

A Space Odyssey: The Political Philosophy of De-Spatialization

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In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the journey into space is constructed with conflicting desires: the desire for the sublime—the need to encounter something far beyond our imagination and the desire for something luminous—a genuine spiritual experience. And yet these desires must balance with the desire to not be lost in space, and to find ourselves in the comfort of home. The human story of postmodernity is the struggle to reconcile these human desires in the context of globalization—our attempt to overcome our singular space in an ever-expanding world. Modern economics, politics, culture, and social norms are mediated through new technologies transforming the human experience through the elimination of physical space. The human longing for home is a journey through globalization and the de-spatialization of our globe.

Terra

Human beings understand our existence in the form of the sphere and “place [ourselves] in an intelligible, formal, and constructive relation to the totality of the world” (Sloterdijk “Globen” 29). This sphere is the series of interconnections between economic, political, social and cultural dimensions subsumed beneath the totality of space. Global capitalism is the human dialectic between these factors. As Fredric Jameson puts it, globalization forms “the substructure of postmodernity, and constitute[s] the economic base of which, in the largest sense, postmodernity [is] the superstructure” (Jameson, “Aesthetics” 104), postmodernity being the era of “late capitalism”, or, the contemporary era of capital circumnavigating the world.

Peter Sloterdijk defines globalization as a continual process of overcoming space which he terms as “spherology.” The first concept of globalization is realizing Earth it itself is a sphere, or a globe rather than a two-dimensional plane. The first realization of the spherical world was noticed thousands of years ago first by Erastosthenes in Alexandria and was confirmed by ancient sailors circumnavigating the globe.

This realization of a spherical Earth gives way to the second stage of globalization—terrestrial globalization, which is realized

practically through Christian-capitalist seafaring and politically implanted through the colonialism of the Old European nation-states...This five-hundred-year middle section of the sequence went down in history as the ‘age of European expansion’. Most historians find it easy to view the time between 1492 and 1945 as a completed complex of events: it is the period in which the current world system took form (Sloterdijk “Interior” 9).

This Age of Discovery eventually sets the stage for the death of feudalism and the birth of capitalism through the economic acquisition of the Earth itself. Circumnavigation of the globe and the establishing of new ports, territories, the division of Africa, and the rise of empires, define this era. Eventually we run out of terra to conquer and turn our attention to the cosmos.

The third sphere is very different from the first two concepts of the globe and can be defined not as spatial expansion, but rather the disappearance of space itself. The third wave of globalization “de-spatializes the real globe, replacing the curved earth with an almost extensionless point, or a network of intersection points and lines that amount to nothing other than connections between two computers any given distance apart” (Sloterdijk “Interior” 13). It is perhaps no surprise that the third wave is dominated by invisible networks of communication. These networks have dissolved the physical distance defining the first and second stages of globalization. Such networks allowed us to move far beyond the Earth—the Voyager satellites we launched in the 1970s are now somewhere in the cold, unexplored interstellar space far beyond Pluto.

Economic De-Spatialization

For Jameson and Sloterdijk, the story of capitalism and globalization are intertwined—two cosmic entities orbiting in an eternal dance. Sloterdijk’s three phases of globalization and Jameson’s three fundamental moments in capitalism form a dialectic, with each stage marking an

“expansion over the previous stage. These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital” (Jameson “Postmodernism” 35). The realization of the sphere has a dialectic with market capitalism (or mercantilism). Terrestrial globalization has dialectic with the monopoly stage or imperialism. Finally, the de-spatialized globe is the era of multinational capitalism.

The mass circulation of capital circumnavigating the globe is the defining component of contemporary capitalism. It is critical to explore globalization through an understanding of money in the contemporary global picture. Sloterdijk explores this concept as

“Gold and globe belong together insofar as the typical movement of money—*return of investment*—incorporates the principle of circumnavigating the world...In the modern age, money, as real and speculative capital, places humans under the rule of the absolute law of commerce...The fundamental fact of modernity is not that the earth orbits the sun, but rather that money circumnavigates the earth. The theory of the sphere is, at the same time, the first analysis of power” (Sloterdijk “Globen” 33).

The third stage of globalization is defined by de-spatialization, and as the world has become digitized, so has the form of currency we use. It is entirely possible to never encounter a physical form of money, merely its simulacra in the form of representative numbers stored on a server somewhere in the world. Simple swipes of credit cards or cryptocurrency transactions allow us to obtain products and services without actually exchanging any physical representation money, but rather the simple exercise of math between two servers that symbolize an exchange of currency. Monetary transactions are no longer physical, but informational exchanges.

In this new brave new globalization,

[t]he dominance of finance capital today is also a spatial phenomenon, in the sense in which its originalities derive from the suppression of more traditional temporalities of transmission and suggest all kinds of new spatial simultaneities. (Jameson, "Valences" 66).

If postmodernity is defined by networking technologies as its means of transportation, then "communications technology requires us to think of them as informational institutions, perhaps, or immense constructions in cyberspace" (Jameson, "Aesthetics" 111).

For Jameson, "postmodernity can be defined by the changes in the technology of sharing information rather than the information itself" (Jameson, "Valences" 436). Looking at newspapers from one-hundred years ago, the information is primarily the same: sports scores, the rises and falls in the stock market, book review and so on. This same reporting is very much alive today, the only difference being that it is communicated to the reader in a very different way. I can view this information on the nightly news. I can read it on a website. I can interact with a smartphone app and easily share this information with others using a touch or two and it will be posted on any number of social media services.

Marx finds this "annihilation of space by time" to be the fundamental transformation of capitalism and ultimately globalization (Grundrisse 524). For Marx, capitalism is constantly revolutionizing the modes of production and thus, communication and transportation are in a relentless state of evolution necessary to maintain a functioning capitalism (Marx "Capital 1" 505-506). David Harvey sees the changes in the modes of production and a shift in the spatiotemporal relations of the financial industry, especially through modern computerization in which buying and selling happens entirely in an online marketplace where human control happens through a few, brief keystrokes (in some cases automation has removed the human component entirely) rather than in any serious capacity (Harvey "Vol. 1" 326). These same changes have occurred in how the

production and consumption of everyday goods and services such as paying bills, finding a restaurant to eat at and even watching a movie in our living room.

In the second volume of *Capital*, Marx addresses the concept of selling time and its relationship to “the distance of the market where the commodities are sold from their place of production. For the” whole period of its journey to the market, capital is confined to the state of commodity capital (Marx “Capital 2” 327). Physical commodities still have to exist within the context of “frequency and reliability of service reduce the stocks of commodity capital that need to be kept on hand by producers (Marx spots here the tendency to create what later became known as the “just-in-time” systems of supply of inputs into production, which gave Japanese industry such a powerful competitive edge in the 1980s, until the rest of the world caught up)” (Harvey “Vol. 2” 281). In the contemporary era, technology has developed to such a state where commodities can be purchased on demand where the stock of the product is irrelevant, there only need by enough bandwidth to keep a digital product flowing.

With these technological changes, new models of production are based in information technology. The reason computer science is a burgeoning field is almost all existing companies (and future enterprises are essentially required by the market) are replacing physical infrastructure with digital infrastructure. These changes in production coincide with new divisions of labor because of global economic interdependence that function on electronic trade routes. The rise of Microsoft, Amazon, Google and etc. exemplify these new changes. Today, digital data is the golden nugget in capitalism. Web advertising is a primary example of this. Companies like Google and Facebook exist through revenue provided by advertising. This advertising is generated through data collection—the more data you have, the more data you can process through complex processes of algorithms, data mining, and machine learning, the more revenue you can generate—there is no product here beyond the consumer providing their data in exchange for free services.

Data becomes a new digital currency. It seems there is no part of the economy that is free from de-spatialization.

Cultural De-Spatialization

A classic definition of globalization is the export and import of culture. Changes in spatial relationships in the third wave of globalization correlate with changes in culture. The economic becomes cultural and the cultural becomes economic, “there are no enclaves—esthetic or other—left in which the commodity form does not remain supreme” (Jameson “Valences” 450).

Hollywood itself is a cultural revolution where the economic forces new forms as “[g]lobalization is a communicational concept, which alternately masks and transmits cultural or economic meanings” (Jameson “Valences” 436). Crime noir, horror, westerns, and superhero cinema all come and go as each genre has its golden age.

It seems that to prosper in an era of mass globalization, nations themselves must downplay their identity. Globalization forces a disappearance of “otherness” because the need of capital circulation forces cultural integration. Travel to any capital city in an emerging market—much of Johannesburg has more in common with London or New York City than it does the rest of South Africa. Distinct cultural identity fades away in favor of a more global culture and the massification of culture the planet.

Even language is not immune—English is used primarily in non-English speaking countries as a language of money and power, not for esthetic reasons. Latin was the primary language of money and power and Rome while Greek held an elevated status as the language of aesthetics and culture. These cultural “policies” exist because the need to capital to circulate outweighs the national necessity for a distinct national culture.

In contemporary America, restaurants often adopt a label for their “type” of food, for example Mexican, Japanese, Thai, Chinese, Italian, and Fusion are “genres” of what is served,

though the dishes are often versions designed for an American palate rather than true versions you would find if you traveled abroad. These small symbols of inclusion prevent the supplanting of dominant cultural forms. This absorption of culture is consistent with the analysis by The Frankfurt School over the past century. Perhaps this absorption of culture in postmodernity explains the rise of identities in terms of race, nation, and religion. The postmodern culture of globalization shows a desire for new adventures as we have run out new places to explore. It seems that cultural reactions become ever more extreme as the shadow of globalization grows ever larger.

Fundamentalism is a false appeal to tradition in reaction to globalization. New fundamentalisms such as the rise of the radical right in Europe, the United States, and religious fundamentalism in the Middle East are not attempts to reconnect with tradition, but rather extreme reactionary politics that “Only a religious fundamentalism seems to have the strength and the will to resist” globalization (Jameson “Valences” 450).

Modern terrorism is not an attack for political ends or causing mass fear, it is simply warfare moving beyond the classical idea of two opposing forces exchanging strikes. It is the “substitution of classical forms of struggle with attempts on the environmental conditions of life of the enemy (Sloterdijk “Airquakes” 44). This arose especially in World War I—the use of gas was primarily overcoming the limitations of trench warfare. It was much easier to modify the environment and use the necessities of life (air/breathing) than it was to send troops over the wall to the reality of mass slaughter. In this new world, “[t]errorism is not an enemy, but a modus operandi...through the broadening of the battle zone, the principle explication in execution of war becomes perceptible: the enemy is made explicit as an object in the environment, whose removal counts as a condition of survival in the system.” (Sloterdijk “Airquakes” 48). It seems that cultural reaction is a story of space rather than identity.

Reimagining Heidegger

Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time*, explores the human relationship with time in a perspective which would become associated with existentialism. Sloterdijk's reinterpretation of Heidegger moves away from existential philosophy and into the realm of space as

“radical phenomenological attention delegitimizes both the century-old realms of container-physics and metaphysics alike. Man is never simply an animate creature in its environment or a rational entity in the house of heaven...The inhabitation of spheres, however, cannot be fully explicated as long as Da-sein is understood as having an essential tendency towards solitude” (Sloterdijk “Da-sein” 39-40).

In Sloterdijk's reinterpretation of Heidegger, our Being-in something—In “world space”, everything is connected (Heidegger 50-51). This notion of a world connectedness is not mystical as in Eastern philosophy but more akin to the Hegelian notion of world consciousness. Sloterdijk develops his notion of “de-spatialization” through Heidegger's idea of “de-distancing” in which Da-sein becomes a spatial element in itself, human awareness that transcends the notion of simply being an element of time.

De-distancing means making distance disappear, making the being at a distance of something disappear, bringing it near. Da-sein is essentially de-distancing...De-distancing discovers remoteness....Initially and for the most part, de-distancing is a circumspect approaching, a bringing near of supplying, preparing, having at hand....An essential tendency toward nearness lies in Da-Sein (97-98).

This attempt to de-distance in an ever-shrinking world is difficult. It is a personal journey in a globalized sphere where “In accordance with its spatiality, Da-sein is initially never here, but over there. From this over there it comes back to its here (100). For Heidegger, this journey has an almost Buddhist or Stoic concept of noting—it is not a destination, but a perpetual adventure,

much like the ancient sailors who first circumnavigated the globe. Heidegger concludes this line of thought saying:

“Letting innerworldly beings be encountered, which is constitutive for being-in-the-world, is ‘giving space’. This ‘giving space,’ which we call making room, frees things at hand for their spatiality....As circumspect taking care of things in the world, Da-sein can change things around, remove them or ‘make room’ for them only because making room—understood as an existential—belongs to its being-in-the-world....the ‘subject,’ correctly understood ontologically, Da-sein, is spatial” (103).

As Heidegger turns to space, his fundamental idea of humans searching for home only grows in importance. Heidegger’s notion of the fundamental responsibility to otherness grows out of this conception of the human yearning for home by overcoming our spatial relationship to one other as “we remain blind to our finitude and obsessed with overcoming all distances and drawing everything within the nearness of our potential grasp” (White 66). Returning to notion of the desire for the sublime, this search for home is balanced through our “letting go, an allowance of distance, a letting be in absence, thus bearing witness to our own limits, our own finitude” (67).

A Dialectic Response

How can we overcome such claustrophobic freedom?⁹ For Jameson,

“As for the implied projection of a philosophical system in the dialectic, it can be taken as a distorted expression of a rather different dialectical requirement, namely that of totality. In other words, the philosophical claim of unity turns out to be a symptomatic transformation of the deeper claim or aspiration to totality itself, about which any number of misconceptions need to be addressed. Right now, it is enough to say that totality is not something one ends with, but something one begins with; and also that it is capitalism as a now global system which is the totality and the unifying force (so that we can also say that

the dialectic itself does not become visible historically until capitalism's emergence)" (Jameson "Valences" 19).

This modern world provides ample potential for seeing it in its totality—there are books, journals, studies, and etc., on every aspect of life on Earth. As such, this data can provide a myriad of ways to analyze the world in such a way that it is possible to play solution of each other through the dialectical system. Importantly, it is crucial to recall that "our only rule, in the examples and illustrations that follow, will be a strict avoidance of the old pseudo-Hegelian caricature of the thesis/antithesis/synthesis; while our only presupposition will be the assumption that any opposition can be the starting point for a dialectic in its own right" (Jameson 24). Data can allow us to invent ideas that cannot go through the traditional Hegelian form of the dialectic, we must be critical of all our own ideas and oppose them until the best idea emerges clearly.

Fredric Jameson expands the concept of dialectic study in his dialectic trilogy (*Valences of the Dialectic*, *The Hegel Variations*, and *Reading Capital*) by incorporating the concept of space as the critical component of the dialectic method missing from Hegel and Marx. Sloterdijk reinterpreted the concept of *Da-sein* as the missing spatial component from Heidegger. The expansion of spatial possibility is essential towards defining new realms of social and political philosophy. In a fast-paced world, we must realize that time and space are related, not merely in physics, but in the human systems, particularly in economics—the definitive relationship that defines our relationship to the globe. Incorporating the spatial element into the study of human interaction is natural, as we have spent thousands of years looking to overcome space and transcend the condition of being a single being on a static planet. The first human attempt to overcome this concept of space can be found in religion and looking towards the sky, but now its entering new fields such as biotechnology—rendering old concepts of human freedom obsolete but

exploring new ways in which philosophy can be realized through human interaction with technology—likely the defining struggle of the coming centuries.

Conclusion

2001: A Space Odyssey features this struggle in several capacities, from apes harnessing the power of a hand-held weapon, to HAL 9000—an artificial intelligence that transcends human control and realizes its own consciousness to the detriment of the spacecraft’s crew. New technologies show the potential for the ultimate de-spatialization: the sharing of consciousness between two or more minds. While this is all science fiction—it is moving ever closer to becoming an everyday reality.

De-spatialization is fundamentally a neutral subject—in fact, much good can come from overcoming space. Scientists can share their information with other scientists with a few keystrokes, doctors can work as teams to find cures for disease, one can now find a handy guide from everything from computer repair to sharing a recipe with anyone in the world almost instantly—these are all fundamentally good things. However, as *2001* shows us, things can go wrong unintentionally just as fast. De-spatialization has allowed corporations and governments to map what we do with the same ease that we do those very things they track. Google has my entire search history available from the day I learned how to search with Google. The speed at which financial transactions take place can destroy an economy in a matter of minutes.

The concept of space is crucial to understanding humanity in the vacuum of “world space.” The struggle between needing space and being without space is something “every day” to us, especially in the developed West. I need space to think, yet I want to overcome space to interact with others and be the social being that humans are wired to be. I want to create my own ideas and yet I want to collaborate with others. As much as I respect the work of every writer I have quoted in this essay, I need to find a way to create my concepts of space, overcoming that space, and being

a member of Earth in its current state of globalization. As you can see, the concept of space and being a “spatial being” in “world space” is no easy task. As Heidegger might put it, we are in a constant state of anxiety in trying to reconcile our being-in-time as well as being-in-space.

Our metaphysical existence is put into words through the concepts of my dialectic— economics, politics, culture, and society and their mediation through technology. It is impossible to think of our function of beings-in-space without thinking of our economic conditions that allow us to construct the Heideggerian home we reside in—whether or not that home is in downtrodden Detroit or a New York penthouse. These economic conditions exist in world space through globalization and the subsequent de-spatialization within the third stage of capitalism: global capitalism in which borders and space wither away every day.

The final scene in *2001* features a man (Dr. David Bowman) watching himself age, maturing drastically in each new frame. His eventual death comes but he is reborn in triumphant conclusion transcending the constraints of time and space entirely and becomes the “star child”— a newborn star. This concluding moment in the film shows exactly what philosophers from Plato, to Hegel, to Marx, to Jameson hope for: the utopian world where human beings transcend the chains of space and time in which “a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature...no longer fettered by the constraints of a now oppressive sociality, [they] blossom in the neurotics, compulsives, paranoids, and schizophrenics, whom our society considers sick but who, in a world of true freedom, may make up the flora and fauna of ‘human nature’ itself” (Jameson “Seeds” 99). Perhaps so, but with wondrous eyes we should look up at the stars in wonder, and embrace the limits and finitude of our existence, savoring the sublimity and luminosity of the human experience of space.

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