell is utilized strategically

is the olfactory approach employed by Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), which is nicely captured by Jim Drobnick's analysis:

KFC is but one example of the smell of food being vented into the air, often by specialized diffusion technology, to travel far beyond its source, following people, meeting them unawares, flaring their nostrils even when out of sight of the scent's origin. Circulating through the streets, occupying a neighborhood, lurking around corners in the mall and other indoor marketplaces, these odors are out for a stroll, trolling for potential customers to entice.<sup>37</sup>

The KFC case illustrates one of the theoretical points that was hinted at above, namely, that Sloterdijk's work on atmospheric politics suggests that, contrary to what, for example, Luhmann's systems theory holds, strict separations between an organization and its environment are hard to maintain. While organizational foam structures, as well as singular bubbles in the social foam more generally, are protected by membranes, the politics of atmospheres adopted by KFC thus effectively aims to undercut the protective shields and to attract customers through seductive odours. In other words, KFC seeks to dissolve the (olfactory) boundary between the organization and its environment.

Indeed, the KFC case is illustrative of the kind of atmospheric manipulation that the fifth question in the proposed research programme aims to examine, and which was only scantily addressed in the discussion of corporate bathrooms. I would thus argue that to follow Sloterdijk's intuition, it is necessary to go somewhat beyond his own work and study systematically the senso-politics of atmospheres that he points toward, but does not examine in full detail himself. Such a study may investigate how the air conditions of specific office buildings are managed, as does Takenoya who discusses the use of fragrance control and stimulating music.<sup>38</sup>

Another related line of inquiry would be to investigate how atmospheric politics affects organizational immunity. For example, does the use of climate control systems produce illnesses which can be transmitted throughout the organizational foam? This question has been discussed within studies of the so-called 'sick building syndrome', which refers to symptoms of discomfort (such as fatigue, irritation, or headache) that seem to be an effect of the time an individual has spent in a building.<sup>39</sup> The sick building syndrome is an example of how the immunity provided by organizational bubbles might be jeopardized. But the (senso-) politics of atmospheres may also have positive effects on immunity. Recent studies of hospitals that have applied a distinctive (senso-)atmospheric strategy – reducing noise levels, building rooms with windows, etc. – thus suggest that patient's stress and anxiety levels are reduced, which improve recovery and reduce hospitalization costs.<sup>40</sup>



Several other examples could be added. For present purposes, however, I am merely interested in the general analytical point which can be derived from Sloterdijk's foam theory. For by elaborating on the fifth point in the proposed research programme, a new agenda is set for social theory and organization studies alike, which takes the senses and the attempts to govern foam atmospheres through the senses seriously. This leads to the following query, which can be added to research question number 5: 'How are the senses employed strategically in the organizational politics of atmospheres?'

## Conclusion

I have tried in this article to show how Sloterdijk's foam theory can be applied to the study of organizations. Specifically, I have claimed, organizations may be fruitfully described as foam structures of singular bubbles each of which strive for maintaining immunity. Moreover, this perspective on organizations emphasizes the role and management of atmospheres, for example, through architectural interventions. In particular the latter aspect is central, as it stresses the importance of taking the politics of atmospheres seriously, also in an organizational context.

Using the corporate bathroom as an illustration of observing the organization as foam might appear controversial. However, Sloterdijk himself has drawn attention to the broader implications of bathroom behaviour for a contemporary atmospheric politics. In a discussion of how to deal with the fact that each of us may poison each other's atmospheric conditions of living, Sloterdijk makes a call for a new political ethics which draws on a well-known bathroom request:

The toxi-politicians of tomorrow will have recognized the necessity of leaving common space in the same state you found it upon entering – as the prophetic signs in the toilets of Eurocity trains say. It was probably a German railway employee of genius who came up with this message. We will have to write this into the declaration of the Rights of Man. The wisdom of public bathrooms will finally recapture political space.<sup>41</sup>

In the same vein, I hope to have shown how the wisdom of corporate bathrooms may inspire a foam-theoretical examination of organizations. This will allow us to critically analyse the meaning and management of organizational atmospheres. Similarly, the management of the smells and sounds of corporate bathrooms might inspire systematic examinations of how, also in other domains, a senso-politics of organizational atmospheres is unfolded.

## Notes

1. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): *Sphären I: Blasen. Mikrosphärologie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp; Sloterdijk, P. (1999): *Sphären II: Globen. Makrosphärologie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): *Sphären III: Schäume. Plurale Sphärologie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
2. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c.
3. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c.
4. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 302, 255.
5. For a more comprehensive discussion of the three volumes and in particular of the foam part, see Borch, C. (2008): 'Foam architecture: managing co-isolated associations'. *Economy and Society* 37(4): 548–71.
6. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 646ff.
7. Funcke, B. (2005): 'Against Gravity: Bettina Funcke Talks with Peter Sloterdijk.' *Bookforum* February/March.
8. Tarde, G. (1962): *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. E. C. Parsons. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, p. 87.
9. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 59.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
11. Borch, C. (2008): o.c.
12. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 535.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
14. For a more elaborated discussion, which also compares these dimensions to existing perspectives in organization theory, see: Borch, C. (2010): 'Organizational Atmospheres: Foam, Affect and Architecture.' *Organization* 17(2): 223–41.
15. Warren, S. (2006): 'Hot Nesting? A visual exploration of personalized workspaces in a 'hot-desk' office environment.' In: Case, P., S. Lilley & T. Owens (eds.): *The Speed of Organization*. Copenhagen Business School Press, pp. 119–146.
16. Böhme's work only receives a brief mention in the sphere theory, though, see: Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 146n58.
17. Böhme, G. (2006): *Architektur und Atmosphäre*. München, p. 16.
18. Brennan, T. (2004): *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
19. Böhme, G. (1995): *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 97.
20. Foucault, M. (1990): *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books, p. 95.
21. DiMaggio, P.J. & W.W. Powell (1991): 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields.' In Powell, W.W. & P.J. DiMaggio (eds.): *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago und London: The Chicago University Press, pp. 63–82; cf. Czarniawska, B. (2004): 'Gabriel Tarde and Big City Management'. *Distinktion* 9: 119–33.
22. Baker, N. (1998): *The Mezzanine*. London: Granta Books.
23. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 534ff.
24. Baker, N. (1998): o.c., pp. 71–72 (n. 1).
25. One may argue that Sloterdijk's notion of foam contains a vitalist dimension in that it tends to celebrate the emergence of bubbles as an emergence of life. Applied to organizations this suggests that the proliferation of new bubbles in the organizational foam is also to be celebrated, because new social associations, meanings, and immunities are created in the process. However, one might consider stress to be a pathological reaction to a quantitative explosion of bubbles. This would indicate that at a certain point, foam and bubbles no longer provide immunity; rather, paradoxically, they may jeopardize immunity and meaning.

26. Sloterdijk in: Funcke, B. (2005): 'Against Gravity: Bettina Funcke Talks with Peter Sloterdijk', *Bookforum* February/March.
27. Baker, N. (1998): o.c., pp. 83-84 (italics in original).
28. What the interior concerns corporate bathrooms to some extent also resemble residences in the somewhat domestic atmosphere they are staging. 'This suggestion of domesticity ... contributes a characteristic tone to the inventions found in the corporate bathroom: these inventions are grander, more heroic variants of machines central to our life away from work – the sink, soap dish, mirror, and toilet of home bathrooms'. Baker, N. (1998): o.c., pp. 73–74.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Baker's protagonist notes: 'The absence of stealth or shame that men, colleagues of mine, displayed about their misfortunes in the toilet stall had been an unexpected surprise of business life. I admired their forthrightness, in a way; and perhaps in fifteen years I too would be spending twenty-minute stretches in similar corporate stalls, making sounds that I had once believed were made only by people in the extremity of the flu or by bums beyond caring in urban library bathrooms. But for now, I used the stalls as little as possible, never really at ease reading the sports section left there by an earlier occupant, not happy about the prewarmed seat' Baker, N. (1998): o.c., p. 83n1.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
33. Brennan, T. (2004): *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, p. 69. See also: Borch, C. (2010): o.c.
34. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 177.
35. Corbin, A. (1986): *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
36. See, for example: Simmel, G. (1992): *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
37. Drobnick, J. (2006): 'Eating Nothing: Cooking Aromas in Art and Culture.' In: Drobnick, J. (ed.): *The Smell Culture Reader*. Oxford/New York: Berg, pp. 342–56 (see pp. 345–346).
38. Takenoya, H. (2000): 'Air-conditioning systems of the KI Building, Tokyo.' In: D. Clements-Croome (ed.): *Creating the Productive Workplace*. London/New York: E & FN Spon, pp. 281–94.
39. For a penetrating analysis of the sick building syndrome, see: Murphy, M. (2006): *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
40. Notably: Ulrich, R.S. (2006): 'Evidence-based health-care architecture.' *The Lancet* 368: S38–S39.
41. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 230.

### 3. “Transgenous Philosophy”: Post-humanism, Anthropotechnics and the Poetics of Natal Difference

Sjoerd van Tuinen

In this chapter<sup>1</sup> I investigate Peter Sloterdijk’s relation to humanism, especially in its post-Kantian sense of an ideology of Enlightenment based on anthropology. How does an author who writes after Nietzsche’s biopolitical challenge of the *Übermensch*, Heidegger’s ontological upgrading of the *humanitas*, Foucault’s structuralist decentering of man, Derrida’s deconstruction of anthropocentric discourse and Deleuze & Guattari’s machinic constructivism, relate to the ideology of emancipation through formation (*Bildung*), i.e. the “anthropotechnics” of reading and writing? What are the biopolitical insights of an “anthropo-phenomenology” or an “anthropology beyond humans”?<sup>2</sup> Can a positive understanding of ‘humanity’ still be found in his work?

Since the Summer of 1999, it has been impossible to find an answer to these questions without reference to the complex context of the affair with which it is customary to associate Sloterdijk’s name. The occasion for Jürgen Habermas and other public intellectuals to ring the alarm bell was a philosophico-literary lecture given by Sloterdijk entitled *Prescriptions<sup>3</sup> for the Human Park. A Reply to Heidegger’s Letter On Humanism*. The contents of this text were wilfully and abusively interpreted as a programmatic series of statements on engineering the *Übermensch*. It soon attracted public attention all over Europe and definitively established Sloterdijk’s name as one of the most significant, but also controversial, present-day continental philosophers. The bitter irony of all this attention, in itself an exceptional honour for a demanding philosophical paper, is that the subject of the original text – and this seems to have escaped humanists and transhumanists alike – was first and foremost precisely the question of what it means to write today, after the age of the book and the humanist ideology of its patient reading have come to an end. And despite, or, one is tempted to think, because of, all the attention this text has received since then, this essentially political question is still waiting to be taken seriously.

In the first part of this chapter, I distinguish and briefly discuss two “layers” that together constitute the scandal: Firstly, Sloterdijk’s actual text on humanism and formation in the age of genetic engineering, and secondly, the convergence

of the scandal and the mass-medial dynamics of “normalization” on the one hand and the hyper-morality and dogmatically conservative humanism of the last generation of Frankfurt School theorists on the other. The common term of these layers is the Kantian concept of anthropology and the critical reaction it has provoked in the works of Heidegger. After a discussion of their respective principles of difference, anthropological and ontological, I demonstrate how for Sloterdijk a non-conservative, contemporary concept of formation depends on a third principle, which I propose to call natal difference. This not only paves the way for an explication of some aspects of Sloterdijk’s complex relation to Heidegger, but also allows us to relate the main arguments from *Prescriptions for the Human Park* and its ‘contexts’ to other critics of the humanist tradition such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and, in some respects, Derrida. In recent decades, these authors have often been labelled ‘anti-humanist.’ However, in the last two paragraphs of this chapter, I explore what a post-Heideggerian concept of formation could gain from Sloterdijk’s post-humanist revaluation of anthropology. This is done by explicating two of Sloterdijk’s hybrid conceptual inventions: “homeotechnology” and “transgenous philosophy.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Sloterdijk-affair

I. *Prescriptions for the Human Park* consists of a rather ‘untimely’ philosophico-literary reply – Sloterdijk himself calls it a *notturmo*<sup>5</sup> – to Heidegger’s letter *On Humanism* (1946), in which Sloterdijk gives a Nietzschean critique of Heidegger’s concept of *Lichtung* in terms of biopolitics and the political meaning of writing. On both issues, it is argued that, despite himself, Heidegger occupies a humanist position. In short, Sloterdijk defines the essence and function of humanism through two intrinsically related projects: first, that of the domestication and breeding of humans through “anthropotechnics”, and second, that of “friendship-constituting telecommunication in the medium of writing.”<sup>6</sup> For a long time, both projects have been carried out in “false innocence” concerning the presupposed knowledge of what it is to be human, a knowledge which is in fact the result of a century old “media conflict.”<sup>7</sup> Even in Heidegger’s critique of the humanist tradition this conflict remains unthought. Sloterdijk argues that the mediality of language itself remains unthought, thus implicitly adopting Derrida’s critique that in Heidegger, writing is subordinate to the direct presence of Being in human speech. As a consequence, Heidegger is not critical enough of the disciplining and domesticating function of language as the “house of Being”. In his “pastoral discourse,” (Sloterdijk) the *humanitas* of humankind is directly related to his ecstatic and decentered residence in language through which he “shepherds” the truth of Being.<sup>8</sup> This shepherding not only sets humankind free from its enslavement to the ontic, but also keeps it “in servitude” (*hörig*) to messages from Being, which is obeyed as the sole authority, without critically differentiating be-

tween the “domesticating,” “emancipating” and the potentially dangerous “disinhibiting” tendencies of this “communication”.<sup>9</sup>

However, with the advent of post-literary media for biopolitical writing such as information technology or biotechnology the media conflict unavoidably manifests itself. “The eviction from habitual humanistic appearance is the main logical event of the present, which one cannot elude by the flight into goodwill.”<sup>10</sup> To be sure, these technologies are themselves essentially a product of the humanist biopolitical project of forming human animals into civilized “park animals” through processes of “(se)lection” or “reading (out)”,<sup>11</sup> but Sloterdijk’s point is that they have also internally eroded the classic strategies of manipulation and their media by definitively exceeding any prescribed, idealistic model of the *anthropos*. Despite the fact that it was Heidegger who paved the way for the liberation from the anthropocentrism of language as *poiësis*, Sloterdijk therefore prefers Heidegger’s first and last metaphysicians – Plato, the theorist of genetic engineering in terms of shepherding, weaving and tending, and Nietzsche, the theorist of pastoral power and the *Übermensch* as the great challenge for the future – for discussing the philosophical prehistory of contemporary technics of writing, which he calls anthropotechnics<sup>12</sup> or “homeotechnology.”<sup>13</sup> Their work presents humans as products immanent to the all but harmless process of breeding and formation by which *homo natura* engenders himself – the disciplining and inscribing practices of all culture in its immeasurable historical extension which Plato calls *paideia* (the ‘art on the child’) and Nietzsche the “morality of custom” (*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*) – and is more relevant than ever in today’s post-humanist biopolitical situation that knows no sovereign<sup>14</sup> and from which a “codex for anthropotechnics”<sup>15</sup> is so dangerously lacking. In other words, these thinkers have “explicitated”<sup>16</sup> a problem that remains the Outside of all classical humanisms.

II. In reaction to Sloterdijk’s exit from humanism, Habermas sent a letter to various journalists – of which, despite his initial denying its existence, a facsimile was later published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (16/09) – with instructions for publishing a number of rather sensational critiques of Sloterdijk’s text. In the ensuing scandal, Sloterdijk was branded a philosophical parvenu, a popstar of thought, a fascistoid breeder of the *Übermensch*, a cynical ideologist of Grand Politics, but also simply the new Nietzsche. The result was a telling display of what it means to do journalism and philosophical or literary critique in a public sphere dominated by increasingly indifference-producing, non-friendship-constituting and therefore post-humanist mass media.<sup>17</sup> After the first attacks in *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, many respected academics such as Henri Atlan, Richard Dworkin, Manfred Frank and Ernst Tugendhat reacted in various other European periodicals, albeit without taking the trouble to seriously contextualise Sloterdijk’s text, which, moreover, was never meant for publication but of which pirate copies had been circulated by Habermas. These authors agreed on two points, namely that Sloterdijk leaves the reader with an uncertainty about what he actually wanted to

say and that he had failed to first study the ethical and biological matter of his text. As representatives of the silent takeover of philosophy by ‘professionalized’ ‘ethics,’ they thus fell victim to a category mistake between ontology and democracy, assuming that they had before them an inferior text on moral ‘rules’ instead of a post-Heideggerian meditation on the essence of “prescriptions.”<sup>18</sup>

If the affair is nonetheless instructive for a better understanding of Sloterdijk’s text, this is not because of the thematic issues that were put at stake in the subsequent public debate but because of the way this debate is reminiscent of the discussion surrounding Habermas’s *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) and the Habermas-Foucault controversies from the early 1980s. At that time Habermas and many disciples of the Frankfurt School had shown that for them attack on humanism that intermingles critique and power as the inside and the outside of the same democratic process automatically comes down to anti-democratic sophistry and must be pilloried as such.<sup>19</sup> But unlike what happened in the 1980s, when post-Nietzschean philosophy became customarily known as “obscure” and “relativistic,” the “false innocence” of humanism about which Sloterdijk had warned in his lecture manifested itself perfectly clearly this time. Habermas, in spite of his being the theorist of democratic dialogue, refused to enter into one with Sloterdijk and preferred the path of indirect, false imputation. In response, Sloterdijk demonstrated the “sham-liberal character” of the still highly influential Frankfurt School by creating a metascandal through publishing two letters – a decent humanistic practice in itself – in *Die Zeit*, one of which is addressed to the journalist Thomas Assheuer, whom he addresses as an exemplary representative of journalistic “alarmism,” the other to Habermas, who is accused of “Jacobinism” and a “social-liberal version of the dictatorship of morality.” Combined, these letters constitute a vehement protest against the steady convergence of hypermorality and over-mediatization, or the decadence of literary and philosophical criticism and the spectacle of indignation.<sup>20</sup> At the end of his second letter, Sloterdijk therefore proclaims – as in fact he had already done in the *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) – the death of Frankfurt Critical Theory: “Critical theory is, on this second day of September, dead. She has long since been bedridden, the sullen old woman, now she has passed away completely. We will gather at the grave of an epoch, to take stock, but also to contemplate the end of a hypocrisy. Thinking means thanking, said Heidegger. I say, rather, that thinking means heaving a sigh of relief”.<sup>21</sup>

## Humanism from anthropological to ontological difference

Both the significance of the affair and the joint venture of banalizing mass media dynamics and critical theory, however, far surpass German borders and idiosyncrasies, as is proven, for example, by the way in which a neo-Kantian such as Luc Ferry has tried to import the scandal into France and other countries. Sloterdijk

himself therefore argues that humanism has progressively turned into “the fundamentalism of Western culture”.<sup>22</sup> Without much exaggeration, it can be said that the tradition in which he writes is a reaction to the rigid way in which the Kantian ideas on Enlightenment, anthropology and politics have been institutionalized. Therefore, a genealogy of Sloterdijk’s arguments and his position in the discursive field surrounding humanism should start with his discussion of Kant.

In a sense, Sloterdijk doesn’t really read Kant: apart from a few exceptions he never really goes into discussion with other philosophers, but rather with their public effects. Nonetheless, implicit in his critique of the “false innocence” of humanism is a reinterpretation of the Kantian concept of Enlightenment, according to which the self-reading of the Reformation found its bourgeois translation in self-thinking and self-knowledge. The critical project of determining the *de jure* conditions and limits of our possibilities is the philosophical attempt to manage our own capacity for “delightments” such as uncritical exaggerations and inhuman projections.<sup>23</sup> Anthropology teaches that man is a “domestic animal” condemned to self-breeding and self-domestication. Yet the question remains “how the potential subject of reason is *de facto* and with existential consequences brought to reason?” Sloterdijk speaks of an unsublatable *anthropological difference* in post-Kantian philosophy. It is a difference between concept and reality in reason-possessing and reason-possessed beings, reminiscent of the difference between “men as *imago Dei*” and as “sinful dissidents of God.” Therefore, man is a “finite” or “transitional subject,” always on his way towards maturity. Biopolitically speaking, the great humanistic projects of *Bildung* are roads to subjective maturity in which natural desire and cultural law ultimately coincide. In these processes of formation, it is the task of the anthropologist, by addressing the question ‘what is man?’, “to moderate between realistic and idealistic factions in the inner forum of modern subjects”.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, Sloterdijk’s interpretation of Kant is highly indebted to Heidegger, who demonstrated that this obsession with the *anthropos* does not necessarily lead to the emancipation of humankind from repressive dogmas and immaturity, but may well bear witness to a repressive ideal of what it is to be human. According to Heidegger, anthropology serves to legitimate man’s unbridled will to power that constitutes the nihilistic essence of Modernity and its violent dialectics between subject and object. In nihilism, all that is (*das Seiende*) becomes objectified into things-at-hand in the manipulative power of subjects. If, through a total “requisition” (*Aufforderung*), anthropocentric representations and installations (*Vor- und Aufstellungen*) reduce the world to a reserve of commodities and raw materials, this goes most of all for emancipatory subjectivity itself. For it is the irony of the on-going *Ge-stell* that what installs itself is in fact what is most enframed (*gestellt*) and installed (*bestellt*). Modern humans only possess power and autonomy, Heidegger therefore argued, insofar as they have forgotten their “proper essence.” Subjectivity is always constituted by a forgetfulness of its own Being. Accordingly,



it is only through commemorating *ontological difference* – the difference between self-identical beings and their Being – that we can be in our rightful element. Our “proper” order, by which the *humanitas* is distinguished from a mere *animal rationale*, is that of an ecstatic openness towards Being – not the fake openness of a one-way road to an all-too-human maturity. As long as ontological difference remains unthought and is repressed by anthropological difference, no authentic being will be possible. Hence Heidegger states that humankind can never be in full possession of nature or of its own essence, but only occupies a small patch of Enlightenment, a *Lichtung*, the horizons of which will always remain anthropologically underdetermined. And because it doesn’t choose to stand in this *Lichtung*, but is *de facto* ‘thrown’ into it by a movement that is not its *de jure* property, neither should it be in the centre of theory. Thus while Sartre, although highly influenced by the turn to facticity in Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, could still emphasise that *nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’homme*, Heidegger corrects this interpretation of existentialism in his letter *On Humanism* by declaring that *nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Etre*.

However, Sloterdijk repeatedly stresses an important similarity between Heidegger’s ontological project and post-Kantian subject-object dialectics. In both cases, an existing form of subjectivity is unmasked as not emancipatory enough. This is done in the name of a more proper, teleologically defined *Bei-sich-Sein*, respectively an essential *auto-* or *onto-nomos*, which ultimately turns out to be – as Derrida has repeatedly demonstrated – a metaphysically and thus morally informed *theo-nomos*. In post-Kantian dialectics, this order has been that of the essence of man, which is not yet fully realized; for Heidegger, it is the voice of Being, which is not yet fully heard. Both anthropological difference and ontological difference are conceived of as ultimate differences which, once appropriated, legitimate a denial of the actual state of affairs in the name of something that is yet to come. Although Sloterdijk clearly subscribes to Heidegger’s critique of anthropocentrism and throughout his work will search for principles of *Gelassenheit* instead of Kantian subjectivity, these cannot be based on a pre-subjective yielding to ontological difference either. Ultimately, both options are too conservative and dogmatic in that they depend on a preconceived, moral idea of what is “proper” to man. For Kant, one must treat every newborn as someone who desires to be, in the end, what he should be. Mature subjectivity is therefore primarily conceived as the idea of a retroactive authorization in favour of the educator. Nonetheless, it remains the “fundamental contradiction of the human condition” that “maturity and freedom are expected of humans, although they didn’t have the right to vote with regard to the most important question of their lives: whether they wanted to step into existence at all”.<sup>25</sup> The same can be said of Heidegger, for whom the original *Verfallenheit* or *Irre* must be overcome in order to bring humanity into its proper relation of listening to the voice of Being and letting itself be tuned by it. Again, Sloterdijk’s critique is reminiscent of Derrida’s

deconstructions of the teleology of anthropocentric discourse under the ambiguous banner of “the ends of man.”<sup>26</sup> Derrida’s lesson was that a morality-free, or “unprejudiced” approach to humanity can only be based on a difference that cannot be appropriated:<sup>27</sup> what is needed, therefore, is what Sloterdijk calls “a new ‘principle’ of difference,” that is, an “ontological difference without metaphysics”.<sup>28</sup> As a way of overcoming modern anthropocentrism, Sloterdijk therefore proposes to think of life from the perspective of its beginnings rather than its ends, for which he proposes the concepts of, firstly, “natality,” or “coming-into-the-world,” and, secondly, of “assuming oneself.”

## Natal difference and the assumption of oneself

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt developed her concept of ‘natality’ as opposed to Heidegger’s being-unto-death.<sup>29</sup> For her, it was the key to a positive theory of man’s finitude. Being born means traversing an *Offenheit*, entertaining an ecstatic relation with things and other people and being under constant pressure from the factic.<sup>30</sup> For Sloterdijk, similarly, natality means that we are perpetually “arriving,” ‘extending’ and ‘embedding’ ourselves in movements and relations in which we are not with ourselves (*bei uns*), but always already outside and ‘away,’ engaged in technological, artistic, social and political affairs.<sup>31</sup> Sloterdijk therefore doesn’t ask with Kant ‘what is man?’ but rather with Heidegger ‘where is man?’ and subscribes to both the latter’s early definition that “man is the way (*das Weg*)”<sup>32</sup> and his later definition that “man inhabits the house of Being,”<sup>33</sup> this house being understood as the language of *poièsis* through which man answers to the voice of Being and communicates (*mitteilt*) and imparts himself (*sich austeilten*) in “ecstatic immanence”.<sup>34</sup> However, for Sloterdijk this “way” is neither the linear one of a predetermined and necessary *Bildung*, nor a grim decisiveness or resigned yielding in the face of the unavoidable. Rather, it consists of an ongoing, complex moving in and moving out, of constantly being reborn and beginning over again in concrete factual situations.<sup>35</sup>

Sloterdijk thus maintains Heidegger’s crucial difference between an animal *Umwelt* and the specifically human *Welt*, but no longer defines it as related to ontological difference. Instead I propose to call Sloterdijk’s new principle of difference, drawing from an adjective that is biological as much as it is poetical, natal difference.<sup>36</sup> It is difference conceived from a flipside perspective to that of ontological difference, similar to the way that natality is the flipside of being-unto-death and in *Sphären III. Schäume* “bornness” is proposed as the flipside of “throwness.” Natal difference is literally intergenerational, insofar as it is constituted by a generative process. It marks what has already been begun with a processual excess over itself. Due to this natal excess humans are never completely with themselves (*bei sich*); yet neither could they be – and that’s why Sloterdijk

calls his own work an “anthropo-monstrology”:<sup>37</sup> an anthropology of natal difference.

As a consequence, coming-into-the-world involves a falling out of the animal *Umwelt*, but this is not a negative *a priori* of the human condition, like estrangement or *Verfallenheit*, which must be compensated for by a necessary trajectory or moral attitude. Rather, it is the sign of an original excess or freedom that is the “quintessence” of human life. Due to this excess, even in poetical language humans are never completely at home but rather the product of a “hyper-birth”<sup>38</sup> or “permanent crisis, which for two-and-a-half thousand years has been called upbringing”.<sup>39</sup> As a consequence, being-born doesn’t simply equal moving into the house of Being; rather, it is a “move to what lies beyond,” namely a whole *Menschenpark*, an irreducible situatedness in which humans constantly have to “assume themselves” (*sich übernehmen*).<sup>40</sup> Together with natality, the concept of assuming oneself refers to the full assumption of one’s own beginning, the result of which is one’s being-there or *Da-sein*, instead of one’s end.<sup>41</sup> It goes back to his Frankfurt lectures called *Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen* from 1988, in which birth is conceived as the ‘original scene’ for post-Heideggerian – whether poetical, philosophical, technological or political – forms of *Gelassenheit*, which I now propose to translate with the word *relief*.<sup>42</sup> Rather than offering an overhasty metaphysical interpretation of the critical principle of *Gelassenheit* from the perspective of its utopian or ‘thanatopian’ ends, Enlightenment and *Gelassenheit* in terms of birth seek utopia in the “unprejudicedness” of the “as yet” of “being-born”.<sup>43</sup> This shift from yielding to relief owes more to Nietzsche than to Heidegger and is rooted in a non-trivial interpretation of Nietzsche’s “become who you are:” a “happy positivism” according to which assuming oneself means assuming responsibility for all the consequences that follow from the fact that one is.<sup>44</sup> Assuming oneself does not depend on a negation of the factual in the name of a transcendent principle of difference – an anthropological shortcoming or an onto-phenomenological reduction from an actual state of affairs – but remains true to the complexity of the world in “a biopositive, non-illusionary but indecipherable, because foetal, reservation of the world (*Weltvorbehalt*).”<sup>45</sup> It implies a Dionysian rather than phenomenological *Gelassenheit* that starts out from the primary “too much” of “ecstatic immanence,” relieved of the economy of the necessary and the proper.<sup>46</sup> About this *Gelassenheit*, Sloterdijk writes: “insofar as this mode of existence is still attainable for grown-up, conflict-hardened subjects, then only if they let themselves get involved in the world as in a stream of proceeding birth”.<sup>47</sup> It is a therapeutic concept, as long as one understands by therapy “the endeavour to set free the flow of pre-predicative ‘affirmations’ towards a reflected acceptance (*Einwilligung*) in self-designed life”.<sup>48</sup>

After anthropological difference and ontological difference, the principle of the self-assumption of birth is a third way of relating to man’s finitude with great consequences for our ecological,<sup>49</sup> social and, as we shall see, genetic self-under-

standing.<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche gave us an understanding of Modernity as “the impossibility of breeding individuals to an end” (2010: 113). But if, for him, humankind is the ‘nicht-festgestellte Tier’, the same goes for the world in which it lives, and any preconceived conformity between youth and world is precluded. Therefore, Sloterdijk argues, Nietzsche is the great “psychagogue of Modernity,” who wanted to actively create new life forms out of the existing materials of talent and character and first made a modern transition from the priority of self-knowledge to that of self-realization which is so typical of our culture of life-long learning. In fact, the human park has always been the scene of a “reformatting crisis in human essence.” But it is Nietzsche, that great thinker of birth, who liberated this crisis from its moral overtones (45ff). If humans are the products of a process of self-formation, and if aesthetics rather than morality is the discipline of forms, then he set free an understanding of *Bildung* that would later become famous under the banner of an aesthetics of the self. Such an aesthetics can function as a strategy of emancipation or enlightenment that is neither *a priori* suspicious of being intimately related to existing power relations nor yields to retroactive subjectivist authorizations. Rather, we should “understand self-assumption in such a way that no metaphysics of ‘I-ness’ has to be presupposed”.<sup>51</sup> Hence, for Sloterdijk, natality is opposed to the reactionary, which he describes as the mindset according to which it is “better to serve an empty form as long as it has the power to impose itself than to lose oneself in the freedom of formlessness and of sheer experiment”. Instead, it allows for an “informal thought” which includes “poetical philosophies” and “the thought that is invested in artworks”.<sup>52</sup>

## Homeotechnology and Poïesis

For Sloterdijk, the great merit of the formula ‘coming-into-the-world’ is that it diminishes or even elides Heidegger’s famous technophobia and provincialism, both directly related to his resistance to anthropology.<sup>53</sup> According to the latter’s onto-phenomenological reduction of the ontic, the modern age of technology and globalization constitutes the summit of more than two thousand years of nihilistic forgetfulness of Being. A Turn (*Kehre*) towards Being, understood as the reversion (*Umkehr*) to, or – with Sloterdijk – the phenomenological rendition of, the modern, vertical movement of ‘revolution’ (2001: 60ff) in the history of Being, could never be the work of humans – since ‘work’ is always active and anthropomorphic and belongs to the *Ge-stell* – but only an *Einkehr* of Being itself. Ultimately, this leads to Heidegger’s famous conclusion that “only a God can still save us” (23/1976, 193ff). Unsurprisingly, Sloterdijk is not pressed for such a salvation. Such an assessment leaves us both in sheer denial of the world we live in today and empty-handed in the face of a potentially dangerous future.<sup>54</sup> In his collection of essays on Heidegger, *Nicht gerettet. Versuche nach Heidegger* (2001), clearly composed as a contextualization of *Prescriptions for the Human Park*,<sup>55</sup> he never fails

to reproach Heidegger for having missed the appointment with Modernity. However, his main problem with phenomenology is no different from his reproach to most modern theory, especially in its young Hegelian and phenomenological variants, and lies in what he repeatedly refers to by employing Luhmann's concept of the 'reduction of complexity'.<sup>56</sup>

Through a "literal," "stubborn,"<sup>57</sup> "kinetic"<sup>58</sup> and "historical" or "evolutionary"<sup>59</sup> reading of Heidegger's *de jure* concept of *Lichtung*, Sloterdijk argues that we are already dealing with the product of a generous, evolutionary *Leichtung*.<sup>60</sup> *Lichtung* and anthropogenesis are thus two expressions for the same historical relief-phenomenon.<sup>61</sup> The rather perverse interest of this interpretation lies in the fact that it paves the way for an ontic history of ontological difference, "without causing oneself to be misled by the contemptuous note of sworn-in Heideggerians, that something 'merely ontic' is abused for determining something ontological. And what if precisely such a determination depended on a reversal through which contemplative philosophy could regain the lost connection with the investigative cultural sciences?"<sup>62</sup> For Sloterdijk, a radical "historical anthropology" and an ontic revision of the concept of *Lichtung* are justified by the fact that today's being-in-the-world has long been "explicitated" as a product of industrialization, as a hybrid of technology and anthropology. In fact, he argues that the genetic and information 'revolutions' mean that "the drama of anthropology has only just begun".<sup>63</sup>

In a post-Heideggerian, historical anthropology, the concept of humanity doesn't refer to an object of knowledge but to a "container concept" that contains "incalculable complexities".<sup>64</sup> Humans constitute a medium or stage, "like an eye through which Dionysus observes himself",<sup>65</sup> on which can appear not beings, but "becomings" or "events" without final aim.<sup>66</sup> It is true that, in today's new technologies and digital interfaces, modern transcendental subjectivity – reformatted into that of the "observed observer"<sup>67</sup> – recurs more strongly than ever. But it is precisely the continuation of phenomenology itself which demands a cybernetics or systems theory that grasps subjectivity "beyond ego and will",<sup>68</sup> in a "historical compromise between cybernetics and personalism".<sup>69</sup> Contrary to Heidegger's analysis of the poverty of modern subjectivity in its role of feedback system of technology, Sloterdijk understands cybernetics as an approach to life beyond property and lack, because it has been the first to theorise scientifically what could previously only be understood as the intolerable and irrational 'scum' of the real: the functioning of information as a third term between subject and object, which introduces into reflexivity a mechanical aspect.<sup>70</sup> It is precisely from a cybernetic perspective that it is impossible to reduce ourselves to mere ontic nature when we speculate, for example, about cloning. Rather, because the human genome has both a material aspect (it doesn't exist without the molecular structure of DNA) and an aspect of intelligence (in interaction with other intracellular components, it steers and regulates ontogenetic routes and contains infor-

mation that commands the synthesis of proteins), genetics “explicitates” the importance of informational technology<sup>71</sup> in such a way that both humans and nature now appear as its derived variables.<sup>72</sup> In other words, a modern sense of relief is expressed in a constructivism which treats beings not as *Bestand*, enframed and domesticated in a world picture, but as events in a dissipative process.<sup>73</sup>

For this reconciliation of *Gelassenheit* and technology, Sloterdijk – following the founder of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann – extends his own concept of “self experiment”,<sup>74</sup> proposes the concept of “homeotechnology,” the technology used for operating on materials that are of the same ontological quality as the operator. It is contrasted with “allotechnology,” the “contranatural” or “estranged” technology that treats materials as being of a different ontological quality. The latter, corresponding to Heidegger’s conception of technology, determines Western metaphysics from Athens to Hiroshima.<sup>75</sup> However, technologies and modes of production such as genetics, artificial intelligence, neurosciences and robotics depend ever less on one-way operations instrumental to an enframing, demiurgic will to power. Rather, they increasingly depend on a “new alliance with the natural worker (*Naturarbeiter*)”<sup>76</sup> and “regenerative energies”. They allow for both humans and their creations to take part in the same continuum of what Heidegger calls “bringing-forth-into-the-open (*Entbergen*)”.<sup>77</sup> Heidegger’s post-metaphysical concept of *poiësis* (and also Maturana’s and Varela’s post-phenomenological concept of *autopoiësis*) bear witness to the fact that *Gelassenheit* doesn’t have to be a “patient shepherding” of life, but can also be an active “bringing-forth-into-the-open.” In fact, it implies a cybernetic transition in the understanding of the self from “*a priori*-regulation to a *posteriori*-regulation”<sup>78</sup> and replaces Heidegger’s God with “the capacity of creating natures.” However, this openness calls for a complex understanding of technology based on a principle of adequacy, according to which such a mode of production should ‘want’ nothing except what the “things themselves” are from themselves or can become from themselves – “all ‘material’ would then be understood and operated upon from its proper obstinacy (*Eigensinnigkeit*)”.<sup>79</sup>

This obstinacy or proper nature (*Eigennatur*) is illustrated with an example from Spinoza: “If, for example, I say that I have the right to do whatever I like with this table, I am hardly likely to mean that I have the right to make this table eat grass.”<sup>80</sup> We really are the quasi-demiurgic species that artificially manipulates nature. But this is only possible through the practice of homeotechnology that makes nature and humans take part in the same poetical continuum. Combined, the ‘gynaecologization’ of Heidegger’s critique of technology towards an understanding of natal difference and the cybernetic interpretation of subjectivity offer a principle of natural or natal difference that puts *Gelassenheit* back into nature, making the “real history of the *Lichtung*” described above coincide with the “natural history of *Gelassenheit*”.

What is therefore most original in Sloterdijk's reading of Heidegger is the way in which he translates phenomenology into a veritable constructivism. The philosophical importance of his concept of homeotechnology lies in his attempt to make Heidegger's *poiësis* converge with Spinoza's *natura naturans*, according to which nature is an "autoplastic" "self-constructing hypermachine".<sup>81</sup> It is typical of a constructivist approach to technology that humanity is never *bei sich*, but constantly reconstructing its "house of Being." Consider the following example: if Dolly is no longer a sheep born from sheep, then neither would the *homo clonatus* be a human born from humans. Yet, at the same time, he is precisely a human-made human, or *homunculus*.<sup>82</sup> At work here is a technology mediated, intergenerational, or natal difference, which, by differentiating nature into a process with two sides – one of production, *natura naturans*, and one of its products, *natura naturata* – frees the creative force of life from its fixation on the side of the produced. Firstly, this difference forces us to understand technology as a production process in which there is no absolute difference between nature and 'human' technology. Secondly, it disallows us to reduce the essence of life to the prescriptive laws of what actually exists or to disconnect it from the laws of self-transgressing becoming. Thirdly, it makes us realise that life, no matter whether it is defined biologically, ecologically, or morally, cannot be restricted to the domain of an essentialistically defined humanity. Man's relation to technology may be uncanny (*unheimlich*), but this uncanniness is also a positive opportunity for new forms of life, now understood as an affair that has always already begun outside the privileged domain of the human: "the innate negativity of the human position towards nature can turn into a positivity, if humans themselves, spoken figuratively, arrive at the 'other side' sufficiently enough – more precisely, on the other side of naturating".<sup>83</sup>

Homeotechnology is, for Sloterdijk, not merely an over-excited speculation in the style of late-romantic philosophy of nature or alchemical or kabbalistic dreams, but the implicit *Leitmotiv* of all modern technosciences. Moreover, once "*natura naturans* becomes a cultural drama",<sup>84</sup> he argues, the concept of homeotechnology might well deliver the "matrix of a humanism after humanism".<sup>85</sup> Or as he puts it in *Nicht gerettet*: "One has to become a cybernetician to remain a humanist".<sup>86</sup> We are not so much ontologists, but second order constructors of machines, "second engineers".<sup>87</sup> Therefore, as Sloterdijk paraphrases Heidegger, "*nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement la technique*".<sup>88</sup> If humans are becoming more and more "self-operable" and are attaining more and more the active side of "(se)lection," then they cannot be reduced to a "raw subject" (*Rohsubjekt*); they must also be understood in their capacity of "co-producer[s]" and in extreme cases as "intelligence accelerator[s]". From the perspective of historical anthropology, humankind is no more than, in Heideggerian terms, a "regional possibility of clearing (*Lichtung*) and a local energy of gathering (*Sammlung*)," or, more Foucaultian, "a gathering place of truth and power," but it is "no gatherer of

everything”.<sup>89</sup> This means that it cannot and must not choose between being itself and not being itself. Humans consort with themselves like a surgeon with his patients. “Today, I can no longer be myself authentically as long as I abstract myself from my potential operator”.<sup>90</sup> Once we convert ourselves ‘from subject to project,’ as Vilém Flusser would have said, we are able to see how the original, pre-Kantian project of raising the potentiality of humans can be continued.<sup>91</sup>

## Writing after the ends of book and man

The concepts of natality and homeotechnology have led Sloterdijk to a definition of the *homo humanus* as a medial inter-being (*Zwischenwesen*). Let us now return to the problem of biopolitics. For a reactionary humanist, Sloterdijk summarizes, growing up means “internalization of the victim” and “hypertrophy of the sense of reality at the expense of the sense of possibility”.<sup>92</sup> But, as Sloterdijk asks, isn’t “the main event of anthropogenesis” rather “the conquest of childhood” and of a structural “neoteny”: the retention, well into maturity, of traits previously and in other species seen only in juveniles?<sup>93</sup> In a sense, therefore, the ‘ethical’ question posed by Sloterdijk is how to remain an unformed subject of experimentation and healthy naivety.

So far, I have shown how, for Sloterdijk, a “relief” from a heavily laden understanding of growing up depends on a principle of difference that doesn’t approach difference from the side where it is already established, but from its processual, productive, performative side. In a time when human autonomy and maturity comes to be conditioned less by ‘humanist’ ideology and more and more by science and technology, such a change of sides is nothing less than urgent. Until now, we have focused on biotechnology as one possible medium in which natal difference is at work. This was justifiable because the concept of anthropotechnics was the main cause of misinterpretation in the Sloterdijk affair and because for Sloterdijk the interference of information mechanisms in subjectivity is the most spectacular in genetics. However, once it is put back in its Heideggerian context, anthropotechnics functions as the theorem of an “historical anthropology” according to which the human condition is fundamentally a product and can only be understood by analyzing its historically varying modes and relations of production.<sup>94</sup> Anthropotechnics in this sense must be understood as a new configuration of ontology and anthropology beyond Heidegger’s critical opposition of technology and poetry. For Sloterdijk, it refers to all media by which humans are inscribed, coded or marked, especially in a time in which not only the life sciences, but also mass media and informatization have pushed aside the book as the privileged medium of human formation. This brings us back to a key issue of anthropo-technical biopolitics: the nature of writing, or the writing of (human) nature, and the critical search for the possibility of beginning to write anew. Already early on in his career, Sloterdijk describes the task of poets to



“transform what Cioran called the absolute disadvantage [“with being born” –svt] into the most euphoric of all advantages.”<sup>95</sup>

The first lesson of historical anthropology, in which natality and (self-)writing converge in a definition of *homo humanus* as techno-poetical domestic animals, is that the house of Being has always been a phenomenon of transference, translation and transmission (*Übertragung*). This was already intuited by Heidegger, when he famously quoted Hölderlin’s: “Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth.”<sup>96</sup> However, according to Sloterdijk’s “immunological” interpretation, this poetics (*dichten*) not only refers to living poetically and ecstatically, but also to an anthropo-immunological process of sealing or closing off a domestic lifeworld by transferring the homely onto the uncanny. “Coming-into-the-world” involves a “coming-into-language” that transfers the original anthropogenetic process onto new *Lichtungen* by befriending the “monstrous Outside” or the “inhuman.” And it is not only poetry; language in general, including that of technology, is a “general organon of translation” and of “becoming friends with the world”. If there is reason to question the humanist legacy today, this not so much because the house of Being is disappearing under technological installations, but because nobody knows what this house will look like after its deconstruction, “since now even its foundation, the liaison between the culture of writing and human formation, is being redesigned.” The immunological capacity of language is being progressively overburdened – one could say that we are being progressively “turned inside out (Sloterdijk uses both *umgestülpt* and *ausgestülpt*),” insofar as cybernetics constructs uncanny analogies of subjectivity by externalizing us in information. “Speaking and writing in the age of digital codes and genetic transcriptions no longer have any kind of homely sense; the scriptural compositions (*Schriftsätze*) of technology develop outside of translation and no longer generate homifications (*Anheimlungen*) nor befriend the outside. On the contrary, they widen the range of the exterior and the unassimilable”.<sup>97</sup>

An intuition of this radical alteration in the essence of writing can of course already be found in the “untimely” writing of Nietzsche for “a people to come” and in Heidegger, who in his letter *On Humanism* – hence right after the end of WWII, when old humanist conservatism seemed the sole guarantee against further inhuman excesses and bookshops were flooded with new editions of Goethe and Schiller – writes that in the age of technology “die Heimatlosigkeit ist ein Weltchicksal.”<sup>98</sup> For Sloterdijk, both Nietzsche and Heidegger are therefore experimental authors, writing for a non-existent, post-humanist public, for the future, uncertain of whether they will ever find a reader able to understand its message. They perform “operations in what is unproven (*im Unerwiesenen*)” and attempt to “think beyond one’s own age”.<sup>99</sup> However, in order to make it possible for Sloterdijk to define writing in terms of natal difference, it took Foucault and Deleuze’s “thought of the Outside” and Derrida’s “deconstructions” of Heidegger’s anthropomorphisms to liberate this search for relief from Heidegger’s “pre-

modern” fixation on ontological difference. To conclude I therefore propose to relate Sloterdijk’s principle of natal difference as “a noble weakness and a local energy of poetics” and “the simple exposure towards the incommensurable”<sup>100</sup> to a principle of *differance* that can be found in the works of these French authors, especially in Derrida’s concept of writing as “anti-genealogical” – or to use a concept of Sloterdijk which unfortunately remains undefined in his works, “transgenous” writing.<sup>101</sup>

Even if Sloterdijk hardly ever refers to Derrida,<sup>102</sup> a Derridean understanding of writing lies at the basis of his own concept of *poièsis*. Already in his early *Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen* (1988), which has the explicit aim of “liberating Heidegger’s thought in a language where it would be more right than in its own”,<sup>103</sup> he has conducted a thought experiment in which each human embodies a syllable, but is unable to read himself because he doesn’t possess an organ for direct self-perception. Rather, “what marshals these living syllables, concealed to themselves, onto the track of their own sounds, is writing”.<sup>104</sup> Because writing is like an infinite book, without a first or last page, Sloterdijk argues that the distinction between literature and life is difficult to make.<sup>105</sup> Humans are world constituting animals and insofar as this comes down to “gathering writing to further the world’s text, poetry is analogous to existence”.<sup>106</sup> The lesson of this experiment is that living is a medial, pre-subjective and pre-objective affair: one comes into the world by communicating oneself, by translating the *ecstasis* into *enstasis*, but through and before this communicating one is already dispersed over and communicated by others.<sup>107</sup> One only assumes oneself by exposing oneself or inscribing oneself in the having-already-begun of a pre-poetic “text of life (*Lebenstext*)”<sup>108</sup> or even “genetic ‘text’”.<sup>109</sup> These textual traces are like a material, exogenous unconsciousness, marked by “existential tattoos, which no upbringing can cover completely and no (humanistic) conversation can hide”.<sup>110</sup> If every “translation” in the asymmetry of generations – what we are used to calling the “tradition” – has the character of a hostage taking, a kind of intergenerational passivity inseparable from an unavoidable violence, then wasn’t it indeed the moral scandal of the old teleological praxis of Enlightenment humanism through breeding, domestication and ultimately, humanization, that it used in-between generations only as a means towards the emancipation of later generations, instead of as an end in themselves?<sup>111</sup> By contrast, Sloterdijk holds that only when the primary inscription is put to “play,” defined as a relief of this ‘natural’ violence, does *poièsis* become possible.<sup>112</sup> *Poièsis* depends on an escape from the economy of the necessary:<sup>113</sup> “Regenerating oneself” or assuming oneself is “to begin anew, to lose time and again the key that only yesterday was certain to open the locks; it means to go back before what we are already able to do, to reveal the tattoos that are monotonously carved into the meaningless flesh”.<sup>114</sup>

## Transgenous philosophy

With today's technologies of writing, these 'poetical' concepts of beginning, play and experiment gain importance. If genes, to pick up the extreme example once more, are like a chain letter through generations, then the disappearance of pre-biotechnological modes of (se)lection and (pre-)scription in favour of a genetic technology that favours disseminative, transversal or lateral<sup>115</sup> connections over linear ones, demands by itself a "transgenous"<sup>116</sup> approach to writing and self-(se)lection.<sup>117</sup> The same can be said of the marginalization of the book by hypertext and ever more interactive – or, following Žižek, 'interpassive' – media of (in)formative writing. In terms of breeding and domestication, genetic engineering no longer depends on in-between generations because it has direct access to its results, and the most shocking moment of the old strategies of formation – the intergenerational elimination of unwanted exemplars – therefore disappears.<sup>118</sup> This is what Sloterdijk refers to when he argues that more and more we attain the active side of reproduction. Of course, this doesn't take away the biopolitical question of (se)lection, but at least puts it in more contemporary terms. Thus, it allows for a relief from over-optimistic expectations of human subjectivity à la Habermas and for a post-subjective or post-author-centered grammar to appear: "Whereas the centered subject is the effect of a grammatical system that harasses to death the living consciousness between 'Thou shalt' and 'I want,' the decentered subject would perhaps be the first to have the right to say in reference to itself: I am".<sup>119</sup> Such a subject is no longer interested in what is his proper end, because in transgenous writing, there can be "no private property of histories" but only "a presentation of transmitted wisdom and no plagiarism" because "there is no hierarchic difference between originals and copies in the flow of ... traditions".<sup>120</sup>

When Sloterdijk proposes a "transgenous" concept such as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in order to develop a more relieved attitude towards the asymmetric violence of tradition, this is not to deny that the new technologies of writing are deeply embedded in social discourses and in the symbolic operations of the sciences. Nonetheless, they do offer a critical relief when compared to the more dogmatic and morally legitimating anthropological and ontological principles of difference that dominate these discourses. It was also for this reason that Foucault, in *The Order of Things* (1966), introduced Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as an indication of the possibility that future humans will develop new discourses, in which the clouds of humanistic languages will dissolve and "in which it is once more possible to think."<sup>121</sup> It is in the same way that we should understand the "sigh of relief" which Sloterdijk writes about in his letter to Habermas, the main protagonist of the philosophical generation preceding his own. What he is looking for is the possibility of a "radical autobiography"<sup>122</sup> and "a poetical resistance to metaphysical and technocratic reflexes of *Humanolatrie*".<sup>123</sup> His anthropo-monstrology

is therefore inseparable from a “postmodern humour”<sup>124</sup> or “cybernetic irony”,<sup>125</sup> which “treats, in anthropological form, of the trans-anthropological content of the latest history of power”.<sup>126</sup> Contrary to religious anthropology and humanist metaphysics, then, for Sloterdijk the concept of humanity ultimately means nothing but “the art of creating transitions”.<sup>127</sup> It is no longer a moral, but a poetical concept.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank Pieter Lemmens for his generous critique and several crucial references.
2. Sloterdijk, P. (1999a): *Sphären II. Globen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 54
3. The lecture was presented at an international conference in Schloss Elmau on “Jenseits des Seins, Exodus from Being, Philosophie nach Heidegger.” For the German original: <http://menschenpark.tripod.com>. For a stylistically slightly revised version: Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): *Nicht Gerettet. Versuche über Heidegger*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 302ff. For reasons that follow from my exposition, I prefer to translate the original ‘Regeln’ with ‘prescriptions’ rather than ‘rules’ (as is usually done, see: Sloterdijk, P. (2009a): ‘Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to the *Letter on Humanism*’, transl. Mary Varney Rorty. *Society and Space* 27(1): 12-28) or ‘regulations.’ Sloterdijk is not a moral(ist) philosopher. Although the term ‘regulations’ could be justified from a systems theory perspective, his concept of *Regeln* also possesses strong juridical and medical connotations. The reader should keep this in mind both in the context of Sloterdijk’s intertwining of *de jure* and *de facto* levels of argumentation, especially regarding Heidegger, and with regard to his “immunological” intentions and his strong solidarity with the tradition of Diogenes and Nietzsche, where the philosopher functions as “physician of culture.” (2001a: 9). See: Sloterdijk, P. & H-J. Heinrichs (2001a): *Die Sonne und der Tod. Dialogische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 9.
4. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 136.
5. Sloterdijk, P. & H-J Heinrichs (2001a): o.c., p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 60; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): *Nicht Gerettet. Versuche über Heidegger*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 302, 324. Two understandings of the politics of friendship in the medium of writing that have been highly influential to Sloterdijk are Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* (1988).
7. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 309.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 316ff.; Sloterdijk, P. (1988): *Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen. Frankfurter Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 115ff; Sloterdijk, P. (1989): *Eurotaoismus. Zur Kritik einer politischen Kinetik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 254, 260ff.; Sloterdijk, P. (1999a): *Sphären II. Globen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 69ff. On the other hand, Sloterdijk’s argument can be nuanced by referring to Heidegger, who in *The Question Concerning Technology* subtly differentiates between listening (*hören*) and obeying (*horchen*), stating that it is exactly the ‘functionary of technique’ who obeys the imperative (*Anspruch*) of the *Gestell* as challenge (*Herausforderung*), whereas he who shepherds Being only listens without indiscriminate obeying. See: Heidegger, M. (1977): *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, p. 25.

10. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 212.
11. Ibid., p. 327.
12. Ibid., p. 329.
13. Ibid., p. 227.
14. Ibid., p. 334.
15. Ibid., p. 329.
16. In his Tate lecture from 10 December 2005, Sloterdijk himself translates the German 'Explikation' as 'explicitation': to unfold in the sense of explicitly making things and rendering things public. See: [http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/spheres\\_of\\_action/](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/spheres_of_action/). It combines Heidegger's *poiësis* (bringing forth into the open) with what Bruno Latour calls 'articulation' and the 'explicitating violence' of modern avant-garde art. See: Sloterdijk, P. (2004): *Sphären III. Schäume*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 208ff.
17. See also Sloterdijk's philosophical reflection on the affair in terms of "mediocrity", see Sloterdijk, 2000, *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, and Van Tuinen 2009b.
18. In his *Offener Brief an Thomas Assheuer* Sloterdijk indeed declares that what is ethically at stake is "the border between legitimate medical optimization for individuals and illegitimate biopolitics for groups." (*Die Zeit*, 37/1999, 35f) For some other 'bio-ethical' remarks from the same period, see. 2001b: 202f, 229f, 232, 300f. However, in an interview with *De Groene Amsterdammer* (06/05/2000) he remarks that "[w]e should first discuss ontology and logic, and only then ethics. Ethical norms don't change." Therefore, his actual ethical remarks on direct intervention in "genetic text" or "scores" are very few and his plea for a "codex for anthropotechnics" can only be understood as ironic. One may even wonder whether the challenges at issue can be processed in the mode of ethics at all, insofar as the term refers to the time-honoured connection between freedom, moral action and subjective autonomy.
19. For a further elaboration of this parallel with the Foucault/Habermas-controversy, see Alliez 2001, who argues that the 'Sloterdijk-affair' might also be called 'the Habermas case.'
20. See: Sloterdijk, P. (1996): *Selbstversuch. Ein Gespräch mit Carlos Oliveira*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, p. 114; Sloterdijk P. (2000): *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 14.
21. Sloterdijk, P. (1999b): 'Die Kritische Theorie ist tot.' *Die Zeit*, 37, pp. 35f. For a full reconstruction and documentation of the affair, see: Nennen, H-U. (2003): *Philosophie in Echtzeit. Die Sloterdijk-Debatte: Chronik einer Inszenierung: Über Metaphernfolgenabschätzung, die Kunst des Zuschauers und die Pathologie der Diskurse*. Königshausen & Neumann.
22. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 107, 114.
23. Sloterdijk, P. (2009b): *Philosophische Temperamente. Von Platon bis Foucault*. München: Diederichs, pp. 68-69. For a discussion of the recurring concept of 'de-lightenment,' see Oosterling 2007. On various strategies of Enlightenment in Sloterdijk, see Tuinen, S. van (2007): 'Critique Beyond Resentment. An Introduction to Peter Sloterdijk's Jovial Modernity.' *Cultural Politics* 3(3): 275-306.
24. Sloterdijk, P. (1994): *Weltfremdheit*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 273.
25. Ibid., p. 275.
26. Derrida, J. (1982): *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. A. Bass, Chicago: The Chicago University Press, p. 109ff.
27. Sloterdijk, P. (2001c) *Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht. Nietzsche's fünftes Evangelium*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 23.

28. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 96.
29. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 151f.
30. Arendt, H. (1958): *The Human Condition*. New York: Double Day Anchor Books, p. 10f, 157f, 170, 221f. See also: Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 151f.; Sloterdijk, P. (1994): o.c., p. 280.
31. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 42ff.; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 389ff.
32. See: Heidegger, M. (1989): *Beiträge zur Philosophie*. Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, p. 323. Compare: Sloterdijk, P. (1994): o.c., p. 265.
33. Heidegger, M. (2000): *Über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, p. 53.
34. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 631ff. Sloterdijk also uses other verbs such as *sich aussetzen*, *sich kompromittieren*, *sich vorgeben*, *sich freigegeben* and *sich ausgeben* to describe this trans-subjective type of communication. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 22ff; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 37, 99; Sloterdijk, P. (2001c): o.c., p. 46ff.
35. Sloterdijk, P. (2001): o.c., p. 42ff.
36. The concepts of *Umwelt*, *Welt* and *Weltoffenheit* originate in the ‘classic’ anthropology of the 1920s, especially in the work of Jakob von Uexküll, Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, Adolf Portmann, Helmuth Plessner and Louis Bolk. For each of them, having fallen out of the environment and being-in-the-world both mean being in an extra-uterine scene or horizon within which one must always be on the lookout for more than the totality of extant things or things that have hitherto appeared. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 157, 161f, 204f; 2004: 391.
37. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 864.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
40. For Heidegger’s use of the concept of *sich übernehmen*, which comes very close to that of Sloterdijk, see his *Beiträge zur Philosophie*: “Gleichwohl stehen Dasein und Mensch in einem wesentlichen Bezug, sofern das Da-sein den Grund der Möglichkeit des künftigen Menschseins bedeutet und der Mensch künftigt ist, indem er das Da zu sein übernimmt ... .” Heidegger, M. (1989): o.c., p. 297.
41. Sloterdijk, P. (1994): o.c., p. 267ff.
42. The term ‘relief’ combines the Kantian and Asian concepts of Enlightenment, the Heideggerian concepts of *Gelassenheit* and *Lichtung*, the anti-philosophical ‘frivolity’ (*Leichtsinn*) of Diogenes, Luhmann’s ‘cybernetical irony’ (2001b: 126), the Nietzschean escape from morality and resentment, technological exoneration (*Entlastung*) and economic de-scarcification (*Entknappung*) in a therapeutic concept that is arguably the main theme of all of Sloterdijk’s work.
43. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 151f.
44. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 163; Sloterdijk, P. (1994): o.c., p. 281.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 22ff.; Sloterdijk, P. (2001c): o.c., p. 50; Sloterdijk, P. (2005a): *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 121f.
47. Sloterdijk, P. (1994): o.c., p. 292.
48. *Ibid.* Therapy, then, is the attempt, mediated and facilitated by anthropotechnics, to reach for the generative pole of one’s own life, to catch up with and overcome oneself, in other words, to “become who you are.” By contrast, Ansell-Pearson criticizes Sloterdijk’s early reading of Nietzsche insofar as it does not make a difference between *paideia* and *therapeia*, or between an affirmative therapy that leads to *amor fati* in the form of a transfiguration of the hard school of life into sovereign individuals on the one hand and an anthropotechnical improvement or healing of patients of existence

- on the other. See: Ansell-Pearson, K. (2009): 'The Transfiguration of existence and sovereign life: Sloterdijk and Nietzsche on posthuman and superhuman futures.' *Society and Space* 27(1): 139-156.
49. See: Tuinen, S. van (2009a): 'Air Conditioning Spaceship Earth: Peter Sloterdijk's Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm.' *Society and Space*, 27(1): 105-118.
  50. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 111f.
  51. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 121.
  52. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 354; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 224, 228.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
  54. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 105; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 300.
  55. Especially the essay "Die Domestikation des Seins. Die Verdeutlichung der Lichtung." Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 142ff.
  56. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 47, 352; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 80.
  57. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 9.
  58. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 260; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 29ff.
  59. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
  60. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 260.
  61. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 159f.
  62. *Ibid.*, p. 159f.
  63. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
  64. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
  65. Sloterdijk, P. (1990): *The Thinker on Stage. Nietzsche's Materialism*, transl. J. O. Daniel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 82.
  66. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 177f.
  67. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 129.
  68. Sloterdijk, P. (1990): o.c., p. 82.
  69. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 223.
  70. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 74of.
  71. Although Sloterdijk seems to assume that genes contain information (genes would be prescriptions or "commands for protein molecules," 2001b: 218), the ontological quality of information in genetics is still highly controversial. For some time now, biology has denied the gene the possession of information (and thus also informational preformism) that could generate phenotypes by itself. However, in the 'post-genomic' age, information seems to regain its matter organizing quality from a more holistic, systems biology perspective in which the organism is no longer understood as a product of its genes, but as an autonomous entity, assigning informational "content" to the genome itself, the genome being only one of the subsystems of a biosystem; the steady growth of complexity in the living world can be understood as resulting from more intensive deployments by organisms of their genomic resources; see also: Kirschner, M.W. & J.C. Gerhart. (2005): *The Plausibility of Life. Resolving Darwin's Dilemma*. New Haven: Yale University Press. For a critical discussion of the concept of information in biology from a developmental systems perspective: Moss, L. (2004): *What Genes Can't Do*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; for an explanation of how information emerges with the ontogenetical process of the organism: Oyama, S. (2000): *The Ontogeny of Information*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Although Sloterdijk's understanding of the gene seems to be thoroughly informationist, it is perhaps important to note that his concept of information as *tertium datur* between man and nature is inspired more by Gotthard Günther's cybernetics than by genetics and that his interest in process ontology implies a non-substantialist, holistic understanding of genes as well. For a Foucault-inspired history of the relation between *autopoiesis* and informa-

- tionism: Kay, L. (2000): *Who Wrote the Book of Life?* Chicago/London: Stanford University Press.
72. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 218. An important source for Sloterdijk for this post-Hegelian concept of information is: Günther, G. (1963): *Das Bewusstsein der Maschinen*. Baden-Baden/Krefeld: Agis-Verlag. The difference made by the latter between “classic” and “transclassic” technology. This difference seems to coincide with a development in cybernetics from Wiener’s original interest in programs operating through negative feedback with reference to an external ‘target’ towards the theories of self-organization and circular causality developed by authors such as Varela or Luhmann.
  73. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 206; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 214.
  74. Sloterdijk, P. (1996): o.c., p. 13f.; Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 7ff.
  75. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 214, 275ff.
  76. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 45.
  77. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 153.
  78. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 870.
  79. Sloterdijk, P. (1987b): *Kopernikanische Mobilmachung und ptolemaische Abrüstung. Ästhetischer Versuch*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 81; Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 148f.; Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 29, 82, 330f; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 53, 227.
  80. Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, IV, 4, cited in Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 227.
  81. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 115, 222; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 494.
  82. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 108; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 166, 215.
  83. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
  84. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 154f.; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 194.
  85. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 226ff.
  86. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 365.
  87. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 295f.
  88. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 225. The term “plane of technique” also appears in Bau-drillard, J. (2005): *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, p. 4. If today’s conservative neo-Kantian strands of thought and phenomenology are being overrun by an “integral technological naturalism,” this is not only because they are progressively unable to handle the new technological and informational givens but also because, ultimately, reduction and distance (2001b: 53) cannot conceal “how the question of Being poses itself through questions of power and technique.” Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 117f.; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 177.
  89. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 222f.
  90. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 73.
  91. One more remark on the ethical consequences of this new ontology (cf. footnote 7): Humans, for Sloterdijk, don’t inhabit a single house of Being as their proper element, but are “amphibian” constructivists accessing a plurality of potential elements or atmospheres. (2001b: 156, 222, 385; 2004: 37) If a post-phenomenological concept of *poièsis* should be retained, then, in order to do justice to the complexity of our world, it will have to be supplemented with a “pluralistic ontology,” and, secondarily, with a “polyvalent morality” which remains immanent to a process of continual “de-” and “re-Interessierung”. (2004: 411) In order for such a morality to exist, a complex concept of *Bildung* as mediator between engineers and non-engineers, surgeons and non-surgeons, entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs, would be valuable. (2001b: 358)
  92. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 739.
  93. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 94; Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 756f.
  94. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 152.



95. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 138.
96. Heidegger, M. (2000): o.c., p. 50.
97. See also: Roof, J. (2007): *The Poetics of DNA*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
98. Heidegger, M. (2000): o.c., p. 30.
99. Sloterdijk defines his work as a “nicht-festgestellte anthropology” (2004, p. 864), as a series of “attempts to collect a knowledge that is pushed away from normalization, yet nonetheless consolidated and inscribed (*hineingeschriebenes Wissen*), and to send it to later generations in the form of a message in a bottle,” (2001a, p. 281f) or as “the art of creating words that point out the horizon on board reality.” (1994, p. 60) He privileges the format of the essay, which is “a driving school for intelligence in a world in which the traffic rules between the participants are being developed only whilst driving” and “a decision-making process in order to render undetermined textual process readable in finite time” (1993b: 20). In an interview with Éric Alliez, Sloterdijk reflects that “[a]s a philosophical writer who’s defined the essay as a definitive form of the provisional, I have in my sights an essayistic notion of philosophy of the highest possible level.” Alliez, E. (2007): ‘Living Hot, Thinking Coldly: An Interview with Peter Sloterdijk.’ *Cultural Politics* 3(3): 307-26.
100. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 223.
101. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 136.
102. An exception is *Derrida, an Egyptian*: Sloterdijk, P. (2006): *Derrida, un Égyptien: Le problème de la pyramide juive*, transl. O. Mannoni. Paris: Maren Sell Editeurs
103. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 10; Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 165.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 13ff.
105. The “gap” or “difference” in the beginning of every self-conscious life and in the self-interpretation of life was the subject of Sloterdijk’s dissertation, *Literatur und Lebenserfahrung*, a study of autobiographical writing in the Weimar Republic initially inspired by Dilthey’s hermeneutics but concluding with an argument against autobiography in favour of the theory of subject-transgressing found in Heidegger and Gadamer. (1978, c.r. 1988: 41ff; 1984: 240ff).
106. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 204.
107. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 22ff.; Sloterdijk, P. (2001c): o.c., p. 46ff.
108. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 12.
109. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 202. Another problematic metaphor. Again, one could argue in Sloterdijk’s defense that a gene, just like a syllable, is nothing in itself and remains in need of an on-going organization into networks.
110. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 16. This approach of information and communication mnemotechnologies as spiritual technologies, situated in the field of what Plato called the *hypomnēmata* and what Foucault called the “technique of the writing of the self,” is also taken by for example Bernard Stiegler, see: <http://www.arsindustrialis.org/manifeste>. See also *Du musst Dein Leben ändern*, which appeared two years after this text was first written and of which Sloterdijk stresses that, for him as for Nietzsche, anthropotechnics concerns “your life (*dein Leben*)” and not “life (*das Leben*).” Sloterdijk, P. (2009c): *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 23. For Nietzsche – despite occasional talk of ‘breeding’ – there is no eugenics, not more, at least, than is included in the recommendation to choose a partner in good light and with intact self-respect. All the rest pertains to dressage, discipline, education and self-design – the ‘Übermensch’ implies not a biological, but an artistic – not to say acrobatic – program.’ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

111. From this perspective, the end of the book is indeed most dramatic: If nowadays Western humans no longer want to be emancipated, but insured; if “insurance is humanism minus the culture of books;” (2001b: 150) if, our society is “taken hostage by its own advanced technologies;” (151) then “[t]he connection between capitalism and Protestantism as it was discovered by Max Weber solidifies before our eyes into the alliance of biotechnology and the market mentality.” (300)
112. “Human modes of behaviour can be considered as ‘relieved’ if, in order to be carried out, they require neither complete seriousness nor any ultimate commitment from the party performing the action.” ([http://www.eu2006.at/includes/Download\\_Dokumente/2003TourismSloterdijkEN.pdf](http://www.eu2006.at/includes/Download_Dokumente/2003TourismSloterdijkEN.pdf)). Ultimately, a post-human human would therefore be a new *homo ludens*: “advanced biotechnics and brain technics draw on a sophisticated, cooperative subject that plays with itself and that forms itself in contact with complex texts and over-complex contexts.” (2001b: 231)
113. Sloterdijk, P. (1987b): o.c., p. 109ff.
114. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 23.
115. After observing that genetics and terrorism, procreation and evil, alternate as the most topical issue in the media, Sloterdijk explains in his essay “Von terror und von Genen” how both genes and terrorism offend us laterally; that is, from a pre-subjective, intimate environment. For an in-depth discussion of Sloterdijk’s analysis of mass-medial mediocrity and his strategic use of ‘intimacy’ for redefining the public and its conditions of possibility, see: Tuinen, S. van (2009b): ‘Breath of Relief. Peter Sloterdijk and the Politics of the Intimate.’ In: Hoens, D., S. Jottkandt & G. Buelens (eds.): *Tickle your Catastrophe: On Borders, Cuts and Edges in Contemporary Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53-81.
116. Transgenesis is a kind of genetic modification in which DNA that is foreign to an existing species, the transgene, is introduced into the genome of a living organism of that species so that the organism might exhibit a new property and transmit that property to its offspring.
117. Normally, the “information flow” in natural evolution is divided between processes of extracellular communication through selection, crossover and mutation and intracellular communication such as replication, transcription and translation.
118. Sloterdijk, P. (2001a): o.c., p. 131.
119. Sloterdijk, P. (1990): o.c., p. 82.
120. Sloterdijk, P. (1987b): o.c., p. 99f. This conception of languages is first and foremost influenced by Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, for whom language is gained not just by letting yourself be disciplined by existing language games, since what counts is the flow of language, the flow of addressing speech, by which the speaker imposes binding appeals or vocations on those learning to speak. We are called to language through the imperatives of an address that we are being spoken to and through, hence speaking is always the passing on of evocations or imperatives, and passing on is continuous change. Cf. Sloterdijk’s speech of thanks for the Sigmund Freud Preis für Wissenschaftliche Prosa.
121. Foucault, M. (2001): *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge, p. 373.
122. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 48ff.
123. Sloterdijk, P. (2001b): o.c., p. 224, 233, 365.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 365.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
126. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

127. Ibid., p. 365. For a further elaboration of this art in terms of Foucault's concept of *ethopoiesis*, see: Bordeleau, E. (2007): 'Entre biopouvoir plastique et biopolitique de la sélection: Sloterdijk penseur de l'anthropogénétique.' *Altérités* 4(2): 92-107.

## 4. Disinhibition, Subjectivity and Pride. Or: Guess Who Is Looking?

Peter Sloterdijk's reconstruction of 'thymotic' qualities, psychoanalysis and the question of spectatorship

Robert Pfaller

### No pride today

A distinctive mark of Peter Sloterdijk's philosophy, especially within the context of the German tradition, seems to be its striking serenity. Sloterdijk is obviously amused by what he observes (for example, postmodern cynicism), and he comments about it with a polite smile reflecting something between a certain kind of love and a slight contempt for a more or less silly object. This detached attitude appears to save psychic energy and to subsequently allow for a pleasurable release in beautiful and witty poetic verbalizations. So even where Sloterdijk is sharply critical, he is never passionate. This has apparently made him popular and readable even for people who may otherwise stay away from philosophy. It is the reason why some of his "disinvolved" findings have generated more debate and social concern than any "alarmist" criticism would have been able to. And it may also explain why traditional critical academia in Germany finds it difficult to deal with his work.

In keeping with the notorious distinction introduced by Bernard de Mandeville in 1705,<sup>1</sup> one can thus say that Sloterdijk succeeds in always taking the side of the "knave", but never that of the "fool". His "criticism" means that he is objectively assessing the structure, i. e., the rationality, necessity, function and power of his object; but never complaining or taking it to task for its impossibilities or lacks compared to an imagined subjective model. He then expresses his findings in a way that allows for amazing clarity and considerable amusement but little identification; and not vice versa. "Whether you like it or not" – such a way of speaking represents a remarkably civilized attitude which does not "bribe" the reader with a favourable opinion, nor bother him with subjective sentimentalities such as vague hopes, wishes, disappointments or angers. This is a rare achievement. We should not forget that, within German culture, after the hopes for bourgeois revo-

lution were dashed, civilizedness was not regarded as a high virtue (as Norbert Elias has pointed out).<sup>2</sup> German philosophy – with very few exceptions – has therefore always spontaneously taken the ‘foolish’ position: either that of blue-eyed “Theodizee” – of giving metaphysical meaning to all the suffering and thus declaring this world to be the best of all possible worlds (as Theodor W. Adorno once has remarked);<sup>3</sup> or it has developed into a woeful display of one’s own vulnerability and desperate, resentful criticism of the present state of affairs; without any idea of how to overcome it – yet still a most passionate claim for such overcoming (an example for this would be Adorno’s own stance, as Sloterdijk has pointed out perspicuously).<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite Sloterdijk’s serene, “knaveish” stance and his preference for investigating the powers and functional necessities of his object instead of complaining about its presumed lacks, the author, in his last book, surprisingly discovers a certain lack in the object of his investigation. In “Zorn und Zeit”, Peter Sloterdijk describes our contemporary period as marked by a specific oblivion: *forgetfulness of pride*.<sup>5</sup> According to Sloterdijk, our culture lacks pride.<sup>6</sup> A long cultural history has accustomed us to a psychology of ‘humilitas’, originally geared to medieval “peasants, clergymen and vassals”.<sup>7</sup>

Everything which stems from pride (or from its insults), such as generosity, heroism or anger and revenge, appears foreign and incomprehensible to us.<sup>8</sup> The Homeric heroes whose fates we become familiar with at school are our most unfamiliar opposites in terms of affective life. They fully indulged in anger; whereas we, on the contrary, have been trained in humbleness and inhibition of angry affects. This lack of pride may well lead, as Sloterdijk remarks, to a certain *lack of power* when it comes to confrontation with cultures such as the Islamic world which have better succeeded in preserving their resources of anger.<sup>9</sup>

Here again a certain shift in Sloterdijk’s methodical approach becomes visible. In the past, a major methodical merit of Sloterdijk’s analysis consisted in the fact that he described the cultural structures under investigation as mechanisms of “disinhibition”.<sup>10</sup> Thus his serene analysis of “cynical reason” not only revealed the infamous enlightened consciousness of those who profit from the late capitalist order of things; it also made it understandable how, with regard to practical behaviour, this rational clear-sightedness itself served as a means to live successfully under obviously irrational conditions. Enlightened, “critical” knowledge itself could, as Sloterdijk showed, take on an *ideological function* – in the sense given to the term by Althusser, i.e., a function of *subjectification*, providing individuals with both the necessary disinhibitions for “spontaneously” and passionately pursuing their individual purposes as well as for maintaining and reproducing society’s existing power relations.

Yet oblivion of pride now does not strike Sloterdijk as a force of disinhibition. Therefore the question remains: what else could it be and on the grounds of what necessity or function could its existence be explained? Can any society ever afford

to live with an unnecessary weakness or lack? We may also wonder what methodical change occurred in Sloterdijk's theory between the critique of cynical reason in 1983 which discovered the perfection, i.e. the functional necessity of its object as well as its disinhibiting powers, and the 2006 analysis of "zero dignity" in "Zorn und Zeit" which detects a lack in its object and, consequently, an element of inhibition.

Sloterdijk gives a rough account of the various degrees of reputation that have been attributed to pride and boldness in the history of Western culture. Greek warrior cultures held those affects in high esteem. Later, in the Middle Ages, people were tamed, as it were, by humbleness; in the Renaissance, on the contrary, the pride of warlike characters was highly regarded in early urban citizenship,<sup>11</sup> whereas in modern Western culture, again, those affects have become highly dysfunctional<sup>12</sup> – which is why they had to be banned: until, as we may read Sloterdijk, in the near or far future, it may prove advantageous to once again rediscover those forgotten virtues. Apparently, according to Sloterdijk, some societies require disinhibition, whereas others call for inhibition. But a lack of pride, as can be noted in our contemporary culture according to Sloterdijk, always has the role of a reason of inhibition in his analysis.

## Thymos and Eros

Pride is described by Sloterdijk as a 'thymotic' quality. It is linked to the imaginary place (organ or drive) that the ancient Greeks called 'thymos': the place where – according to this mythology – qualities such as pride, courage, ambition, anger and others are situated.<sup>13</sup> In his dialogue "Politeia", Plato had suggested a three-fold topology of the human soul which included *logos* (reason), *eros* (appetite) and *thymos* (pride).<sup>14</sup> Slightly differing from that scheme, Sloterdijk in "Zorn und Zeit" focuses exclusively on the opposition between *eros* and *thymos*. The two opponents are, as Sloterdijk argues, to be distinguished as follows:

While erotics shows us ways to the "objects" which we lack so that the proximity or possession of which makes us feel complete, 'thymotics' offers human beings ways to assert what they have, are able to, are and want to be.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sloterdijk's diagnosis, there is a predominant focus on 'erotic' motivations in Western culture. This has accustomed us to an 'ethics of zero dignity' ("Ethik der Würdelosigkeit"),<sup>16</sup> pure consumerism, envy and resentment.<sup>17</sup> We have been seduced to greed, our appetites have been quickened, overwhelmed with erotic offers and commodities, and thus we no longer know how and when to fight.<sup>18</sup>

The specifically political impulses – the pride-based 'thymotic' causes of human action – have become unfathomable. They may well appear in the guise of

anger (of other people, of course) or in popular fantasies about revenge – now doomed to mass-culture products of little cultural distinction such as Alexandre Dumas popular novel “Le Comte de Monte Christo”,<sup>19</sup> in which the culturally repressed element celebrates its massive return.

Apart from ancient forces like Christianity, Psychoanalysis is for Sloterdijk one of the culprits of this forgetfulness – due to its unilateral attempts of erotic explanation and the “reduction of individuals to patients”, i.e. “persons without pride”.<sup>20</sup> Thus psychoanalysis has, according to Sloterdijk, contributed to a “propaganda of erotization and vulgarization”.<sup>21</sup>

## Resentment rules

In his description of contemporary culture, Sloterdijk has, I believe, touched upon a neuralgic point: our culture is actually a culture of resentment – resentment taken as an envious aggression “against the ego and its inclination to assert itself and what belongs to it”.<sup>22</sup> Where resentment rules, as we can learn from Nietzsche, the rule is: *The weaker you are the better you are*. Cultures of resentment therefore do not allow anyone to show signs of elegance or greatness but, on the contrary, engage in competitions of presumptuous modesty. Referring to this, Sloterdijk appears totally justified when he speaks, in wonderful moments of sharpness as well as good humour, for example, of “subcultures, inebriated with humbleness”.<sup>23</sup>

To illustrate the degree to which resentment rules in our culture, I would like to take just one example from the art field (where I work as a philosopher, teaching philosophy to artists). Here one might recall how the last documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor, spoke about its selected artists:

The artist belongs to a new generation of artists who have won international recognition by the fact that they live and work in the country where they were born.<sup>24</sup>

‘Stay at home and just worry about your own things’ – and please never make any other, more universal claims: if you follow this precept, then you may end up in documenta. (I will not discuss here to what degree this misrecognizes and even does injustice to the artists selected by documenta). Artists are now preferably chosen for their presumed weakness; they are not supposed to show mundane signs of cosmopolitanism, glamour, excess, madness, extravagance, obsession, mastership or international solidarity. Instead, they are encouraged to display humble traces of their own poverty or discrimination.

By focusing on such forms of resentment, Sloterdijk, I think, teaches a crucial political lesson to a certain culture-based leftism, which in recent decades has more and more mistaken resentment and victimization for actual emancipatory

political struggle.<sup>25</sup> Resentment has imposed itself as the voice of the weak in the world. Yet it has to be recognized as a massive force of actual *de-politicization*: resentment always takes sides with the weak. At the same time it goes to great pains to ensure that the weak remain weak (and at a remove from the strong). It never allows the weak themselves to become strong or proud or to make substantial claims that would bring about a change in society's structure. Only exemplary individual victims who stick to their victim status are granted small individual advantages which provide a Western petty bourgeoisie (that appears to need this) with a considerable amount of good consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

### **The stumbling block: Are we really so erotic?**

As much as I appreciate, and also agree with, Sloterdijk's diagnosis of resentment in contemporary culture, I find his dismissal of psychoanalytic theory a step taken too hastily. And this is not only a mistake in one particular detail. Rather, it is the reason why Sloterdijk's whole theoretical enterprise in "Zorn und Zeit" is doomed to fail. Since Sloterdijk explains resentment by the predominance of the erotic pole in our culture (a predominance to which psychoanalysis, according to Sloterdijk has contributed), I, by contrast, want to affirm that resentment rules – but not because of a predominance of the erotic pole. It is not the erotic pole that rules. And psychoanalysis allows us to understand this.

Apparently Sloterdijk accepts here too quickly the self-description of our culture as "hedonist" and purely "consumerist". But is this self-description correct? Look at the massive *ascetic* tendencies that this culture produces – its disgust with pleasures such as sex, smoking, adult language or even politeness. Is it not amazing that this culture, which at the end of the sixties appeared as a culture of "sexual liberation," has turned out to be, at the end of the nineties, a culture of "sexual harassment"? Is our pleasure today not subjected to the most peculiar restrictions – so that we have, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, coffee only without caffeine, cream only without fat, and beer preferably without alcohol?<sup>27</sup> Is the predominant cultural phenomenon not precisely a strange inhibition on the erotic pole – a surprising inability of the people to claim what they want to possess? And is it not obvious, on the political level, that the masses not only *accept* shortcuts imposed on them by neo-conservative governments, but even *hail* those governments for this, making the most radical political protagonists of privatization and deregulation their most beloved darlings? Are we not observing the paradoxical phenomenon of a strange, completely reactionary *lack of greed* among the masses?

With Nietzsche, we can see how resentment is linked to asceticism and ascetic ideals: yesterday's losers like to declare their losses their virtues and tend to see a high moral value in the abstinence from those goods for which classes have struggled. But are such ascetic ideals actually situated in or pushed forward by the erotic pole? How do we then explain the fact that our culture does not ascribe



high value to all kinds of glamour but perceives them as causes of irritation and harassment? Confronted with the problem of how to account for the predominant asceticism in contemporary culture, it seems to me that Sloterdijk's analysis inevitably stumbles.

## **Superbia: too proud to be proud**

The whole problem seems to revolve around one symptomatic point: the question of *superbia*. Sloterdijk emphasizes that the classical objection of *superbia* (roughly to be translated as pride) – put forward by Christianity as well as Psychoanalysis – has made the thymotic field finally inaccessible.<sup>28</sup> By coining this term *superbia* (as the concept of a cardinal sin) and by denouncing proud and warlike people as exemplifying it, “theistic dressages in humility” have taken place which continue to exist in modern, democratic consensualism.<sup>29</sup>

Yet with regard to the history of philosophy we have to be aware of the fact that the objection of *superbia* is not only raised within the Christian mainstream. It is also voiced in the works of radical or marginal Christians such as Blaise Pascal as well as in the writings of adamant non-Christians such as Benedict de Spinoza. Surprisingly, despite all their differences, their notion of *superbia* is the same. We thus have to understand the very specific meaning that the term *superbia* had – a meaning which may appear utterly foreign to some of our today's common-sense understandings of *pride*. In a first step, Sloterdijk seems quite justified to identify an aim of *submission* in the *superbia*-objection. Pascal, for example, writes:

It is superstition to put one's hope in formalities; but it is pride to be unwilling to submit to them.<sup>30</sup>

Pride (*superbia*) is clearly a form of non-submission; in this case, non-submission to formalities (religious formalities such as kneeling, praying with the lips etc.).<sup>31</sup> This can also be seen in the following paragraph by Pascal:

Other religions, as the pagan, are more popular, for they consist in externals. But they are not for educated people. A purely intellectual religion would be more suited to the learned, but it would be of no use to the common people. The Christian religion alone is adapted to all, being composed of externals and internals. It raises the common people to the internal, and humbles the proud to the external; it is not perfect without the two, for the people must understand the spirit of the letter, and the learned must submit their spirit to the letter.<sup>32</sup>

Again submission is the opposite of *superbia*; in this case it is submission of the spirit to the letter. Yet this allows us to discern the very specific meaning that the

notion of *superbia* has assumed. What Pascal introduces here are *two different orders of observation*:<sup>33</sup> one consists of externals, the other of internals.

To submit to the order of externals means here to attend to how things look from the outside. If one follows formalities to the “letter” and behaves like a religious subject, one focuses, for example, on whether “people could have believed” that one was religious. This is an order of *outside observation*. What counts here, is appearance.

To rely on the order of internals means, by contrast, to follow the view of the “spirit”; i.e., to think, for example: “I know what I believe” or “I know how I mean it”. In this case one does not bother about outside observers. One regards oneself only with the inner eye of the “spirit”, and does not care about appearances. Religious belief does not have to become visible. Assured by one’s own introspection, one could care less whether outside idiots are able to become aware of one’s true inner religious conviction or not. The ruling order here is *internal observation*. Its only currency is intention.

Here it becomes clear that Pascal understands “pride” (*superbia*) as the primacy of internal observation over the external. To be proud means to rely exclusively on what one knows by oneself and not to care what other people could have concluded from the appearance one displays to them. Therefore pride is an attitude that totally devaluates and neglects the externals (for example, dressing nicely on Sunday and going to church).<sup>34</sup> It does not submit to the external order of elegance and ritual.

*Superbia* is not what Sloterdijk takes it for, namely, an expression of everybody’s inclination to (publicly) assert one’s ego and what belongs to it. Quite on the contrary: *superbia* is the sin that consists in not taking care how one appears to other people. It is the total neglect of one’s own visibility, not its affirmation. Therefore *superbia* is the exact opposite of what we understand primarily when speaking today of pride in the sense of presenting oneself in some skilful superficial way that attends to appearances. Pride in the sense of Pascal means precisely to be overly proud in order to appear proud. Pride is the force of internalization that sweeps away all visible forms of determined posture. If such a posture seems to be banned from contemporary culture, this can only be caused by an existing dominance of *superbia* – and not by the theological and philosophical criticism of it.

## **Intimacy, narcissism, asceticism**

The fact that pride precisely in this Pascalian sense (of *superbia*) dominates contemporary Western culture has been perspicuously discerned by the sociologist Richard Sennett in his study “The Fall of Public Man” from 1974. Sennett discovered that Western societies since the late 1960s have shifted massively from “outside-governed” to “inside-governed” relationships.<sup>35</sup> They have replaced outside

observation by inside observation. Thus the whole sphere of public life that had existed in Western culture since the Renaissance has been abandoned.

Since the Renaissance, Sennett argues, Western cultures had developed a sphere of public life distinct from the private. In public, people behaved, dressed, moved and spoke differently. They developed an appearance meant to represent something for others. This theatrical dimension of public life was supported by the architecture, of urban squares, for example: thus the public space functioned as a kind of stage that made everybody an actor for the other.<sup>36</sup> In public space one had to play a “role” for others – all codes of education, politeness and civilized, mundane behaviour were oriented to play, and they told how to play it well. The public role was carefully held apart from the private, intimate personality: it was a mark of civilized behaviour not to bother the other with one’s self.<sup>37</sup>

Since the late sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this separation between a theatrical public space and an intimate space, between public role and private person, has become increasingly blurred, as Sennett observes – at the cost of the public sphere. Intimacy has exceeded all limitations; it has universalized its claims and tyrannically subjected everything to its proper criteria. This means that the public order of visibility and outside observation has disappeared and become replaced by an order of “intimate” inside observation. Not skilful appearance is what counts but authenticity, as unspoiled by skills as possible. Not the fictitious art of the theatrical role but the true nature of the person.

This internalization is at the same time a subjectification: now every process becomes judged not by objective criteria (for example: how much money do I get for my work?) but by subjective criteria (for example: can I really identify with what I am doing?). Not objective rules, codes or social fictions and appearances matter but only authentic revelations of the self – or what the latter takes them to be.<sup>38</sup> Again it is not “what other people could have thought” that counts but “how it was meant”. The “letter” becomes ignored for the sake of the “spirit”, i. e. the introspective view of the ego.

This fixation on the ego which Pascal and Spinoza called *superbia* is described by Sennett by its psychoanalytic name: *narcissism*.<sup>39</sup> Narcissistic societies are unable to maintain a public sphere, because they perceive any played role as an “alienation” from the true self. Just as the concept of *superbia* also the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism has to be understood differently from its common sense meaning. Whereas common sense often refers to theatrical characters as “narcissistic”, a strict psychoanalytic understanding like Sennett’s emphasizes the fact that narcissism is unable to play a role. For narcissism, the ego is too precious for it to be given up for something less valuable like an appearance, even for a moment.

Yet this fear of alienation does not only concern one’s public appearance. Rather it concerns one’s whole relationship to the outside world. Narcissism regards the ego as “pure” and everything foreign to it as something filthy: money,

happiness, success, structural improvements of society, embodied in material apparatuses and laws, etc. – the entire outside world falls under this suspicion of filth.<sup>40</sup> This leads to the ascetic nature of narcissism – its hostility against pleasure, sex, smoking, politeness etc. and the amazing readiness for shortcuts that we have observed in several Western societies.

With Sennett, I would therefore like to maintain the thesis that the deficiency of contemporary Western culture lies in its narcissism. This is, as Freud has pointed out, a deficiency of the erotic, object-libidinal pole.<sup>41</sup> There is not too much of an “appetite” for outside objects, as Sloterdijk has assumed, but on the contrary, a limitless appetite for the ego which makes any interest in the outside world impossible. This is the reason why Western populations have become so unable to fight against the neoliberal “dealing and stealing”. This shift from an intact object-libido to a narcissistic obsession in Western societies can also be illustrated on the level of popular culture. Is it not astonishing to see to what extent the 1970’s battle cry “*We want the world*” has been substituted by the narcissistic categorical imperative of Hip Hop: “*Be yourself!*”?

## Weakness as disinhibition

Narcissistic fixation on the ego brings about a predominance of introspection and a total devaluation of the external world visible for outside observation. This narcissism (which older authors had called *superbia*) is what causes asceticism and resentment. It should be noted at least in passing that narcissism’s losses on the object-side are never compensated by any gains on the part of the ego. The quest for the true self is limitless and can, as Sennett remarks, never be satisfied.<sup>42</sup>

Since the narcissistic ego rebels against all rules, it also rebels against the regular criteria of its self-esteem. The ego is so magnificent that there is no measure for it. So it can never assure itself of its greatness, and this is the reason why, as Spinoza has pointed out, pride and its opposite, dejection, appear to coincide:

Though dejection is the emotion contrary to pride, yet is the dejected man very near akin to the proud man. For, inasmuch as his pain arises from a comparison between his own infirmity and other men’s power or virtue, it will be removed, or, in other words, he will feel pleasure, if his imagination be occupied in contemplating other men’s faults; whence arises the proverb, ‘The unhappy are comforted by finding fellow-sufferers.’<sup>43</sup>

Because of this, narcissistic cultures always end up in collective humbleness, and never in collective self-esteem. Since the narcissistic ego cannot tolerate any criteria, it cannot distribute self-esteem among a number of candidates. There appears to be only *one* respect, and if one member has it, the others must inevitably be deprived of it. This narcissistic logic of *The One* (whose model is the *one* ego)

can easily be observed in our everyday experience with narcissistic individuals. As soon as they gain some respect from somebody, they immediately start to regard this other as an idiot – a contempt which, of course, retroactively affects the quality of the given respect: the winner thus becomes an equal loser (a problem that Hegel has commented on in his theory of the “struggle for recognition”).

Thus in a narcissistic society only the totally powerless and humble character can be a positive figure. For the less I have at my disposal material qualities such as power or esteem, the more pure I am (and the less I am under suspicion to have taken The One away from others). This may explain why the victim has become such a key figure in Western societies during the last decades. It is not only the object of highest (sometimes obscene) interest but also the last moral instance: the less we like to defend general rules (which we resentfully denounce as “authoritarian”<sup>44</sup> or as “big narratives”) the more attention we give to the small exceptions. As soon as a victim can be found, any social reality can be efficiently put into question. Victimization works today as the most powerful mechanism of censorship: “You feel embarrassed by adult language? – OK, let’s prohibit it! Your identity gets offended when at the university you learn about certain works of art? – No problem, we put them on the blacklist! You cannot stand relentless or sarcastic philosophical ways of speaking? – OK, let’s ban them, etc.” The victim whose misery appears to call for immediate and unlimited action does not allow for a discussion about what should reasonably be allowed to exist in public space. The figure of the offended individual (which can always be found as soon as there is a request for it) makes it possible to destroy all public spaces by subjecting them to the most sensitive criteria of a private environment. Today this subjection of the public to the private fits very nicely with the neo-liberal tendencies of economic privatization of public property and with the new repressive tendencies of reinforced censorship and control – the marks of upcoming “post-democratic” politics (as Sloterdijk calls them).<sup>45</sup>

Here it can be seen that resentment is far from being an *inhibiting* force, as Sloterdijk assumes. On the contrary, it is the *disinhibiting* mechanism par excellence: victimization recruits subjects for neoliberal society most efficiently, transforming them into convinced and passionate warriors for a resentful cause. It would be hard to tell by what other justification people in Western societies could have ever been persuaded to accept those new prohibitions imposed on them. With resentment and victimization, this miracle becomes possible: people do not only accept prohibition, surveillance and censorship; they even call and struggle for it – spontaneously. Totally *disinhibited* by a cunning ideology of resentment, they start “fighting for their own slavery as if it were their beatitude” (to put it in Spinoza’s words).

## Reclaiming the appearances

Our investigation has prompted us to make two modifications of Sloterdijk's crucial position about the dominance of resentment in our culture. First, we understand resentment as a form of disinhibition. Thus it does not represent a lack within neoliberal society but an important force. Secondly, we find that resentment does not stem from a forgetfulness of pride, as Sloterdijk assumes, but, on the contrary, from the predominance of pride (*superbia*). Neoliberal ideology has disinhibited individuals to narcissistically strive for their true self at any price. Now it is the internalization following from such narcissism which renders impossible both "thymotic" and "erotic" action, i.e., a display of courageous attitude as well as the claiming of the material goods which are at stake in social struggle.

Maybe it makes sense to try to briefly explain how Sloterdijk's mistake could have been possible. Sloterdijk's distinction between the erotic and the thymotic follows the line of classical distinctions, like that between *having* and *being*,<sup>46</sup> which refers in the final instance to the Cartesian distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Now when people are not ready to fight, it may seem obvious to conclude that they are "too well pampered", provided with goods; that they *have* too much and care too little for what they *are* (this would be, for example, Hegel's explanation concerning the struggle for recognition: the loser is the one who is too attached to his life to risk it).

But this explanation is not correct. Rather, we should say that those apparently lazy people are not able to care for what they *are* in the *eyes of others*. Courage is a matter of imagined external spectatorship. "Maybe the dragons we encounter in life are nothing but enchanted princesses, waiting to see us beautiful and brave", Don Quixote once says. When such external spectatorship disappears, people cease to display their warlike virtues, and if they do not show them anymore, they cannot even assure themselves about their existence anymore. (Because, as the philosopher Alain has demonstrated, the existence of such virtues depends on their display.)<sup>47</sup>

The reason why external spectatorship disappears is that internal spectatorship comes to power. Precisely when people fanatically start wanting to *be*, something, for themselves, they become reluctant to *stage* something for others. The quest for authenticity then replaces the desire for appearances. Thus it is *being* (for oneself) that renders *being* (for others) impossible, and consequently (by transforming all possession into filth) even *having*. Narcissism swallows both: the desire for external attitude and that for external possession.

A criticism that confuses the two different forms of being – being for others and being for oneself, external determined attitude and narcissistic introspective pride – is in danger of becoming a part of its object; i.e. of contributing to the tendencies that it criticizes. Blaming the erotic appetites for the lack of determined attitude means precisely to contribute to those very narcissistic tendencies

in culture which render this attitude impossible. Ironically, where Sloterdijk's theory appeared most critical – in an unusually open way – it would turn out most affirmative. In order to avoid that, one has to make a difference between narcissistic pride (*superbia*) on the one hand and external 'thymotic' virtues such as courage or elegance.

## The superego and the naïve observer

Psychoanalytic theory has provided concepts for understanding this difference as a difference in spectatorship. From its very beginnings, it has constructed virtual instances of observation (for example, the ego-ideal, or the superego). More recently, the French analyst Octave Mannoni has added another instance of that kind: the *naïve observer*.<sup>48</sup> This is the instance at work, for example, when we enjoy the tricks of a magician in a *variété*. Of course, we know that the artist does not have supernatural powers, but still we are delighted when appearances are maintained. "I know quite well (that it is not true), but still (it is great)" is Mannoni's expression in describing this kind of pleasure. We are delighted when *someone* could have believed something. Of course, it is not always easy to tell who that someone could have been. It is a virtual instance, not necessarily embodied in a real person. But nevertheless this virtual instance has to be constructed in order to understand what is going on. This instance is the addressee of the performance in which magician and spectators secretly team up to deceive its naïve observer.

This psychic instance of the naïve observer also evokes courage by letting people appear courageous. Since the naïve observer is only concerned with appearances, its functioning is completely different from that of the superego. The superego is never concerned about appearances; it only asks *how things were meant*. This leads to the conclusion, as noted by Freud, that the superego does not only punish for bad actions but also for bad intentions – and even more strictly for bad intentions than for bad actions.<sup>49</sup> Behind the recurring insistence on the question of *what things mean* (for me) in narcissism we can therefore discern the efficiency of the superego.

So we can say that spectatorship can be executed either by the naïve observer or by the superego. The former will only look at external appearances, the latter only at intentions. This difference is crucial. It has a bearing, for example, on the ways revenge becomes necessary – revenge being one of the central issues in "Zorn und Zeit". One might, first, assume that the desire for revenge always stems from the superego – as one of its typical categorical commands: "They have done me injustice, I know that for certain. So I have to go for redemption at any price." This may apply to the example of Monte Christo that Sloterdijk discusses. But we have to be aware that revenge is often a revenge for crimes that have been committed not to the avenger himself but to other people. An example of this is "Once Upon A Time in the West", to which Sloterdijk refers.<sup>50</sup> Henry Fonda's cruel men, when

hanging the elder brother, put him on the shoulders of the boy “harmonica” (Charles Bronson). Here, an existential problem is created through an appearance: it looks as if it had been “harmonica’s” fault that his brother has to die. *Somebody could have believed that*. A very strange guilt is thus imposed on Bronson’s character: He himself *knows quite well the opposite* – that he is not to blame for that, but still he cannot dismiss the guilt just by knowing that (here Mannoni’s expression shows its bitter validity). Bronson must repeat the “primordial scene” and put the harmonica between the lips of Henry Fonda. An appearance has to be created in order to defeat another appearance – so it is obvious that what drives “harmonica” to his revenge is not the superego but the naïve observer.

The qualities that Sloterdijk finds lacking in our culture are precisely those virtues that correspond to the spectatorship of the naïve observer. What caused their disappearance is not appetite for objects but the narcissistic limitless appetite for one’s ego, given the fact that narcissism leads to internalization. In order to oppose this power that brings about resentment and zero dignity, one has therefore to reclaim the order of appearances – the whole field of cultural phenomena (for example, politeness, greatness and elegance) which never allow for full conviction and identification but always exist in a distanced form, as the expression “*I know quite well (that this is not true), but still (it is great)*” indicates.

The distinction between external and internal spectatorship shifts the entire problem that Sloterdijk is concerned with. Mannoni’s distinction produces an epistemological break with the classical distinction between having and being. *Being for others* and *being for oneself* both appear to be forms of being; yet their difference is crucial here. Of course, one could argue that erotic desires can be detected in a desire for *being for others*. This may well be true. Then we would just have given new, more precise names to the two old poles. But the result has changed. The new result is *directly* opposed to Sloterdijk’s assumption: not having, but being (for oneself) is the source of resentment in contemporary culture.

By the way, our consideration has followed the same trajectory as Sigmund Freud’s investigation of the origins of the discontents in culture: in the beginning, for Freud, just as for Sloterdijk, it appeared as if the erotic drives were to be blamed for any inconveniences. But as the investigation went on, it turned out that not the erotic, but the death drives were at the core of disagreement with culture, whereas the erotic drives appeared to be more its allies than its opponents.<sup>51</sup>

We can find confirmation for this conclusion when we look at the materialist tradition in philosophy. Materialism is highly “erotic”, because it regards this external world as the only thing we have. Yet this erotic adherence to the world is, as materialism shows, not an obstacle against fighting (as Hegel had assumed) since *love for life* does not exclude the *fear of a bad life*. And this fear may well be stronger than that of death. In his poem “Resolution der Kommunarden” Bertolt Brecht writes:



In Erwägung daß ihr uns dann eben  
Mit Gewehren und Kanonen droht  
Haben wir beschlossen, nunmehr schlechtes Leben  
Mehr zu fürchten als den Tod.<sup>52</sup>

The lesson of materialist philosophy is therefore that *reactionary forces never come from the erotic pole*. Or, to put it differently: If one sticks to the Brechtian claim that “first comes food, and then come morals”, one will never end up with resentment.

## Notes

1. Mandeville, B. (1980 [1705]): *Die Bienenfabel oder Private Laster, öffentliche Vorteile*. [The Grumbling Hive or Knaves turn'd Honest.]. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp (German and English edition), p. 67, 79. Jacques Lacan has commented upon this distinction in his Seminar VII: Lacan, J. (1986 [1959-60]): *Le Séminaire. Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-60* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller). Paris: Seuil, p. 215.
2. Cf. Elias, N. (1998): *Über den Prozeß der Zivilization. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 Bde.. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 124-131.
3. Cf. Adorno, T.W. (1973): *Philosophische Terminologie. Zur Einleitung*, 2 Bde. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 170.
4. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (1983): *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 Bde. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, vol. 1, p. 22.
5. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): *Zorn und Zeit. Politisch-psychologischer Versuch*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 32.
6. Although Sloterdijk blames psychoanalysis for having introduced this lack, his concept is different from the Lacanian notion of *lack*. In Sloterdijk's theory, lack is situated at the thymotic pole and erases this pole. This brings about an erotic monism. For Lacan, on the contrary, lack is localized on the erotic side. Its introduction (by symbolic castration) brings about the dualism of object-libido and ego-libido. In his earlier works, Sloterdijk appeared more aware of this dualism in psychoanalytic drive theory (cf. Sloterdijk, P. (1983): o.c.).
7. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 33.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 32, 80.
9. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (2007): ‚Religion ist nie cool‘. Streitgespräch mit Walter Kardinal Kasper, in: *Die Zeit*, Nr. 7, 8. 2. 2007, pp. 15-19 (p. 16): “Ich habe in meinem Buch versucht anzudeuten, dass der Westen ohne eine gewisse thymotische Neubesinnung in einer solchen Situation schlecht aussieht.”
10. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (1983): o.c., p. 12; Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 36, 93.
11. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 33.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
13. For Sloterdijk's list of “thymotic“ qualities see *Zorn und Zeit* (p. 32): pride, outrage, anger, ambition, (high will to) self-assertion, extreme readiness to fight (“Stolz, Empörung, Zorn, Ambition, hoher Selbstbehauptungswille und akute Kampfber-eitschaft”). It has to be noted here that *pride* is cited first in this list, and not *anger* (that gave the book its alluding title). This priority of pride stems from the fact that

anger, as opposed to pride, is not exclusively linked to the thymos. Anger appears as a “symptom”, not as a reliable evidence of a “structure”. Rather, it can appear within several structures. Since there is anger even before the Platonic, self-reflexive consciousness of thymos: the Homeric name for this primordial, blind, limitless anger is “menis” (cf. p. 42). The central importance that Sloterdijk accords to pride for unambiguously determining thymotic qualities can also be seen in the quotation cited in the text above (p. 30).

14. Cf. Plato, *Politeia*, 438d-443b.
15. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 30, my translation.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
17. *Ibid.*, p 31, 34.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 309, 312, 338.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 80, 274.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 31: “demutstrunkene Subkulturen.”
24. Kunstforum Bd. 161, August – Oktober 2002: Die Documenta 11, p. 137.
25. See on this also Zizek, S. (2001): *Die Tücke des Subjekts*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 298 318.
26. See for this also Sennett, R. (2001 [1974]): *Verfall und Ende des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Tyrannei der Intimität*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, p. 351.
27. Cf. Zizek, S. (2007 [2004]): *Passion In The Era of Decaffeinated Belief*. <http://www.lacan.com/passion.htm> (accessed: 2007-03-07).
28. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 31.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
30. Pascal, B. (2004) *Les Provinciales. Pensées [édition Sellier] et opuscules divers*. Paris: Le livre de poche/ classiques Garnier, Pascal, P § 396 : „C'est être superstitieux de mettre son espérance dans les formalités, mais c'est être superbe de ne vouloir s'y soumettre. ”
31. *Ibid.*, § 250.
32. *Ibid.*, § 251.
33. Like Pascal, also Sloterdijk is aware of the crucial role of spectatorship for any question concerning pride. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 147, pp. 314-315, p. 355.
34. It must be noted here that submission in the sense of Pascal means submission of the spirit to the externals. Those externals can themselves sometimes look like expressions of submission (for example, kneeling down). But this does not always have to be the case. A submission of the spirit to externals that look *elegant* or even *arrogant* is a submission as well.
35. Cf. Sennett, R. (2001 [1974]): o.c., p. 18.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 92, 143.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
40. See for this : Grunberger, B. & P. Dessuant (1997): *Narcissisme, christianisme, antisémitisme*. Paris et al.: Actes Sud
41. Cf. Freud, S. (1989 [1914]): ‘Zur Einführung des Narzißmus’, in: *Studienausgabe*, Bd. III. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, pp. 37-68
42. Sennett, R. (2001 [1974]): o.c., p. 22.
43. Spinoza, *Ethics IV*, prop. 57.

44. Sloterdijk's lesson about the resentment core of German anti-authoritarianism is of crucial importance. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 35; Sloterdijk, P. (1983): o.c., p. 22.
45. Cf. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 340.
46. Cf. Fromm, E. (1976): *Haben oder Sein. Die seelischen Grundlagen einer neuen Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart: DVA.
47. Cf. Alain, E.C. (1961): *Propos sur le bonheur*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 53, 112.
48. Cf. Mannoni, O. (1985): *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre Scène*. Paris: Seuil, p. 18.
49. Cf. Freud, S. (1993 [1930]): *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in: *Studienausgabe*, Bd. IX. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, pp. 191-270 (p. 252).
50. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): o.c., p. 83.
51. Cf. Freud □1930□: 249.
52. Brecht 1984: 653.

## 5. Sloterdijk and the Question of an Aesthetic

Peter Weibel

### Preliminary remarks

In order to understand Peter Sloterdijk's writings on aesthetics and their singularity, we must first at least outline the "setting", the historical foil to the problems he addresses. Today, art is a "discourse", as we know, a conceptual field in which the different types of images, objects, processes, activities, theories, ideas and institutions play a role. The dynamism of this field is characterized by instabilities, contradictions and conflicts that trigger disquiet among the one or other viewer. The one set learns from New Jersey (Land Artist Robert Smithson), the other from Las Vegas (Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown). The one camp praises autonomous formalism and the sublime (Clement Greenberg), the other the transfiguration of the commonplace.<sup>1</sup>

In his writings, J.M. Bernstein<sup>2</sup> demands that aesthetic experience also offer a dimension infused by cognitive theory, ethics and politics. Aesthetic Modernism is the appropriate ethical and political response to capitalist Modernity, which is typified by rationalization, reification and disenchantment. True aesthetic Modernism has to defend radicalism against universal and instrumental claims. He anchors aesthetics in ethics and politics, in a mix of Marx, Lucács, Kant and Adorno. Over the last two decades, English and American art historians and theorists have seen the need, given the pressure of a global media industry, to expand the analysis of the image culture away from the specific objects of art to all forms of images in our culture, i.e., to include the mass media of film, TV, animated images, etc. The field of art has therefore been extended under the concept of "visual culture". W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>3</sup> has emphasized that the visual field is constructed socially and the social field visually. Stanley Cavell and Noel Carrall from an early date discussed the mass media of film as a matter of course in light of what Mitchell terms a "pictorial turn".<sup>4</sup> James Elkins extended *Visual Studies* (2003) and *The Domain of Images* (1999) to include the image of the natural sciences.<sup>5</sup>

In Adorno's skeptical *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) art can still admittedly possess a truth content, but in a purely utopian function. In order to achieve this, art must reflect society and is therefore not fully autonomous. On the other hand, it must be autonomous if it is to adopt a critical function. Against the backdrop of the

“culture industry”, in which mass culture means deceiving the masses, the truth of art can consist solely in enlightening us on social illusions, i.e., to be perceptive not deceptive, and to insist what society could and should be. Niklas Luhmann describes art as a subsystem of the social system that observes itself and is organized according to its own rules. In this regard, Luhmann is not far off Adorno’s concept of autonomy. However, as a discursive system, what Pierre Bourdieu terms the “rules of art” are mutable and as a consequence the art system, the “operating system” of art depends on the social context, on the institutional and discursive situation. Peter Weibel and George Dickie emphasized how art depends on, is defined by and given its mission by the institutions, a motif later adopted by A.C. Danto.

Now, Sloterdijk’s writings on aesthetics enter this discursive field. In his explorations, Sloterdijk touches on all classical and modern genres of art, from music to architecture, from the art of illumination to the art of movement, from design to typography. He scans all fields of the visible and invisible, the audible and the inaudible, whereby the historical reach of his observations stretches from Classical Antiquity to Hollywood. In other words, he approaches the practice of “visual culture” while at the same time revealing an affinity to the institutional theory of art. He reflects on the conditions of current art production, from the world of sponsors to the museum system, from the development of the media to the metamorphoses of aesthetic subjectivity. He likewise addresses the classical problems of a philosophy of art, namely its reference to ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, society, politics, and subject, from Aristotle to Adorno, from Kant to Kierkegaard. Familiar questions arise on the status of the autonomy of art, on its truth content and its social role.

What is decisive is always the inimitable surprising pace at which the author departs from the well-worn paths of art commentary. Seen through the prisms of Sloterdijk’s thought, we can experience art as a heterodox form of knowledge. Through the author’s elaborate language as well as his art of changing position and perspective, we are confronted by surprising and convincing insights and vista. Sloterdijk expands his own method of creating an estranging discourse to include the observation of artworks and genres, and in this way the newly described objects appear in an abruptly changed light. The dividing lines between philosophy and literature, argumentation and narrative become fluid; the art objects themselves seem to be set in motion. Under Sloterdijk’s gaze, well-known aesthetic phenomena are transformed into sources of surprise. They gain a second lease of life by dint of their recontextualization. The objects of his theoretical prose appear before the reader like unknown beings; at the same time, they are presented close-up and with the familiarity only possible thanks to a new outlook. Sloterdijk’s key contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics probably consists in the fact that with his oeuvre he has made a key contribution to solving the problem of Modernism/Modernity.

## Modernity – between disenchantment and re-enchantment

The fate of modern art has evolved over the last 200 years between two poles, has stretched out between them. The two poles are disenchantment and re-enchantment. Aesthetic programs of disenchantment and re-enchantment permeate the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, parallel and successively, with each other and against each other, as sequences or alternatives, mutually or in opposition, as a unipolar or bipolar structure.

Following Hegel, who in 1800 already believed the world was devastated, Max Weber termed the impact of industrialization, of Enlightenment and the science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the “disenchantment of the world”. The epoch of disenchantment sets in with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and it would be pleasant if we could add, as did the epoch of Modernity. However, that is not the case, as at an early date a counter-movement commenced that battled against the Enlightenment and the turn away from the absolute in politics and religion, against science and its consequences, industrialization, endeavouring instead to return the church and monarchy to their hegemonic positions. “The Romantics were the first to sound the battle-cry against the Enlightenment,” wrote Ernst Cassirer in his *Der Mythos des Staates*.<sup>6</sup> With Romanticism and its command that, as Novalis put it, “the world be romanticized”, the programmes of re-enchantment of the world and the arts commenced. The problem is to show that Modernism/Modernity consists of both programmes, is a skein woven with both.

With the French Revolution (1789-1804), which heralded the end of Absolutism and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which was machine-based, the path was set that defined the conflict between the aesthetic, philosophical and political parties and programs of Modernity and Anti-Modernity. The Revolution was followed by the Restoration. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 a “Holy Alliance” was formed between the five major powers, Russia, Austria, Prussia, France, and Great Britain, obliging the crowned heads of state to uphold the Christian religion as the highest maxim of their political actions and thus preserve the divinely blessed feudal structures and repeal the Enlightened reforms. Between 1816 and 1829 universities were placed under surveillance, censorship reigned, liberties and teaching were restricted, some were forced out of their jobs, kangaroo courts installed, etc.<sup>7</sup> The years 1830-1848 again saw revolutions: the first models for Parliamentary systems or constitutional monarchies with all citizens as legal equals, with freedom of expression and the press arose. In 1848, Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto*, which described the state of ongoing global industrialization in such drastic terms that it reads like an account of globalization today: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.”

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.”<sup>8</sup>

We must also see that movement that responded to the horror scenarios of that age (horrific wars, impoverished districts in the cities, pauperism in rural communities) by raising a program of aesthetic re-enchantment against the foil of this dialectics of *Revolution and Restoration*,<sup>9</sup> of ratio and belief, of industrialization and idyll. It was an agenda Heinrich Heine called “The Romantic Scholl” in 1833. Heine was an opponent of Romanticism: “It was nothing other than the re-awakening of the poetry of the Middle Ages, such as had been manifested in the latter’s songs, images and edifices, in art and life. That poetry had, however, issued from Christianity, it was a flower of passion sprung from the blood of Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Heine already deploys the opposites of spiritualism and sensualism here that is so typical of the contradictions of Modernity. He understood sensualism to be that current of thought which he himself represented and that defended the “natural rights of matter”, citing in its favour the Hellenes, embodied in the “Greek” Goethe. Heine, the Enlightener, who fought for the end of Absolutism and Despotism in its political and religious forms, accused the Romantics of “absolute Spiritualism” and of supporting despotism with their religiousness. Christian religion [he referred to Roman Catholicism], “through whose unnatural task sin and hypocrisy actually entered the world” was, he suggested, “the tried-and-true support of despotism. People have now discerned the essence of this religion, they are no longer prepared to be fobbed off with instructions from Heaven. Precisely because we now understand all the consequences of that absolute spiritualism, we may now believe that the Christian Catholic world view has reached its end.”<sup>11</sup>

On the contrary, the myth returned. F.W.J. Schelling, the philosophical champion of Romanticism, devised a *Philosophy of Mythology*, in which myth is considered the driving force behind culture. F.W.J. Schelling’s notions of art are of great importance for the German Romantic art. According to Schelling, art’s vocation is

to take the highest place among products of the intellect. The task of philosophy is to grasp the “Absolute” through “intellectual contemplation”<sup>12</sup> or “genial intuition”. Schelling distinguished between art product and organic product of nature, something that enables him in his treatise *On the Relationship of the Visual Arts to Nature* (1807) to free art of the obligation to imitate nature and declare the artwork an independent “Natura naturans”.<sup>13</sup> This is the reason for that “holiness and purity of art” according to which “the tyranny of the poet suffers no law above him,” or so Friedrich Schlegel defined his notion of “universal poetry”.<sup>14</sup> The autonomy of art, that “holy” axiom of Modernism, starts here from a Romantic heritage. By turning his back on mimesis, Schelling initiated a turn toward an aesthetics and culture of reception, clearing the way for Modernism to adopt artistic methods of appropriation and the emancipation of the viewer. The originator becomes less important than the artwork and its reception. “That is the way with every true artwork, for each, as if it contained an infinity of intentions, were open to infinite interpretation, although one can never say whether this infinity was created by the artist or is the product of the artwork.”<sup>15</sup> So the “infinite interpretation” opens up those “infinite realms of interpretation” and a culture of the recipient such as we will later encounter in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Michail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. Together with Hegel and Hölderlin, Schelling also contemplated a reconciliation of aesthetics and philosophy, enjoyment and reason, beauty and truth, aesthetics and ethics. “I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, that which embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness are only sisters in beauty.”<sup>16</sup> The reverse conclusion, that beauty only exists as truth and goodness, i.e., aesthetics only has as its sisters politics, ethics and science, was something he discounted. With this manifesto, Schelling and the Romantics had come to a fork in their path, a turning point. Schelling and Hegel went separate ways. Schelling turned away from reason and insight and returned to faith and myth.

In his *Philosophy of Art* of 1802, Schelling wrote: “The unity of the finite and the infinite is thus action in Christendom.”<sup>17</sup> Art thus has its base in mythology, “in this new mythology” and is thus linked with philosophy as the conceptual presentation of the Absolute. In this treatise, Schelling took the mythology of Christianity as the prime material of all art. The return to Christianity was thus almost dictatorially imposed in the philosophy of art around 1800. Thus, with their faith in Christian mythology<sup>18</sup> and their return to myth and religion the Romantics followed the pattern of responding to the disenchantment of the world by industrialization in a manner we see happening today: Many people respond to the devastation of globalization by seeking safety in religion.

The Romantic response was radically opposed to that of the Enlightenment and German Idealism, which rested on the power of conceptual/rational thought. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Hegel wrote in Jena in 1806, he said: “The true



shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth.”<sup>19</sup> Hegel reveals himself here as an opponent of the Romantics, whom he accused: “the Absolute is not supposed to be comprehended, it is to be felt and intuited; not the Notion of the Absolute, but the feeling and intuition of it, must govern what is said, and must be expressed.”<sup>20</sup> Hegel criticized the very method of contemplation taken by Romantics, something on which Edmund Husserl later relied when he laid down the gauntlet to rationalism in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (1936).

With Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835-38)<sup>21</sup> the end of the Romantic form of art sets in. For Hegel, Romanticism already marked the end of art as expressed by his famous statement that philosophy in the form of the self-awareness of the spirit has taken the position of religion and only it can advance to the state of absolute truth. Religion and art are both in the second rank. Art is defined as the “sensuous semblance of the idea” and thus has an epistemological and conceptual status. Hegel’s sympathy is with Classical Greek art. To his mind, Romantic art proves that art is dissolving in line with his theory that precisely philosophy is the real field in which spirit comes to itself as the highest stage of human development, followed by sensuousness. The sensory artwork can only lay claim to existence as a forum for the human spirit, not as sensuousness for itself.

In the “End of the Romantic art form” Hegel wrote, “For this reason the artist relates to his content overall like the dramatist, who places different, strange persons on an exposed stage. Although he still inserts his genius into the matter, interweaving his own material into the fabric, but only the Universal or the entirely Particular; by contrast, the more individualized is not his, for in this respect he uses his stock of images, creative forms, past art forms, to which he is, essentially, indifferent and which only become important because they just happen to seem best suited for this or that subject. (...) There is as little purpose in appropriating past world views, substantively as it were, i.e., to firmly embed oneself in these ways of viewing, as there would be, for example, in becoming Catholic, such as many have recently done for the sake of art, in order to fix their emotions and to transform the specific limitation of their representations for themselves into something in-and-for-itself.”<sup>22</sup> With this reference to the use of past creative forms and art forms, to dramatic productions of images that already exist, to eclectic strategies of appropriation and to indifference, Hegel (interpreted by the Modernist eye) sees Romanticism as the “post-modern” reaction to the Enlightenment. We thus experience a kind of repeat epoch: disenchantment and re-enchantment, Enlightenment versus Romanticism, Modernism versus Postmodernism.

When, in around 1800, the industrial and political revolutions marked the beginning of the end of political absolutism, in order to survive, the idea of the

absolute migrated into philosophy and art. There it survived and continues to reign to this day, precisely because Modernism has never shrugged off its Romantic heritage and its attack on the Enlightenment. The absolute and the spiritual, the religious and the sovereign, the authoritarian and the visual continue to flicker in modern art.

Precisely what Heine accused the Romantics of doing continues to thrive unchanged in 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract art: the spirituality as expressed even in the title of a weighty tome: *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*,<sup>23</sup> which explores the influence of Romanticism, mysticism, esotericism, and the occult on the emergence and development of abstract art. And Hans Scheufl's book *Das Absolute*,<sup>24</sup> which presents a panorama of Modernism, also reveals traces of the religious Romantics. Another contribution to the history of the ideas of Modernism, namely that of the Romantic heritage, and the search for the absolute in modern art, is *Paths to the Absolute* by John Golding,<sup>25</sup> which attests to the Romantic vocabulary of the fusion of the arts in the sublime even in the chapter headings: "Malевич and the ascent into ether," "Kandinsky and the sound of colour," "Pollock and the search for a symbol," "Newman, Rothko, Still and the abstract sublime". There was never a *Farewell to the Absolute*.<sup>26</sup> Modernism drowned between the Scylla and Charybdis, between Enlightenment and Mystification, between disenchantment and re-enchantment.

We have thus seen that with Romanticism aesthetic arizes, or rather aesthetics per se is founded: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aestetica*, 1751, which for all its inner contradictions and recurses to Classical Antiquity, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages and religion nevertheless helps define the discourse of Modernity. Romanticism has decisively helped shape the face of modern art and the modern artist; for example, in the wish to forge a new basis for art in the people, and to unify utopia, art and life. The programmatic battle cry of Fluxus, Happening and Action Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was "Let us therefore transform our lives into artworks", and it does not stem from them, but is taken verbatim from Ludwig Tieck's *Phantasien über die Kunst für Freunde der Kunst* (1799).<sup>27</sup> All spheres of social life, so he demanded, should be aestheticized, should become art. This is the response to Romanticism's program of poeticization. Everything is art, and each person is an artist. What Joseph Beuys said had already been called for by Novalis: "Every man should be an artist. Everything can become beautiful art."<sup>28</sup>

Friedrich Schlegel's important contributions to Romanticism include the concept of universal poetry: "There is no realism as true as poetry. (...) Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its destiny is not merely to reunify all the separated genres of poetry and to link poetry to philosophy and rhetoric. It wants to make (...) life and society poetic."<sup>29</sup> This demand, as outlined in the 116<sup>th</sup> Athenäum fragment (1798), is in line with Novalis and his programme: "The world has to be romanticized."<sup>30</sup> The universal poetry triggers that fusion of the arts, that unification of the genres, poetry and philosophy (see Schelling), the *gesamt-*

*kunstwerk*, as was repeatedly called for by the members of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde. Another typical feature is that Schlegel shows great reservations as to the outcome of the French Revolution in two Athenäum fragments. It is therefore not surprising that in 1808 Schlegel converted to Catholicism and together with Schelling became one of the leading representatives of a Christian philosophy.

With the atheism of the Enlightenment, which placed society on foundations of science, technology, and the distribution of knowledge, along with industrialization and political upheaval came what Max Weber terms the “disenchantment of the world”. Romanticism was the first counter-reaction. It was against the Enlightenment, reason, science, technology, industry, and was thus the first re-enchantment program. Since that time, various re-enchantment programs have been declared.<sup>31</sup>

There is a long-standing tradition of scepticism toward science and technology, the mechanical arts and their findings, and the stance has repeatedly been en vogue. It arose in precisely that historical moment when the Enlightenment (and the *Encyclopédie*) postulated and declared the primacy of science. Under the pressure of the nascent industrial revolution, at that moment all areas of life were subjected to wide-ranging rationalization, something that triggered discontent among certain social groups, that famous *discontent with civilization* cited by Sigmund Freud in 1930. Contradicting this rationalization led to a philosophical tradition that persists to this day.

As late as 1936, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger’s teacher, spoke of the “crisis in the European sciences” that started with their rationalization. He dated the crisis to “the Galilean mathematization of nature”. The crisis in science, he said, stemmed from the loss of historical experience, which came to be replaced by mere mathematics. “In the Galilean mathematization of nature, the latter itself becomes mathematical diversity.” Husserl set contemplation and the world of experience against the rationalization of the world “more geometrico” and mathematics’ “symbolic, so devoid of contemplation”. For “in the current application of measuring activity to occurrences derived from contemplative experience all that is gained are empirical/inexact figures and variables.”<sup>32</sup> The reduction to a mere science of facts is, so Husserl claimed, the crisis in science, for as a consequence science loses its “significance for life”. In precisely this way, the crisis of the sciences also becomes a radical crisis in life. Only the turn to history *Geschichte* and the lifeworld can free us from this crisis, he suggests. Like the Romantics, Husserl evoked history as the highest authority, the highest source of our action.

The Romantic heritage in Modernism has ensured we have never become truly modern, as Bruno Latour has shown.<sup>33</sup> The dispute between Enlightenment and Absolutism, between concept and contemplation, between sensualism and spirituality, between rationality and religion evidently never ended, but continues, if

under different conditions and presumptions. Thus, the old equations and calculations no longer count and therefore Modernism/Modernity, above all owing to its Romantic heritage, must be overcome. We find a starting point for this in Sloterdijk's writings.

## Beyond modernity

The re-enchantment of the world continues to this very day to romanticise, poetise, and aestheticise all of life. It calls for a general aestheticization, a return to intuition instead of analysis, contemplation instead of abstraction, image instead of number.

Walter Benjamin observed these two positions and presented the contradictions in sharp contrast in the final section of his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935/6): "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." He continued: "But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual it begins to be based on another practice – politics." "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. [...] All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."<sup>34</sup>

Fascism sought a haven in the aestheticization of politics, communism in the politicization of aesthetics. This leads to the conclusion that a total aestheticization includes politics and that Romanticism ends in fascism, whereas the total politicization of aesthetics drives Hegelianism into Marxism.

So these are the two poles between which the fate of Modernity is played out, disenchantment and re-enchantment programs. There has long been a yearning for a programme that frees us from this embrace, even if the price is the end of Modernism/Modernity. Sloterdijk's philosophical aesthetics offers modules and methods for withdrawing from Modernity and/or for bidding farewell to Modernity.

A central role is played here by the recontextualization and redefinition of aesthetic judgment, aesthetic value, and aesthetic experience, which have classically all been defined in generally binding terms that took as their benchmark Kant's categorical imperative. "Imperare" means as much as "command, decree". An imperative is a type of requirement, a commandment, a law. Kant's "categorical imperative" is generally a value commandment for practical action in ethics and states that "Act such that you treat people, both your person and the person of any other as an end and not merely as a means." In analogy to a natural law, the categorical imperative can be considered a "practical law": "only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>35</sup>

The categorical imperative is a law of reason, a “fundamental law of practical reason”. A philosophy of aesthetics has to date assumed that the same rational conditions also obtain for aesthetic experience, that aesthetic insights also obey universal laws and that aesthetics is not simply a subjective field. For we can only debate matters of taste, where aesthetic judgments are universally valid and adhere to obligatory rules and laws.

Sloterdijk’s writings show that such an aesthetic imperative, on which as it were covertly all aesthetics to date have been based, cannot exist and thus take Modernity out of its set frame. Ovid’s sentence from Book 8 of his *Metamorphoses*, Daedalus and Icarus, “*Et ignotas animus dimittit in artes*” (“He directed his mind to unknown arts”) can be paraphrased as: ‘He directs his mind in an unknown way to the arts (to avoid the fate of Modernism)’. His aesthetic project has an ethic dimension. What resonates in Kant’s famous motto “The firmament of stars above me, the moral law in me”, namely the connection of aesthetics and ethics, is the question what could innately link aesthetic pleasure, the experience and appearance of the beautiful and is in the heart of what we term epiphany, to the ethic law of Kant’s categorical imperative. How can the one be the echo of the other? How to link Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1751), a worthy successor to Descartes, to Kant’s ethics and Hegel’s philosophy? How to describe an aesthetic experience that does not rob us of enjoyment and can also be brought into line with philosophy? Is there an affinity between the true and the beautiful? Is the true only a product of the intellect and the beautiful only a product of the sense? Can the intelligible not perhaps be an occurrence and result of the senses and the beautiful a product of the intellect and thus of truth? Have the equations of truth equals beauty and beauty equals truth any meaning in the 20th century, the nightmare of history? Is the claim that the world has become absurd and meaningless identical to the demand that art has also become ugly? Are cognitive processes not the precondition for enjoying beauty and is it not reality itself that first generates enjoyment? Does aesthetic enjoyment exist beyond the pleasure principle, i.e., is aesthetic enjoyment wrestled and wrested from the pleasure principle by sublimation and asceticism? Jacques Lacan accused Freud of political agnosticism in *Science and Truth* (1965), and one could likewise accuse Sloterdijk of aesthetic agnosticism, as for him it is not sublimation that generates the beautiful, but on the contrary, beauty and aesthetic enjoyment exist precisely beyond the pleasure principle. Albeit with the qualification that the place where enjoyment happens is not necessarily the place of the others’ desire. To this extent, we have to do with a qualification of Kant’s categorical imperative. Sloterdijk does not call for a universal ethics that is binding for each individual and thus for all. Equally, he does not call for a universal aesthetics that applies to each individual and thus to all. It is the attempt to escape the nightmare of history as meaning. Can, however, the aesthetic replace meaning just as repetition can replace sublimation? In Sloterdijk’s thought, meaning and the senses, concepts and percepts,

recognition and beauty enter into a new equation that places itself in the service of neither the death drive nor Eros, but on the contrary endeavours to flee both. His aesthetics is, however, no theory of compensation, because he does not shed the idea that aesthetic enjoyment shall remain at the heart of aesthetic experience. The author does not separate himself from life by writing, nor does the artist separate himself from life through his work and thus become a medium of the death drive. On the contrary, writing and the work or reading as such are all acts of enjoyment and the act of life. Thus, aesthetic experience can be brought into line with enjoyment, the pleasure and the reality principles reconciled.

Sloterdijk moves from the categorical imperative to a law of desire, and thus between Kant, Freud and Lacan. He does not consider culture the sublimation of libidinous desire, just as *philia* in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is neither benefit, nor pleasure nor virtue. Precisely because he rejects a universal aestheticization, there is no universal ethicization. Neither ethical nor aesthetic commands must be robbed of their absurd character or their character as commands. Sloterdijk takes his cue here from Blaise Pascal and his *Thoughts on Religion*: "All people hate one another mutually by nature. To the extent possible, people used desire and made use of it for the common weal, but that as hypocrisy... The Ego is per se unjust by making itself the center of everything. It thus annoys the others, for it tries to subjugate them, as each Ego is an enemy and wishes to by the tyrant ruling over all the others."<sup>36</sup> Pascal had relativized Kant's categorical imperative before the latter had even formulated it. The logic of the categorical imperative does not function where everyone hates, makes use of, exploits, and subjugates one another. Pascal's solution was of course faith: "Credo quia absurdum." Sloterdijk takes a similar approach. The cover of the present volume shows the aggression innate in all imperatives, both the ethical and the aesthetic variants. Kant tries to transform the Biblical commandment that "Love your neighbour like yourself" into a rational claim: "This is how, without doubt, we should understand the passages in which we are command to love our neighbours, even our enemies. For love as a propensity cannot be commanded, but to do good as a duty... is practical and not pathological love... but the one alone cannot be commanded."<sup>37</sup>

Obviously, this command is the categorical imperative, that rests on no other logic than the rational call for freedom from contradiction and prescribes that every rational being respects the human in the other person. Kant sought to extract the commandment of love as an ethical imperative from faith and give it a rational grounding. This practical ethics corresponded to a practical aesthetics. The attempt to found aesthetics as a science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was exactly the same process, namely to extract the experience of the beauty from faith, i.e., from intuition, from contemplation, feeling, etc. and to give it rational foundations. Aesthetic experience, captivation by beauty were transformed into a rational demand, a commandment, a legal demand, as it were. Aesthetics became part of

jurisprudence, became subject to the interpretation of the commandments of the aesthetic Gospel. Aesthetic experience became a commandment and law, and thus robbed itself of its meaning, for aesthetics was after all to be a field of pathological love, a field of mere propensity. “De gustibus disputandum est” taste can be a matter of debate, and that is the essence of taste, it can be negotiated, an object of exchange, and thus precisely not a law. As soon as aesthetics commands, it renders enjoyment impossible. The command spoils aesthetic pleasure, for aesthetic pleasure consists precisely in acting without orders, commandments and laws. Transgression is therefore one of the central elements of a future aesthetics. Sloterdijk attacks the aesthetic order, the diktat of beauty. He knows that the fate of cultural progress lies buried between ethical and aesthetic orders and commandments. The human inclination to aggression, which Pascal underscores, does not contribute qua resistance to cultural progress, as Kant or Freud believed. We can learn from Freud’s treatise on “Civilization and its Discontents” (1930) that it is precisely the moral standard that culture juxtaposes to aggression by commanding that we love our neighbour which actually strengthens aggression. What challenges aggression paradoxically forms the decisive factor to strengthen that aggression. Aesthetic commandments thus do not function to reduce barbarism, but it is the aesthetic imperative that we bring to bear as the foil against barbarism that intensifies the latter. What counters ugliness paradoxically decisively reinforces ugliness. Anyone devising an ethics of Eros paradoxically contributes to the aesthetics of Thanatos. In Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi aesthetics we can discern how the aesthetics of Thanatos and aggression shrouded an ethics of aggression. To the point where we recognise that if ethics is the field of Eros, the commandment that we love our neighbours, then aesthetics is the field of Thanatos, the commandment issued by the death instinct. Sloterdijk seeks to free us from this 200-year-old alliance of ethics and aesthetics, categorical and aesthetic imperatives. To do so, he resorts to Nietzsche, for whom Zarathustra spoke: “One ought still to honour the enemy in one’s friend... In one’s friend one shall have one’s best enemy. Thou shalt be closest unto him with thy heart when thou withstandest him.”<sup>38</sup> You see in these quotations the inversion of the commandment of love and the reliance on Pascal’s definition of the Ego as the enemy of every Ego. Nietzsche does not say love your neighbour to the extent that you love your enemy like a friend; he instead turns the values around and says that your friend shall be your best enemy and that you shall honour the enemy in your friend. This rule would ensure that we would once and for all no longer be able to operate with images of an enemy, because we would only have images of a friend. Sartre’s metaphor that “Hell is the others” the way we think them and the only good persons are ourselves, is a credo followed by US politics to this very day; this hellish metaphor rests in fact on the universality of the commandment that we love. Freud himself found the commandment almost inhuman, at least so writes Lacan in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959/60). We can only escape this hellish equation if

we paradoxically abandon the universality of the commandment that we love, in other words abandon the ethical and aesthetic imperatives, and concede that these imperatives have a clear mutual affinity. We must abandon the universality of aesthetic commandments in order to really be able to act aesthetically and find our way out of the aesthetic hell of Modernity. We could thus say that Sloterdijk devises an ethics of aesthetics in which there is no aesthetic imperative. He considers the aesthetics of Modernism as inhuman and searches for a human aesthetics. In the process, he follows Lacan, from whom we learn that everything relating to enjoyment that is turned into a commandment or prohibition simply strengthens the prohibition. Take the commandment that orders the subject to “Enjoy!” and in doing so only shows him in a crueller way that he is castrated. The order “Enjoy!” castrates the subject and undermines enjoyment. Thus, aesthetic enjoyment can only function if it is not subject to a commandment or prohibition. For this reason, Sloterdijk turns against an aesthetic imperative derived from Kant and his categorical imperative. Aesthetic enjoyment must not be cast in fetters because they simply kindle resistance and that resistance spoils enjoyment. The commandment of love bears within itself the possibility of the inhuman, and Kant’s categorical imperative bears within itself the possibility of the human, which is why Sloterdijk rejects the possibility of an aesthetic imperative. He therefore does not opt for Nietzsche’s solution, for turning the aggression instinct into a turn to the will to power, following which Foucault introduced his analyzes of power to the systems of the West. His aesthetic project does not represent a collective doctrine, and for him aesthetic experience does not even give rise to a cultural community, for he knows that a political regime could be built on it. Every imperative merely highlights for the subject his/her solitude, the compulsion of a commandment imposed by the Super-Ego. Sloterdijk demands a democracy that enables the subjectivities to transpose their conflicts by not unequivocally formulating them. This is the meaning behind his literary and philosophical method of de-definition – a basis for a democratic subjectivity. Relying on Pascal’s insight and Nietzsche’s error, he seeks the basis for a form of subjectivity that is neither power nor tyranny but forms the basis for an aesthetics of democratic subjectivity. Here, again, we can refer to Hegel and the basic structure of his philosophy of right, in which we already find the idea of a paradoxical connection of the rhetoric of the desires (aesthetics) and the logic of the political (ethics), because here Hegel develops a system of right that refers to particularity and uniqueness and not to mandatory universal applicability. And Sloterdijk’s aesthetics is likewise a doctrine of singularity and not a construction of the general.



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## 6. Uneasy Places. Monotheism, Christianity, and the Dynamic of the Unlikely in Sloterdijk's Work – Context and Debate

Laurens ten Kate

Es ist das beste an der Religion, dass sie Ketzer hervorruft.  
Ernst Bloch<sup>1</sup>

### Monotheism revisited in contemporary philosophy

A spectre is visiting the western world – the spectre of monotheism. It is fashionable nowadays, when referring to this spectre, to speak of a 'return of religion' in our times, but in fact, what is returning, what is revisiting the world, is not religion in general, but its threefold western varieties: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The spectre is visiting us, and we have to 'revisit' it – in philosophy and science, in politics, in our daily existence. However, what does 'revisiting' mean? Does it simply address the return of something that had temporarily disappeared (or at least one hoped so)? Or does it have to face the possibility that the spectre had never been away? That the western world, that 'we' are in a way the spectre, so that one has to conclude that, when we take on the task of a revisiting of monotheism, we are actually revisiting ourselves?

It is this second possibility that forms the emphatic focal point of a new development within contemporary philosophy, in which the works of Peter Sloterdijk take an active part. One need not be surprised, therefore, that the opening phrase of this chapter is a slight, specifying variation of the way Sloterdijk opens his recent book *Du musst dein Leben ändern* (You Will Have to Change your Life, 2009): "A spectre is haunting the western world – the spectre of religion."<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, Sloterdijk in turn varies the famous opening statement of Marx's and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>3</sup> However, whereas the latter alludes to a completely new, revolutionary event in Europe, the inevitable rise of communism through and within the political economy of capitalism, Sloterdijk aims at exactly the opposite: the spectre of religion is an old, all too old spectre, that has formed and

made the complex configuration we call the ‘West’, or ‘Europe’. Nothing new, nothing even returning ...

It is not a case of some element [Grösse] that would now have returned after having disappeared, but a shift of accent in a continuum that was never broken.<sup>4</sup>

This “continuum”, as I will argue, is the continuum of monotheism – hence my little specification of Sloterdijk’s phrase. What this continuum of monotheism could be, we will have to explore below. For the time being, let me make two important preliminary observations.

### Definition of monotheism

The first, brief observation concerns the definition of the term ‘monotheism’. For at least a century, the philosophical concept of monotheism has transcended its technical meaning as applied by historians of religion. It has shifted from a formal categorization of some world religions toward the articulation of a fundamental problem of and within western culture; to be more precise, it is thought of and analyzed as a problematic and ambivalent legacy within modernity. This shift can be found from Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophy of religion, via Nietzsche and Heidegger, to contemporary thinkers like Löwith, Blumenberg or Gauchet. In this shifting use of the term, one usually no longer sees the exclusive recognition of only one God (*mono-*) as the essential characteristic of monotheism, but a deep change in and deregulation of the relation between God and humans, heaven and earth, transcendence and immanence. In this sense, it is not only God, but also man that is central in monotheism’s conception: after all, one should speak of two coherent terms, monotheism and mono-anthropoism. This change in the relation between the divine and the human stems from a rupture with ‘the gods’ and hence a new worldview, a new perspective on humanity, that modern philosophers and historians of culture have baptized *logos*: the rupture with the mythical, polytheistic experience (*mythos*) that, as rupture, would have formed the West. The problem and ambivalence of monotheism consists precisely in this point of rupture: how can a religion do away with the gods and still have a God? What complex type of non-God can this be, that places humanity – and not divinity – in the centre of existence? Such questions have led Marcel Gauchet to his well-known dictum: monotheism would be “the religion for departing religion”.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, monotheism is a revision of itself: it constantly and fundamentally revisits its own ground – God – to the extent that it becomes untenable, self-contradictory, and even ‘impossible’. However, the thinkers I will discuss in the following, all move one radical and provocative step further, by stating that it is precisely this untenability (we will notice that many of them, including Sloterdijk, prefer the assignment ‘impossibility’ or ‘improbability’) that defines monotheism

as religion: as untenable it proves its tenability. In sum – but here I am anticipating the coming analysis – monotheism deconstructs itself.

More revisitors: Badiou, Agamben, Žižek

The second, longer observation deals with those philosophers who, apart from Sloterdijk, devote their work, in different but equally remarkable ways, to what I have named a revisiting of monotheism. They all share an explicit distrust regarding the logic of a ‘return of religion’. Their writings on this theme are responses to the singularity of the present world, a world – the West, East, South – in which secular modernity and religion are entangled in a complex way. They formulate these responses by diving into the history of monotheism as a crucial part of the history of the West, and, as such, as belonging to our present, rather than to our past. They focus in particular on Christianity as the most dominant religion of the West, and, as such, dominating the entire world. I will briefly mention three thinkers who have taken innovative and provocative positions in this direction: Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek.

In his essay on the biblical letters of St. Paul, one of the first theorists and political leaders of the Christian communities, Badiou, involves himself in a revisiting to the extent that he searches for the “unheard-of” in Paul’s theology. Badiou locates this in Paul’s concept of truth and universality, grounded in a “paradoxical connection”: that “between a subject without identity and a law without support”.<sup>6</sup> Badiou argues that Paul presents a new vision of the human subject: it bears this paradoxical universal truth as a singular event, and, in the end, coincides with this event, all while defying the truths of his time: those of Judaic Law and of the rationality of Greek *Logos*. The Pauline subject rejects the order of the world without withdrawing from it in some individual realm; it refuses the world by proposing a new one, totally different in “nature” and “being”: the world not as infinite substance but as infinitely finite event. This subject is outside and inside the world at the same: a crucial double bind that is the kernel of monotheism’s self-deconstruction, most explicitly coming to the fore in Christianity.

Agamben, in contrast, rejects this universalist key to Paul’s writings, claiming instead that Paul’s concept of time, *kairos*, as the moment interrupting the present as present, escapes any form of the universal and opens a “remnant” (*reste*), in which any identity, any vocation is negated.<sup>7</sup> In this attempt to think time and event beyond a structure of identity and identification, Agamben yet remains close to Badiou. Later, in *Le règne et la gloire*, Agamben attempts a genealogy of modern economy by deconstructing the early Christian notion of *oikonomía* as it is present, for instance, in the divine economy expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Following this path, Agamben states that “secularization.. .”, seen as “the conceptual system of modernity, is like a signature...” under this system “that leads us back to theology”.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek underlines, as does Badiou, an unheard-of and even subversive feature of Christianity, which he ascribes above all to St. Paul. It is, so he states in his essay *On Belief*, the Christian discovery, or rather, the invention of God's imperfection, as represented in the story of the crucifixion, paralleled in the Christian notions such as love and belief, which, according to Žižek, are nothing other than forms of a basic "attachment to the Other's imperfection".<sup>9</sup> Žižek's daring interpretations of the doctrine of incarnation lead us to the conclusion that the Christian God – in Christ – retreats from himself *within* himself, opening up a space where presence and absence become entangled. Žižek does not speak of a retreat, but of a separation: "... in the figure of Christ God is thoroughly separated from himself."<sup>10</sup> According to Žižek, it is from this internal separation of God and man in God, that monotheism's, and particularly Christianity's emphasis on the general separation of humanity from a radically distant God originates. Still, it is exactly this separation that "unites us with God", which comes to light in the twofold nature of Christ. Like Badiou and Agamben, Žižek presents the deconstructive analysis of this structure of separation and unification in monotheism primarily as a new perspective on modernity, referring to Kant:

We are one with God only when God is no longer one with himself, but abandons himself, "internalizes" the radical distance which separates us from him. ...Kant claims that humiliation and pain are the only transcendental feelings: it is preposterous to think that I can identify myself with the divine bliss – only when I experience the infinite pain of separation from God do I share an experience with God himself (Christ on the Cross).<sup>11</sup>

### Sloterdijk and Nancy

Despite their differences, all three thinkers share the approach of unveiling the unexpected, the unlikely, or even the unthinkable or impossible features of monotheism, and demonstrating how and why these features still 'work' in the present as subversive forces, explaining monotheism's persistence in modern times. In this approach, they touch the trajectories of Sloterdijk and of a fourth relevant thinker, Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>12</sup> Although both Nancy and Sloterdijk refrain from claiming some renewing force in monotheism, they also underline the unthought, strange aspects of monotheism – aspects that will first of all surprise and unsettle monotheism itself – that are still to be articulated and investigated in our time, in order to come to an understanding of that time.

In 2002, in an interview in the German magazine *Lettre International*, Nancy defines and confines his research on monotheism as a "deconstruction of Christianity". This *deconstruction* must be understood according to the inventor of the term, Jacques Derrida: it is neither a destructive criticism, nor a reconstruction of some lost entity. It is, Nancy states, the determination of "something" in Christianity that would have "made it possible", but that, at the same time would be the "un-

thought” of Christianity: that is to say, something in Christianity that at the same time “is not Christianity proper” and “has not mingled with it”.<sup>13</sup>

In his trilogy *Sphären* as well as in *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, Sloterdijk analyzes key features of monotheism. In *nuce* these features all consist of a sensibility for the “unlikely” or the “improbable”, a sensibility that is strived for in what monotheism is *in actu*: a “spiritual system of exercise” that contributes to the “immunitary configuration” of human existence.<sup>14</sup> The first part of *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, entitled “Die Eroberung des Unwahrscheinlichen” (The Conquest of the Unlikely), is an elaborate exploration of the history of this sensibility. “Only the impossible is certain”, Sloterdijk cites the early Christian theologian Tertullian (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century), investigating the meaning of this paradoxical adage in the last, programmatic section of Part I.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile it becomes clear that Sloterdijk and Nancy move their revisitings and deconstructions of monotheism to quite a fundamental level. They do not simply explore unthought aspects of it, but rather rethink monotheism as the configuration of the unthought, the unlikely and unthinkable in western history and culture.

In the following I will offer a brief critical account of Sloterdijk’s rethinking of Christian monotheism and of its “continuum” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will do so by concentrating on his “spherology”, as laid out in the first two volumes of his *Sphären*,<sup>16</sup> and on the role he attributes to Christianity within the history of these ‘spheres’.<sup>17</sup> After a presentation of the innovative topological viewpoint underlying this spherology, I will raise the question whether, and to what extent, Sloterdijk’s revisiting of Christian monotheism, with its conservative emphasis on the immunizing and ‘spherotechnic’ function of religion, does justice (1) to his own definition of spheres, and (2) to his plea for an ‘ethics of the unlikely’.

## **How to receive the visitor? Rethinking monotheism in Sloterdijk’s spherology: A discussion<sup>18</sup>**

### Topology as First Philosophy

The trilogy *Sphären* is primarily and essentially a philosophy of the place. As such, it breaks away from quite a classic and modern anthropological heritage. ‘Spherology’, the doctrine of the spheres, is rooted in the assumption that the *topos* of man is a far more determining aspect of human existence than the *essence* of man – whether this essence is constituted in a classic way (from Antiquity into the Middle Ages), by relating to an originary and external ground, foundation or *substance*, or in a modern way, by reducing it to a presence-to-self (to man’s own internal ground or foundation), or to the concept of *identity*.<sup>19</sup> An understanding of human existence on earth should start, according to Sloterdijk, from the ques-



tion ‘Where?’, and not ‘What?’ or ‘Who?’. This critical, topological re-orientation, although having been prepared intensely in Nietzsche’s work, and although traces of it having lain dormant since the beginning of modern philosophy, has found its explicit articulation in Heidegger’s existential phenomenology. It was then taken up by post-war existentialism insofar as this presented itself, particularly in Sartre’s early work, as the first reception of Heidegger, however problematic and erring this reception may have been. But the question of the place of man was addressed in a more decisive way – theoretically and empirically – by later currents as structuralism, poststructuralism (in particular the philosophy of deconstruction) and systemic theory in the social sciences, where the critique of subjectcentric thought has immediately led to a concentration on the place as the non-essentialist *being* of man.

The modern existentialist thinkers have demonstrated that it is less important to know who we are than where we are. As long as banality sets a seal on intelligence, people are not interested in their place, that seems to be simply given; they are stuck on the false guides of their names, identities and activities. What has been named *Seinsvergessenheit* [The forgetting of being] by 20th-century philosophers, shows itself primarily as the persistent ignorance with regard to the uneasy place of existence.<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, this topological turn in anthropology and in ontology is a polemical response to the universalist philosophies that have dominated the postwar world successfully: the universalism of Anglo-Saxon, analytical ethics (Rawls), or of the later Critical Theory (Habermas). It was the ambition of these currents to recover from the disaster brought about by Nazism, by defining man as a rational, moral subject independent from its topical limitations, and by proposing universal, ‘extra-spherical’ values, reasoned out by equally universal theories of justice or of communication, as the only possible structure for global human life. How problematic this ambition is, becomes clear in view of the intercultural and interreligious reality that embarrasses Europe at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>21</sup>

In his essay *Gottes Eifer. Vom Kampf der drei Monotheismen* (Holy Fire: On the Battle between the Three Monotheisms) Sloterdijk devotes himself to the task of thinking this reality. Focusing on the distinction between the three monotheistic religions, Sloterdijk takes a completely different approach from Habermas’s universalism. The western world is not a unity, has never been and cannot be so: one can only think the West in three. However, Sloterdijk does not present the topographic borders around and icons of these religious configurations (“Jerusalem”, “Mecca”, “Rome” etc.) exclusively as closed, identificational spheres, but also as *topoi* that open themselves up to the world and measure themselves with what they are not. This measuring must be understood in the aggressive sense (measure up to) as well as in the tolerant sense (expose oneself to):

Jerusalem, with Rome, with Mecca, with Wittenberg and similar names...are centres of personal suprematism, from which the ecstasies of submission overflow the world. But in a positive sense, dome of these names indicate the broadening of the circle of empathy: they point towards the growing capability among those who are motivated by the religion or idealism, to become engaged in the fates of strangers, as if they were relatives.<sup>22</sup>

The spherological criticism of *Ortsvergessenheit* (The forgetting of place) draws the attention towards the *topos* where people live, whether they like it or not: or rather, towards the *topos* that people *are*. But what is this *topos*? First of all, it should not be thought as an object at the disposal of us, as subjects; on the contrary, it should be thought as a condition of being in which our *Dasein* – to use Heidegger's redefinition of human existence – is fully integrated, to the extent that the *Da* of our *Dasein* is understood as fundamentally topical. I am where I am – this would mean: where I am, that is what I am. Or even: I am my own 'where?'.

This *topos* is never simply a static place in the small sense, with its self-defining measures and borders (a house, a car, a village, a nation); neither is it a static place in the broad sense, with its self-defining immoderateness and boundlessness (the world as infinite possibility of appropriation and colonization, fiction of the American foreign policy following the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001). This *topos* should be thought of dynamically: it is the event *between* limitation and delimitation, or in Sloterdijk's vocabulary, between immunization against the outside *and* being exposed to the outside.

Spheres, such as Sloterdijk analyzes them in his trilogy, are precisely these dilemmatic places that we are in, in which we never succeed in choosing between the immune system that we need against the unliveable outside, and the openness we desire towards this outside. A sphere is then like a verge, or, to use a concept of Derrida, an *atopos* or *aporia* that marks the scene of indecision. Man is in the world, and at the same time man cannot be in the world.

### Sphaira as dilemma

As we stated above, the characteristics of this dynamic and dilemmatic topology was first systematically investigated by Heidegger. Sloterdijk continues in the paths set out by him. The *Da* of *Dasein* is, according to Heidegger, precisely this in-between situation typical of the *topos* that we are: between the place that protects us against the world and the *ek-stasis* (ecstasy as a standing outside oneself) that opens us towards this world that frightens us nevertheless. *Da* is the basic form of a sphere:

What in 20th-century philosophy is called being-in-the-world is actually first of all being-in-spheres. When people are *da*, they are so in spaces that have opened themselves for them, because these spaces, precisely because people

take a living within their form, have offered to these people content, possible extension and duration.<sup>23</sup>

This paradox of an anthropology that thinks humans as places following the structure of *da*, does however play quite an ambiguous role in Sloterdijk's work. On the one hand, he thinks the radical instability of this *topos* we are,<sup>24</sup> on the other there is, particularly in *Sphären*, a one-sided preference for the immunizing features of spheres, features that form only one pole of the in-between. Sloterdijk implicitly describes the spherical paradox of a *communauté de ceux qui n'ont pas de communauté* (community of those who do not have a community),<sup>25</sup> in which the modern problem of being-in-the world is articulated in its necessity and impossibility. Still, he recoils before this tension sometimes and tends towards a reduction of the *topos* of *da* to systems immunizing us against the world.

### Spherology and Christianity: A chronology of betrayal?

This ambiguity can be found most emphatically in the way Sloterdijk gives an account of the history of Christian monotheism within western culture.<sup>26</sup> In this complex history, Sloterdijk tries to demonstrate how the Christian God has gradually been perverted: a history of decline. The God of early Christianity – Sloterdijk calls him the metaphysical God, in whom the old Greek cosmology and geometry, the Jewish God of the creation and the Christian God of salvation meet – would have been the intimate God, he who creates and maintains the immunizing spheres needed by man because he is the ultimate, all-embracing sphere. Man is literally in God, an idea and experience that is intensified in the story of the incarnation of God into Christ. Somewhere between the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance the theologians, the church, and with them, modern man who was about to be born, would have abandoned this intimacy between God and man. God would have become the infinite, the totally distant. Hence, this 'infinitezation' of God leads to the disenchantment of the human world, for man has removed the protector of his immunity against the outside: against the emptiness and 'placelessness' of the cosmos, of death. God has *become* this uneasy, unsettling outside. The infinitezation of the divine *sphaira* is thus the key process in what is usually called 'modernization' or 'secularization'. Sloterdijk mourns:

The most clever theologians have killed God, because they could not refrain from thinking of him as the actually and extensively Infinite. The phrase 'God is dead' means first of all a morphological tragedy – the destruction of the imaginary, satisfying and visible immunizing ball [Immunitätskugel] through relentless infinitezation. Now, God is becoming the Invisible, Unimaginable, Formless – a monster to the human eye..., an absolute, groundless [Ungrund]

gap. Suddenly it has become irrelevant and senseless to be in this God of infinity, because the door between inside and outside is closed.<sup>27</sup>

However, the history of Christianity within the development of the West is more complicated than this linear chronology of decline would have it. My thesis would be that the Christian God is characterized from the beginning by the tension I analyzed above in the *da* of *Dasein*. From the period of the Pauline letters, the first gospels written down and the rise of the first theological debates on the nature of the Christian God (Is he God? Is he human?), on the incarnation and, later, on the complex relations within a trinitarian God/man/spirit, this God has been ‘so close and yet so far’. The infinite God is hence not at all an invention of late medieval theology. Neither has the intimate God – the caring, protecting and comforting God as an immunizing sphere that Sloterdijk places only at the dawn of Christianity – stopped to exert his power in modern times; for instance the numerous neospiritual experiments we encounter nowadays testify to this.

The Christian God always was both at the same time: infinite space and immunizing sphere, outside and inside, absolutely transcendent and closely imminent, utterly strange and familiar. Because he is both simultaneously, he symbolizes that dilemmatic *topos* we studied above: in the end, a sphere is nothing more than the interval between place and non-place, between a safe life and a life at risk – or, to put it in a general, existential way: between life and death. So, by describing the Christian God as the ultimate immunizing power, he is unfaithful to the basic assumption of his spherology: that the sphere is like a medium between us and the world, between the self and the loss of self, between identity and alterity.

In all of its long history, Christianity has never lost its concentration on – sometimes advancing to an ecstatic obsession with – this complicity of life and death. The ‘death of God’ is not the murderous act of medieval theologians, preparing the ground for an even more murderous modernity; this death commences on the Cross. The ‘life’ of this strange God is his death, his being close and human is his distant divinity, and vice versa. It is this entanglement of life and death, or, in the terms of a long tradition of metaphysical theology still very active in modern philosophy: of time and eternity, that marks the *unlikely*, the *unwahrscheinliches* Sloterdijk deals with after his spherological trilogy. This entanglement pinpoints monotheism as a configuration of the unthought, the unlikely and unthinkable in western history and culture, as I have called it above.

We should not reject the “formless monster”, we should take it very seriously because it locates itself between form and formlessness: this is what the story of its passion, death and resurrection experiments with, what it tries to convey without knowing exactly what it is doing. The early Christian communities have taken four centuries to quarrel about this unstable, unsettling, uneasy foundation of their religion: who is our God? Do we have a God? Who is this Christ? Whom to

worship? Should we worship a God? The lack of a clear-cut *creed* is the only *credo* of Christian monotheism, at least at the beginning of its history.<sup>28</sup>

### The end of religion?

Despite his emphatic and multifaceted project of analyzing the religious continuum we have retraced above and so far, Sloterdijk, in *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, sometimes decides to fall for this rejective approach. He refrains from rejecting the “formless monster” of the Christian-monotheist legacy in favour of some presumed better version of these religions – or of religion proper, that is, in the fashionable lexicon of late modernity: spirituality in its general, universal, secular or even humanist shape. But the rejective approach is more intelligent: Sloterdijk claims that religion has never returned in our times, because it has never existed in the first place. While the continuum of monotheism is one the one hand presented as a “spiritual system of exercise” that contributes to the “immunity configuration” of human existence,<sup>29</sup> at the same time Sloterdijk states that there has never been such a religious continuum: what one has always called religion, is *nothing else than* these immunizing practices.

... There is no religion, there are no religions, but only misunderstood spiritual systems of exercise, whether these are practiced collectively – church, Ordo, Umma, sangha – or in personal performances – in the playful exchange with “my own God” from whom the citizens of the modern world take their assurance.<sup>30</sup>

This viewpoint is repeated at the end of the long *prolegomenon* to the book, entitled “Der Planet der Übenden” (The planet of those who exercise). Once more Sloterdijk declares that “religion does not exist”. We are in fact dealing with “misinterpreted anthropotechnical systems of exercise”, as well as regulating operations aimed at “self-formation”. Such systems and operations would lead to the improvement of our “immune-status”.<sup>31</sup>

This expulsion of the term ‘religion’ from our vocabularies seems rather innocent; whether one uses religion or exercise, re-baptizing the old *communio* into a new *immunio*, is just a question of choice of words. However, reducing religion to immunization has serious consequences for our understanding of the continuum and its continuing force in our time. Religion, especially its monotheistic variety, as we have seen above, is much more complex and ambiguous than the system of rituals promoting immunization – protection, security, strength, something “to hold on to”, assurance, etc. – Sloterdijk wishes to limit it to. A religion like Christianity, despite its long history of claims to authority, truth, power and foundation, is hardly suitable for an effective and successful immune-system, exactly *because* it thinks, proclaims, enacts, performs and imagines the lack of a clear-cut creed just as well, and indeed trains us in the “art” of believing in a God who does

not want to be God – meanwhile inviting humans to do likewise: not wanting to be human, striving for the unlikely.

Hence, Sloterdijk's focus on the immunological side of his anthropotechnics (and, in its slipstream, of religion) is a refutation of the dynamics of the unlikely he attempts to explore in his book too. In this respect, his trajectory differs in a fundamental way from the one followed by the other revisiting thinkers treated above, who all are keen to (1) avoid a *restorative* scheme ("return of/to religion") – with Sloterdijk – and (2) avoid a *reductionist* scheme ("religion is in essence something else underlying it") – against Sloterdijk. In other words, the radical improbabilism searched for in *Du musst dein Leben ändern* has a difficult relation with the equally radical immunism that dominates the book. Maybe one should conclude that both exclude one another. By shifting our attention to the mysterious doctrine of the incarnation, on which Christianity had fed throughout its history, we may receive a closer understanding of this difficult relation.

### The Prevalence the Interior: Incarnation as the Event of the Unlikely

How can trained self-formation and self-affirmation coincide with openness towards the unlikely and impossible? How can self-assurance and self-abandonment go together? It is Christianity that – maybe inadvertently – has designed the tools to "live" this double bind, that, paradoxically, has become a central feature of the modern, "post-Christian", secular age.

#### *Man in the centre*

A religious tradition that is uncertain about its God to obey and worship, is bound to turn its attention to man as its centre: this is why monotheism, and especially Christianity, places such an emphasis on its *anthropology* and its *ethics*. Strangely enough, Christianity's *theology* supports this turn effectively, by way of the narrative and doctrine of incarnation. It is God himself who empties out his divinity (*kenosis*) in order to become human; it is God himself who places man in the centre...

This anthropology of Christianity feeds its continuum, its continuation and persistence in modernity, for it is in itself essentially modern. Furthermore, as a modern anthropology it is at the same time a fragile, broken, dilemmatic anthropology. Why?

The Christian concept of man parallels the 'interiorization' of religiosity: it advocates a personal, authentic relation to God and an experience of 'becoming truly human' that befalls us when we give ourselves to this God. Faith in God is, as a consequence of this dynamic, not primarily focused on God, but on finding one's own authenticity. This predominance of authenticity and individuality is already present in early Christianity. Augustine is exemplary here. His *Confessions* function as a ritual practice aiming to find and recover oneself (*ipse*) through the gift of self to God, a gift that has the structure of a radical abandonment and loss,

of sacrifice and alienation, ultimately of death. By giving ourselves away we discover the God in ourselves, in our interior (*intus*), who in turn gives us back to ourselves in a purified, enlightened state. God is here the Giver of intimacy, of the immunizing sphere: he even is this sphere, giving himself to and as man. Man, on the other hand, according to this proto-dialectical logic, had to abandon this sphere – this is a key feature of Christian ethics – in order to gain it back in the form of the ‘true self’.

### *Man de-centered*

So far, the circle of Christian anthropology seems closed and self-evident. However, this closure is not obvious at all, and it is here that the brokenness of this view of human life becomes apparent. Sloterdijk touches upon this broken condition, but, as we have seen, ignores it at the same time. The intimate God of Augustine is not simply the Giver of our interior self, he interrupts and undermines it just the same. The self-giving God does by no means coincide with man, melting with him; in the dialectical movement, he leaves man alone with his authentic interiority, and withdraws from any spontaneous, ‘natural’ relation with humanity. This paradox of a God that at once is extremely close and infinitely far away is expressed in Augustine’s famous adage on God: “*Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*” (More inwardly than my most inward self, higher than my highest self). The one and only (*mono-*) God of monotheism rides himself in two parallel ways of his authority and power: by losing his divinity in the incarnation (*so close*), and by retreating in absolute distance (*yet so far*).

But this paradox might still suggest some dualist structure, and this is actually suggested by Augustine in his doctrine of the two worlds or reigns: the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terrena et humana*. However, there is no dualism, there is only entanglement. In fact, this absolute distance is already present in the narrative of the incarnated God, who retreats into infinity through his death, only to prove himself more human, less divine than ever in this gesture of mortality. In this sense, this narrative is not only the centre of the Christian religion, but it is also its distinctive feature as compared to other religions, also to the other monotheisms. The incarnation disorders the classic, hierarchic relation between gods and humans by introducing an infinite *thanatography* – a story about dying. God dies as God only to regain life as human: but this human then dies (on the Cross) only to live again as God. However, this deceased and resurrected God can no longer be a ‘normal’ God, for he cannot be worshipped but in the shape of the one who humiliated himself and refrained from being God. Death of God, death of humans: these two inextricable events structure Christianity, precisely in their endless repetition.

## Coda – From conquest to touch

If this remarkable double event is the unlikely dynamic of monotheism in its Christian form, then Sloterdijk's rich and detailed revisiting of monotheism – in *Sphären*, and in his works following the trilogy – is quite close to an effective understanding of this unlikeliness that haunts and inspires modern and postmodern culture. The topological decentering of the human subject, the development of the concept of the sphere in its fragility and impossibility, and the articulation of an “acrobatic existence” that tries to revive the unlikely within the likeliness of life –deregulating for example the opposition of life and death –, all this contributes to a powerful deconstruction of monotheism aimed at thinking its continuum in our time.

However, the complex paradoxes of this continuum, of this monotheistic heritage in modern western culture, are suddenly ignored when Sloterdijk advocates a certain “conquest” of the unlikely. This comes to light in a remarkable section concluding Part I of *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, in which Sloterdijk launches a daring interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>32</sup> Sloterdijk reads the end of Jesus' life on earth as an expression of a huge achievement; in order to do so, Sloterdijk invokes the atmosphere of a fitness centre. Presenting Jesus as a well-trained athlete, he claims that he would have reached the unlikeliest impossible: he would have vanquished death itself.

Sloterdijk forgets however that the only “fulfilment” Jesus has brought about, according to the gospels, is his dying proper, on the cross, in accordance with the Jewish Scriptures. These Scriptures – the Psalms, the Prophets – are “fulfilled” in this miserable act of dying, as John writes (John 19:28), and in this way they resonate in the famous “It is fulfilled” (30) Jesus himself exclaims the moment he releases his last breath. Here, God having become man gives himself away, loses himself – that is the unlikely event of this scene –, and his death is not overcome into a new life, but it is life. What is “resurrected” here is not life, but death. Death is drawn into life as life's key feature, as if dying were the prime task of living. Death in life instead of death against life: again, we encounter here the proto-dialectic structure of the doctrine of incarnation we have studied above. The outcome of this Christian structure, that has influenced modern philosophy so deeply – once more, the continuum comes to the fore – is: suffering, *passio*, tragedy. It is the tragedy between God and humans, who, losing themselves to each other, can neither achieve a synthesis, nor a sharp separation. No mystical fusion, no gnostic dualism remains possible here. God and man, they are entangled, like life and death, in an impossible relation. Sloterdijk's heroics of a victory over death attributed to Christ's gesture is thus far removed from the textual composition of all four gospels: a composition that is structured by the so-called “announcements of suffering” Jesus repeats to and rehearses with his disciples time and again.



Here the confrontation between Sloterdijk's deconstructions and those carried out by Nancy becomes most acute. For Nancy advocates the interwovenness of life and death as emphatically as possible, interpreting the resurrection as an emancipation of death in life – or rather, in his philosophical language, indebted to Blanchot and Bataille: of absence in presence, of “disappearance” in appearance. Commenting on yet another passage from John's account of the last days of Christ, Nancy offers another daring interpretation, albeit radically opposite to Sloterdijk's view. With regard to John 20:17, the well-known scene of Jesus appearing before his empty grave to Mary Magdalene and asking her to not touch him (*Noli me tangere*), Nancy states:

Death is not “vanquished” here, in the sense religion all too hastily wants to give this word. It is immeasurably expanded, shielded from the limitation of being merely demise. The empty tomb un-limits death in the departing of the dead. He is not “dead” once and for all: he dies indefinitely. He who says “Do not touch me” never ceases to depart, for his presence is that of a disappearance indefinitely renewed or prolonged.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, the unlikely, considered as a *dynamic* and not as a *goal*, cannot be conquered nor appropriated; it simply happens in repetitive events, that conquer us while leaving us to ourselves a second later, free and yet bound by the event. A logic of conquest, of heroic change (*ändern*) as presented by Sloterdijk in *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, is not able to grasp the hesitation of these words of Tertullian, cited by Sloterdijk himself.<sup>34</sup> Mixing the affirmative and the negating mode in a dazzling way, they appear to have no other wish than to say nothing, to do nothing. Only by rendering language and action itself impossible, can the impossible be said, be done. Only in this way one might touch the unlikely.<sup>35</sup> Let me end then by quoting Tertullian:

The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful.  
 The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is silly.  
 He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. The best thing about religion is that it makes for heretics. Bloch, E. (1968): *Atheismus im Christentum. Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 15; Engl. ed.: Bloch, E. (1972): *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*. New York: Herder & Herder, p. 9.
2. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): *Du musst dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropotechnik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 9. My translation.
3. The original formulation is: “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.”

4. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): o.c., p. 12. My translation.
5. Une religion de la sortie de la religion. See Gauchet, M. (1999): *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 101-115, 200-207, where the author speaks of “The Religious after Religion”.
6. Badiou, A. (2003): *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 5.
7. See: Agamben, G. (2005): *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 23, pp. 51-53.
8. Agamben, G. (2008) : *Le règne et la gloire. Pour une généalogie théologique de l'économie et du gouvernement – Homo Sacer II*, 2 Paris: Seuil, p. 21.
9. See Žižek, S. (2001): *On Belief*. London: Routledge, p. 147; see also Žižek, S. (2000): *The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* New York/London: Verso; Žižek, S. (2003): *The Puppet and the Dwarf: Christianity's Perverse Core*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, in which he deconstructs this “core” of Christianity between perversion and subversion (as the original German title reads), and defines Christianity as a form of atheism (e.g., p. 171).
10. Žižek, S. (2003): o.c., p. 78.
11. *Ibid.*, 91.
12. See for an elaborate account of the philosophical debate on monotheism and modernity in which Nancy's work plays a central role (with a.o. Sloterdijk and the three aforementioned thinkers as his context) Alexandrova, A., I. Devisch, L. ten Kate & A. van Rooden (2011): “Re-Opening the Question of Religion: Dis-Enclosure of Religion and Modernity in the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy”, in: *Retreating Religion: Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy*. New York: Fordham University Press.
13. J.-L. Nancy, “Entzug der Göttlichkeit. Zur Dekonstruktion und Selbstüberschreitung des Christentums”, in *Lettre International*, winter 2002, 76-80, 76: “. . . was das Christentum möglich gemacht hat (und mit ihm das, was die gesamten abendländischen Zivilization strukturiert hat), was aber gleichzeitig nicht das Christentum selber wäre und sich nicht mit ihm vermischt hätte – etwas, was das noch im Kommen begriffene Ungedachte des Christentums selbst wäre.” My transl.
14. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): o.c., pp. 12-13.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 323-325: “Certum est quia impossibile: Nur das Unmögliche ist gewiss” (Only the Impossible is Certain – my transl.).
16. *Sphären*, vol. 1: “Blasen”, vol. 2: “Globen”, vol.3: “Schäume”, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998, 1999, 2004 resp. Surprisingly, this remarkable, controversial magnum opus by one of the influential thinkers of our time, translated in numerous languages throughout the world, has still not been translated into the English language.
17. Sloterdijk uses the term *Sphäre* (sphere) in a sense close to the classic Greek meaning of *sphaira*: surrounding circle, offering protection to those within the circle.
18. Elements of this section were published earlier, and in a different version, as: Ten Kate, L. (2009): “Zwischen Immunität und Unendlichkeit. Der Ort in Peter Sloterdijks Sphärologie im Hinblick auf seine philosophische Analyse des christlichen Erbes”, in Jongen, M., S. van Tuinen & K. Hemelsoet (eds.): *Die Vermessung des Ungeheueren. Philosophie nach Peter Sloterdijk*. München: Fink Verlag, pp. 120-129.
19. We will see below that this modern anthropology of identity, related to a strive for individuality and autonomy, can be traced back to monotheism's equally modern anthropology. This coherence of modernity and (esp. Christian) monotheism with regard to the idea of the self is brought to its most radical complexity in Hegel's system. Cf. also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, esp. part II.

20. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): *Sphären: Blasen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 27. My translation.
21. In his later work, Habermas has attempted to complicate and, in a way, correct his universalist project by rethinking late-modern or late-capitalist societies as belonging to a post-secular era. See: Habermas, J. (2003): "Faith and Knowledge", in *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 101-115. This is one of the first publications in which the concept of the post-secular was introduced – issued only a few months after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York of September 9, 2001. See also: Habermas, J. (2008): *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press. See also for an analysis of the debate on the postsecular and Habermas's contribution to it: Alexandrova, A. et al. (2011): o.c.
22. Sloterdijk, P. (2007): *Gottes Eifer. Vom Kampf der drei Monotheismen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 151. My translation.
23. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., p. 46. My translation. Being-in-the world (*In der Welt sein*) is obviously a reference to the doctrine of the 'existentials' in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 48: "Spheres share with happiness and glass then risks belonging to all those things that can easily be crushed." My transl. See also: Sloterdijk, P. (1999): *Sphären: Globen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, ch. 6: "Anti-Sphären", pp. 593-611.
25. A formulation by Georges Bataille.
26. See esp. Sloterdijk, P. (1998): o.c., ch. 8, and Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., "Einleitung" (Introduction) and ch. 5.
27. Sloterdijk, P. (1999): o.c., p. 130. My translation.
28. See on the ambiguity of the Christian creed, in its original Nicean/Constantinoplean form of the fourth century, also: Ten Kate, L. (2008): 'Outside In, Inside Out: Notes on the Retreating God in Nancy's Deconstruction of Christianity.' *Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 69(3), pp. 305-320, esp. sections 6 & 7.
29. See above, note 14.
30. Sloterdijk, P. (2009): o.c., p. 12.
31. *Ibid.*, 134.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-320.
33. Nancy, J-L. (2008): *Noli me tangere*. New York: Fordham University Press, p. 16. In as far as a detailed textual analysis is concerned, Nancy surely has a point; although the gospels are not unambiguous here, they strongly prefer to use the expression *anastasis tōn nekron*, not that of ... *ek nekron*, implying a resurrection of the dead and of death instead of a resurrection from or out of the dead or death. What is suggested is the unlikely event of the dead emerging into life as dead, thereby mixing up the entire distinction of life and death. Life is seen as mortal life here, but not because it ends in death, but rather because it coincides with death. See on the complex relation of life and death in Christianity also my "De wereld tussen 'ja' en 'nee' Monotheïsme als modern probleem bij Assmann, Nancy en Blumenberg." *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, forthcoming 2011 (Dutch).
34. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
35. Here I follow the language of Nancy. The concept of touch/touching is of crucial importance in his work: touch indicates contact as exposition: two singularities (e.g., I and the other, God and man) pass one another in a blink of the eye, between presence and absence, a movement that avoids identification or appropriation.
36. Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 5. Translation from Evans, E. (1956): *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation*. London: S.P.C.K.

## 7. The Attention Regime: On Mass Media and the Information Society

Rudi Laermans

### Sloterdijk's work observed through the lens of current social theory

Peter Sloterdijk is not exactly a social theorist in the ongoing academic sense. One will look in vain in his books for elaborated conceptual arguments, lengthy discussions of the views of canonized social scientists, or the kind of meticulous step-by-step reasoning that tries to convince the sceptic who is already well versed in the matter at hand. Sloterdijk prefers to think fast and overwhelms the curious reader of his sometimes biting, much more often ironic comments on contemporary society primarily with well-chosen metaphors instead of dry concepts. Several of his writings do nevertheless address in an interesting way at least three substantial issues within current social theorizing. The first one regards the nature of the social. What is the kind of proverbial stuff societies are made of? As *Sphären* ('Spheres'), the title of his three-volume magnum opus, already indicates, Sloterdijk opts for a topological approach. In his view, societies indeed consist of 'turbulent and asymmetrical associations of space-multiplicities' or spheres.<sup>1</sup> A sphere is an inner zone that acts as an atmosphere, as a space that links two or more individuals because it is filled with moods or vibes, inspirations, energies, and resonances or sympathies that produce mutual solidarities.<sup>2</sup> The basic component of the social is the dyadic sphere, thus Sloterdijk asserts with much gusto against the idea that the social is composed of inter-subjective relations between autonomous subjects. A human subject is never alone but can only exist in the mode of co-subjectivity, as a being that is literally animated by past and actual words, gazes, voices... of others. In line with the recent 'affective turn' within social theorizing,<sup>3</sup> and partly inspired by the writings of Gabriel Tarde, Sloterdijk thus points out the importance of non-linguistic forces for a correct understanding of the social. Not that 'flows of desire', a key expression in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and also an influence acknowledged by Sloterdijk, animate social life.<sup>4</sup> Sloterdijk rather advocates a social energetic view, an approach that tries to understand the phenomenon of human togetherness primarily in terms of shared energies, or immaterial forces that act upon the participants in social relations and produce various 'communities of resonance'.

The second thread that links Sloterdijk's oeuvre with the current concerns of social theory is time diagnosis: in which kind of society do we actually live nowadays? Sloterdijk has published 'a philosophical theory of globalization',<sup>5</sup> yet the most stimulating parts of his many considerations on contemporary society touch upon the process of individualization or, more generally, contemporary individualism. Ulrich Beck may claim to have been the first sociologist who managed to go beyond the clichés about an ego-centred lifestyle in his book *Risk Society*, originally published in German in 1986 and meanwhile a quasi-classic within sociology that has spawned a myriad of critical comments, diverting appropriations and empirical operationalizations.<sup>6</sup> In *Sphären III*, which mainly focuses on the contemporary conditions of living in the better-off West, Sloterdijk presents his own version of the idea that individual autonomy is no longer a philosophical ideal but a widespread reality. 'Individualism emerges when people make their self-description themselves, so when they start to claim the copyright of their own histories and opinions', thus he asserts in the small interview-book *Selbstversuch* ('Self-examination'). And he goes on with stating that this 'novel-individualism' has meanwhile been complemented with 'design-individualism: we now also claim the right on our image of appearance'.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary individualism also gives a specific twist to the basic fact that every subject is a co-subject. The individualized ego doubles itself into an actual self and a virtual or potential self, which results in an endless dialogue between – to paraphrase Goethe's famous saying in *Faust* – the two souls inhabiting one's breast. The relation with an Other thus becomes internalized: the subject literally changes into a co-subject through various forms of 'self-pairing'.<sup>8</sup> The net outcome is a 'post-social individualism': society nowadays 'needs individuals who are themselves always in lesser need of society. Socialism turned out to be a-socialism'.<sup>9</sup>

Sloterdijk often uses the metaphor of 'apartment individualism', which he particularly discusses at length in *Sphären III*, in order to evoke a social reality in which we only share walls that separate well equipped 'ego-spheres' from each other.<sup>10</sup> This situation of co-isolation is quite comfortable thanks to the communication networks that link every apartment to unknown or known others. The home thus changes into an enjoyable capsule in which the individual or the couple, with or without children, acts as a communicative sovereign.<sup>11</sup> The dwelling transforms into a 'zone of immunity', 'a defensive measure with which a territory of wellness is demarcated against intruders and other transmitters of calamities'.<sup>12</sup> Yet something more profound is at stake than just the observation that contemporary individualists massively enact the slogan 'my home is my castle'. In the wake of the combined process of individualization and neoliberal globalization, the different kinds of spheres that make up contemporary world society also ceased being vastly integrated within an overarching sphere such as the nation-state. The social transforms into foam – also the subtitle of *Sphären III* –, into 'an aggregate of microspheres (couples, households, enterprises, relational enti-

ties) with varied formats, which like the separate bubbles in a heap of foam border on each other and stack themselves above or under each other, without either being really reachable for each other or being separable from each other'.<sup>13</sup> Yet how can such a foaming social acquire a minimum of social order? Which processes may connect, be it only temporally and in a loose way, the innumerable monadic spheres in today's society? This issue brings us to the third topic that links Sloterdijk's writings with academic social theory.

## Social synthesis via mass media

Much can be said for the thesis that the question 'how is social order possible?' is the basic problem of reference of sociology as a distinctive social science.<sup>14</sup> The question has received many answers, yet two lines of thought stand out within social theory: either a shared core of norms and values or power acts as the primary medium for the coordination of human actions. Whereas the first thesis goes back to Emile Durkheim, the second of course originates in the work of Karl Marx. Sloterdijk follows another track, which is actually doubly articulated and not really explicitly spelled out in his writings. He thus only mentions in passing in *Sphären III* the existence of two kinds of so-called social 'synthesizes', or mechanisms that ensure a minimum of mutual cohesion among microspheres within today's foaming social.<sup>15</sup> The first one has an operative nature and consists of market relations. In line with this operative synthesis, Sloterdijk (2005) stresses in *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* the role of money, and therefore also of purchasing power, as the primary medium that nowadays gives access to goods, information, places,... and even others since money allows one to be mobile. In a way that reminds one of Gerog Simmel's diagnosis in *The Philosophy of Money*, Sloterdijk points out the double effect of the still increasing 'monetarization' of the social: purchasing power corrodes more permanent relationships on the one hand, and substitutes them for revocable choices on the other.<sup>16</sup> Money frees from strong relationships, such as the ones with family or neighbourhood, and makes many lighter or fleeting, freely chosen social contacts possible. Its social release effect thus goes hand-in-hand with 'the release of egoism', at least if one disposes of a minimum of purchasing power.<sup>17</sup> Money stimulates individualization, again an idea already put forward by Simmel, and simultaneously operates in ever more domains as the principal coordination medium of the actions of the egocentric spheres within a 'foaming' social.

The second synthesis, which brings me to the actual topic of this essay, has an affective and imaginary nature. The modern mass media, particularly television and more contemporary Internet-based media such as YouTube, produce a constantly renewed and highly fleeting cohesion-effect through the production of common news themes, omnipresent celebrities, or various kinds of fads and foibles.<sup>18</sup> According to Sloterdijk, their social effectiveness has once again every-

thing to do with their affective or energetic impact. Mass media communications excel in 'hot' messages that not only want to arouse a temporary interest but also try to produce an affective involvement, an urge to take notice and to respond because one feels emotionally concerned. Thus images of model beauties arouse jealousy as well as guilt, and political or other scandals elicit feelings of rage and moral indignation. These affective reactions are shared and produce 'excitement communities' with a sometimes quasi-global reach.<sup>19</sup> A telling recent example is the worldwide indignation about the bonus payments for managers, particularly within the financial sector, in the aftermath of the credit crunch that broke out in September 2008. Mass media reports tended to overlook the more abstract mechanisms underlying the crisis and instead highlighted the exorbitant sums of money going to risk-taking individuals as one of the prime causes of the financial debacle. This created a collectively shared, even global alarm about 'greedy managers who gamble with our money' that has meanwhile become a cliché in daily conversations. It nicely illustrates Sloterdijk's main point that the mass media produce an instant cohesion by bombarding the foam bubbles that make up contemporary world society with 'excitement proposals' that may result in an affectively driven common concern.<sup>20</sup> The created outcome is usually not a substantial sociability but an unstable and fleeting, highly imaginary sociality. 'We feel indignant about high bonuses' – yet this 'we' lacks long-term organization and has primarily the form of a temporary public opinion that for some time puts a vague pressure on politicians to address it.

That the modern mass media create an instant integration among dispersed individuals or households is not precisely a new or revolutionary thesis. The idea underlies for instance the well-known analysis by Benedict Anderson<sup>21</sup> of the role of the press in the formation of modern nationalism and can also be found in Niklas Luhmann's systems theoretical considerations on the mass media as an autonomous function system within contemporary world society.<sup>22</sup> In line with these authors, Sloterdijk highlights the fact that the mass media produce the kind of informational synchronization without which a national sphere or contemporary world society is just unthinkable. They more particularly synchronise the attention of countless ego- and microspheres, especially via global news events and musical fashions, thus reproducing again and again a temporary synchronized world. 'Current events form the formal world language of the synchronous world, they are by way of speaking the money of simultaneity, the substance that constitutes the synchronized life of the species', thus Sloterdijk concludes.<sup>23</sup> This observation may be correct, yet the creation of current events and, more generally, the instant integration via mass media is based on the previous mobilization of individual attention. Sloterdijk acknowledges this condition of possibility but does not dwell upon it. He rather neglects the basic fact that in a so-called information society, attention is a scarce good and therefore the object of a fierce competition between not only the various mass media or different television

channels. The very same competitive logic dominates for instance the sphere of advertizing or the selling of popular music. One may therefore defend the thesis that the synchronization of attention and the concomitant creation of mass publics, and thus also the performative production of various modes of instant integration, is a broader hallmark of contemporary society. This justifies the expression attention regime, as I will argue hereafter. I will outline in the next paragraphs with admittedly broad brush strokes the basic contours of this new regime. At the end of the essay, I shall return to Sloterdijk's diagnosis that the instant integration via the mass media, or the synchronization and aggregation of individual attention, is primarily an affective matter. In the concluding coda, I will comment upon Sloterdijk's more critical statements on the overwhelming social power of contemporary mass media and put into perspective the previously presented diagnosis of the contemporary attention regime.

## **From the information society to the attention regime**

Since the introduction and the all in all improbable spreading tempo of the Internet and other forms of digitally networked communication during the 1990's, it is no longer sensational news that we live in an Information Age<sup>24</sup> or an information society.<sup>25</sup> It is questionable if this is still a univocal blessing, as could still be assumed without much argument by the initial optimistic rhetoric on 'the information highway' and 'the information economy'. Thus one of most heard lamentations nowadays is that 'we are drowning in an endless sea of information'. The complaint may be followed by a demand for more reliable information filters or selectors, yet it also suggests that something more substantial is missing than proverbial life buoys or solid navigators. Not that we are just lacking time, since that is also true in the many other domains that confront us with a plethora of attractive possibilities, such as the sphere of leisure or the arts. From the point of view of current information possibilities, which are vast and also constantly renewed, the principle scarce good is the amount of attention available to an individual or within an addressed target group. The polyglot social scientist Herbert Simon was one of the first to point out this inverse relation between information possibilities and attention. In an article published in 1971 on 'Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World', he unfolds the observation that a high supply of information unavoidably results in a scarcity of the attention that every information use per definition consumes. The reception of linguistic, visual or other information indeed asks for a minimal of psychic attention: without it, no transmission of information takes place. A complex or information-rich world therefore automatically produces an unintended chronicle imbalance between the offered information possibilities and the individual or collective capacity to notice them effectively. Or as Simon succinctly asserts: 'In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of what-



ever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it'.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of information society actually refers to an inconceivable mass of information possibilities that are continuously in want of their realization. Precisely this change of potential or virtual information in actually consumed information necessitates a minimal attention from the side of one or more individual receivers. Without the coupling of at least one human consciousness to a public-oriented information source such as a website, the latter's digital data do not acquire an informational or communicative value (of course, information is also exchanged between coupled machines, for instance between the computers that are mutually wired within a digital network – hence my use of the expression public-oriented information source). It is thus the individual noticing of potential information that ensures the creation of actual information. In short, not the sender but the attentive receiver produces actual information. Or as Niklas Luhmann has it: the receiver rounds up the utterance of information since her or his attention and selective understanding transforms the uttered information into a communication with a particular information-value.<sup>27</sup> Thus understood, information is not only observer-dependent but also an unrepeatably temporal event. Using or consuming information indeed differs from learning, or the building-up of an individual memory that selectively stores information though its repeated consumption.<sup>28</sup> Particularly mass mediated information is usually not stored but simultaneously produced and used up in the act of its reception.<sup>29</sup> Within the sphere of public-oriented information sources, the realization of information possibilities or the creation of information values is synonymous with their destruction; witness the well-known saying 'old news is no news'. More generally, the renewed observation of already observed information is mostly non-informative since it no longer operates – in the famous phrase of Gregory Bateson – as 'a difference which makes a difference'.<sup>30</sup> Except when one is learning, in the broad sense (so including for instance the 'memorizing' of a song through repeated listening), recurrent information does not surprise any longer and is experienced as boring. This rule of thumb – which knows of course quite some exceptions – explains the steadily, even restless manufacture of new information possibilities within and outside the sphere of mass media. It is indeed a defining paradox of contemporary information society that it produces a structural surplus of potential information and a massive amount of idle information possibilities, yet simultaneously renews this excess in order to reproduce and sustain the attention given by the actual users of television channels, blogs and other websites, YouTube, Facebook-messages, and so on.

The mass of continuously innovated information possibilities circulating within contemporary world society do obviously not form a homogenous bloc. The

supply is segmented, with every segment addressing particular target groups. To a certain extent, this reduces the complexity of potential information, yet without much real avail. Within every target group, the available amount of information sources and possibilities also largely exceeds at every moment the momentarily available amount of attention. The information society is therefore differentiated in countless big and small markets on which information providers actively fish for attention. Perceptivity is the primary scarce good within an information society, as we already observed, and scarcity equals economy and struggle. This has led several authors, such as Georg Franck and Richard Lanham,<sup>31</sup> to speak of an attention economy. Given the importance of the mobilization of attention within nearly all societal domains, varying from the mass media over the vast domain covered by the notion of consumer culture to the once sacrosanct sphere of the arts, the expression attention regime may be the more apt one. With this notion I particularly want to highlight the crucial significance of raising attention for the current functioning of the different realms of communication that make up contemporary world society. I concur with Luhmann<sup>32</sup> that the latter is differentiated into various subsystems that consist of self-referentially enchaind communications and they all commit themselves to a specialized societal function. Thus, whereas the economy is composed of payments that make possible future payments, the political subsystem focuses on the preparation, manufacturing and implementation of binding decisions that necessitate new binding decisions, and the domain of education concentrates on the transmission of specialized knowledge via pedagogical communication. Yet, what Luhmann rather underrates is the simple fact that the selling of commodities, the obtainment of votes that may be translated into political power, or an effective learning process, demands a minimum of attention from the side of consumers, citizens or students respectively. This perceptivity is usually not given but has mostly to be raised, even actively produced and competed for from the point of an individual business company, a singular political party, or the poor teacher who has to instruct rapidly distracted pupils.

## **The attention regime and contemporary capitalism**

Notwithstanding my principal reserve, the notion of attention economy undoubtedly points to a crucial shift in the functioning of the economic system. Attracting attention has become an essential economical activity, and on many markets even the prime one, because it conditions the possibility to realise economic value. Within a competitive (information) economy indeed reigns the famous dictum of Bishop Berkeley: 'esse est percipi', 'what is not perceived, does not exist'. This new reality principle permeates ever more markets, also those that have no immediate link with the direct production and consumption of information. On most consumer markets for material goods, the attraction of a minimum of attention by

means of captivating information on the offered commodities has meanwhile become a basic condition for the cashing in of their value. Design tries to enhance the visible or palpable noteworthiness of products, and accompanying advertisements attempt to capture attention by means of images and slogans. According to Jean Baudrillard,<sup>33</sup> design and advertizing are the prime media of a sign-value that has outstripped the use- or exchange value of commodities. We do not consume predominantly useful goods but coded semantic differences, or the surplus in meaning that design and advertizing associate with commodities according to the codes of social standing, youthfulness, authenticity, personality,... The arbitrary character of the produced associations, and more generally of every sign-value, is openly affirmed – but without much critical effect, quite the contrary – in the promotion of empty brand names or logos as status signs.<sup>34</sup> This diagnosis sounds plausible, even quite convincing, yet Baudrillard's analysis is incomplete. Design and, particularly, advertizing transform commodities into meaningful goods or 'object-signs', thus changing them into carriers of information. This 'informatization' is a simultaneously necessary and risky process within the context of an information society. The effective realization of the created information potential, and thus also of the coded sign-value, depends on a minimum of attention – but precisely perceptivity is, as said, a scarce resource. Advertisements therefore either have to raise attention for themselves or hold an already given volume of attentiveness, for instance in between two TV programs. They demand attention by being noteworthy in order to focus it on the recommended product, with the risk that the striking advertisement is consumed for itself and the advertized product remains rather unnoticed in the interest for the entertaining information value of an image, storyline or slogan. It is nevertheless a risk one currently has to take.

In a simultaneously capitalist and information-rich environment, psychic attention is literally valuable because it is an increasingly unavoidable relay in the process of economic value production and realization. Georg Franck therefore puts forward the thesis that we live in a 'mental capitalism',<sup>35</sup> a notion that fits the idea that in a so-called creative or post-Fordist economy immaterial or informational labour has become a prime productive force.<sup>36</sup> Franck's expression is evidently a rather essayistic and catchy metaphor that does not mean to correct the more rigorous conceptual analysis in Karl Marx' *Capital*. Yet the basic idea that the captivation, aggregation and modulation of attention characterizes contemporary capitalism is in line with the global economic diagnosis that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri<sup>37</sup> have unfolded in the trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Common Wealth*. Contemporary world capitalism has in their view an intrinsic biopolitical nature because it mobilizes within the spheres of production and consumption the capacities that define human life (or bios). Thus within the domain of production, the generic faculties that are constitutive for individual living as well as for living together are the primary resources of immaterial labour. Human beings have the

capacity to communicate and to cooperate, to think and to imagine, to affect and to be affected. Precisely these powers are put to work though the collaborative production of for instance software programs, games, movies, pop songs, fashionable clothes, or advertisements. An immaterial labourer thus makes use of the faculties that she or he has predominantly learned to deploy outside the sphere of labour, in and through his own individual and social life. She or he brings in a so-called human capital that is synonymous with her or his way of being, her or his particular way of practicing generic capacities that are constitutive for every being human as such. Hardt and Negri therefore argue that ‘the current passage in capitalist production is moving toward an “anthropogenetic model,” or in other words, a biopolitical turn of the economy.’<sup>38</sup> Living beings as fixed capital are at the centre of this transformation, and the production of forms of life is becoming the basis of added value.’ The created commodities indeed also appeal to generic human faculties for their consumption. Immaterial or cultural goods incessantly captivate, direct and co-structure the human capacities to feel, to communicate, to think, to fantasise,...

Consumption practices nowadays particularly depend on the generic capacity to be – in an always selective way – sensory and psychically attentive, or to experience and observe selectively the potential information in one’s environment. Biopolitical capitalism permanently exploits and manages this basic human faculty within the sphere of production and constantly tries to do the same within the sphere of consumption. Like most of the other writers who are working within the tradition of Italian autonomous Marxism – Maurizio Lazzarato is a notable exception<sup>39</sup> –, Hardt and Negri rather tend to overlook this central role of perceptivity in the contemporary cycles of value creation and realization. This strikes all the more because they again and again emphasise the intrinsic relationship between the generic capacities that define human life and post-Fordist, or post-modern, capitalism. Something may be learnt here from Karl Marx’ *Capital*, after all one of the principal sources of inspiration of Hardt and Negri. Marx defines the exploitation of labour as the difference between the actual time during which one produces value and the time needed for the reproduction of one’s capacity to labour.<sup>40</sup> Contemporary capitalism, particularly mass media, also exploits the free time during which our attention is neither concentrated on certain tasks at hand for which we are paid nor coupled to activities that are undertaken in order to reproduce one’s labour potential. It is no small thing that it tries to command our capacity to be perceptive within the sphere of leisure, in the strict sense, via an endless offer of strategically produced images, sounds, words, designed goods,... Quite the contrary, since giving one’s attention to this image and not that sound, is giving up a slice of life time during which one could have been attentive to something else.

## The performativity of the mass media

The struggle for attention is undoubtedly the fiercest, and therefore also the most visible, within the sphere of mass communication, in the broad sense (so including for instance advertising and YouTube). The mass media indeed lead the way in the competition for attention since the (re)production and the 'collectivization' of attention is their prime reason of existence. Georg Franck therefore rightly argues that a communication medium transforms into a mass medium from the moment it starts to offer in a calculated way information possibilities in view of the captivation, aggregation, and modulation of attention.<sup>41</sup> Newspapers and magazines, radio stations and television channels or, more recently, internet sites are all primarily engaged in the (re)production of the highest possible volume of collective attention. A reading or viewing public just equals a specific amount of attention (which is, for that matter, also true of the public for a performance or an exhibition). Mass media organizations generate a particular quantum of collective attention, e.g. '1 million viewers during prime time', and sell it to the suppliers of advertisements. The obtained revenues allow them to distribute potential information freely or under cost price, but the indirect financing via commercials of course weighs on the offered communication possibilities. Particularly commercial mass media organizations must succeed again and again in the mobilization of a satisfying amount of attention since otherwise the revenues from advertising will dry up. Since the advent of 'advanced liberalism'<sup>42</sup> and the growing regulation of state funded institutions according to the model of the market, this rating logic has come to dominate the functioning of many publicly funded organizations that are active within and outside the sphere of mass media as well.<sup>43</sup> They are thus also under the pressure to offer information that is 'public friendly', an often used expression that may actually conceal the performative nature of the attention regime.

The notion of 'public friendliness' suggests that a public or an audience already exists before the active creation and aggregation of a certain amount of attention. As a matter of fact, it is precisely produced through the latter activities. A public is indeed not an already existing collective of individual consumers who are addressed according to presupposed needs or wishes. The mass media are rather performative producers of various publics within the mass of individuals – or in Sloterdijk's vocabulary: within the foam of egocentric spheres – that make up contemporary society. With or without audience or marketing research, they offer information possibilities to general target groups that are most of the time statistically delineated in view of a logic of attention maximization, thus producing again and again a particular audience. The constructed public may remain relatively stable over a certain period of time, yet this stabilization is also the outcome of a constantly renewed effort to raise attention within a highly competitive environment. In short, a public is first and foremost an attention community. It has no

substance, no shared values or norms: it just consists of the captivated, aggregated and modulated attentiveness of a certain number of individuals. Their receptivity is effectively coupled and synchronized during a particular period of time to a particular information offer. We nowadays all belong to various kinds of attention communities, often without realizing this. Thus the individuals who simultaneously use a website form an attention community, and this without any mutual communication. The same is true for the geographically dispersed masses of TV viewers. Day after day, evening after evening, they are brought together in attention communities that are continuously constituted anew, with shifting borders and in changing numbers. For the involved television stations it comes down to an incessant struggle, with daily winners and losers.

The principal means deployed by mass media to captivate, aggregate and modulate attention are well-known to every average media user.<sup>44</sup> Thus whereas news reports tend to focus on 'bad news' or social, political, environmental and other problems, soaps or movies excel in the dramatization of social relations from an emotional point of view. We have meanwhile also become used to the various sorts of physical and psychological 'pornography' that dominate talk shows, human interest-programs and reality television. As Sloterdijk rightly points out, the underlying general logic has an affective nature.<sup>45</sup> Mass media primarily try to raise and reproduce individual attention by presenting information possibilities that attempt to engage the potential user emotionally since an affective engagement enhances the chance that the consumer will keep on watching, listening or reading. As a consequence, the way of addressing the potential user seems often as important, if not more decisive, than the offered content. Style matters more than substance, thus Lanham argues: 'The devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices. Attracting attention is what style is all about. If attention is now at the centre of the economy rather than stuff, then so is style'.<sup>46</sup> This actually comes down to a primacy of rhetoric and, concomitantly, the continuous reproduction of an imperative meta-message. Within the sphere of mass media, the majority of potential information is indeed double coded. There is the virtual message that is waiting for its actualization thanks to an attentive eye and/or ear, or more generally: a perceptive body and consciousness; and there is the way it is uttered or stylized, containing the meta-message or the imperative 'look!' (or 'hear!', 'read!', 'use me!',...). The imperative is an injunction that tries to overcome with rhetorical means the ever-lasting possibility that the offered information possibility remains unnoticed and thus unrealized.

The sphere of the mass media also illustrates in an exemplary way the self-reflexive functioning of the attention regime. Reflexivity, thus Luhmann has pointed out, is not the privilege of human consciousness, which produces thoughts-on-thoughts in the state of self-consciousness.<sup>47</sup> In the more general meaning that Luhmann advocates, the notion of reflexivity refers to every kind of operation in which a practice is applied on that very same practice, such as the

control of controllers, decision-making on decision-making, or the instruction of instructors. Reflexive attention is thus the attention for attention, the noticing of what is noticed. This mechanism of reflexive or second order-attention vastly regulates the use of for instance YouTube and also structures the functioning of search engines like Google (the item list one obtains after typing in a search term is composed according to the number of hits for every mentioned site). Yet a more general societal effect is at stake, particularly within the sphere of mass media communication. Information that succeeds in mobilizing quite some attention indeed tends to get further attention in daily communication as well as from the side of information users or consumers. In short, there exists a marked tendency to give attention to what has already been given attention: what already mobilizes attention has a serious chance to further mobilise attention. Comparable to fashions, which are actually a subcategory of it, collective attention thus partly functions in a self-fulfilling and self-propelling way. There is yet a necessary relay, i.e. information on what effectively attracts attention. This kind of information comes in many forms: hit parades and other charts of what is popular, fashion reports and various sorts of coverage of successful products, or the more individualized waves of drawing to the attention of one's friends what still other friends have been calling attention to within digital social networks. The overall function of reflexive attention is immediately clear. It acts as a selection mechanism or filter within an information-rich information, not the least for the snob who does not want to be swayed by the issues of the day. Both the attention conformist and the attention snob, or the trend follower and the trend critic, are keen on information that takes the temperature of collective attention. The steady rise of lifestyle-information since the 1980's is a good indicator for the current importance of second order-attention within mass media since the genre primarily informs about what is in and what is out. It thus contributes to the overflows of potential information on what already gets much attention; witness contemporary celebrity culture.

### **'The chronic, agitating, hysteria producing mass communication'**

The production and reproduction, and particularly the aggregation of the attention dispersed over many individuals, is nowadays one of the primary forms of 'being together' or commonality. Day after day, we share with countless unknown others the attention for the same TV program, the same kind of music, the same YouTube-images,... and also for what is already collectively noticed. The proverbial power of the various mass media as well as their central position within contemporary information society has indeed everything to do with their ability to synchronise the attention of a myriad of individuals and other 'ego-spheres', thus temporarily creating a common sphere. Mass media act as social synthesizers, as producers of a temporary unstable, fleeing social integration via the production of

current news events, clothing fashions, popular music trends, or (trans)national celebrity information. This brings us back to the writings of Peter Sloterdijk, who couples the synthesizing function of the mass media to his portrait of the better-off parts of current world society as a foaming social that consists of self-centred bubbles or micro-spheres. In *Die Verachtung der Massen* ('The Contempt for the Masses') and *Sphären III*, he distinguishes the synchronically connected mass, or mass media publics, from the collected mass that is physically brought together in a sports stadium or during a political rally.<sup>48</sup> Nowadays, big conference centres still act as mass collectors, yet the postmodern mass is primarily a 'media mass'. The heydays of the collected masses lie indeed behind us. They were intrinsically linked with the political mobilization of the masses in totalitarian regimes, particularly by means of public manifestations during which the political leader addressed the physically collected mass. The networked or connected mass is everything but political and also non-hierarchical: the star is not a leader. 'The completely mediatized society vibrates in a state in which the millions no longer can appear in a gloomy, condensed, furious way as an actually gathered totality, as a conspirating, crowding and bursting out collective life substance. The mass rather currently experiences itself only in its particles, the individuals, who give themselves over as elementary particles of an invisible commonality precisely to the programs [of the mass media], in which their mass character and commonality is presupposed', Sloterdijk concludes.<sup>49</sup>

In order to attract and grip attention, mass media create a permanent agitation by spreading bad news, gossip or 'must see'-cues. They produce 'synchronizing hysterias and homogenizing panics' in view of a minimum of tension that can raise and sustain attention; the net outcome are 'self-stressing ensembles' or 'excitement communities'.<sup>50</sup> 'The virtual bodies of the big social ensembles are integrated via stress-mimetic mechanisms', thus Sloterdijk asserts. 'In their interior flow energies of the kind that I baptize discrete panics or micro- and macro-epidemics'.<sup>51</sup> A striking example of this sort of media-induced epidemic is the already mentioned reporting on the financial crisis, which resulted in a world-wide gulf of moral indignation on the greedy risk-taking behaviour of traders, bank directors and other leading financial actors. If we follow Sloterdijk,<sup>52</sup> the case illustrates a more general evolution. Since the end of the Cold War, the economic sphere has replaced the political East-West opposition as one of the principal themes with which the various mass media continuously try to pump up the volume of aggregated attention. Collective stress is nowadays pretty often produced through alarming reports on the outcomes of worldwide competition, for instance between Europe and China, and by means of jealousy-eliciting stories on financially successful individuals who are often also bright and beautiful. Since 9/11, the stress-inducing headlines on economic topics have been joined by the fear for religious terrorism and the worries about Islamic fundamentalism. Because the threat of Islamic terrorism 'puts the attacked collective virtually under stress,



it contributes to the coming into being of the feeling within this collective – and this notwithstanding the recently again hugely increased differences – that one participates in a real community of solidarity, that is to say: in a survival unit that fights for its future'.<sup>53</sup>

I sympathise with Sloterdijk's predominantly energetic approach of contemporary mass media and his strong emphasis on the affective nature of the instant integration they produce among the uncountable ego-centred micro-spheres that make up the foaming social. His view is indeed a healthy antidote against the still overriding stress on the cognitive or cultural power of mass media within current media studies and in most social or cultural theorizing on mass media.<sup>54</sup> Yet in these scattered remarks on the functioning of contemporary mass media, Sloterdijk also tends to aggrandise their emotional or energetic impact and to underestimate the framing power, or the reality defining impact, of television, the press and other media.<sup>55</sup> He acknowledges that the constant exposure to media messages that appeal to a same 'we', such as a nation, has real social effects.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Sloterdijk principally sticks to the thesis that the content of the distributed information is of a much lesser importance than the produced emotional outcomes, such as collective stress, affective involvement of innumerable individuals, or the kind of contagious excitement that connects a dispersed mass of individuals who consume alarming information on an economic or political crisis. That mass media communication can also frame in an often biased way the dominant view on particular issues, such as immigration or Islam, is thus rather neglected. Overall, Sloterdijk opts for an approach that deliberately goes against the grain – against the tradition of the Enlightenment and its critique on the one-sidedness and cliché-character of mass-mediated information. That is not to say that he does not criticise at all the latter.

### **Coda: from mass media to mass movements?**

Two points stand out in Sloterdijk's more critical remarks on the current functioning of mass media. The first one regards their already circumstantially discussed role as captivators, aggregators and modulators of attention. As social synthesizers, mass media not only confiscate life-time and the generic human capacity of receptivity, but also attack in a genuine way the central imaginary pillar of modern culture, namely the idea of individual autonomy. Mass media indeed transform their users into passive conductors of collective stimuli and of affective energy flows that induce self-confusion and elicit the emotional urge to participate in common fashions and opinion movements.<sup>57</sup> To affirm one's sovereignty as an individual, thus Sloterdijk concludes, is nowadays synonymous with the capacity to distance oneself from the continuous stress or excitement created by mass media. We can of course not withdraw completely from mass media communication, but we may learn to become relatively immune for its

affective impact. The challenge is thus to change ourselves from passive channels or intermediaries into active breaks or embankments of opinion flows, fashions and all the other sorts of mass-mediated panics and epidemics.<sup>58</sup> If we succeed in doing so, we will also become again angels in the literal sense of the word: individual messengers, or transmitters of information. Sloterdijk's second point of critique vis-à-vis the mass media is precisely that they colonise the ontological capacity of human beings to act as receivers of 'otherness' and, therefore, to function as media themselves – as active mediators or translators of traditions, shared experiences or retrieved information.<sup>59</sup> The mass media parasite on this capacity and simultaneously deafen it: they transform us into echo chambers of their stories, thus eroding our potential to tell our own stories or to transmit the stories told by fellow human beings. In short, they communicate for us and thus corrode our own faculty to communicate.

The idea that the mass media usurp the potential to communicate and produce a mass of attentive individuals who passively contemplate communication instead of speaking (up) themselves, is not a new one. Guy Debord already voiced in 1967 this critique of massive self-alienation in the sphere of leisure with a difficult to beat sense for dramatization in his meanwhile classic diagnosis of 'the society of the spectacle'.<sup>60</sup> One year later, Michel de Certeau described within the May 1968 movement a reverse tendency: he spoke of a 'capture of speech' that would have long lasting effects.<sup>61</sup> In line with the ideas of Debord and other Situationists, De Certeau analyzed this re-appropriation of the faculty of communication as a collective outburst in which the participants partly re-used or deployed with different accents the imposed language and vocabularies of the mass media.<sup>62</sup> Their recovery from a general communicative insomnia was not synonymous with the invention of an own language but rather came down to a creative play with the clichés of mass media communication (such as 'system', 'capitalism', 'domination',...). De Certeau's analysis may be flawed by his position as an engaged witness of May 1968, but it nevertheless sensitizes for the possibility of collective movements that simultaneously go with and against the affective attention flows created by mass media. Precisely this dialectical interplay between passivity and activity, 'being spoken' by mass media and 'to speak up' as a mass, is nearly absent in Sloterdijk's considerations. He does not really discuss the possibility that genuine mass movements, which gather physically, may not only become the subject of mass media communication but are nowadays also often co-constituted by the mobilizing effects of the mass mediated synchronization of attention for particular issues. In short, Sloterdijk rather neglects the eventual dialectic between connected and collected masses. He shares this blind spot with the many academic social theorists who also depict contemporary society as consisting of a mass of individuals who have nothing in common – as foam made up of co-isolated bubbles. Much can be said for this diagnosis, which also substantially informed my above considerations on the contemporary attention regime. It is nevertheless a one-

sided picture if one does not take into account the possibility of mass movements which are simultaneously induced by and critically commented upon in mass media communication. This dialectic played, for instance, an important role in the alter-globalization movement that emerged towards the end of the 1990's and is today still a political force, albeit a fragmented one. It is just one example of a more general possibility worth thinking through: every now and then the mass media not just synchronise the attention of individuals but contribute to their capacity to speak as a temporarily organized mass – as an actively foaming social.

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## 8. In the Beginning was the Accident: The Crystal Palace as a Cultural Catastrophe and the Emergence of the Cosmic Misfit

A critical approach to Peter Sloterdijk's *Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* vs. Fyodor M. Dostoevsky's *Notes from the underground*

Yana Milev

The century's biggest issue will emerge from the catastrophe of traditional culture and its holistic morality: making the immune systems explicit.<sup>1</sup>

### A briefing

“Philosophy is a briefing”<sup>2</sup> is the *eo ipso* and slightly strategic and business-like quote from Peter Sloterdijk's *Versuche nach Heidegger*; it is also slightly broken down to size within the realm of quotidian management. However, what could be better than being invited to a briefing – especially since it connotes presenting solid facts and requesting our expert opinion (if we have one)? “Briefing” initially sounds inviting and like solution-oriented optimism. But since we know that solutions rarely bring us much further – not only because more solutions are circulating in the world than problems, which in itself causes more problems – a certain scepticism towards a scheduled briefing is appropriate. But what is the situation at hand? Is it the state of the nation or the state of the world? The state of thinking and the state of existence? The state of mankind and its dwellings? Or is it the state of all these *meta-*, *para-*, *post-* and *neo-*designs of the nation and the world, thought and existence, mankind and its dwellings? According to Sloterdijk, being in the right state means, *a priori*, moving with the times. But moving also implies *falling*, *experiencing* or *the turn*.

From my perspective there is no greater challenge today than entering into the labyrinth of Sloterdijk's hyperboles, parabolas and trains of thought, and thus

into the disaster of self-forgetfulness, into the rush of acclamation of the same while simultaneously remaining left behind, blessed and speechless, in the sense of staying in place or falling. My personal practice is designed to flee this narcotic effect and take a stance, even if this fails to relieve me of my blessed and speechless state. No matter, because in searching for Sloterdijk's profile behind all of these briefings on *Spheres*, the *Crystal Palace*, *indulgence and comfort machines*, *immune systems and emergencies* I think I can identify the "Highlander", or the "Störtebeker", the Nordic Hun, a blonde man of grand stature who is going for his guns. Called upon as a lone warrior and armed for a decathlon, his duty is: a declaration of war that precludes a victory "that lies beyond the difference between ›victory‹ and ›defeat.‹"<sup>3</sup> He quickly eliminated the lesser of two evils, the playboys. The greater evil, the conquistadors, are satisfied with a "versorgungsbonapartistischen"<sup>4</sup> (provision-bonapartist) gesture. And the greatest evil, the neo-scholastic functionaries of *academia*, theory consortiums and the newspapers' arts sections are systematically and strategically forced to the edge of their comprehensive faculties. For a battle round of this kind, the old anarchist and bohemian weapons are being sharpened – Baudelaire, Benjamin and Sartre. From his Russian brother in arms Dostoevsky, introduced as the first anti-globalization protester, Sloterdijk inherited the *Underground Man*; using the self-technique of *Emergency Design*, he dissolves the construct of the *Crystal Palace*, which advances to being a protagonist in history via the state of emergency in neo-liberal dynamics of disinhibition, as declared in the unofficial fourth part of the sphere trilogy *Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*. The *Crystal Palace*'s state of emergency is a *state of comfort* in the globalization winners' container; a state of emergency that is neutralized by the superfluous people's state of emergency – a permanent *state of crisis*. The last battle zone is visible here: the liquidation of meaningful affirmations in a universal sense, in the crisis as a medium within living environments.

Here the briefing is marked by the omen of the monstrous. In this essay, the *Crystal Palace*, the most notable and striking metaphor for utilitarianism and neo-liberalism, is investigated from all sides to then finally be abandoned – from the perspectives of movement in a *crash, experience and turnaround*.

## The Crystal Palace

"That it continues 'like this', is the catastrophe."<sup>5</sup>

The *Crystal Palace* as an exhibition machine (the problem of exclusion)  
 The *Crystal Palace*, exhibition pavilion and landmark for the first world exhibition in 1851, *The Great Exhibition* in London, doesn't just serve as a metaphor for a new, flexible industrial architecture whose contemporary expression is found in today's fair and modular buildings. Instead, and above all, it should be seen as a meta-

phor for the beginning of industrial capitalism's hegemony to foster worldwide free trade. The *Crystal Palace* is a governmental symbol of a persuasive, prospering neo-liberalism that expanded from Anglo-Saxon territory with Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and John Maynard Keynes. The idea of free trade is based on a classic economic Liberalism from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is simultaneously the paradigm of a governmental policy whose principle can be explained in a turn and redefinition of the relationship between the state and the economy. "It's the market's form that serves as the organizational principle for the state and society."<sup>6</sup>

The precarious status of the social was introduced with the neo-liberal economization of the social.<sup>7</sup> The *Crystal Palace* model, described by Peter Sloterdijk as an exhibition machine, should, on the other hand, simultaneously be seen as a psycho-political and social machine of exclusion. Thus a relation of equivalence results between geo-political progressions that Sloterdijk calls "comfort animated corridors for those with access to purchasing power" and regressions, the "international ocean of poverty",<sup>8</sup> in which the habitats of luxury and wellness swim.

These comfort zones organized by purchasing power, habitats of luxury and spheres of indulgence – such zones of living or exhibition that can be considered products of a neo-liberal governmental spatial revolution – appear in Sloterdijk's theories as installations and *Immersionsanlagen*.<sup>9</sup>

The real 20th century 'spatial revolution' is the explication of human dwelling or residence in an interior with the Machine for Living, climate design and environmental planning (up to the large forms that we call collectors), as well as the exploration of the neighborhood with both the inhuman spatial structures that precede and are associated with the human: the cosmic (macro and micro) and the virtual.<sup>10</sup>

Not only do "Machines for Living"<sup>11</sup> as *habitus machines* demonstrate the *habitus* of technological and automated luxury and comfort, but also *vice versa*, the *habitus* of withdrawal, exclusion and poverty. We can read about this in Sloterdijk's texts at a different location:

Demographically, the capitalist *Weltinnenraum* includes, as previously stated, hardly a third of the current world population of seven billion, and geographically, hardly a tenth of the surface of the world's continents.<sup>12</sup>

Within Sloterdijk's approach, this fact (or, from another perspective, this dilemma) is based on systemic laws. As an *Immersionswelt* and a prosperity zone installation, the Machine for Living is a product of an architectonic, aesthetic, technological, legal, habitual and media expression of a 20<sup>th</sup> century exhibitionism based on purchasing power. This is reflected in the prototypical builders Le Corbusier



(*Machine for Living*), Buckminster Fuller (*Dymaxion*) and their predecessor Joseph Paxton (*The Crystal Palace*). If “the presented apartment”<sup>13</sup> is a private collection transferred into public space – which Sloterdijk raised as an issue based on Ilja Kabakov’s installation at the documenta 9 – then one can conclude from this statement that *Machines for Living* make the “private” explicit in public. They are lounges or indulgence corridors such as shopping malls, air-conditioned *parcours* that constantly invite one to partake in oral gratification, movie theatre-mall-parks flanked by sandboxes, escalators, glass elevators, shuttle trains to amusement parks, wall-sized video projections and terminals that offer uninterrupted entertainment. But it’s not reduced to that: they turn indulgence into a habit, and then they optimise the mandatory compulsion to consume indulgence along with the necessity of securing purchasing power. This culmination of habits and their consumer compatibility – differentiated in tendencies, styles, lusts and identities of products at the top end of a top-quality management chain that hardly discerns between clients and service personnel – empties out into an inter-collective compulsive disorder of consumption-driven participants, all seeking to be the highest bidder.

Consequentially the term ›globalized world‹ only applies to the dynamic installation that serves the fraction of humanity possessing purchasing power as a ›Lebenswelt‹ skin. In their interior, new heights of stabilized improbability are reached, as though the lottery of the consumption-intensive minorities could endlessly battle against entropy.<sup>14</sup>

If the *Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* and its symbol, the Crystal Palace, “are to be understood as a social-topological expression that speaks for the interior-creating power of contemporary communications media”<sup>15</sup> as well as “the horizon of potential access via money to places, people, goods and data – of chances that can all, without exception, be deduced from the fact that the essential form of subjectivity within the *great installation* is determined by an access to purchasing power”,<sup>16</sup> then this statement intends to emphasise an asymptotic pendant to the crystal palace’s systemic decisionism – the potential of what is systemically suspended.

The Crystal Palace metaphor can be interpreted as an arena of societal anomie when considered against the backdrop of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* and “Capitalism as a Religion”<sup>17</sup> fragment, as well as in a connection to Emile Durkheim’s sociological thesis “*Der Selbstmord*”,<sup>18</sup> which was also created under the impression of the World Fairs (London, New York and Paris). Panoptic consumerism, equally an opportunity for access to an Olympic battle of purchasing power and exhibitions of the *Great Installation*, puts the issue of a lack of opportunity and an exclusion from the space of purchasing power up for negotiation. At this point the Trinity of *monetary universe*, *capitalism as religion* and *panopticism* unifies into a sig-

nificant image of the Crystal Palace as an arena of societal anomie. Sloterdijk offers us an insightful approach to this subject:

The truth is that money has long since proven itself as an operatively successful alternative to God. This does more for the context of things than the creator of the heavens or earth could accomplish. (WK 328)

This monotheism of capital, augmented by Michel Foucault's theories of discipline, leads to a succinct conclusion for the Crystal Palace metaphor: the *Great Installation* as an exhibition machine is simultaneously a machine for arms, the media, justice and exclusion. And in essence: the *Great Installation* is the Neo-Leviathan.

### The Crystal Palace as an arena of societal anomie

At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and under the impression of the world fairs, Émile Durkheim developed the societal paradigm of anomie in his sociological analysis "Der Selbstmord". Here Durkheim speaks of anomie, the lack of norms and laws as a chronic phenomenon in economic life and the resulting social and individual disorders that then finally lead to anomic suicide as a final consequence of societal disorientation. However, he doesn't indicate the existence of an emergency of individual poverty – incurred in sudden economic crises (SM 273) or catastrophes (SM 293) – as being the cause for suicidal aporias. Instead, since even sudden economic cycles also lead to the same phenomenon of suicidal aporia, the causes are rapid and radical shifts in the psycho-political value system in general. Thus, according to Durkheim, a sudden social privation as well as sudden social prosperity are both the result of economic dynamics and thus in both cases an expression of societal anomie – essentially an acute lack of rules in the social systems of order and values. The *anomic society* is, according to Durkheim, such a society in which rule-breaking or unregulated behaviour becomes the rule through competition, rivalry, exclusion, the desire to consume, posing, etc. As a consequence, collective consciousness is not able to maintain psycho-social and psycho-political order. Durkheim's sociological and theological-sociological analysis presents us with two concepts of anomie: on the one hand, societal or *economic anomie*<sup>19</sup> that leads to a suspension of collective rules and social conventions; and on the other hand, *subjective anomie* that leads to anomic suicide. Both concepts characterise the *Great Interior* from a critical perspective and expand the *Weltinnenraum des Kapitals'* positivist show in its anomic and panoptic dimension.

Durkheim's suicide paradigm can also be added to the *Weltinnenraum* idea. While Sloterdijk establishes the discursive idea of the *Great Interior* as an immunizing habitat of prosperity and luxury, Durkheim states that material prosperity and wealth lacks any element of immunity to societal *anomie*s, concretely *anomic suicide*.

In other words, the prosperity aggregate of the hedonistic interior of luxury is not able to save people from psychological and psycho-political disorientation and anomie. Here Durkheim makes an indirect reference to the cultural-catastrophic *dispositive* of the *emergency*. Profound and sudden adjustments, possibly in rapid alternation, are obviously dynamics that disrupt and destroy the psychological, social, neuro-physiological, etc. habitats in their constitutive milieus. Purchasing power, as is clear from Durkheim's analysis, is not immunized; this is a valuable cultural indicator for the inability of ›money‹ to create anthropological values such as ›freedom‹ or ›security‹.

The Crystal Palace: a prospering cultural catastrophe (emergency) or a postmodern performance?

Walter Benjamin notes in his *Arcades Project* that the idea of progress is rooted in the idea of catastrophe: "That it 'goes on like this', is the catastrophe."<sup>20</sup> So he pleads for an interruption in catastrophic progress. His critique is directed against the framework that advances both objectification and the fascination for technology instead of nullifying them:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But the situation may be quite different. Perhaps revolutions are not the train ride, but the human race grabbing for the emergency brake.<sup>21</sup>

Even though "the consciousness of being embedded had quickly become de-politicized after 1945" (SIII 532) and *Immersionswelten* were being seen, purchased and consumed to an increasing degree under aesthetic, hedonistic and 'stylish' aspects of ambience, technical precision, perfected form, good taste, etc., the impetus behind this development, a capital-steered, revenue- and profit-oriented business connected to dwelling and living in the space of business, is striking. The access to urban Machines for Living is tied to the exclusive rights of purchasing power and is coordinated, administrated and marketed to the highest degree on a bio-political and geo-political level with urban space-arcade-control.

Who owns public space?

This is the central question given the description of Worlds for Living based on purchasing power and governmental *Immersionswelten*; it makes reference to the installation of infrastructure, to what is regulated by public law and to the markets that create interiors. Corridors of brands and brandings announce ownership rights within public space. Those who want to participate must have purchasing power. Here is the phalanx of a new battle: the combatant is the significant participant and resident of Machines for Living. His significance is his distinction as the owner of a chip card, the owner of titles and the carrier of diverse uniforms from Armani to Zara. At this point the problem unfolds: a new *spatial* sovereignty

and its bio-politics are increasingly formulated in a media and iconography of living, habits, body and intimacy as well as of the precarious workers, the superfluous and expendable, the migrants and audience. Political and economic, technological and medialized *Immersionenwelten* are designed worlds increasingly defined by economics, politics, media and technology – in short, a polarization of the social. The exclusive nature of Machines for Living creates the marginality of those who are excluded, the psycho-political *emergency* as a cultural catastrophe and its market, the *zones of anomie* and their media hysteria, the design paradigms of management and poverty. What applies to apartments also applies to public space:

The residence becomes a Machine of Ignorance or is built to have an integral defence mechanism. Its architectural foundation is fundamental right to ignore the outside world.<sup>22</sup>

The apparatus of sovereign exclusivity and welfare – the *gated community*, the *Crystal Palace* – stands on the one side; on the other side one finds the masses' Machine for Living, the slum, the ghetto, suburbia, the informal settlement or simply the idea of being weeded out or having a burnout in the midst of it all.

In the case of the 'superfluous', it's more a question of structural disadvantages in the labor market. Above all it's a question of the driving, tortuous or self-destructive feeling of living in a world of gainful employment and prosperity and no longer being able to keep pace, and no longer feeling represented in the symbolic system of acquisition positions and career status, short: being 'superfluous' in a society of superfluity.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly enough, the sociology of catastrophe<sup>24</sup> also corroborates that interwoven social contexts, more or less social *nets*, inherently possess a certain catastrophic potential. In its final form, catastrophe is then a special case of extreme social change. *Emergencies* are, as logical consequences of a catastrophic disposition of societies (*Immersionenwelten*), special cases of social change whose results lead to social as well as psychological anomies and disorientation. Thus social processes generally also stand for risky processes that have been more or less successfully subsumed under existing powers' control calculations stemming from early modern or modern social contracts' security options as well as from post-modern, market strategy suggestions for security. The Kiel sociologist Lars Clausen calls all catastrophes *cultural catastrophes* from the viewpoint of a sociology of catastrophes. In this case natural catastrophes as well as technological catastrophes<sup>25</sup> and wars are all incorporated. Clausen's argument is convincing, because, if seen from the sociological perspective, the symptoms of social anomie on an individual and social level are the same regardless which types of cata-

strophe are meant; it's namely an "appalling social process" and a "crass social change" that concerns the entire network of actors.<sup>26</sup> The era of *postmodern warfare* is defined by it being an era of cultural catastrophes and catastrophic markets, an *emergency empire*<sup>27</sup> of exploration and explication of the exclusivity of interior spaces and exclusion in exterior spaces. The specific catastrophic dynamics when creating spaces of legal vacuums and social anomies advanced to a governmental technique in post-political times (e.g., in the worldwide anti-terror war); this is a governmental technique of dramaturgically synchronizing events and markets. The crux of such a dramaturgy lies in the legalities and legitimacies created in the framework of legal vacuums or *states of emergency*. These are such legal stage directions that are a necessity for the performances of liberal business politics and for generating new markets, which means new emergencies (cultural catastrophes). From my perspective, a chain reaction ensues at this point: an increased implementation of governmental techniques for states of emergency leads to an increase in profit rates in the markets, and these then lead systemically to an increase in the number of cultural catastrophes. In the accumulation of the *state of emergency* as a governmental technique to create (market) spaces with legal vacuums and their extension in a worldwide prospering business with anomic zones (*zones of emergency*), one rediscovers Lyotard's theory of "legitimacy through performativity".<sup>28</sup>

If the criterion of *performativity*, the increase in power and effectivity, determines the development of science and art, then only those sciences and arts will be supported that are *performative* in this sense. Thus "money" is also then determinant for "truth" and "the law". The new circularity that becomes visible here emphasizes the connection between science, art, *performativity* and the economy or power (financial capital) as well as its legitimacy. Thus Lyotard made an essential contribution to the concept of *economic performance*. However, Lyotard obviously overlooked that, although the era of idealist and humanist narratives are in a state of dissolution, the *sovereign cortex* of societies has reproduced and replicated itself. A control that is legitimated by a consensual narrative (or power) can't be abolished, because it's precisely this control as a bio-political technology that has appropriated the concept of performativity. *Sovereign performativity* is a word from entrepreneurial, globalized financial capital's vocabulary. Sovereign performativity is also the axiom with which the Crystal Palace achieved its greatest possible extension – as an uncompleted project of modernity on the stage of postmodernist conceptual renovation. Lyotard's performance concept thus becomes the event concept of *emergencies* just like the performance concept has become a synonym for the postmodern art of war. Lyotard's concept of performance can thus be listed in the Crystal Palace's register, since no other concept makes the expansiveness and militancy of the capital-steered machine of urbanization as concrete.

## In the beginning was the accident: the Crystal Palace as an autoimmune system

In the context of the extent of obliteration that mythological and historic accidents leave behind, the question arises if accidents are a *topos* of what can't be represented. Each accident implies the death of God and the end of history. This monstrosity, simultaneously an ontological inescapability, is what Martin Heidegger terms "thrownness" [*Geworfenheit*] in "Sein und Zeit".

The greatest conceivable accident/worst case scenario (GAU) is thrownness into the death of God. After this, one can speculate that a birth of metaphors follows: the birth of culture and war. Great narratives, epics and myths tell of this dialectic between the GAU and war, between God's death and iconoclasm. Examples of mythological super-GAUs are: the Egyptian epic "The Book of the Heavenly Cow",<sup>29</sup> the Kabbalah epic of "Breaking the Vessels"<sup>30</sup> and the biblical epic "First Book of Moses".<sup>31</sup> Examples of historic super-GAUs as hegemonic symbolic deaths are events such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the Thirty Year's War, the Shoah, "Hiroshima" and "9/11". In the chronicles of accidents as they have been passed down in 5,000 years of monotheistic cultural history it becomes evident that cultural achievement is an achievement of renewal performed by societies, and is based on the accident imperative and its abolishment. Such an assumption incites one to create a theory about the autoimmune compulsion that social systems generally have. The theory could be: in the beginning was the accident (God's death) as a self-induced cultural achievement. An equation of catastrophes with cultural achievements is included as a central argument.

Peter Sloterdijk's answer to the problem of societies' autoimmune compulsion, especially that of the Crystal Palace, is found in the *Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* as a theory of inhibition and disinhibition contexts. The cultural achievements that result from cultural catastrophes – such as security, risk prevention, media politics, the pharmaceutical or military industries, etc. – establish themselves as forms of governance and produce, in dialectical reciprocation, the impact with their own obliteration. A consequence of these dynamics is social and individual anomie. In other words, the anomies produced in prospering global economic systems are a result of targeted marketing strategies as well as market-specific precautions to ensure self-preservation. When anomies are equated with emergencies, then paradox social dynamics oscillating between the production forms associated with creating and combating anomies can be identified. Within this paradox, a question appears to be of interest: to what extent must the system create its own destruction in order to successfully accumulate? The production of exclusion means a production of poverty, and in turn this leads to the production of markets. As soon as the market has usurped poverty, the once created exclusion is turned inside out into a fabricated inclusion within the welfare system.

Debates on integration are then ambivalent in so far as they are in a process of assimilating cultural potential fundamentally equipped with advantages – the ad-

vantage of disinhibition (criminal energy; Sloterdijk) and the advantage of immunity (poverty; Durkheim). The consequences of integration mean market and purchasing-power accumulation – but above all they mean an increase in an *autoimmune potential* on the one hand and the production of *superfluous material* on the other hand.

If one brings Sloterdijk's thoughts to their logical conclusion (his plea for the disinhibition factor of the cultures excluded from the *Great Installation*), then this can be read as a plea for the preservation of the autoimmune compulsion of the Crystal Palace system and simultaneously as a plea for postmodern terror in the contemporary style of autonomous encroachments. Only when both – an autoimmune compulsion and disinhibited terror – are present at the same time is the paradox climate of tension in place from which the media, design and political markets draw their resources.

If one understood why prevalent conditions play so well into the hands of terrorists, then a detailed picture of one's own situation could be drawn: the bombers have understood, better than many societies of production, that the masters of the cables can't create all contents in a studio and thus remain dependent on the infusion of events from the exterior.<sup>32</sup>

The official media channels' cable men consciously construct the hollow and empty spaces below the polished media surfaces for clandestine bombers and their terror-seeking invasions.

The infospace in the *Great Installation* remains as open to invasive acts the way amorphous Africa was to the most brutal of European access in the 19th century. This means: an attack always sells, and the more ruthless it is, the higher the media profit.<sup>33</sup>

Thus "the inhabitants of the Crystal Palace's nervous systems can be occupied with ease by any invader (...)"<sup>34</sup> This fact conforms to an extremely calculated dramaturgy for the preservation of tension within the *Lebensraum*.

Given this interpretation, the "terreur"<sup>35</sup> of the third commons legitimated by Maximilian de Robespierre could become more relevant than ever, except for the fact that Sloterdijk's statements on the issue do not reflect a sympathy for commons-specific clientele, but rather a sympathy for a system-specific intelligence that "stimulates (its) acupuncture points [...] via minimal invasions"<sup>36</sup> and thus saves it from its anomic suicide (without relieving the autoimmune compulsion). "Given these aspects, it becomes comprehensible why neo-liberalism and terrorism belong to the same page like *recto* and *verso*" (WK 284).

## Conclusion

Emergency Design: the cultures of crisis from the spirit of the accident

“The crisis of the world’s soul emanates from its dwellings.” (SIII 545)

### *Paradox*

In an exemplary re-interpretation, the inhibiting factor of “poverty” for Durkheim could flow into the disinhibiting factor “innovation” if one were to nullify the contrast between this pair of concepts. As we saw in Durkheim, it is neither need nor luxury that leads to an anomic suicide. It is above all the rapid shifts and radical upheavals of orientation within the social body as well as constructs of meaning and value that, running in every possible direction, causes the subject to seek escape. The streams of refugees, the escapism of tourism, the defection to other confessions, the auto-destructive flight into death, etc., apply to all refugees<sup>37</sup> in search of the zone of invariable values. This idea incites the paradox attempt to liberate “the subject” from its aporia in the midst of these *emergencies* by presenting anomie as the humus of innovation as such. Why shouldn’t the anomic foundation, the permanently fluctuating social grounds, be precisely the *topos* on which forced suggestions of participation in purchasing-power dominated habitats are led *ad absurdum*? Or where the *probands* and protagonists are inspired to an autonomous emigration or an independent escape from the Crystal Palace – basically an act that proves itself to be a self-determined step to becoming superfluous? The goal of this line of thought is to liberate the anomic suicide from its criminal image and to lead anomie into a category of social innovations. In the language of sociology and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s repertoire of concepts, this voluntary (socially innovative) act, with an escape plan of refusing to play along with *downshifting*, could be translated as the creation of the *nomadic perspective*. Because:

First, nomadism is precarious; second, offensive and third, borderline. The nomadic is also a precarium, something that only survives until it is revoked, that fails as a prerequisite, or to put it more agreeably: the constituting difference between a goal and the results. Precariousness, acting in precarious contexts, is a prerequisite of the nomadic.<sup>38</sup>

Things that fall hard land on an existential reality that doesn’t fit in the reality of *Immersionswelten* (anymore). This difference in fit, termed a “Cosmic Misfit”<sup>39</sup> by Peter Sloterdijk, creates the unsolvable and innovative connection between existentialism, becoming a refugee (nomadism), poverty and criminality (vs. creativity). This is where we should place Sloterdijk’s concept of the “Ontology of Ad-



vantage”;<sup>40</sup> here the innovative factor of crime is made plausible as a factor of advantage. Carl Schmitt’s theory of the *sovereign*, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,”<sup>41</sup> is then confronted by Sloterdijk’s theory of the *innovator*, namely: “sovereign is he who decides for himself what he wants to fall for”.<sup>42</sup> In other words: sovereign is he who decides if he wants to fall for the phantasmagoria of the Crystal Palace or not!

### Breaking with the Crystal Palace and the exercitium of nullification

Durkheim’s descriptions of anomic suicide’s early symptoms were already discussed by Sören Kierkegaard – in the example of the category of *Angst* that he introduced into philosophical discourse, in the example of *desperation as sickness onto death*<sup>43</sup> as well as its opposite, *boredom*, which appears when a lack of doubt or desperation exists.

Fyodor M. Dostoevsky offered a highly dense analysis of desperation in his *Notes from the Underground*.<sup>44</sup> They were written after his second visit to Europe in the fall of 1863; in his *Notes* he expanded on his impressions from his first European trip published as *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*; here he exhibits a disgust and aversion towards the optimistic Humanism that he met with in Western Europe during the Crystal Palace era. The *Underground* was consciously chosen by Dostoevsky as a metaphor of contrast to the *Crystal Palace* metaphor, a stylistic protest that deeply denounces and deconstructs the main actor of the Crystal Palace, the *flâneur* of purchasing power. Here the anarchic gesture of self-exclusion from the Crystal Palace points in two directions: to a deepening isolation through this act of self-exclusion and desperation, and simultaneously to a liberation from the catastrophic dilemma of societies steered by capital. The self-exclusion of protagonists with all psychological consequences in Dostoevsky’s underground narrative doesn’t just conform to the autonomous act of a practiced self-technique, it’s above all the autonomous act of interrupting (sovereign) economies of violence that take effect on oneself. The protagonist decides for himself – from his point of departure – that it doesn’t fit. And, above all, he is not willing to fit in.

The concept of *emergency design*’s origins includes the radical idea of the reversal of utilitarian visions for oneself as they are understood in Dostoevsky’s *exercitium*, while simultaneously turning toward a crisis economy of absence. The example from Dostoevsky’s work, whose reception was eased by Friedrich Nietzsche’s enthusiasm, presents a character that stems himself against the era’s revolutionary attempts and a typology of a complete dropping out of the sovereign world of winning and losing. Here the gesture of negating any role or any social utility for oneself can no longer (just) be termed anarchy, even though it was motivated by hatred and disgust for the world of the Crystal Palace. The *Underground Man* reveals a typology of an Eastern attitude; it can also be seen in the character of Andrei Rublev,<sup>45</sup> one of the most famous Russian icon painters, as well as in Byung-Chul Han’s approach to the concept of *absence* in relationship to the Lao-

zi<sup>46</sup> interpretations. In Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, instead of anarchy, an inner emigration into non-worlds and non-values takes place beyond all sovereign standards – into *absence*. Dostoevsky conceives of the anti-man – also in rejection to any type of stylized, exemplary progressive man such as Tschernyshevsky<sup>47</sup> proposed. Dostoevsky conceived an anti-hero of the utilitarian society and its economies of consumption and propaganda that we now term *corporate identity* and *corporate design*. Man can't fulfil his purpose in a state of freedom, at least not with a so-called free will (Dostoevsky doubts its existence in his *Notes*), because the free will is an *agens* of constructs of power as well as subjugation – the ultimate motor to conformity. The participants in “freedom” miscalculate their own situation in vain and poor illusions.

The anti-hero leaves the Crystal Palace's building with his bright sides and anomies, and searches for redemption through humility – the act of devoutness towards the absence of all – in the *exercitium* of nullifying identity. This autonomy is felt as a *lively life*, free of other people (of fear or hysteria, of boredom or terror), of Humanistic optimism or a place in society – certainly not without sadness, a prevalent form of suffering for the *Underground Man*, though it has an innovative dimension in *absence*. “The mourner wins. [...] It's about a victory (however) that is elevated above the difference between ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’”.<sup>48</sup> In a bridge to Eastern practice, the nullified man is by definition, identity, function and utility an absent man, the no one and the nameless – a witness to the annulling of economies of power<sup>49</sup> and subjectivity.<sup>50</sup> In a comparison between the Zhuangzi,<sup>51</sup> the most Eastern negation and Leibniz, the Western position (theodicy), Byung-Chul Han states:

“Zhuangzi's empty mirror differs radically from Leibniz's inspired mirror. [...] He desires nothing, holds on to nothing. He is empty and absent. So he lets the things that are reflected there simply come and go.”<sup>52</sup>

And surprisingly one can find a quote in Walter Benjamin's critique of subjectivity in which he states that it is “the historic prison of the original historic human being.”<sup>53</sup>

Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, through the absence of meaning and utility, of the Crystal Palace and anomie, in the *exercitium* of desperation and devoutness, exertion and disinhibition, reaches a dimension of happiness, because this happiness has been liberated from moral questions. Here, the specific *Ontology of Advantage* is the state of emergency of the perpetrators' disinhibition; it's in the process of dissolving subjectivity into itself and thus also the individual fit for the interior spaces of the *Great Interior*. This disinhibition goes beyond what has been known up until now and extends into open space, without direction.

## Emergency Design

The prototype of an *Emergency Designer* was discussed in the character of the *Underground Man* (and in the case of Dostoevsky himself). This is someone who practices the *exercitium* of nullification on himself – as a self-technique of immortality. *Immortality* is demanded as an imperative of men and the “human” – beyond the machine habitats of utilitarian technology and teleological instrumentalization; it is a deep and original quality of man in his spiritual dimension.

The Eastern practice of withdrawal into spaces of living beyond being and not-being, beyond having and not-having, is connected to what – in the case of Dostoevsky – one could call the Russian soul. The moment of enlightenment for the *Underground Man* is not simply the emotionless abstraction of a *beyond*, but rather the glow of love as a potential for a quality of life that emaciates, encloses and burns the entire body.

Turning away from the privilege of being superfluous – from the role of being in the world of the proficient and useful, a slacker and useless, a no-good and good-for-nothing, completely beleaguered by all anomic symptoms of *angst*, criminal activity, depression, burn-out, anarcho-radical activity, poverty and suicide – makes reference to the *cosmic misfits'* radical retreat from the Crystal Palace dilemma. Beyond this dilemma the space of *crisis* with a new connotation – or in Eastern, Taoist language: the space of emptiness.

By implication one can then state that the GAU of *Immersionswelten* is responsible for liberating the system of crisis or at least creating an access to the *medium of crisis*. Because: a transformed critique of installations of cultural catastrophes in the form of turning away and *re-organizing the self* reveals the Crystal Palace's breaking point to be the *Ist-Stelle* of the crisis with a new connotation. In this sense *Emergency Design* can be defined as “a necessarily coherent answer to the state of emergency dispositives created via globalizing space-power-monopolies” in the form of the *cosmic misfit's* autonomous superfluity. “The *Emergency Design* man is the misfit who tries to prepare himself for something that one can't prepare oneself for.”<sup>54</sup>

Cultures of *crisis* are cultures of *absence*, from the one as well as the other, from the Crystal Palace and then also from its *positive innovations* and *anomies* (the cultures of precariousness, marginalization and poverty, depression, *Angst* and suicide), as well as from its *negative innovations* and *anomies* (the cultures of anarchy, pirating, freebooting, crime, shadow globalization and terrorism). The location of the *crisis* lies in between and extends beyond this, re-interpreted and newly defined as a spiritual immune system and paradox medium within living environments.

Translation: © Christopher Langer

## Notes

1. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): *Sphären III. Schäume*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 195-196.
2. Sloterdijk, P. (2001): *Nicht gerettet. Versuche nach Heidegger*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 32.
3. Han, B-C. (2007): *Abwesen*. Berlin, p. 22.
4. Compare the Frankfurt sociologist Klaus Horn's theory of provision-bonapartism.
5. Benjamin, W. (1983): *Das Passagen-Werk*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, Vol. I, p. 592.
6. Bröckling, U., S. Krasmann and T. Lemke (2000): „Gouvernementalität, Neoliberalismus und Selbsttechnologie. Eine Einleitung“. In: Bröckling, U., S. Krasmann and T. Lemke (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart, Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 15.
7. See Bourdieu, P. (1998): „Prekarität ist überall.“ In: *Gegenfeuer. Wortmeldungen im Dienste des Widerstands gegen die neoliberale Invasion*. Constance, pp. 96-102.
8. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 306
9. From the beginning, Sloterdijk's *Immersion* is seen as the dwelling (of man) as embedded in the medium within living environments. Here the spheres should be thought of as the earliest media within living environments and as proto-habitats to the *Immersionswelten* of Machines for Living, Urbanization and War. In contrast, *Immersionswelten* can also be considered in terms of aggregate or condensation conditions, whereby the spherical already describes the condition of condensation as a medium of space in and of itself. The spherical immersive medium of space is introduced by Sloterdijk on the one hand as a morpho-immunological entity in an aesthetic sense, as an anthropological essence in the sense of cultural science and as an *Immersionswelt* in the media and media-technological sense, and, on the other hand, as a Machine for Living in a habitual, sociological and psycho-social sense. The idea of *Immersion* as a form of being for man in his dwellings is supported by Sloterdijk's following three concepts: interior – immune systems – installation. (See also „Einbettung und Immersion“ in SIII.)
10. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 503.
11. The term originates from Le Corbusier. The *Unité d'Habitation* or the *Machine for Living* is a type of high-rise building that the architect developed and presented in Paris in 1925. The first Apartment Units were built in four French locations and in Berlin in 1947 and 1965.
12. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 305.
13. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 526.
14. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 306.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
17. Benjamin, W. (1991): 'Kapitalismus als Religion (Fragment).' In: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt/M., pp. 100-103.
18. Durkheim, É. (1973): *Der Selbstmord*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
20. Benjamin, W. (1983): o.c., Vol. I, p. 592.
21. Benjamin, W. (1983): o.c., Vol. II, p. 1231.
22. Sloterdijk, P. (2004): o.c., p. 540.

23. Vogel, Berthold. „Überflüssige in der Überflussgesellschaft? Sechs Anmerkungen zur Empirie sozialer Ausgrenzung“ in: Bude, H. and A. Willisch (ed.). *Exklusion. Eine Debatte über die ›Überflüssigen‹*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008) p.157.
24. Clausen, L. (1994): *Krasser sozialer Wandel*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
25. See Morisch, C. (2002): *Technikphilosophie bei Paul Virilio. Dromologie*. Würzburg.
26. See Latour, B. (2007): *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft. Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
27. See Milev, Y. (2009): *Emergency Empire – transformation des Ausnahmezustands. Souveränität*. Vienna/New York.
28. Lyotard, J-F. (1994): *Das postmoderne Wissen*. Vienna, pp. 30–35.
29. See Hornung, E. (1982): *Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen*. Göttingen.
30. See Scholem, Gershom. *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981)
31. See Genesis, First Book of Moses.
32. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 282.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. De Robespierre, M. (2000): *Über die Prinzipien der politischen Moral*. (Speech on February 5th 1794 in front of the Convent). Hamburg.
36. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 283.
37. See. Arendt, H. (1986): 'Wir Flüchtlinge.' In: *Zur Zeit. Politische Essays*. Berlin, pp. 7-21.
38. Raunig, G.: *Kriegsmachine gegen das Empire. Zum prekären Nomadismus der VolkTheaterKarawane*. Online publication, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics. <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0902/raunig/de> (Download on January 9th 2009).
39. Sloterdijk, P. (2008): 'Kosmische Misfits. Selbstaufäumung als Emergency Design.' In: G. Blechinger & Y. Milev (eds.): *Emergency Design. Designstrategien im Arbeitsfeld der Krise*. Vienna/New York, pp. 47-59.
40. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 118.
41. Schmitt, C. (1989): *Die Diktatur*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot p. 11.
42. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 107.
43. Kierkegaard, S. (2005): *Die Krankheit zum Tode*. Munich.
44. Dostoevsky, F. (1984): *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Kellerloch*. Stuttgart.
45. Andrei Rublev (1360-1430), Russian icon painter. His life's work was memorialized in the prize-winning, two-part film epic of the same title by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky in 1969.
46. Laozi or Lao-Tse, legendary 6th century B.C. Chinese philosopher, is seen as the founder of Taoism. See Lao-Tse (1988): *Tao Te King*. Stuttgart.
47. Nicolai Gavrilovitsch Tschernyshevsky, Russian author, publisher, literature critic and revolutionary and contemporary to Dostoevsky wrote the novel *Was tun?* [What is to be done?] in 1863. The title was used by Lenin for his programmatic text *What is to Be Done?* at the beginning of the 20th century.
48. Han, B-C. (2007): o.c., p. 22.
49. See Bataille, G. (2001): *Die Aufhebung der Ökonomie*. Berlin.
50. See Hegel, G. W.F. (1970): *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik 2. Vol 14*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
51. Zhuangzi (ca. 365-290 B.C.), Chinese philosopher and poet whose work is seen as the fundamental text basis for Taoism, along those of Tao Te King. See Zhuangzi (2006): *Das Buch der Spontaneität. Über die Nutzen der Nutzlosigkeit und die Kultur der Langsamkeit*. Aitrang.

52. Han, B-C. (2007): o.c., p. 23.
53. Benjamin, W. (1983): o.c., Vol. I, p. 289.
54. Sloterdijk, P. (2008): o.c.



## 9. A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk

*Bruno Latour*

When I was young, the word design (imported to French from English) meant no more than what we now call “relooking” in French (a good English word that, unfortunately, does not exist in English). To “relook” means to give a new and better “look” or shape to something – a chair, a knife, a car, a package, a lamp, an interior – which would otherwise remain too clumsy, too severe or too bared if it were left only to its naked function. “Design” in this old and limited meaning was a way to redress the efficient but somewhat boring emphasis of engineers and commercial staff. Design occurred by adding a veneer of form to their creations, some superficial feature that could make a difference in taste and fashion. Even if design could be greatly admired, it was always taken as one branch of an alternative: look *not only* at the function, *but also* at the design. This dichotomy was true even though the best design was one that, in good modernist fashion (as it did in “functionalism”), approximated function as closely as possible. “Design” was always taken in this “not only... but also” balance. It was as if there were really two very different ways of grasping an object: one through its intrinsic materiality, the other through its more aesthetic or “symbolic” aspects.

I know this is a very poor rendering of what is now meant by “design”. (I am well aware that the French use of the word is much more restricted than the Scandinavian or the English one). However, I want to utilise this definition from my youth as a base line from which to fathom the extraordinary career of this term. From a surface feature in the hands of a not-so-serious-profession that added features in the purview of much-more-serious-professionals (engineers, scientists, accountants), design has been spreading continuously so that it increasingly matters to the very substance of production. What is more, design has been extended from the details of daily objects to cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes, and, as I will argue, to nature itself – which is in great need of being re-designed. It is as though the meaning of the word has grown in what logicians refer to as ‘comprehension’ and ‘extension’. First, it has grown in com-



prehension – it has eaten up more and more elements of what a thing is. Today everyone with an iPhone knows that it would be absurd to distinguish what has been designed from what has been planned, calculated, arrayed, arranged, packed, packaged, defined, projected, tinkered, written down in code, disposed of and so on. From now on, “to design” could mean equally any or all of those verbs. Secondly, it has grown in extension – design is applicable to ever larger assemblages of production. The range of things that can be designed is far wider now than a limited list of ordinary or even luxury goods.

The reason I am interested in the spread in comprehension and extension of the term design is not because of any intimate knowledge of design practice. Yet I take its expansion as a fascinating tell tale of a change in the ways we deal with objects and action more generally. If it is true as I have claimed that we have never been modern, and if it is true, as a consequence, that “matters of fact” have now clearly become “matters of concern”, then there is logic to the following observation: the typically modernist divide between materiality on the one hand and design on the other is slowly being dissolved away. The more objects are turned into things – that is, the more matters of facts are turned into matters of concern – the more they are rendered into objects of design through and through.

If it is true that the present historical situation is defined by a complete disconnect between two great alternative narratives – one of emancipation, detachment, modernization, progress and mastery, and the other, completely different, of attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care – then the little word “design” could offer a very important touch stone for detecting where we are heading and how well modernism (and also postmodernism) has been faring. To put it more provocatively, I would argue that design is one of the terms that has replaced the word “revolution”! To say that everything has to be designed and redesigned (including nature), we imply something of the sort: “it will neither be revolutionized, nor will it be modernized”. For me, the word design is a little tracer whose expansion could prove the depth to which we have stopped believing that we have been modern. In other words, the more we think of ourselves as designers, the less we think of ourselves as modernizers.

## **Five advantages of the concept of “design”**

I dare to articulate this odd argument based (very flimsily I agree) on the various undertones of the word “design” itself. It is the weaknesses of this vague concept that give me reason to believe that we can take it as a clear symptom of a sea change in our collective definition of action. The first section of this lecture will review five successive connotations of the concept of design. In the second I will provide an introduction to Peter Sloterdijk’s philosophy of design. And finally, I will end with a brief conclusion on how to *draw* things together, that is, to design.

As a concept, design implies a humility that seems absent from the word “construction” or “building”. Because of its historical roots as a mere addition to the “real” practicality, sturdy materiality and functions of daily objects, there is always some modesty in claiming to design something anew. In design there is nothing foundational. It seems to me that to say you plan to design something, does not carry the same risk of hubris as saying one is going to build something. Introducing Prometheus to some other hero of the past as a “designer” would doubtlessly have angered him. Thus, the expansion of the word “design” is an indication (a weak one to be sure) of what could be called a post Promethean theory of action. This theory of action has arisen just at the moment (this is its really interesting feature) when every single thing, every detail of our daily existence, from the way we produce food, to the way we travel, build cars or houses, clone cows, etc is to be, well, redesigned. It is just at the moment where the dimensions of the tasks at hand have been fantastically amplified by the various ecological crises, that a non- or a post- Promethean’s sense of what it means to act is taking over public consciousness.

A second and perhaps more important implication of design is an attentiveness to details that is completely lacking in the heroic, Promethean, hubristic dream of action. “Go forward, break radically with the past and the consequences will take care of themselves!” This was the old way – to build, to construct, to destroy, to radically overhaul: “Après moi le déluge!” But that has never been the way of approaching a design project. A mad attention to the details has always been attached to the very definition of design skills. And ‘skill’ is actually a term that is also attached to design, in the same way that design is associated with the words ‘art’ and ‘craft’. In addition to modesty, there is a sense of skilfulness, craftsmanship and an obsessive attention to detail that make up a key connotation of design. The reason why this is a point worth remarking is because it was unthinkable to connect these features of design with the revolutionary and modernizing urges of the recent past. To the contrary, a careful attention to detail, craft and skill, was precisely what seemed reactionary as this would only have slowed the swift march to progress. The expanding concept of design indicates a deep shift in our emotional make up: at the very moment when the scale of what has to be remade has become infinitely larger (no political revolutionary committed to challenging capitalist modes of production has ever considered redesigning the earth’s climate), what it means to “make” something is also being deeply modified. The modification is so deep that things are no longer “made” or “fabricated”, but rather carefully “designed”, and if I may use the term, precautionarily designed. It is as though we had to combine the engineering tradition with the precautionary principle; it is as though we had to imagine Prometheus stealing fire from heaven in a cautious way! What is clear is that at this very historical juncture, two absolutely foreign sets of passions (foreign for the modernist ethos that is) are having to be recombined and reconciled.

The third connotation of the word design that seems to me so significant is that when analyzing the design of some artefact the task is unquestionably about meaning – be it symbolic, commercial, or otherwise. Design lends itself to interpretation; it is made to be interpreted in the language of signs. In design, there is always as the French say, *un dessin*, or in Italian, *designo*. To be sure, in its weakest form design added only superficial meaning to what was brute matter and efficiency. But as it infiltrated into more and more levels of the objects, it carried with it a new attention to meaning. Wherever you think of something as being designed, you bring all of the tools, skills and crafts of interpretation to the analysis of that thing. It is thus of great importance to witness the depths to which our daily surroundings, our most common artefacts are said to be designed. To think of artefacts in terms of design means conceiving of them less and less as modernist objects, and conceiving of them more and more as “things”. To use my language, artefacts are becoming conceivable as complex assemblies of contradictory issues (I remind you that this is the etymological meaning of the word “thing” in English –as well as in other European languages).<sup>1</sup> When things are taken as having been well or badly designed then they no longer appear as matters of fact. So as their appearance as matters of fact weakens, their place among the many matters of concern that are at issue is strengthened.

The transformation of objects into signs has been greatly accelerated by the spread of computers. It is obvious that digitalization has done a lot to expand semiotics to the core of objectivity: when almost every feature of digitalized artefacts is “written down” in codes and software, it is no wonder that hermeneutics have seeped deeper and deeper into the very definition of materiality. If Galileo’s book of nature was written in mathematical terms, prodigiously expanding the empire of interpretation and exegesis, this expansion is even truer today when more and more elements of our surroundings are literally and not metaphorically written down in mathematical (or at least in computer) terms. Although the old dichotomy between function and form could be vaguely maintained for a hammer, a locomotive or a chair, it is ridiculous when applied to a mobile phone. Where would you draw the line between form and function? The artefact is composed of writings all the way down! But this is not only true of computerized artefacts and gadgets. It is also true of good old-fashioned materiality: what are nano- or bio-technologies if not the expansion of design to another level? Those who can make individual atoms write the letters “IBM”, those who implant copyright tags into DNA, or who devise nano cars which “race” on four wheels, would certainly consider themselves to be designers. Here again, matter is absorbed into meaning (or rather as contested meaning) in a more and more intimate fashion.

The fourth advantage I see in the word “design” (in addition to its modesty, its attention to detail and the semiotic skills it always carries with it), is that it is never a process that begins from scratch: to design is always to *redesign*. There is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem. Design is a

task that follows to make that something more lively, more commercial, more usable, more user- friendly, more acceptable, more sustainable, and so on, depending on the various constraints to which the project has to answer. In other words, there is always something *remedial* in design. This is the advantage of the “not only... but also” feature although I criticized it above. This split is a weakness to be sure (there is always the temptation of seeing design as an afterthought, as a secondary task, as a less serious one than those of engineering, commerce and science) but it is also an immense advantage when compared to the idea of creation. To design is never to create *ex nihilo*. It is amusing that creationists in America use the word “intelligent design” as a rough substitute for “God the Creator”. They don’t seem to realise the tremendous abyss that exists between creating and designing. The most intelligent designers never start from a *tabula rasa*. God the designer is really a redesigner of something else that was already there – and this is even more true for His Son as well as for the Spirit, who both are sent to redeem what has been botched in the first place... If humanity “has been made (or should I have said designed?) as the image of God”, then they too should learn that things are never created but rather carefully and modestly redesigned. It is in that sense that I take the spread of the word design as a clear substitute for revolution and modernization. I do so furthermore, because there is always something slightly superficial in design, something clearly and explicitly transitory, something linked to fashion and thus to shifts in fashions, something tied to tastes and therefore somewhat relative. Designing is the antidote to founding, colonizing, establishing, or breaking with the past. It is an antidote to hubris and to the search for absolute certainty, absolute beginnings, and radical departures.

The fifth and decisive advantage of the concept of design is that it necessarily involves an ethical dimension which is tied into the obvious question of *good versus bad design*. In the modernist style, this goodness and badness were qualities that matters of fact could not possibly possess. They were supposed to sit there, undisputable, and removed from any normative judgment. This was so much so that their entire purpose was to make the fact/value distinction possible. “We are there whether you like it or not”. But it is easy to understand that when you say that something has been “designed”, you are not only authorized but forced to ask whether it has been well or badly designed. The spread of design to the inner definitions of things carries with it, not only meaning and hermeneutics, but also morality. More exactly, it is as if materiality and morality were finally coalescing. This is of great importance because if you begin to redesign cities, landscapes, natural parks, societies, as well as genes, brains and chips, no designer will be allowed to hide behind the old protection of matters of fact. No designer will be able to claim: “I am just stating what exists”, or “I am simply drawing the consequences of the laws of nature”, or “I am simply reading the bottom line”. By expanding design so that it is relevant everywhere, designers take up the mantle

of morality as well. I will come back to this in the conclusion: suffice it to say now that this normative dimension that is intrinsic to design offers a good handle from which to extend the question of design to politics. A politics of matters of facts and of objects has always seemed far-fetched; a politics of designed things and issues is somewhat more obvious. If things, or rather *Dinge*, are gatherings, as Heidegger used to define them, then it is a short step from there to considering all things as the result of an activity called “collaborative design” in Scandinavia. This activity is in fact the very definition of the politics of matters of concern since all designs are “collaborative” designs – even if in some cases the “collaborators” are not all visible, welcomed or willing.

A small parenthesis on our two disciplines: when science and technology studies (STS) scholars began to revisit the old materialist traditions some forty years ago, they too would deeply transform objects into projects. They too had brought meaning into what was defined as mere “material constraints”; they too had disputed the form versus function argument; transformed matters of fact into complex and contradictory assemblies of conflicting humans and non humans; they too had demonstrated that “artefacts have politics” and that a parliament of things could be assembled. But because of the word “construction” (used especially in the infamous expression “social construction”), they too were divided by the modernist opposition between what was social, symbolic, subjective, lived and what was material, real, objective and factual. No matter how many efforts were made to escape the trap that the modernist constitution has laid in the path of empirical inquiries, science and technology studies has always lurched into it. (Would things have looked better had we talked of “social design” instead of “social construction”? I doubt it). The trap has been nearly impossible to escape. Impossible that is, so long as we remained officially modern. But what is so interesting to me in that in the spread of design, this concept has undergone the same amazing transformations as my own field. STS, that was until a few years back but a small subfield of social (alas, alas, so social!) science, has now received the formidable support of a much larger movement. What was a slightly far-fetched and a clearly scandalous claim, namely that there are no objects but only things and disputed assemblages, is now fast becoming common sense. Everything that was conceived of earlier as hard objective undisputable material drives (remember the “irresistible path of progress” “the white heat of technology”?), has now melted into air. Yes, everything that has been designed during the four or five former industrial revolutions has had to be redesigned —including Cornwall. It is the same material world, but now it has to be remade with a completely different notion of what it is to *make* something. What has gone is mastery —this odd idea of mastery that refused to include the mystery of unintended consequences.

Of course, all five of these dimensions of design as well as the development of STS could be taken as a clear sign of postmodernism, as a quiet and lazy abandonment of the tasks of Promethean modernism. Some diehard modernists do

think that way, but I don't believe this is the case. As I pointed out earlier, the spread of the word "design" doesn't come at a time when there is less to do; it comes at a time when there is more to do. Infinitely more, since it is the whole fabric of life that is now concerned thanks to the ecological crisis. What no revolution has ever contemplated, namely the remaking of our collective life on earth, is to be carried through with exactly the opposite of revolutionary and modernizing attitudes. This is what renders the spirit of the time so interesting. President Mao was right after all: the revolution has to always be revolutionized. What he did not anticipate is that the new "revolutionary" energy would be taken from the set of attitudes that are hard to come by in revolutionary movements: modesty, care, precautions, skills, crafts, meanings, attention to detail, careful conservations, redesign, artificiality, and ever shifting transitory fashions. We have to be radically careful, or carefully radical... What an odd time we are living through.

### ***"Dasein ist Design"***

The best way to sum up the first part of this chapter is by quoting a marvellous pun made by Henk Oosterling: "*Dasein ist design*". Oosterling is a specialist of the work of Peter Sloterdijk, the great German thinker to whom I will now turn in order to continue this little meditation on the philosophy of design. By taking seriously what Heidegger had only abstractedly meant by *Dasein*, Sloterdijk has managed to extirpate the Western philosophical tradition from the bifurcated way in which it has always dealt with materiality (always, that is, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century). This seriousness about *Dasein* is what makes his philosophy so exciting for people like you who are bombarded with offers to redesign everything from chairs to climates. You cannot indulge anymore into the idea that there are, on the one hand, objective material constraints and, on the other, symbolic, human subjective ones.

Sloterdijk, very early on and very literally took on the spread in comprehension and extension of the notion of design.<sup>2</sup> So literally, in fact, that he has been made the Rektor, that is the Dean or Master, of a School in Karlsruhe – the *Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung* (*Gestalt* being the word here for design). This is a tremendously original art, craft, and philosophy institute (that is housed, by the way, in the same revamped factory as ZKM, the place where I have been fortunate enough to curate the two exhibitions of *ICONOCLASH* and *MAKING THINGS PUBLIC*).

When we say that "*Dasein is in the world*" we usually pass very quickly on the little preposition "in". Not Sloterdijk. In what? he asks, and in where? Are you in a room? In an air-conditioned amphitheatre? And if so, what sort of air pumps and energy sources keep it up? Are you outside? There is no outside: outside is another inside with another climate control, another thermostat, another air-conditioning system. Are you in public? Public spaces are spaces too, for goodness' sake. They are not different in that respect from private spaces. They are simply

organized differently, with different architectures, different entry points, different surveillance systems, different soundscapes. To try to philosophise about what it is to be “thrown into the world” without defining more precisely, more literally (Sloterdijk is first of all a literalist in his use of metaphors) the sort of envelopes into which humans are thrown, would be like trying to kick a cosmonaut into outer space without a spacesuit. Naked humans are as rare as naked cosmonauts. To define humans is to define the envelopes, the life support systems, the *Umwelt* that make it possible for them to breathe. This is exactly what humanism has always missed. (This is why Habermas became so cross at Sloterdijk and launched a very mean attack against him: naked humans on the one hand, fully equipped humans on life support on the other – of course there was no way for those two German thinkers to agree with one another).

I hope you are beginning to see why Sloterdijk is *your* philosopher: in the same way as a spacesuit or a space station is entirely artificially and carefully designed, so are all of the envelopes that constitute the fragile life supports of humans. (Sloterdijk calls these “spheres”, and uses the term, “spherology” to name his endeavour.) Humans are to be handled with infinite precaution from the womb (natural or artificial) in which they are grown (Sloterdijk defines philosophy as a kind of obstetrics!) all the way to the place where they survive and die. What is so important in the extended metaphors that Sloterdijk pursues to the bitter end is that they begin to accomplish exactly what I was asking for in the first part of this chapter. How can we reconcile the entirely different sets of emotions, passions and drives triggered by the two alternative Great Narratives of modernity – the one of emancipation (the official story) and the one of attachment (the hidden one)? When you check on your spacesuit before getting out of the space shuttle, you are radically cautious and cautiously radical... you are painfully aware of how precarious you are, and yet simultaneously, you are completely ready to artificially engineer and to design in obsessive detail what is necessary to survive. Whereas modernist or anti-modernist philosophies of history are always considering only one narrative (that of progress or the failure of progress), Sloterdijk is the rare thinker who shows how the stories of both emancipation and of attachment are a single story. This unification is possible provided that you deeply modify what it is to be “in the world”: the cosmonaut is emancipated from gravity *because* he or she never lives one fraction of a second outside of his or her life supports. To be emancipated and to be attached are two incarnations of the same event, provided you draw your attention to how artificial atmospheres are well or badly designed.

The concept that is key for reconciling those two sets of passions and for inventing this strange role of a precautionary Prometheus, is that of *explicitation*. Explicitation is a consequence of the concept of envelopes. The envelope is a term that will surely draw the attention of architects and designers: we are enveloped, entangled, surrounded; we are never outside without having recreated another more artificial, more fragile, more engineered envelope. We move from

envelopes to envelopes, from folds to folds, never from one private sphere to the Great Outside.

Modernism, in the hands of Sloterdijk is no longer a concept. It is a place, a design, a style. It is a very specific type of architecture to which the whole second volume of *Sphären* is dedicated: that of Globes. A modernist is someone who lives under a vast dome, and who sees things as though sitting under a huge architecture, the Globe of Science, the Globe of Reason, the Globe of Politics. For the modernist, the humanist is the one who reads a book under a lamp or who sits clothed in some sort of Roman toga on the stairs of a huge amphitheatre under the painted fresco of some immense dome... except that in the modernist architecture, the life supports necessary for this Dome or this Globe to be sustainable have not been explicitated. A modernist takes for granted that there will always be air, space, water, heat, for the development of his or her “global view”. But there is nothing global in globalization. Global is always a lot of globaloney, a lot of hot air. And of course, blowing hot air also requires a mechanism of some sort, a pump, a hairdryer – a designed hairdryer! What happened in the second half of the last century is that modernism disappeared in the exact measure where the life supports were made more explicit, one after the next. Ecological crisis, in such a view, is the slow and painful realization that there is no outside anymore. It means that none of the elements necessary to support life can be taken for granted. To live under a huge inflated Globe you need a powerful air-conditioning system and powerful pumps to keep it inflated. Yes, modernist Globes have been deflated; modernism’s fate has been somewhat the same as that of those dirigibles, like the Zeppelin or the Hindenburg.

So you see, what was called the “modernist style” in history of design should now be given a much more profound signification and a much longer life span. The very ways in which things have presented themselves as matters of fact which are now visible as a style –and a style that is changing under our very eyes. The aesthetics of matters of fact have always been precisely that: a historically situated aesthetics, a way to light objects, to frame them, to present them, to situate the gaze of the viewers, to design the interiors in which they are presented – and of course the politics with which they are (they were) so strongly associated.<sup>3</sup>

What I find so important in the notion of explicitation, of folding envelopes into envelopes, is that it is a powerful way of retrieving science and technology by completely modifying what is meant by a sustainable artificial life. It is really in that sense, that Sloterdijk is the philosopher of design. If earlier I have been correct in defining the five reasons why the notion of design was such a powerful substitute to the notion of making, building and constructing, explicitation might allow us to understand that it is possible to *rematerialise* without importing with the notion of ‘matter’ the whole modernist baggage of ‘matters of fact’. This is exactly what Sloterdijk does. No contemporary philosopher is more interested in materiality, in engineering, in biotechnology, in design proper, in contemporary



arts, and in science more generally. Yet when he deals with materialities it is not as if these were so many matters of fact that would inject indisputable natural necessity as the final word in some social or symbolic questions. Instead, when he adds materiality to a site he is rendering another fragile envelope into which we are even more entangled, explicit. This entanglement is as relevant for the envelopes of biotechnology as it is for space stations.

This is exactly the reason why Habermas could not accept Sloterdijk's argument. For a good old modernist humanist, when someone begins to talk about life support, about the necessary conditions to "cultivate human beings", about the air-conditioning to have them breathe safely, this is a tantamount to a plea for an Orwellian world, for eugenism. What Habermas has entirely missed, however, is that when humanists accuse people of "treating humans like objects", they are thoroughly unaware that they are treating *objects* unfairly. A humanist cannot imagine that objects may be things, that matters of facts might be matters of concern, that the whole language of science and engineering might be portrayed as anything other than the boring carriers of the indisputable necessities that modernism has rendered popular. Humanists are concerned only about humans; the rest, for them, is mere materiality or cold objectivity. But Sloterdijk is not treating humans matter of factually as humanists claim. Rather, he treats both humans and non-humans as "matters of grave and careful concerns". By treating human life supports as matters of concern, we pile concerns over concerns, we fold, we envelop, we embed humans into more and more elements that have been carefully explicitated, protected, conserved and maintained (immunology being, according to Sloterdijk, the great philosophy of biology).

This little shift in the definition of matter modifies everything. It allows practitioners to reuse all of the notions of materiality and of artificiality by freeing them from the restrictions imposed by the older style of modernist matters of fact. In other words, we can have science and technology without implying naturalization. Not only has nature disappeared as the outside of human action (this has become common wisdom by now); not only has "natural" become a synonym of "carefully managed", "skilfully staged", "artificially maintained", "cleverly designed" (this is true especially of so-called "natural" parks or "organic foods"); but the very idea that to bring the knowledge of scientists and engineers to bear on a question is to necessarily resort to the unquestionable laws of nature, is also becoming obsolete. Bringing in scientists and engineers is quickly becoming another way of asking: "How can it be better redesigned?" The bricolage and tinkering elements always associated with design have taken over nature. Actually, they are inherent in nature if we take Darwinian ways as a clever form of bricolage, of "intelligent design"... albeit a blind one.

It is somewhat understandable that when Sloterdijk raised the question of how humans could be "designed", that is, artificially nurtured, this invokes the old phantasm of eugenic manipulations. But the similarities between these two proj-

ects prove to be completely superficial when submitted to a close examination. They are similar only in the same way that two trains can both be moving ahead even though they are at an intersection that will lead them toward completely different destinations. Habermas missed the switch, the bifurcation that is so important for us to locate. Yes humans have to be artificially made and remade, but everything depends on what you mean by artificial and even more deeply by what you mean by “making”. We have returned to Prometheus and to the question of Creation. Are we able to be the God of intelligent design? This is the heart of the matter. This is why it is so important to talk of design and not of construction, creation or of fabrication. To design something as I indicated earlier, allows us to raise not only the semiotic question of meaning but also the normative question of good and bad design. This is true of DNA manipulation, as well as of climate control, gadgets, fashion, cities or natural landscapes, a perfect case of design from beginning to end. Artificiality is our destiny, but it does not mean accepting the modernist definition of an artefact as the invasion of matters of fact over the softer flesh of human frailty forever. To put it differently by alluding to another line of more fashionable thought: there is nothing necessarily post human in enveloping, folding, veiling humans into their life supports. Humanists as well as post-humanists seem to have no other repertory for speaking of science and technology other than the modernist idiom of matters of fact.

The great importance of Sloterdijk’s philosophy (and I think the major interest of a designer’s way of looking at things) is that it offers another idiom. The idiom of matters of concern reclaims matter, matters and materiality and renders them into something that can and must be carefully redesigned. This might be far from the humanists’ limited view of what humans are, but it is every bit as removed from the post-human dreams of cyborgs. What is clear is that the collective definition of what artificial life supports are supposed to be becomes the key site of politically minded investigation. Nothing much is left of the scenography of the modernist theory of action: no male hubris, no mastery, no appeal to the outside, no dream of expatriation in an outside space which would not require any life support of any sort, no nature, no grand gesture of radical departure – and yet still the necessity of redoing everything once again in a strange combination of conservation and innovation that is unprecedented in the short history of modernism. Will Prometheus ever be cautious enough to redesign the planet?

I hope I have not been too far off the mark by proposing (out of ignorance, surely) these few steps toward a philosophy of design or by introducing Sloterdijk as its main contributor. I wish to conclude by offering a challenge to the specialists of the history of design assembled here. When I said earlier that there is something inherently normative in design because of the necessary follow-up question, “Is it well or badly designed?”, I also mentioned that this was a good handle for bringing in the question of politics. If the whole fabric of our earthly existence has to be redesigned in excruciating detail; if for each detail the ques-

tion of good and bad has to be raised; if every aspect has become a disputed matter of concern and can no longer be stabilized as an indisputable matter of fact; then we are obviously entering into a completely new political territory. As every one of you knows too well, it is the perverse character of all ecological questions that they branch out in all sorts of counterintuitive ways. It is probably of ecology that St Paul was talking when he said: "I don't do the good I wish to do and I do the bad that I hate". Political ecology is bringing political difficulty to the square. For according to this marvellous rather Paulinian quote of de Gaulle: "If of the good only good would ensue, and if of bad only bad ensued, government would be rather simple: a village parson could do it".

Let me raise the question of design, taken literally in the etymological sense of drawing or rather of "drawing together". How can we draw together matters of concern so as to offer to political disputes an overview, or at least a view, of the difficulties that will entangle us every time we must modify the practical details of our material existence? We know that whenever we prepare to change our fixtures from incandescent to low energy light bulbs, to pay our carbon expenses, to introduce wind farms, to reintroduce the wolf to the Alps, or to develop corn-based fuel, immediately, some controversy will be ignited that turns our best intentions into hell. And we are no longer able to stop the controversies by stating the undisputable facts of the matter because facts are constantly disputed. Fine, unintended consequences are now on everyone's mind, Prometheus braces himself for the worse.

Now here is the challenge: In its long history, design practice has done a marvellous job of inventing the practical skills for drawing objects, from architectural drawing, mechanic blueprints, scale models, prototyping etc. But what has always been missing from those marvellous drawings (designs in the literal sense) is an impression of the controversies and the many contradicting stakeholders that are born within these. In other words, *you* in design as well as *we* in science and technology studies may insist that objects are always assemblies, "gatherings" in Heidegger's meaning of the word, or things and *Dinge*, and yet, four hundred years after the invention of perspective drawing, three hundred years after projective geometry, fifty years after the development of CAD computer screens, we are still utterly unable to draw together, to simulate, to materialise, to approximate, to fully model to scale, what a thing in all of its complexity, is. We know how to draw, to simulate, to materialise, to zoom in and out on objects; we know how to make them move in 3-D space, to have them sail through the computerized virtual *res extensa*, to mark them with a great number of data points, etc. Yet we are perfectly aware that the space in which those objects seem to move so effortlessly is the most utopian (or rather atopic) of spaces. These are the least realistic spaces of circulation ever imagined. They are spaces that do not even fit with the ways in which architects, engineers, designers draw and modify blueprints, nor with the process through which they direct fabrication on the factory floor or manipulate

scale models. To use some more German: we know how to draw *Gegenstand* but we have no clue what it is to draw *Ding*. I once asked one of the greatest historians of technology to send me what he considered his best drawing of the marvellously complex history of mechanisms he has been writing about for so long. He sent me some doodle which I would not have dared show to my first-year students as an example of what a thing is. How could this doodle be compared to the comfortable and effortless manner in which objects float through the so called “Euclidian space” of a CAD design or to the ways in which I can visit Falmouth before I arrive there through the apparently smooth travel of Google Earth?

There is much to suggest that the whole history of technical drawing and of scientific visualizations more broadly conceived has been one of the main driving forces for the development of science and technology in its modernist version. It is more than likely that the same will be true for the development of science and technology, once freed from its modernist limitation. However, what history also shows is that we are a long way from being able to provide for things, that is for matters of concern, a visual, publicly inspectable space that is as remotely as rich, at least as easy to handle, and as codified as what has been done over four centuries for objects conceived of as matters of fact. As long as this lacuna remains there will be no way for design to ease modernism out of its historical dead end. To imagine that a political ecology of the magnitude being anticipated by all of the experts can be carried out without new innovative tools is to court disaster. New innovation will be absolutely necessary if we are to adequately represent the conflicting natures of all the things that are to be designed. (I take the verb “to represent” here in the largest sense, including artistic, scientific and political representation techniques).

So here is the question I wish to raise to designers: where are the visualization tools that allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented? A common mistake (a very post-modernist one) is to believe that this goal will have been reached once the “linear”, “objectified”, and “reified” modernist view has been scattered through multiple view points and heterogeneous makeshift assemblages. However, breaking down the tyranny of the modernist point of view will lead nowhere since we have never been modern. Critique, deconstruction and iconoclasm, once again, will simply not do the job of finding an alternative design. What is needed instead are tools that capture what have always been the hidden practices of modernist innovations: objects have always been projects; matters of fact have always been matters of concern. The tools we need to grasp these hidden practices will teach us just as much as the old aesthetics of matters of fact – and then again much more. Let me be clear – I am not advocating for another CAD design for Prometheus. What I am pressing for is a means for drawing things together – gods, non-humans and mortals included. Why should this prove to be an impossible task? Why can the powerful visual vocabulary that has been devised in the past by generations of artists, en-

gineers, designers, philosophers, artisans and activists for matters of fact, not be devized (I hesitate to say restyled) for matters of concern?

## Notes

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2. Available in English: Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Foreword to the Theory of Spheres*. In: Ohanian, M. & J.C. Royoux (eds.): *Cosmograms*. New York: Lukas and Sternberg, pp. 223-241.
3. Latour, B. (2005): *What is the Style of Matters of Concern? Two Lectures on Empirical Philosophy*. Booklet of the Department of Philosophy Amsterdam (accessible on the web at [bruno-latour.fr](http://bruno-latour.fr) xx).

# 10. Sloterdijk and the Question of Action

Erik Bordeleau

We still do not think at all decisively enough about the question of action.  
Heidegger

Reach the threshold  
Rests  
Remains.  
Daodejing

## By way of introduction: Therapeutics vs. politics in the work of Sloterdijk

1. In this preliminary study we propose the development of some central issues in Sloterdijk's thought, taking the question of power and its political elaboration as our central theme. In his seminal *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk establishes a crucial polemical distinction that takes on a programmatic value: "Psychological and political enlightenment are, in fact, opponents in that they not only compete for the free energies of individuals but also often come into conflict at the heart of the matter".<sup>1</sup> Stigmatizing "the psychological naïveté of the old concept of politics"<sup>2</sup> and stating that, "the depth psychologies are, as it were, the thinking heart of the modern",<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijk gradually develops a theory of therapeutics that can be described as the most determining feature of his work.

2. For Sloterdijk, therapeutics literally encompasses the domain of politics or, to put it another way, Sloterdijk seeks to counter the universality of politics with a "generalized therapeutic concern"<sup>4</sup> that "queries the individual as to his capacity to endure his innate cosmopolitanism".<sup>5</sup> For Sloterdijk, therapeutic theory is from the outset located in a cosmopolitical context, and the apparent strangeness of the expression "innate cosmopolitanism" merely anticipates the later development of his "theory of the spheres" and his remarks on immunitarian processes.

3. So initially – in other words primarily in *Critique of Cynical Reason* and *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* – we see the development of a theory that interprets politics in the general context of a radical critique of metaphysics and subjectivity.

For example, where revolutionary politics traditionally raises partiality to the value of truth in order to constitute itself as a subject of unilateralized action, Sloterdijk advocates “deneurotizing politics”:

Let me put it this way: during the plunge from the body of the mother into late capitalism, the pain of individuation accumulates for which late capitalism as such cannot be held responsible – however close this reflex may be and as numerous as the discourses may be that tell us, in the course of the instinctive search for the guilty party, where he can be found. To process on a subpolitical level this pain, which belongs not to the realm of social formation but rather to the cycle of life, a self-aware antipolitical therapeutics is required – not to depoliticize individuals, but to deneurotize politics, to protect the political from psychodynamic movements and Dionysian short circuits. (N., p. 90) (my emphasis)

[therapeutics releases] politics from the suspicion that it could be immediately responsible for the self-compositions and the sufferings caused by individuation in individual lives.<sup>6</sup>

4. This radical critique of the political totality, made from the therapeutic domain, is one of the fundamental gestures of Sloterdijk’s thought. What is at stake in this radical challenge to the pretensions of politics? Despite the implicit reference to a certain form of resentment (“search for the guilty party”) to reduce this critique to a simple attempt at psychologization<sup>7</sup> would be to seriously misunderstand its nature and would lead us, among other things, to lose sight of the fundamental theological and religious themes within therapeutic theory, with which Sloterdijk explicitly allies himself. Or rather, if Sloterdijk claims to reveal mechanisms that have remained unconscious in politics, it is usually to highlight – in the purest tradition of psychological enlightenment – “the function of politics as substitute theology”.<sup>8</sup> This kind of link between the political and the religious recurs throughout his work. By his own admission, he places himself in the eye of the storm of religions, “so deep inside that religion has disappeared”, his project remaining moreover unintelligible if one does not remember that his thinking expressly starts out from the point “at which positive religions are formulated”.<sup>9</sup> This position, unique in the contemporary philosophical landscape, partially explains the virulence of his critique of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, the “bible of alter-globalization” as it said on the cover of the paperback edition of the French translation, which he curtly reduces to its unacknowledged religious dimension:

This “empire” can only be understood in the singular and is strictly ecumenical in nature [...] Just as it often happens that the Church cannot distinguish itself from the world it claims to resist, so we can no longer make a clear

separation between the multitude of the universe and the capital from which it seeks to distance itself [...] Only a mystical decision allows members of the affluent left to know that they are still on the left [...] They base this on introspective observation, the fact that they feel within themselves a pure being-against. Since the enemy to be risen against no longer has a shape, the affect “against” has to be enough on its own: this being against becomes the essential key to every active position in the world... De facto, these against-men, belonging to the Church of opposition, are, like all contemporaries, ambivalent clients of the given.<sup>10</sup>

At a distance of twenty years this critique of *Empire* and the remarks on the therapeutic limitations of politics are mutually illuminating. The critique of *Empire* illustrates the way that Sloterdijk rejects any interpretation of the suffering of being-in-the-world that simply refers back to an underlying political antagonism and how he moreover rules out all claims to base an “active position in the world” on reactive being-against. His condemnation of the totalizing passion of the political is implacable, at the level of both theory (the division of the world into empire and multitude) and practice (the subjective truth of being-against as the foundation of an active position in the world).

4.1 Sloterdijk’s critique of the political totality is reminiscent of the positions of Lacan, who was very quick to dismiss both Christian apologetics and modern political beliefs. However, this parallel with Lacan requires greater clarification. It is justified to the extent that psychoanalysis is part of the psychological enlightenment to which Sloterdijk also lays claim, moreover recognizing from the outset Lacan’s influence on his own thought. Their similarity can be summed up as a basic agreement on the critique of the fetishism of identity, a “mental illness of western Man”, as Lacan put it, whose most subversive expression is undoubtedly the inversion of the Freudian rule, “Where id was, ego shall be” into, “where ego was, id shall be”. On the other hand this comparison between Lacan and Sloterdijk may lead to confusion if we do not explain how Lacan’s critique connects to the political. To be brief, here again it is a matter of the relationship between politics and totality. For Lacan,

the imaginary idea of the whole as it is given by the body, relying on the right form of satisfaction, on that which, arguably, makes a sphere, has always been used in politics by the party of the political priesthood.<sup>11</sup>

For the celebrated theorist of desire as lack, the almost Parmenidean idea of making a sphere, which informs politics, can never in any circumstances be accepted as such. In insisting on the imaginary nature of this “whole” grounded in the model of the body, and in describing a “party of the political priesthood” that



seeks to impose its own “right form[s] of satisfaction” on its flock, Lacan is seeking to name a deficiency at the very heart of the political rationale. In so doing, the psychoanalytical critique of politics restates the opposition between psychological and political enlightenment advanced by Sloterdijk.

4.2 But above and beyond this preliminary distinction between the two types of enlightenment, on which Lacan and Sloterdijk clearly agree, Lacan’s comments reveal a profound disagreement over the body and the relationship to totality. This is no marginal matter: it is probably the site of the fundamental dividing line in contemporary European philosophico-political thought, and it would not be too much to see Lacan as (at least partially) the source of this split. Briefly outlined, on one side of this line are Badiou, Žižek and Rancière – the first two claiming a direct link to Lacan, the third sharing his concern with “disembodiment”<sup>12</sup> – and, on the other, Agamben, Deleuze, Foucault and Sloterdijk.<sup>13</sup> What is perhaps most striking in this demarcation is to see how the former claim to be more politically radical, ruling out neo-Nietzschean approaches a priori (for example Rancière says “there is no Dionysian politics”) and upholding the truth of revolutionary *acting out*. In the final analysis, what is at stake here is the constitution of a subject of political action. Ultimately all of Žižek’s work relates to this question, from his rejection of neo-Nietzscheanism to his unbridled praise of Lenin:

With biogenetics, the Nietzschean program of the emphatic and ecstatic assertion of the body is thus over. Far from serving as the ultimate reference, the body loses its mysterious impenetrable density and turns into something technologically manageable, something we can generate and transform through intervening into its genetic formula – in short, something the “truth” of which is this abstract genetic formula.<sup>14</sup>

The problem of today’s philosophico-political scene is ultimately best expressed by Lenin’s old question “What is to be done?” – how do we reassert, on the political terrain, the proper dimension of the act?<sup>15</sup>

Does the enormity of the first remark even require a response? Does Žižek expect geneticists to discover the gene for ecstatic presence in the world? Despite his extremely dubious readings of some authors (we might think of Deleuze), he remains an excellent interlocutor in an attempt to formulate the question of political action. The importance of the first of Žižek’s remarks cited above lies in the fact that it indicates, in “negative” and in a very radical manner, the place of the essential negativity of subjectivity as interpreted from a Lacano-Hegelian perspective. This negativity introduces an unbridgeable gap between the body and the subject proper: in the Cartesian tradition upheld by Lacan, and following him by

Žižek, “I have a body”, in direct opposition to phenomenologico-ecstatic attempts to envisage a unity of body and speaking subject, to which Sloterdijk fully belongs.<sup>16</sup> Rather than insisting on a fundamental division of the subject as a basis for the political, Sloterdijk prefers to develop a description of the plastic powers that produce the human, implying a strong conception of an anthropogenetic sphere that incorporates the political. This way of approaching plastic anthropogenetic power brings Sloterdijk closer to affirmative biopolitics as developed in recent years in the wake of Deleuze’s thought. On the other hand his conception of the biopolitical, based on a monism of affect and more given to considering the molecular conditions for the exercise of power, is clearly some way from the analysis of biopower developed by Foucault and Agamben.

In the second citation from Žižek, the reference to Lenin highlights the quintessential political act of revolution – that “negativity at last come down into things”, as Marx would say:

With Lenin, as with Lacan, the point is that the revolution ne s’autorise que d’elle-même: we should venture the revolutionary act not covered by the big Other – the fear of taking power “prematurely”, the search for the guarantee, is the fear of the abyss of the act.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of these two remarks, we can see how they project an authentic subject of political action who, without recourse to a great Other or any other ecstatico-totalizing guarantee, accepts the absolutely contingent and performative nature of all human activity and manfully confronts *the emptiness of the act*.<sup>18</sup>

5 We shall now look forward a bit to the rest of the present essay. We shall say that “What is to be done?” is an essentially metaphysical question – the emptiness of the act that it implies is a properly metaphysical void, which coincides with the gap between theory and practice. Its unthought element is the question of *power*, envisaged as immanent. This question must be considered from the beginning, starting with the body and the relationship to totality – in other words in an ecstatic mode. The Lacanian *emptiness of the act* and the corresponding subject of the action must be countered by the processual, immanent void of non-action. It is only in this void that the act comes together.

6. To grasp what is at stake in Sloterdijk’s critique of the political totality, we must look in detail at the way in which he develops a non-metaphysical conception of power and its political elaboration. For if there is a recurrent political problem in our era, it is precisely that of the constitution of a subject of action, or a way of ensuring that action is carried out. We shall henceforth subsume both formulations under the question of action. Of course it is no coincidence that Sloterdijk’s

critique of Hardt and Negri comes down heavily on precisely this point (“this being against becomes the essential key to every active position in the world”). As has already been suggested, it is precisely this that is questioned by the anti-metaphysical critique of power. So if by metaphysics we understand all efforts to stabilise a referent for action, how does Sloterdijk understand the question of action non-metaphysically?

## Critique of the metaphysics of power

The distinction of metaphysical origin between theory and practice,  
and the representation of transmission between the two,  
blocks the access of the intelligence to what I call “thinking”.  
Heidegger

1. There are ways of envisaging power that lead invariably to impotence. This is particularly true, says Sloterdijk, of the critique of power that unconsciously retains metaphysical aspects. “One cannot escape the constraint and possibility of being powerful”.<sup>19</sup>

**Gloss  $\alpha$ :** The most common error one risks committing in relation to such a statement is that of reducing it to a simple expression of a will to power, as though the aim here was to contrast those who “want” to be powerful with the quintessentially resistant who criticise that will in order to refrain from it more successfully. Nor is it enough to say that power has no “outside”, which can easily be incorporated into a perspective of primary *realpolitik*. To understand what is at stake here it is necessary to be sensitive to the passivity of the phrase used by Sloterdijk: “One cannot escape the constraint and possibility of being powerful”. This suggests that the question is independent of individual will, that at a fundamental level power does not arise from will. If we accept the Heideggerian reading that sees the will to power as the ultimate expression of metaphysics, we can understand that an anti-metaphysical critique of power necessarily overturns the relationship between will and power.<sup>20</sup> From a poietic perspective, in other words that sees life as self-composition, power must precede all will: “the self-composing structure of life can find its optimal development only in retaking a ‘power’”.<sup>21</sup> This idea runs counter to any Darwinian or Hobbesian aesthetics of instrumentalized subjects pitted all against all, instead insisting on the “taking up” of shared bodily powers – of life forms. So we can already see how the idea of a non-metaphysical understanding of power in Sloterdijk’s work is profoundly anchored in what he calls elsewhere the “primary communicability of the living”.<sup>22</sup>

2. There is always more power in the real than can be known. In Spinozist terms this means that we do not know what a body is *capable* of. This poetic thought infinitely overflows the schema of theory and practice, the metaphysical idea of theory as the foundation of practice. “Modernism has stuffed us full of theory of action”.<sup>23</sup>

**Gloss  $\alpha$ :** We should be careful not to extend this idea of an intrinsic limit to what we can know into the typically Kantian terms of the conditions of possibility of knowledge of the *thing in itself*. Here we have a second glimpse of the dividing line mentioned above: can one have access to “Being”, to the “Real” or not? The impossibility of such access is the touchstone of both Kantian philosophy and Lacanian theory: indeed for the latter the Real is that which absolutely resists symbolization – it is properly impossible to imagine, incorporate or reach in any way at all. This founding impossibility is the basis not only for the theory of desire as lack, but also for an entire theoretical construction intended to understand and legitimate the subject of action. So we can say: without the noumenon, there can be no Kantian practical philosophy, and no Lacanian *vide de l’acte*.

**Gloss  $\beta$ :** Conversely, immanence-based thought constantly returns to this experience of continually renewed access to the world, or of participation in the gestation of the world as Anne Cheng so nicely puts it in relation to Daoist thought. We shall see later on that this reference to Chinese immanentist thinking is anything but arbitrary when it comes to envisaging the question of action in a non-metaphysical way. For the moment Bergson gives an excellent glimpse of the fundamental link between the ontological question of access to being and that of action in the passage from *Creative Evolution* which directly critiques evolutionist thinking and, in the background, Kantianism:

If the intellectual form of the living being has been gradually modelled on the reciprocal actions and reactions of certain bodies and their material environment, how should it not reveal to us something of the very essence of which these bodies are made? Action cannot move in the unreal. A mind born to speculate or to dream, I admit, might remain outside reality [...] But an intellect bent upon the action to be performed and the reaction to follow, feeling its object so as to get its mobile impression at every instant, is an intellect that touches something of the absolute.”<sup>24</sup>(my emphasis)

One cannot fail to see a striking parallel between Bergson’s description of the relationship between intelligence of the world and action and the description developed by Sloterdijk of the entry (the pro-duction) of the human into the open in anthropotechnical terms. Indeed one of the fundamental aspects of Sloterdijk’s work is that it envisages the anthropological unthought in the Heideggerian idea

of the clearing of being. To this end Sloterdijk proposes a theory of anthropogenesis that gives primordial importance to the technical. At a distance of almost a hundred years, and from a very similar “creative evolutionist” perspective, Sloterdijk illustrates with a great many detail the theory that Bergson was trying to erect against abstract idealism in philosophy and its (properly metaphysical) inability to envisage the relationship between truth and action:

If there has been something like a primal scene of the clearing, in the perspective of evolution, it would indubitably consist of a series of actions in the course of which the pre-man would take hold of a stone [...].

Watching a thrown stone is the initial preliminary form of theory and the feeling of concord engendered by a successful throw, a shot on target, an effective throw, is the first stage in a function of post-animal truth. [...] [It was enough] to unleash the first event of anthropogenesis, the first production with ontological significance, in the sense of the production of an effect in an open space.”<sup>25</sup> (my emphasis)

To envisage a technical action as producing a space in which truth is produced is also to envisage “moments of truth”. Rather than giving more value to the manly capacity to confront the excess or abyss of the act, thinking based on immanence prefers to concentrate on the concrete processes that enable the body to attain the required levels of intensity, precision and attention: open space, emptiness – and the possibility of getting it right. This is what José Gil calls “the space of the body”, “a spatial *middle ground* (*milieu*) that creates the depth of places”.<sup>26</sup> According to some sinologists the character 中 (*zhong*), one of the most important characters of the empire that always called itself “middle” (中国, *zhongguo*) is the representation of a target seen from above, pierced through its centre by an arrow. It is said that every five years in ancient China there would be archery competitions in which all the nobles of the royal court took part. During these competitions, the most important test was musical shooting. This involved hitting the centre of the target at the right moment, in other words at a particular moment in the melody sounded out by the gong. Whoever managed not just to aim well but more importantly to loose his arrow to the rhythm of the melody demonstrated that he had the ability to govern.<sup>27</sup> The “happy medium” [*juste milieu*] is thus not a geometrical notion but a vibrant space. In this context we can see the full significance of the idea that it is in the void that the act comes together. This understanding of the act opens up the sphere of the ethos. The latter seems to be at the opposite pole from the sphere of the exercise of actual power only for those who conceive of it in a strictly formalist, metaphysical way.

**Gloss  $\gamma$ :** In *Le palais de cristal*, Sloterdijk sets out a great many ideas on the advent of the modern subject of action, in a kind of paradoxical tribute to the men who brought the process of globalization to fruition: discoverers, explorers, entrepreneurs and other rejects of philosophy. I say paradoxical to the extent that this description of the “internal stabilization of a culture of actors”<sup>28</sup> in the modern era is simultaneously a chronicle of that era’s forthcoming death. At the same time, in Sloterdijk’s view, a post-historic era is taking shape, “subject to the primacy of kindness, symmetry, inhibition, interaction and cooperation”,<sup>29</sup> a situation opposite to the offensive unilateralism characteristic of the modern period. The psychodynamics of action developed by Sloterdijk is thus intended as the most realistic and concrete description possible of the subject of action in the metaphysical era, seeking to bring elements of psycho-political answers to the question of the uncertain movement from theory to practice. Sloterdijk’s theory is developed in two stages: first the subject is defined from the outset as an actor; then the ability to act must always be won from primary inhibition:

Being a “subject” means adopting a position from which an actor can move from theory to practice. This transition usually occurs when an actor finds the motive that frees him from hesitation and takes away his inhibitions, allowing him to act.<sup>30</sup>

The main problem that is then posed for this theory is to explain the means by which the subject succeeds in casting off his inhibitions. More precisely, it is a matter of understanding how one manages to obtain a “psychic formatting” that enables one to act “starting from oneself”, how one manages to “mobilise” oneself – on this point Sloterdijk even speaks of the “arming of subjectivity”. The use of warlike metaphors to describe the constitution of the modern subject of action constantly recurs throughout the book, continuing a critique of subjective reason and an understanding of demobilization that harks back to his early work (see 6.). Commenting on William James’s essay *The Will to Believe*, Sloterdijk highlights the “cognitive function of foundation”<sup>31</sup> in the constitution of the modern subject of action:

Modern individuals are generally very successful in establishing a “final authority” that they regard as obligatory. American liberal psychology understood that the “papacy” is not a Roman peculiarity, but a psychic function with ubiquitous validity that must be explicitly activated when individualist forms of life start to become dominant. The mission of the inner pope is to halt the infinite regression produced by doubt in order to assert the psycho-semantic function of dogma on an individual basis.<sup>32</sup>

If we keep to the partial definition of metaphysics proposed above (metaphysics as the totality of efforts to stabilise a referent for action), we cannot fail to observe the extent to which the schema of belief and obedience to oneself outlined by Sloterdijk fully corresponds to it. This should tell us something about at least one thing: the question of power is intimately linked to the question of belief or, to put it another way, there is no “taking” of power without the acquisition of the appropriate psychological equipment. A critique of the metaphysics of power or of subjectivity thus cannot do without an in-depth analysis of the psychodynamic springs of action. This moreover gives an idea of the urgent need to integrate a spiritual dimension into the anti-capitalist critique (see Foucault’s last work, the spiritual understood as inner work of an ethical order) in order to be able to adequately problematise belief as a foundation of the metaphysical subject of action. We should also note that the question of belief, approached in its metaphysical background and with the appropriate psychological subtlety, proves infinitely more pertinent than endless verbiage about identities (personal or national) and their psychosocial or multiculturalist management.

3. *Knowledge is power*: “The old social democracy [...] continually failed to recognize which knowledge it is that really gives power and what kind of power one must be and have in order to gain the knowledge that expands power.”<sup>33</sup> The critique of cynical reason traces the limits of the Enlightenment and its bloodless politicization of thought. For the Enlightenment developed a strangely fleshless conception of power, at a time when it was explicitly espousing the cause of political emancipation. This inherent tension between power and its political elaboration in the modern period points to the question of action.

**Gloss  $\alpha$ :** The critique of cynical reason is primarily a project of embodied enlightenment, which Sloterdijk also calls physiognomic thought. For it is against the background of a generalized absence to self that the cynic proliferates as a mass type. Access to this tension between the therapeutic and the political, which is so crucial to Sloterdijk’s philosophical project, is also afforded by the objectifying, distancing and reifying enlightenment that “reduces the world of physiognomy to silence”.<sup>34</sup> This is to say that it neutralizes the relationship of proximity to that which surrounds us, *circumstances or environment*, it renders us illiterate in reading all that gives life forms their substance – their world. This type of enlightenment is at home wherever people politologise, in other words anywhere that people methodically exclude themselves from the “bundle of the many” the better to prognosticate on the eternal elsewhere of the “political stage”. It is in this light that we should understand Sloterdijk’s radical rejection of the “structurally stupid position of criticism”.<sup>35</sup> Its problem is at once structural and postural: structural because it systematically looks down to show itself to be superior and secondly because “it is a matter of proper distance”<sup>36</sup> when what is urgently needed now is

to rediscover the proper proximity. So it becomes a postural problem when the misery of the bodies that cling to this regime is not in doubt. Knowledge may have promised power, but criticism reproduces absence; it speaks from somewhere we are not.

**Gloss β:** From the outset the psychosomatics of cynicism as outlined in Sloterdijk's first book places us in the territory of ethopoietics. The main importance of a therapeutic approach to the question of power is almost certainly that it envisages the body in a situation of power and places "a truth as it is read in the fabric of *accomplished acts and bodily postures*" at the centre of its concerns.<sup>37</sup> In his *Métamorphoses du corps*, José Gil develops an interesting reading of the relationship between body, power and therapeutics which is worth quoting at length:

Therapeutic power appears as a fundamental axis around which unfold all the fields in which the effects of power are manifested. The question of the power or impotence of a given political or economic organization seems to rebound (and/or have its source) in the mechanisms at work in therapy. It is certainly no coincidence that Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is subtitled "capitalism and schizophrenia" and that the book's movement is one of a constant coming and going between the therapeutic field and that of social and economic power: this is because at the centre of the question of power is that of the power of the body, its energy, the regime of circulation to which it is subject depending on the different organizations of power one is dealing with.<sup>38</sup> (my emphasis)

The authors of the Nietzschean family each approach the ethopoietical question in their own way; it could be said that this is precisely how they can be recognized and/or included within that tradition. This is because Nietzsche placed "the auto-genesis of the subject on the agenda of philosophy",<sup>39</sup> in other words the question of coming-into-the-world, thus placing philosophy within the immunitarian/biopolitical context. Sloterdijk seems to be the most "therapeutic" author in this tradition to the extent that he remains the closest to Nietzsche's concern to explain the conditions of human viability (starting with its coming into the world) – and after that the most sensitive to "the need to invent a new poetics of immunizing space" (*Vivre chaud et penser froid*, interview with Eric Alliez). The premises of this theme, which has its fullest development in the trilogy of the spheres, can already be seen in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, in Sloterdijk's concern to develop a philosophy he describes as "integrative" and anti-schizoid. Sloterdijk's starting point is a kind of inside roundness, as it might be described by Bachelard, whom he cites in an epigraph to the magnificent *Bulles*, and in that he visibly distances himself from a certain "thinking of the outside" common to Blanchot, Foucault and Deleuze for example. This is the level at which the most virulent critiques of



Sloterdijk's thought are addressed. Most concern his inadequacy when it comes to envisaging a properly political stasis or, in other words, his tendency to reduce the political to the domestic sphere. We shall return to this problem shortly. First we must look at what Sloterdijk has to say about the philosophies of difference:

The process of coming-into-the-world in the human being is a continuum that includes discontinuities. [...] When I insist on the fact that coming-into-the-world is a continuum of continuities and discontinuities, my formulation is intended to indicate that despite all the disasters and ruptures that human beings have always undergone [...] the strange mosaic of humankind always remains [...] So we are still dealing with a continuum of continuities and discontinuities. We can observe the strength of this formulation when we try to invert it, in other words when we bank essentially on discontinuity, as do some forms of thought arising out of the philosophy of difference. These are blocked to the enigmas of continuity, which I say can never be envisaged with sufficient seriousness.<sup>40</sup> (my emphasis)

This primacy of continuity is expressed in an infinite number of ways in his work, which in this sense can be summed up as a concern to understand the inner space. Sloterdijk rails against “the rabble of observers who want to take everything from the outside and don’t understand the slightest rhythm”;<sup>41</sup> he exhorts us to take responsibility in relation to the “symbolic air-conditioning of the common space”,<sup>42</sup> observing that, “the belief that the empathy of human beings for other human beings is not exhaustible is an irresponsible illusion”.<sup>43</sup> This is the properly therapeutic dimension of his work, expressed in the concern with the inner space which, for discussion purposes, we can classify into three “formal” levels: 1. religio-psychotherapeutic: “the faculty of *being understood* and repaired is the idea on which the entire profession of priests and psychotherapists rests to this day” (my emphasis);<sup>44</sup> 2. politico-immunitarian: “the Roman legal expression *integrum* [...] the legal practice of the Roman or old European type has a therapeutic effect, to the extent that it is fundamentally about protecting oneself from wounding and re-establishing the ‘integrity’ of things”;<sup>45</sup> 3. spatio-architectural: “What is therapeutics if not the knowledge of procedure and the art of knowledge of the re-establishment of relations more appropriate to humanity after an outbreak of excess – an architecture of the spaces of life after the demonstration of the unbearable?”<sup>46</sup> We should note that it is from this perspective that Sloterdijk draws on what he calls the “Chinese continuum” – “up until the threshold of our century China was surely a monstrous artistic exercise on the theme of ‘existing in a space without an outside by walling oneself up’”.<sup>47</sup>

**Gloss γ:** So from the therapeutic perspective, in the beginning was the inside. It is understandable that from such a perspective the political is a natural object of

kosmopolitical hypostasis and that being-in-the-world is essentially envisaged as a being-in. And it is doubtless no coincidence that, in the “retrospective insight” that leads to the trilogy of the spheres, Sloterdijk brings together a macro-historian, a theologian and a literary critic, who, despite great methodological differences, at least agree on the need to create a “literature of grand circumstances” – a phrase to be taken literally, both at the level of what is around (circumscribes) and according to the idea that there is a literary dimension inherent in any phenomenon of comprehension (we might think of the scientists who necessarily have to represent their theories by means of models and narratives). But the properly political problem of the therapeutically-inspired grand narrative implemented by Sloterdijk to give a representation of global excess is that its development starts from such a macroscopic viewpoint that one loses all sight of politics as a dissensual form of action. While seeking to acquire the means to grasp the monstrous nature of the period, the megalopsychic hyperpolitics deployed by Sloterdijk has an unfortunate tendency to *domesticate* the political, in other words, literally, to bring it back into the bosom of the *oikos*, the household. Sloterdijk’s filiation to Plato, so brilliantly brought out in his attempt to renew the humanist thinking outlined in *Règles pour le parc humain*, here seems problematic in another way. We know that for Plato the distinction between *oikos* and *polis* is not presented, as it is in Aristotle, in terms of an opposition. It is in this sense that Aristotle critiques Plato’s conception of the *polis* and criticizes his master for insisting excessively on the unitary nature of the city, thereby running the risk of turning it into a house. “It is clear that if the process of unification is taken to a certain point,” he writes, “there will no longer be a city. A city is by nature multiple, and if it becomes too unified it will no longer be a city but a house (*oikia*).”<sup>48</sup> One could not express more clearly the way in which the cosmopolitical hypostasis implemented by Sloterdijk is ultimately more theological than political and how on the other hand his philosophy of calming (*Gelassenheit*) still carries the risk of definitively absorbing the stasiological break – a preventive suspension of the common?

But there again, this critique must itself be suspended, or at least nuanced, in order to avoid insisting prematurely on the gap that could be said to separate Sloterdijk from the philosophies of difference, which apparently find it easier to envisage stasis. The passage from *Métamorphoses du corps* cited above already gives a glimpse of a central therapeutic dimension in Deleuze and Guattari’s work: as a purely indicative example we might think of the many calls for prudence when forming a body without organs, not to mention the countless references to the cosmic in *A Thousand Plateaus*. We should also note the return to the question of ethics in Foucault’s last work, and the persistent incomprehension to which this change is still subject, particularly among those who see the theory of “the aesthetics of existence” as a more or less marked retreat from radical politics. This systematic blindness to ethics on which a certain Marxism prides itself is more-

over strangely symmetrical with the ecstatic rigidity institutionalized in many contemporary artistic circles, whose credo is to discredit *a priori* as romantic any relationship to the One or to totality, as though there were nothing more subversive than to uphold a primary conception of discontinuity and difference. Compared to this, therapeutics at least makes it possible to show the need to start from the concrete bodily situation in power games in order to clear a space for real stakes to be brought into play – a space for *intercessors*.

4. The word “magic” implies the envisaging of a different type of relationship between knowledge and power. “As it is employed among philosophers, the word *magus* refers to a man combining knowledge with the power to act.” (Giordano Bruno).

**Gloss  $\alpha$ :** The German etymology of the word for power leads us to understand it as potential. The German words *Macht*, power, and *machen*, to do/make, have the same root as the words “mechanical” and “magic” and derive from *mögen*, *vermögen*, “to be able to”. This “being-able-to” should be understood in the context of a general theory of the media. In return this redefines the question of power and its political elaboration.

**Gloss  $\beta$ :** In this way we come to the core of the non-metaphysical conception of power in Sloterdijk’s work. This can be summed up in a question: “Shouldn’t the most decentred individual be understood as potentially the most powerful?”<sup>49</sup> In an undoubtedly very similar sense, Deleuze describes the thinker as the dark precursor between two potentials. In both cases thinking in terms of a unilateralized subject who thus becomes a “beam of pure initiative”<sup>50</sup> has been replaced by thinking in terms of a capacity to make worlds happen. The renaissance conception of the *magus* illustrates this idea:

In expressions of magic, the early modern period is agreed on a human being who believes that his business is to bring about things hitherto regarded as impossible. What the 16th century, the great period of the European seizure of power and domination, calls the “*magus*” is a man capable of receiving encyclopaedic stimuli, endowed with a polyvalent openness to the world, who trains himself in attentive, artistic cooperation with the private interactions between things in a highly communicative universe. The *magus*, as common prototype of the philosopher, artist, doctor, engineer and computer expert, is nothing other than an operator and go-between in the world of correspondences, influences and attractions.<sup>51</sup> (my emphasis)

For Sloterdijk the theme of magic is part of an archaeology of therapeutics and of the revelation of the anti-psychoanalytic unconscious, whose second high point

(historically speaking) was the discovery of animal magnetism. Here again this is an aspect of his work whose seeds were already present in his very early writings. In *Critique of Cynical Reason* he writes, “All this says that at least since the late eighteenth century, the illusion of a transparent human self-consciousness has been systematically destroyed.”<sup>52</sup> Of course here Sloterdijk has in his sights the model of the traditional political subject as he has been understood right across the modern political spectrum: autonomous, voluntarist and completely impermeable to the conditions in which he is plunged (“my heart goes mad when I advance towards the future”, in the words of a Chinese revolutionary song). Conversely, in a non-metaphysical theory of power, the capacity for ecstatic openness and availability becomes a fundamental political question. The political is then understood as a degree of intensity in the ethical element – and communism as a readiness to allow oneself to be touched and to share what is common.

5. In Chinese, the “media” are 媒体, *meiti*, literally the go-between or intermediary between bodies. Sloterdijk, like Heidegger before him, draws abundantly on ancient Chinese thought in order to go beyond the metaphysical conception of subjectivity and the modern mobilization arising out of it. His theory of the media is part of what he himself calls an oriental renaissance; “a Chinese element is mixed into it in subtle pulsations, a barely perceptible foetal music of the spheres can be heard”.<sup>53</sup>

**Gloss α:** Heidegger’s interest in oriental thought is well documented. In addition to his close relationships with several Japanese thinkers and his profound knowledge of the *Zhuangzi*, he is known to have undertaken the translation of the *Daojing* with the student Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, in the summer of 1946. There is no doubt that this prolonged sojourn in the thought of the master of non-action had some influence on the writing of his *Letter on Humanism* in the autumn of the same year, in which action is explicitly envisaged in terms of achievement, a theme, incidentally, that recurs throughout ancient Chinese thought. It is the idea of the performative as perfection: “The brush perfecting creation / Not all the credit goes to Heaven!” (Li He, 10<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese Buddhist poet). Sloterdijk gives remarkable expression to this rich Sino-Heideggerian tradition in his book on eurotaoism:

From that point, the importance of the oriental renaissance to the modern West becomes clear: [...] As long as the times are modern times, they will be obsessed with the question of the compatibility of human vital processes with modernity. [...] Modernity as being-towards-movement, this modernity is characterized as “mobilization-in-general”, in other words as being-towards-auto-annihilation. The “renaissance-in-general” that we see at work in the orientaling manoeuvres of the sensitive fraction of the West is equivalent to no

more nor less than a change of ontological premise. [...] Anyone seeking a language of demobilization today will find it most easily in oriental antiquity, where different dramas from those of the civilization of western mobilization were developed for the kinetics of the will to life.<sup>54</sup> (my emphasis)

6. Envisaging the question of power in a non-metaphysical way thus fundamentally means (for Sloterdijk), envisaging demobilization. This means first and foremost going beyond the now improper and outdated form of sovereign subjectivity – “I am what I am” as Spectacle suggests to us. But how can this idea of demobilization translate on the political level? Or to put it another way, how can we understand the political as a dissensual form of action based on a strong theory of the media? Like Heidegger before him, Sloterdijk lays himself wide open to the criticism of quietist idealism. This is undoubtedly the main issue at stake in the question of action.

**Gloss α:** Marx vs. Heidegger: the question of action posits a distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, in other words a distinction between two fundamentally different ways of conceiving of productive human activity. For Marx, *praxis* is defined as voluntary action that constitutes the human being as such. Through it “man makes his vital activity itself the object of his will and his consciousness” in order to posit himself as universal producer.<sup>55</sup> All that is involuntary must become voluntary – such is the fundamental equation of modern mobilization.

Because of this movement, the proletariat is called to understand what it means to be the productive class proper; it is only once it has understood this that it can extract from its weakness the strength to take the essential production on itself, [...] the autoproduction of a social world in which workers are not poor devils alienated from themselves, but companions in solidarity with a rich life. There is no doubt that this is the most vigorous project ever formulated concerning the interpretation of human initiative.<sup>56</sup>

Against Marx, the thinker of revolutionary mobilization, Sloterdijk sides with Heidegger, the thinker of conservative revolution, for whom the starting point will never be found in *praxis*, but rather in the poetic dimension of being-in-the-world. At this point in the present work I shall simply confine myself to indicating, succinctly and by way of conclusion, how Sloterdijk develops his own version of the demobilizing “step back” for which Heidegger’s thought calls.

**Gloss β:** From a therapeutico-mediatized perspective, the preliminary political observation concerns total mobilization. Sloterdijk recalls how this is intimately linked to our conception of *praxis*:

In the theory of subjective reason, the world is paraphrased as the content of our doings. Subjectivity has been turned fully into praxis. [...] Our 'praxis' [...] in fact represents the central myth of modernity.<sup>57</sup>

Sloterdijk contrasts our awareness of our dignity as "universal producer" with a conception of ecstatico-mediatised man, implying in the first place that we invert our relationship to action. The passage cited above continues:

In this blinding, practical reason could not see that the highest concept of behavior is not 'doing' but 'letting things be' [...] Those who exercise the praxis of abstention do not get caught in the self-continuation mechanism of unleashed activities.<sup>58</sup>

So there is a shift from praxis towards what Sloterdijk provisionally here calls "abstention", which profoundly affects the coordinates of political action. Even the concept of quintessential radical transformative action – revolution – is swept up in this movement:

In the concept of revolution itself, there vibrates a harmony that refers back to religious tradition. If we look at it more closely, we discover that the grammar of the concept of revolution presents an analogy with the concept of conversion [...] conversion is a term that cannot be integrated into a grammar of action. It should instead be understood as event.<sup>59</sup>

This transition from a grammar of action to a grammar of the event is entirely representative of the "step back" that informs Heideggerian-inspired thinking about action. The question of conversion sits precisely at the meeting point between therapeutics and politics. There is no doubt that conversion is a fundamental element in rethinking the question of politics – Foucault's last work being once again a pioneer in this regard.

**Gloss  $\gamma$ :** *Anonymity as the threshold of the politicization of existence.* Following the development of the theory of the media in Sloterdijk's thought, the preliminary idea of abstention is refined into that of interruption.<sup>60</sup> For Sloterdijk total mobilization is "the establishment of a system of synchronous stress on a world-wide scale", a system in which everyone is required to carry out *identity service*. "Excitability then becomes the first civic duty"<sup>61</sup> he says, as a result of which,

My sovereignty, if it exists, can arise only from the fact that I allow the integrated impulse to die within me or that I pass it on, possibly, in a totally transformed guise [...] I am free only to the extent that I can interrupt the processes that degenerate and can immunize myself against infections of opinion.<sup>62</sup>

The whole question – the question of action that is – then becomes *how* to bring about this immunizing interruption. It is a question of coming-into-the-world and of anonymity – a word which, if we take it literally, refers back to the magic of the nameless state, the anonymity of life in the present: “The more anonymous I am, the more present”.

At this precise point we must begin to understand Sloterdijk against Sloterdijk.

## Notes

1. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred. London/New York: Verso, p. 86.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
4. Sloterdijk, P. (2003): *Ni le soleil ni la mort. Jeu de piste sous forme de dialogues avec Hans-Jürgens Heinrichs*. Paris: Fayard, p. 254.
5. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*, trans. Jamie Owen Daniel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 84.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
7. Sloterdijk's most recent book, *Colère et temps. Essai politico-psychologique*, seems to contradict this interpretation, at least in part. In this work Sloterdijk summarily assimilates dissensual-revolutionary forms of action to expressions of resentment and its fructification, describing a veritable planned economy of anger which, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he argues, culminated in a “world bank of vengeance” – communism. This chatty, mediocre, furiously Nietzschean book does not do justice to Sloterdijk's better intuitions concerning the formation of human foams and its bioplastic powers. On the other hand it leaves no doubts as to the reach of the cosmico-imperial therapy proposed by Sloterdijk as he settles more comfortably into the role of a great *kybernetes* of the human vessel. For more detail on this question, see: Bordeleau, E. (2008): ‘La terapia cosmico-imperial de Peter Sloterdijk.’ *Espai en blanc* 3-4.
8. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 460.
9. Sloterdijk, P. (2001): *Essai d'intoxication volontaire*. Paris: Hachette littérature, p. 126.
10. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): *Écumes*. Paris: Maren Sell, pp. 730-731.
11. Cited by Assoun, P.L. (2003): ‘De Freud à Lacan, le sujet du politique.’ In: *Jacques Lacan: psychanalyse et politique*, Cités no. 16, Paris. On the subject of the political desire for totality, from a slightly different perspective, see: “The idea that knowledge can make a totality is, if I may say so, immanent in the political as such.” *Séminaire XVII*, “l'envers de la psychanalyse”, 17 December 1969.
12. “Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal [...] The paths of political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification, but of literary disembodiment.” Rancière, J. (2000): *Le partage du sensible*. Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, p. 63-64.
13. This is obviously an overly crude distinction. Though they have many aspects in common, Deleuze and Foucault and, still more, Agamben and Sloterdijk differ on essential points.
14. Žižek, S. (2003): *Organs without Bodies*. New York: Verso, p.25.
15. Butler, J., E. Laclau & S. Zizek (2000): *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*. New York: Verso, p.127.

16. On this see the many (and very substantial) developments of this question in Žizek, S. (2003): o.c., pp. 87–93, p. 120ff.
17. Žizek, S. (2002): *Revolution at the Gates*. New York: Verso, p.8.
18. From this point of view, sticking to the contingency of human existence and action seems to be enough to avoid “dangerous” metaphysical totalizations. It would seem that this is an interpretation of metaphysics which, although entirely acceptable, is different from that developed by Sloterdijk in his books. Purely as an indication, and in a less polemical tone, I would cite the following highly eloquent passage from *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*, which seems to me to give an excellent idea of the way in which the question of political action is developed in this tradition of thought (Laclau and Butler also clearly make a great deal of Lacan’s theoretical contribution): “There are significant differences among us on the question of the “subject”, and this comes through as we each attempt to take account of what constitutes or conditions the failure of any claim to identity to achieve final or full determination. What remains true, however, is that we each value this “failure” as a condition of democratic contestation itself” (my emphasis). In: Butler, J., E. Laclau & S. Žizek (2000): o.c., p. 2..
19. Sloterdijk, P. (2001): *La domestication de l’être*. Paris: Mille et une nuits, p. 92.
20. However we should note that Sloterdijk slightly distances himself from Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche and his claim to make him the ultimate thinker of metaphysics, preferring to play Nietzsche against himself. We shall not go into the details of that discussion.
21. Sloterdijk, P. (1989): o.c., p. 103.
22. Ibid., p. 68. For more detail, see my : Bordeleau, E. (2007): ‘Entre biopouvoir plastique et biopolitique de la sélection: Sloterdijk penseur de l’anthropogénétique.’ *Altérités* 5 (2). <http://www.alterites.ca/vol5no1/bordeleau.html>
23. Sloterdijk, P. (2000): *La mobilization infinie. Vers une critique de la cinétique politique*. Paris: Christian Bourgeois éditeur, p. 27.
24. Bergson, H. (1998): *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, p. xxi.
25. Sloterdijk, P. (2001): o.c., pp. 48–51.
26. José Gil, *La Danse*, unpublished manuscript
27. Javary, C. & P. Faure (2002): *Yi-Jing*. Paris: Albin Michel, pp. 985–986.
28. Sloterdijk, P. (2006): *Le palais de cristal. À l’intérieur du capitalisme planétaire*. Paris: Maren Sell, p. 100.
29. Ibid., p. 268.
30. Ibid., p. 86.
31. Ibid., p. 262.
32. Ibid., p. 92.
33. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. 78.
34. Ibid., p. 184.
35. Sloterdijk, P. (2005): o.c., p. 390.
36. Sloterdijk, P. (1988): o.c., p. xxxiii.
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# 11. The Space of Global Capitalism and its Imaginary Imperialism: An Interview with Peter Sloterdijk

Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens & Willem Schinkel

**Q** Professor Sloterdijk, you say that philosophy is its own place, raised to the level of thought. Can you tell us what you mean by spatiality in philosophy?

**PS** I believe that space, in a philosophical sense, is actually the great unknown of the modern world, since all speak of space but no-one was there. That has to do with the fact that we know and use at least two or three deeply differing concepts of space. One is the concept of space used by physicists, mathematicians or topologists. It is the homogeneous space, the completely neutralized space in which the equipotentiality of points is presupposed as a mathematical axiom, perhaps even as an ontological axiom. Between equipotential points one can draw an arbitrary number of lines, as many times as one would like. This concept of space is mostly used by neo-liberals and also by common commentators when they speak of globalization. They usually mistake this geometrical space of points in topology for the space of geographers. The geographer's space is a space that already comes closer to reality, to the living space of natural subjects, which understand space to be something like environment (*Umwelt*). For us that is usually connected to the sense of dwelling, of the space of living. So inasmuch as people are living creatures that dwell, they create a wholly different and living, vital space, a space of meaning, in which all objects around are charged with a variety of semantic values. And then there is a third concept of space, which is in a sense the most mysterious, and which my work actually deals with most – that is, the first part of my trilogy (*Sphären*) – and that is, how shall I put it, in a sense you put it right in your question, this 'psychodynamic space', which is the space in which existence takes place. Existence for me doesn't quite mean, as it does for Heidegger, that man is extended in the world. Heidegger of course translates the Latin verb *existere* by the Greek word *extasis* by association. And this *ecstatis* (standing-out) in Heidegger leads to the openness of the world, but also to the loneliness of the cosmic night in which man can lose him- or herself. For me, the relational space of existence is to be understood differently, since I claim that people are ecstatic, as Heidegger says, but not because they are contained in nothingness, but rather in

the souls of others, or in the field of the soul of others, and vice versa. They themselves are ecstatic because the other always already penetrates them. And that means somehow that that erotic ecstasis is prior to the subject itself. And sexuality is a helpless attempt to catch up with this much older ecstasies or the somehow render it plausible. But one cannot do so because the older ecstatis is always deeper than the sexual ecstatis. And what is striking is that it is an invisible ecstasies for most people, that is to say that it is mistaken for the normal situation. It is rendered banal to such an extent, that it is unseen. Only in religion, the only interesting alternative to sex, is this ecstasies symbolically coded in a somewhat orderly form: we have a relation to God. That leaves highly unclear what kind of relation that would be, but it is clear that it is a symbolization of a situation of ecstasies. In a sense people have to resign to that. You see, when one operates with three so different concepts of space, one needs relatively many words to separate them from each other.

**Q** In your work the existential appropriation of space is a historical process. That leads to two questions. First: what is the place of your own philosophy? Is there for instance an occidental philosophy or is there only a global philosophy? And second, then there is a historical ontology of space, what is the role of time in it?

**PS** Yes, you are right, I believe the time of global philosophy is over. Philosophy was global only in its metaphysical age. And metaphysics was of course a project to transform men into cosmopolitans. That means an inhabitant of the world as a whole, quite literally translated: cosmos is not the earth, nor the entire surface of the earth, but cosmopolitanism denotes that man becomes an ex-centric observer of the world and tries to emulate the vision of the godly eye with the help of the view from the sky. That is the philosophical cosmopolitanism of classical metaphysics. To see the world the way God would see it, if he had human eyes. I believe that option is over for us. We have to accept our localization in a much more radical way, and to then ask, where we are. My answer follows from my books. Humans are in fact offspring from savannah-monkeys, which today, however, live in cities. What does that mean? What does a savannah-monkey do in the city? That is the question that contemporary philosophy and anthropology of space must answer. First: how do savannah-monkeys come to be building cities? And how can they live there? And how can they bear the ecological and psychological absurdity of that localization? There are a number of answers to that, mostly described in my book *Sphären 3*, in a chapter on modern individualism, where humans in their apartments build something like tiny bastions and how they accommodate themselves in what I call such 'connected isolations'.

**Q** Is there, with respect to the political dimension of all of this, a kind of global democracy, in which a political being-together is wrought from the co-isolation of this life of foam, as you describe it in *Sphären 3: Schäume*?

**PS** Everyone knows there is no global democracy, for the simple reason that democracy is a system dominated by language. In a democracy, language is in power. A politician is simply someone who uses language in a particular way. The good politician is someone who interprets the mood of the collective with the use of language and who steers it with the use of arguments, with speeches, with seduction or with reassurance. That amounts to a kind of verbal cybernetics with which a polity is steered, and it is quite clear that the great polities of today are not controlled through language. They are steered by means of flows of money and images. That is simply a mediological reason for why something like a global democracy doesn't exist nor will be able to exist.

**Q** Can we keep the idea of democracy vital by way of adapting the money and images to it, or is that not possible?

**PS** I believe money and images are the two great, vital systems of illusion that can be deployed for the steering of mass needs. Language, on the other hand, is increasingly marginalized.

**Q** When you put it like this, and given the important role of language in most critical theories, what do you reckon to be the contemporary possibilities of critique?

**PS** Well, what is critique? The only form of critique that counts for me is that one offers a better theory, or a better description of the world. My critical ambition resides in developing my books. I use a variety of language games and not the ones used by the usual theory of globalization. Instead, I use others and in the end that's a case of a reader trying to construct an image of where the better descriptions lie. Otherwise, I believe that indeed the age of critique has passed, for in the place of critique, well, critique itself is actually a form of the production of illusion. That is to say that critique is strong when one believes that through the use of negations, the person using these negations becomes sovereign. I believe that has been the idea of critique, that something like sovereignty arises through negativity. I take that to be a romantic exaggeration, since experience dictates that critique actually breeds helplessness. Instead of turning people into sovereigns, critique makes them rather more helpless than they are. But what is highly meaningful, are associations, organizations, solidarizations, collective actions: all of them things that are operative.

**Q** If we consider your ‘domestic anthropology’ of the affluent society, can one say that this describes something which is present everywhere, or solely in the Western society? There appears to be some sort of duality in your work: you link it to sexuality, which is everywhere, but the examples you give, mainly the examples of luxury, are more Western.

**PS** Yes of course. I believe it comes down to the fact that people in the West are the only ones who speak of globalization, for all others the theme doesn’t exist. Globalization is a theme in the monologue of the rich world.

**Q** In that case, what is the status and extent of the anthropology you delineate?

**PS** The anthropological problem, to my opinion, is that humans aren’t *Mängelwesen*, as modern, so-called critical anthropology has shown. For Arnold Gehlen and for the German school of philosophical anthropology, man is a biologically impossible animal that can survive only with the help of cultural stabilizers. In my opinion, that is simply a half-truth. The truth is that humans are creatures that stem from a form of constitutive luxury. This has to do with their ecstatic relationality. They are so to speak creatures of luxury from the first day on. And that has to do with the fact that they are born early into the world, which means they don’t really come into the world as they do into the arms of a family, into the arms of a mother, which in an existential sense should actually be interpreted as a treasure. This is interesting: the child comes into the world and the first thing it discovers is a treasure. And this is because the mother is not the mother, but as a person – and there are of course no words yet for this situation – she is a treasure. The primary experience of the child coming into the world is that there is a treasure which one can find and which is there – later one searches for a treasure, in the beginning one finds it. People so to speak change over time from treasure finders into treasure seekers. That has to do with the fact that the treasure progressively retreats. While the child grows older, the treasure becomes ever more invisible until one simply has a mother and one no longer understands that the first thing one discovered in the world was richness. A mother is nothing other than the principle of richness in the form of a person, for the interesting thing is of course: she always has something, she never comes empty-handed. She is so to speak a source herself, she is more source than human, that means she herself is a sort of magician, a fairy, the nymph of her child. And for this reason, when human beings come into the world, they always arrive at a treasure island. That is the place of human beings, and for that reason I ask: where do they go? Where are they actually? Are they at the treasure island?

There is a lovely passage in Bruce Chatwin on the primary experience of children among a certain people, whose name I can’t remember, a nomadic people somewhere in Asia. He has of course written about Australians, but he has also

mentioned other peoples, where mothers carry their newborn children with them even when horse riding, in front of them, on their arm, and these women take such pride in this that they decorate their breast with gold necklaces. Chatwin makes the beautiful remark that the first thing these children see, or their first impression of the world is: they see a breast and a gold shower. That fits very well with the thesis I develop, which is that the original experience of being-in-the-world is the arrival at a treasure island. The bad thing is, that children of this age are so endlessly sensitive that the treasure island can at the same time be a place of madness. It easily transforms into a place of insanity when children at this age, in this highly vulnerable condition soon experience unreliability, abandonment, and of course that doubles the despair. This can leave deep marks in the psychic system and can instantiate a kind of primordial mistrust against the world. One could say that the psychodrama of human existence since a few thousand years, as far as one can find it documented in religion and the arts, is that unrelenting fight between this primordial mistrust and a primordial trust, for trust is but one possibility, and it is often disclaimed. Human beings are often hurt and mistrustful from the start, they don't come into the world gladly and the hard thing is that they might not find anything on the treasure island. That is simply the case. Many are born into poor families or poor families in a psychic sense and then one finds oneself on a treasure island without a treasure; a rather unfortunate situation. Modern society in a sense constitutes an attempt to construct a collective treasure island. That is, to organise richness as a collective good. And to promise that in our system, no one should in the end have to stand empty-handed in the treasure hunt.

**Q** Does this constitute a third way to think of space, next to religion and sexuality?

**PS** Well, human existence is always ecstatis, standing out, and by definition.

**Q** But not ecstatic in the sense of a lack?

**PS** No, not in that sense. Not in the sense of a lack but rather in the sense of an excess. It is an excess, since we all basically live in a world that is too big. For an animal the world is too big. That is why Heidegger already said that man dwells in the home of language. For language is the form in which we at least transform this too-big world into a kind of home. As soon as one can dwell, this overkill, this *Ek-sistenz* is domesticated.

**Q** Does this then resemble Silesius' equation between place and word (*der Ort ist das Wort*)? And is this an ontology in Heidegger's sense?

**PS** Yes, certainly, because it is an existential hermeneutics, the question what it means to be in the world. What does it mean to articulate that ecstatis?

**Q** Yet the ontological difference is hard to locate in your work. Is it still operative in your existential hermeneutics? One would expect a Heideggerian ontology to take it as a starting point.

**PS** Indeed, the ontological difference is still there in my work, because I always work with the thesis 'we are in the world but never in the entire world, for we are always in spheres'. I take the ontological difference to be a spatial difference – or a difference of space – in the sense that I continually interpret the difference between dwelling and existing. Something similar has been done by the later Heidegger as well, since he distinguished between the total ecstatis of existence and the relative ecstasis of dwelling. And I believe the bringing into play of this difference can be traced throughout my work.

**Q** But this cannot have reference to an empirical form of spatiality. That is, it pertains not to the first two concepts of space you describe, but only to the third?

**PS** Yes, but it comes down to what you understand by 'empirical'. For all spatial types we mentioned there are of course empirical correlates.

**Q** What I mean is that the ontological difference indeed refers purely to the ontological and not to the ontic realm. So when you interpret the ontological difference as spatial, then this must refer to a non-ontic spatial realm in order for it to still be an ontological difference.

**PS** Yes, but it is clear that the ontic spaces are all receptacles, all containers. And the ontological space is precisely not a receptacle, but rather this total ecstatic form. As soon as a receptacle-effect occurs, one can define space in an ontic sense. But the actual ontological interpretation of space is in particular that according to which man is not in a receptacle, but rather transcends this receptacle.

**Q** Yet throughout the history of philosophy, this receptacle concept of space has in some form or another been dominant, even in classic conceptions such as in Plato or in Aristotle's concerning world-spheres. In your work, you describe a historical process in which such receptacles gradually disappear, yet are replaced by other morphologies.

**PS** Yes, people in the past actually solved this problematic in a rather elegant way, didn't they, when they conceived human existence as the wandering through different receptacles? They come from the mother, which is a rather unequivocal

image of a container, and they end in a grave, also a container. They go from container to container and in the middle there is this great container which is the world. And because Heidegger has temporalized the ecstasis instead of conceiving it in a spatial sense, things look different for him. For him, the entire ecstasis is connected to the idea of being-unto-death and because of this movement unto death defined as the ecstatic movement as such, one finds there a different take on the ontological difference than in case of its spatialization, although for Heidegger, this of course also means that man is situated in history. As individual or as Dasein, being-unto-death or being part of a culture, a people or a collective is part of a historical movement. Heidegger didn't understand much of that last part. The historical movement he in the end saw, is simply the movement of technology. As partakers in a collective, we are mostly agents of an encompassing technical operation that spans the world as a whole in a technical net.

**Q** And how would you characterise this movement?

**PS** Well in Heidegger this movement is conceived in a Nietzschean way, namely as will to power through technology.

**Q** And do you concur in thus conceptualizing power, as will to power through technology?

**PS** No, I see this movement differently. I describe the history of technology and of civilization as a relief (*Entlastung*), that is, as an attempt to restore the primary richness. Modern society is in fact an experiment in the archetype of the rich life.

**Q** And does that then constitute more a being-unto-birth than a being-unto-death?

**PS** Well it's rather more a being-unto-life, it's a movement that leads into life. For that reason I wholly left out this darker side of Heidegger's philosophy, and I try to interpret the movement into life as a kind of permanent birth. That means that, only when life itself is poetic, birth in fact doesn't stop occurring. As soon as life is caught wholly institutionally, or in tradition, wholly in routine, it loses its poetics and becomes so to speak a permanent funeral. The interesting thing is that, for many people, the funeral starts much sooner, it starts so soon one wonders what these dead are still doing among us.

**Q** Could one say that *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* (2005) is in a sense an extension of *Sphären II: Globen*?



**PS** Yes and no. In *Sphären II* there is a chapter with the title 'Last Sphere' (*Letzte Kugel*). It takes up about one fifth of the volume, which is almost half of *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*. In that book, however, the accent is on more recent developments, where I try to describe the vision of the western world as a crystal palace. I reanimated this Dostoevskyan image in order to adequately describe the western comfort-sphere. This is not the classical theory of the neo-liberal globalization, but quite to the contrary the description of a world which is relatively exclusive. Although it is tremendously inclusive, it is still exclusive. It has perhaps a billion members, or perhaps one and a half billion, and that means it is the greatest system of inclusion the world has ever known. Negri and Hardt saw a similar phenomenon, but as far as I am concerned they described it the wrong way when they use the concept of 'empire' to designate it and paint a false image of this global structure. I believe Negri and Hardt were taken in by the neo-liberal propaganda and really believe that capitalism is an inclusive system, which is however not true. The 'Weltinnenraum des Kapitals' is a sphere that has clearly gone airborne, which one can sense in the fact that in certain places in the world, one can do something with a credit card but on many places one can't. And this includes maybe one fourth of mankind, of mankind in a numerical sense, and it accordingly excludes three fourths. And whoever is inside, has typically arrived; whoever is outside has a problem.

**Q** And what kind of space does this outside constitute? In what kind of sphere do the excluded reside?

**PS** One can live outside the inner space of global capitalism, and this is also an authentic life, but it's different receptacles, different forms, different cultures, different cultural containers in which this life takes place. Nothing about it is wrong, for people have always lived in such forms. The inner space of global capitalism is a relatively modern construction, which is not older than two hundred years. One can date this fairly accurately, which Walter Benjamin did in his *Passagenwerk*, to the moment the Parisian architects started to cover the alleys between streets with glass roofs and thereby created a kind of artificial world, a kind of panopticon of truth, of pleasure. That is the start of psychedelic capitalism. And the entire contemporary western civilization more or less resides in the inner realm of such a psychedelic installation. And there is an outside, this is entirely true, but those who live outside this sphere don't simply live outside, but they live in another sphere. So it is clear that for those people religions are tremendously important, which is also articulated again within capitalism, where one could say it is used as a secondary insurance system. Initially we have eliminated religions because we could replace them with social insurance. The symbolic immunity of religion was simply no longer needed once the great systems of solidarity emerged. Whoever has health insurance, needs God only half as much as before,

but whoever has life insurance, doesn't need him at all. But meanwhile, also the west has discovered that God has other uses and is therefore being reanimated among us as well. And this should not come as a surprise.

**Q** And when neo-liberal rhetoric poses the image of the inner space of global capitalism as indeed a global space, without outside, is that still a form of imperialism?

**PS** Yes, it is an imaginary imperialism because it is a way of thinking in which the situation of others is not respected. But communism was also always an imperialism, a social imperialism. It was also understood in a missionary way, it was a symbolic imperialism. It was, if one will, a second Catholicism. Communism was a Catholicism without God which then directed itself towards all. That is, by the way, one of the reasons why pope John Paul II could, in an astoundingly effortless way, reclaim the eternal truths of communism for the Vatican. Once the monstrum was conquered, and once it was sure the monstrum was conquered, the Vatican started to speak in communist fashion. For the problem of Catholic inclusion has of course not been solved. Catholicism may be the greatest world religion but it is just as exclusive as capitalism, which means: one billion inside, five billion outside. And I would say that whoever claims to know how the total inclusion of humanity within humanity itself functions, is a charlatan.

**Q** This makes one think of what Voegelin writes on the contacts between the Catholic church and the Mongol khan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A correspondence has been preserved between the pope and the khan, wherein the latter says: 'you may not know it yet, but you are always already a part of the Mongol empire.' Given the power of the Mongols in those days, this aroused great fear in the west, but it's structure is similar to what you describe as this 'imaginary imperialism': you may not know it yet, but you are always already inside. Capitalism has a strategy in many ways similar to the Mongol khan, a strategy which is now global. Perhaps there are those who believe they are outside, but they are not.

**PS** There is even a further commonality. You may remember that Genghis Khan in the same letter offered his daughter, a real beauty, to the pope. He describes her: "Her hip is as lean as a bale of grain!" Lovely images! But the pope has to decline with thanks. And what do we do today: we send the images of our naked girls to the poorest of the poor in the world and invite them with the help of this erotic imperialism to become part of our system. That is amazing. By the way, I believe Voegelin is the only author that has observed such things with such an observant eye. I believe one finds it in his beautiful book *The New Science of Politics*, a relatively small yet very substantial book. Yes, I am glad you know it, not a lot of people do.

**Q** Like Voegelin you are also a historically interested thinker. How do you select your examples, which are often historical? Where do you find the symbolizations of space, the spatial receptacles, for instance the Chinese ceramics mentioned in *Sphären I*? There are many such examples and one wonders how you select them, and whether there are perhaps examples that support another kind of argument?

**PS** Yes, always, because I prefer to learn from authors that think wholly differently. It is a fact that there has been a series of thinkers, for about a hundred years now, that have tried to respond to globalization, to really and philosophically respond to globalization. Hegel did it summarily, and there are some important passages in his philosophy of law where one can sense he is really starting to think globalization, for instance in passages in which he writes about the sea and the oceans and about international trade, but they remain summarily and they are not properly elaborated. And then one has to wait a relatively long time for actual thinkers of globalization to appear, and these are most of the time politically objectionable because they were positively connected to imperialism in one way or another, but they often have a clear grasp. I believe that when one wishes to stay in good philosophical shape, one must always train with the opponent, not with one's friends. And this is basically what I have been doing systematically for many years now. I am one of the few who still take Spengler seriously. Most simply reject him and think he was a bad man and a terrible biologist. But the truth is simply that he had great visions and that he is perhaps the only one who really lives up to the image of the historian as the prophet turned towards the past. He saw many things others didn't see. And there are likewise many others, Max Weber, Alfred Weber, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy and Erich Voegelin, these are all authors who do not have much of a reputation today, but they nonetheless constitute a treasury of knowledge. The values that lie there have not been properly passed on into liberal or emancipatory thought. There is much to be found there.

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