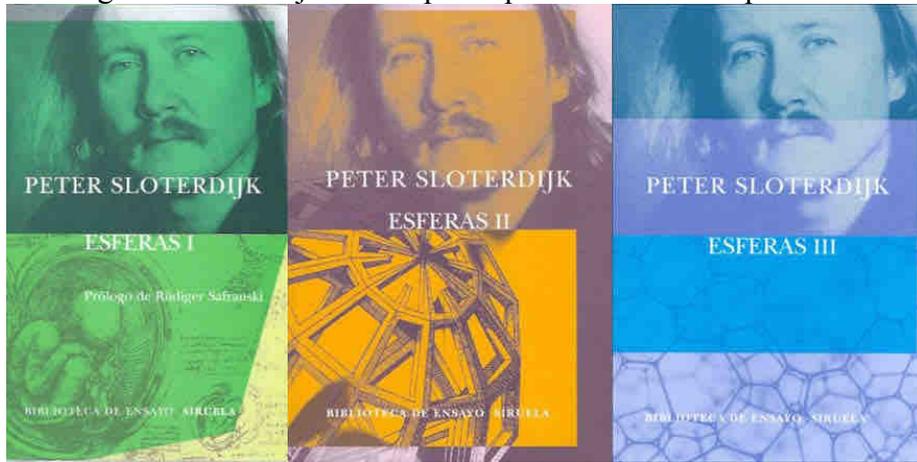


Reading Peter Sloterdijk's concept of spheres Bubbles : Spheres 1



Spheres are above all expressions or institutions of love. He states his central thesis in the introduction to the trilogy: "I will develop, more obstinately than usual, the hypothesis that love stories are stories of form, and that every act of solidarity is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior" (I, 12).

Instead, Sloterdijk argues, relationships between people, ideas, voices, media, et cetera are always already immanent in existence. The concluding discussion of Trinitarian theology makes the most poignant points about this strange immanence, but along the way Sloterdijk convincingly deconstructs the bases for modern psychology and hypothesizes about the real beginning of conscious life in the womb.

The idea is that when we create an intimate (not sexual) relationship we create and enter a space or a sphere somewhere else, in an extension-less field. These spheres provide an enclosed shelter and are combined to basically form culture. In modernity we lost this shelter by killing God and by inhabiting an infinite universe.

He also talks about the magnetic rapport that the magnetizers (think Mesmer) of the 19th century used to heal. All these are attempts to make us more receptive to the idea of the formation of those deep intimate relationships but also to point out that these relationships do not create a uniformity. People keep their roles and their subjectivity within them. In the lovers example there is the lover and the beloved, in the mother-child relationship or the patient-doctor one there is someone who is helpless and has to trust someone else completely to be helped and for this, non-cynicism and non-suspiciousness is required.

Sloterdijk quotes Macho who talks about three stages of development within the womb, where the fetus starts perceiving fluids (blood notably), sounds and air. These are no objects, the fetus doesn't enter traditional subject-object relationships with them but medial ones. He also quotes Laing who splits our life in three parts: conception to implantation, implantation to birth and birth to death with the earlier ones affecting the later ones. I find it kind of hard to take this seriously.

: (1) Refute loneliness: Expose us to the dual or doubled-up nature of self, the plural aspect of being, or to a subjectivity that is resonant. From the discussion of the Greek genius to mesmerism; from Giotto's painting of interfacial space to Magritte's tree of infinite recognition; from Odysseus and the Siren's Song to the idea that, "as soon as breath exists, there are two breathing," this primary dyad that we are forms the bubbling center of microspherology. Sloterdijk does not revise our notion of the self; he exposes its premises, and reminds us that we begin shared. (2) Praise transference: Expose us to these spaces of resonance that constitute our being-wholly-in-relation, being as "in-relation." To praise transference is to praise the transferential nature of my being: I am only in transmission, I "am" transmission. I'm here so that sense can bounce and rebound off of me, in the infinite relating of shared truths, or the infinite creation of interiors. As Sloterdijk writes, "The limits of my capacity for transference are the limits of my world." In other words, the creation of a world and the sharing of the world are very similar.

The challenge of this reading is an existential challenge (perhaps reading ought to always be so). It calls you out into the open, beyond the personal "point" and into plural-transferential spheres: encounters, engagements, and encodings with/in externality, "outside."

Sloterdijk's original concept, The With, changes the relationship of the I and Thou, proposed by Buber. The With explains the desire and lack we feel as humans and our longing for a union of the being that is closer to me than I am

to myself.

Human beings always live within mostly self-created and self-maintained interiors. These are Sloterdijk's spheres, and they range from the protective zone of the family and home, to the peer group, the apartment, the village, the city, the car, the school, or the nation.

This is the *ur-Situation*, as Sloterdijk calls it, from which every human being takes its departure, and that remains important throughout life. It functions as a model for all subsequent spheres in life, each of which is interpreted by Sloterdijk as an external recreation of the womb.

Given their nourishing and protective nature, he designates these microspheres as immune systems; the same is true for macrospheres.

Because these spheres are shaped by the intimate relation between the child and the placenta in the womb, Sloterdijk stresses that their basic structure is dyadic. Collective immunity is more profound than individual immunity.¹

On Sloterdijk's view, the history of metaphysics is a progressive building of worldviews as immune systems. Over time, smaller local cultures are integrated into the all-encompassing whole, what the Greeks called the cosmos. Western philosophy has always explained mankind with respect to its position and immersion in a greater whole. This whole, whether conceived as God, the cosmos, the world, or simply as Being, had a concentric-spherical structure, often laid out in some detail as an object of contemplation or admiration, *and* as a protective structure in which the individual soul could find guidance and, ultimately, safety.

This sense of solidarity, currently so lacking in our individualized societies, can only be recovered by recapturing the primary experience of intimate closeness.² Human coexistence always involves sharing "the same sphere of openness," what Martin Heidegger called *Offenbarkeit*; every human being "brings the sphere of [a] possible neighborhood with [him]."³ Coexistence precedes existence.

This may be the key to Sloterdijk's conception of anthropology: human life is as much a matter of its various envelopes as anything else.⁴ Pace Heidegger, we are never thrown naked into the world.

The macrospheres serve materially, affectively, and symbolically to transfer the inner world onto the outside world, which in this way acquires a "soul." This spheropoietic drive lies at the basis of human culture. Human history, writes Sloterdijk, is an account of humanity's spheric enclosures, or the creation, destruction, and regeneration of its inner spaces. Starting from the domestic situation of the family, human beings have continually expanded their planetary reach; the expansion has now lost itself in "uninhabitable boundless space.

This is the motto of Sloterdijk's anthropology: "Tell me what you are immersed in, and I will tell you what you are. [emphasis original]"⁷ As for the analogy between micro- and macrospheres, if fetus and placenta form the first pair, then God and the soul, or the cosmos and the individual intellect, form the last.⁸

The consequence was that describing the universe as an immune system unites in one design two things that exclude one another: a closed and finite immunological system, and an open and infinite universe. The universe had always been considered the ultimate source of immunity, and this is one part of the design. But immunity is a property of finite systems. The infinite universe, however, is remarkably indifferent to the individual.⁹ And this is the second part of the design. From a modernist perspective, the conclusion is inevitable.

Globes thus describes the history of religious and metaphysical thought as an attempt to "animate" the universe by describing it as an immune system, one modeled ultimately on existence in the womb.

Sloterdijk refers scornfully to the "relief" of those who believe that grand narratives are no longer possible. Although those who don't read German will have to wait a little longer to assess Sloterdijk's grand sphereological narrative, *Bubbles* leads one to expect that Sloterdijk's trilogy is nothing if not a giant meta-narrative, wheels within wheels, an heroically immodest exercise in universal history of the most defiantly, monstrously unfashionable kind.

Sloterdijk has not been shy of controversy. In "Rules for the Human Zoo," he declares that literature cannot play the civilizing role that it once did; literary texts have become mere "archived things," no longer "letters to possible

friends.\" The humanist project has failed, Sloterdijk contends, and he posits biotechnology as a substitute.

In Sloterdijk's 1983 estimation, we are in an age of *cynicism*, or enlightened false consciousness. We all know, when we stop to think about it, that the world is not as it should be, and that we are not living as we ought to live. But even as we know this, we numb ourselves to it, and even laugh over the disconnection between what we know and how we live. \"

To be intelligent and still perform one's work, that is unhappy consciousness in its modernized form, afflicted with enlightenment. Such consciousness cannot be dumb and trust again; innocence cannot be regained\" (7). Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* provides a portrait of our age, and tries to find a path leading toward something – anything – more promising. But we really are in a tight spot. There is no returning to the ideals of the Enlightenment, for we have seen through them.

Sloterdijk suggests, a return to attitudes less worldly, less knowing, less trapped by the conceptual snares we have laid for ourselves. As he writes in his preface, his hope is \"to see the dying tree of philosophy bloom once again, in a blossoming without disillusionment, abundant with bizarre thought-flowers, red, blue, and white, shimmering in the colors of the beginning, as in the Greek dawn, when *theoria* was beginning and when, inconceivably and suddenly, like everything clear, understanding found its language.\" He then asks: \"Are we really culturally too old to repeat such an experience?\"

Spheres are more than a geometrical figure to Sloterdijk. They are enclosed social spaces whose limits are equidistant from a center. \"The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans – insofar as they succeed in becoming humans. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. Spheres are immune-systematically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside\" (I, 28). Spheres then are shelters from formless, chaotic, and inhuman forces. They can be found wherever humans are found – in the womb, in the family, among friends, in church, in nations and empires, and on maps of our world and the cosmos. One might see each social or ideological sphere as the phenotypic expression of the human need for community.

Those are the assumptions he is attempting to rewrite, in exactly the same way Heidegger refigured human beings by positing them as *Dasein*. His approach, like Heidegger's, is phenomenological, which means that it begins and ends within human experience, broadened to include our sentiments and intuitions. We do not start with the physical world and locate ourselves as furniture within it, which is the familiar approach of the social sciences. Rather, phenomenology begins in the domain of human experience and positions our knowledge of the world within it. \"Humans are beings that participate in spaces unknown to physics,\" he writes, and it is only from philosophy that we can learn \"how [our] passions find concepts\" (I, 83; 81).

Sloterdijk's *magnum opus* consists in three volumes. *Spheres I* bears the name *Bubbles*, which refers to the \"microspheric units\" that \"constitute the intimate forms of the rounded being-in-form and the basic molecule of the strong relationship\" (I, 62). These are the intimacies we first encounter in our lives, as we are born not alone but within a mother enclosing us, whose voice and body are the first sounds we encounter. The second volume's title is *Globes*, which explores \"a historico-political world whose models are the geometrically exact orb and the globe\" (I, 64). This is basically the transition from Aristotle's terracentric heavenly spheres to Kepler's heliocentric elliptical orbits, from flat Eurocentric maps with hazy borders to globes. The third volume, *Foam* – which has yet to appear in English translation – \"will address the modern catastrophe of the round world... For Catholic Old Europeans, the essence of the Modern Age can still be expressed in a single phrase: **spheric blasphemy**\" (I, 69-70; emphasis added). Sloterdijk explains further: \"In foam worlds, the individual bubbles are not absorbed into a single, integrative hyper-orb, as in the metaphysical conception of the world, but rather drawn together to form irregular hills... What is currently being confusedly proclaimed in all the media as *the* globalization of the world is, in morphological terms, the universalized war of foams\" (71).

Sloterdijk's *Spheres* is more like a brainwashing flood than it a patient argument for identifiable conclusions. But this is just what it must be, if Sloterdijk's final aim is to overcome cynicism. No argument can possibly succeed – what is required instead is a radical change in vision, a conversion to newfound meaning. Spheres are above all expressions or institutions of love.

\"Taken in its true context, then, the great declaration of God's death means something entirely different from what the vulgar readings of all interest groups customarily claim: understood on its own terms, it deals with the meaning

of losing the cosmic periphery, the collapse of the metaphysical immune system that had stabilized the imaginary in Old European thought in a final format. ... "God is dead" – what this actually means is that the orb is dead, the containing circle has burst... for the height is empty, the edge no longer holds the world together, and the picture has fallen out of its divine frame. ... After the scientific attack on the harboring circle, the personal enchantment of geometry is finished. Now humans are only immanent to the outside, and must live with this difficulty." (II, 559)

There never is any going back – that is pretty much the meaning of *time*. But by seeing our history and our lives in terms of Sloterdijkian spheres, we begin to see the outlines of what we require. We must begin to take ourselves more seriously than our current super-sized media allows, and beware of reducing our experiences to the dregs left behind by our drainers of culture – "No happiness is safe from endoscopy: every blissful, intimate, vibrating cell is surrounded by swarms of professional disillusioners, and we drift among them – thought paparazzi, deconstructionists, interior deniers and cognitive scientists, accomplices in an unlimited plundering of Lethe" (I, 76).