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Review Essay

Sloterdijk

You Must Change Your Life. On Anthropotechnics

Peter Sloterdijk. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2013. 500pp.

In the World Interior of Capital. For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization

Peter Sloterdijk. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity, 2014. 280pp.

Globes: Spheres II: Macrospherology

Peter Sloterdijk. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014. 1024pp.

Pieter Lemmens*

Although the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1947) is certainly still not a well-known, let alone “settled” author within the Anglophone philosophical community that leans toward what is still frequently called “continental philosophy,” unlike similarly important figures such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Niklas Luhmann and Axel Honneth, his star is nevertheless slowly rising and many of his books have been translated in English in recent years. One of the reasons for

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this delayed reception in Anglophone academia might be Sloterdijk's highly idiosyncratic approach to philosophy, his even more idiosyncratic, lavishly exuberant, intensely literary and (in my humble opinion) hardly translatable prose, as well as the enormous variety of themes his formidable versatile intellect engages itself with, which makes him a thinker who is very difficult to pinpoint or categorize. And although his work nevertheless touches to a large extent upon the same themes that many other "continental" thinkers address—from postmodernity and posthumanism to biopolitics and globalization—the way he frames those themes is so utterly original and so thoroughly different from the usual theoretical formats and frameworks that this work is not so easy to connect with. And last but not least, it appears to be strangely immune to academic appropriation/annexation.

Sloterdijk emphatically characterizes himself as a "philosophical writer," i.e., as an *author* writing about philosophical issues, and one of his most consistent aversions concerns academic and professional (in his view: scholastic) philosophy. Before accepting the chair for philosophy and aesthetics at the prestigious *Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung* in his hometown Karlsruhe in 1992, he was proud to live his life as a "free writer," convinced that philosophy was too beautiful and too real to leave it only to the (professional) philosophers. He is also very much a publicly engaged thinker and writer and especially since the notorious "Sloterdijk affair" resulting from his controversial 1999 lecture "Rules for the Human Zoo" on the future of humanism and the prospects of human genetic engineering, he has been the instigator, either willingly or unwillingly, of many a heated debate in his home country. He also hosted a late night philosophy "talk show" for German television together with his colleague Rüdiger Safranski from 2002 to 2012. Yet he can in no way be identified with "media philosophers" of the like of Bernard Henri-Lévy, André Glucksmann and Alain Finkielkraut, even if he counts them among his friends.

The two thinkers most influential to Sloterdijk are undoubtedly Friedrich Nietzsche and Diogenes of Sinope, the latter being the inspiration for the "kynic" (as opposed to "cynic"), bodily and "plebeijan" style of his early philosophy and cultural criticism, the former being Sloterdijk's model for the philosopher as a "physician of culture" and for philosophy as the bold practice of "untimely" and "dangerous thinking" in the sense of intellectually "playing" with the explosive themes and taboos of one's time. Also, as for Nietzsche (and Heidegger), Sloterdijk considers the role of the

philosopher to be a “medium,” a “mouthpiece” or a “seismographer” of being. He once characterized his overall philosophical perspective as that of a “Dionysian materialism,” a position he first expounded in his eminently joyful 1986 book on Nietzsche, *Thinker on Stage. Nietzsche’s Materialism*, in which he also offers a more kynic, “plebeian-aristocratic” interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy, inspired by Diogenes.

Other influences of Sloterdijk are the critical theory of the earlier Frankfurt School, mainly Adorno and Bloch, especially the messianic thought of the latter. The failure of critical theory (and of rational critique in general) to stay emancipatory in our cynical times formed the main backdrop of his 1983 debut *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Early on in his career, however, he exchanged the Frankfurt School for what he called the “Freiburg School” in his 1989 book *Eurotaoismus. Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik (Eurotaoism. Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics)*, by which he meant his turn to Heidegger, who became one of his most enduring interlocutors. Besides Heidegger and the Frankfurters, Sloterdijk’s thinking is inspired as well by French poststructuralism, in particular Lacan, Deleuze and Derrida but also and probably most important Michel Foucault. In the later, less critically and more (onto-)anthropologically oriented phase of his work that started in the early nineties with books like *Weltfremdheit (Unworldliness, 1993)* and *Im selben Boot. Versuch über die Hyperpolitik (In the same Boat. An Essay about Hyperpolitics, 1995)* and culminated in the great *Spheres* trilogy that will partially be reviewed here below (1998–2004), the influence of the German tradition of philosophical anthropology—above all the work of Arnold Gehlen and that of his student Dieter Claessens—becomes increasingly apparent as well as the views on cultural evolution of the German cultural theorist and philosopher Heiner Mühlmann, one of his colleagues from Karlsruhe.

The “hidden master” that speaks through all of Sloterdijk’s works, however, is without doubt the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, in his later years better known as Osho, whom Sloterdijk visited in Poona in 1979–80 and whom he holds in very high esteem despite his evident charlatanry, since he liberated Sloterdijk, in his own words, from the “masotheoretical” and “aggressive-depressive complex” in which German critical theory had become stuck since the late sixties and who taught him, like Diogenes and Nietzsche, to practice a more playful and cheerful and less intellectual and all-too-serious form of “critique.” All the figures mentioned here, however, are only Sloterdijk’s most important influences, as he is a thinker who creatively draws on the work of a vast

and diverse spectrum of authors like no other contemporary philosopher that I know of. In this respect his erudition seems to be endless and boundless, a merit that is only matched by the sheer abundance and variety of his own theoretical output.

The three books under review here can all be said to ensue largely from a Nietzschean inspiration. Thinking “after Nietzsche,” according to Sloterdijk, means thinking anew about the truth of the human condition without the possibility of relying on the traditional metaphysical and religious narratives. In particular, the notion of truth itself needs to be rethought completely. Following Nietzsche, Sloterdijk rethinks truth as a function of vital systems and considers them as illusions necessary for the survival of the species. Accordingly, truths must be theorized metabiologically as belonging to the way human organisms collectively organize and ensure their continuity and this means that philosophy should become *biosophy*. In the Nietzschean inspired terminology Sloterdijk develops in his monumental *Spheres* trilogy, truths in the traditional metaphysical sense must be rethought as *symbolic immune systems* through which the human organism protects itself against invasions from the outside or to what Sloterdijk regularly calls “the uncanny” [*das Ungeheure*], a translation of the Greek word *deinon*, which figures so prominently in the first chorus of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, notoriously interpreted by Heidegger in his 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics* (as well as in his Hölderlin lecture on *The Ister* from 1942), in which the human (*anthropos*) is famously characterized as *to deinotaton*, “the most uncanny.”

Since modernity, however, these so-called first order truths, like the existence of a benevolent creator God (Christianity) or the march of the World Spirit towards ever increasing freedom (Hegelianism), have progressively been “unmasked” by the scientific enterprise as nothing but illusory projections of the human psyche onto the unknown outside. It is the insight in the illusory-projective yet vitally indispensable nature of these first order truths that yields the “second order truths” about the human condition which Nietzsche talks about in his famous 1873 essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*). This insight forms the kernel of Sloterdijk’s *immunological* re-interpretation of the metaphysical and religious history of the West, and by extension also of the worldviews and self-understandings of non-Western cultures. Metaphysical and religious systems but also humanistic worldviews should be understood as symbolic immunization projects.

For Sloterdijk these projects basically consist in the creation of symbolic spheres or inner worlds that immunize human beings from the dangers of the outside and, thus, function as protective shelters for the human beings that subscribe and, thereby, belong to them (Sloterdijk's friend Bruno Latour calls them "envelopes"). Therefore, his immunology is more precisely to be understood as a *sphero-immunology*, as a theory of immune spheres. The *Spheres* trilogy is in fact a grand sphero-immunological "massive re-description" (to use a term from Richard Rorty) of the history of human culture from the very first beginnings of human evolution all to the postmodern and now supposedly posthuman present. Humans cannot live without their immune systems since they are vital to their existence—humans are fundamentally sphere-shaping (sphero-poietic) and sphere-abiding beings and it is emphatically *as* such beings that humans have evolved and first of all *become* humans, as "inside world creatures" profiting from the beneficial conditions provided by their continuous intra-spheric existence yet also totally dependent on them. Yet the big caesura in this process that starts to emerge with modernity and the Scientific Revolution, according to Sloterdijk, concerns the transformation from symbolic strategies of immunization (those of religion, metaphysics and the early "logo-theoretical" phase of science) towards technical strategies of immunization. The transition phase between these two modes of immunization generally goes by the name of nihilism, either in its negative (backward looking) or positive (forward looking) variety. For Sloterdijk, the replacement of symbolic immunization by technical immunization forms the hard core of the process (or the project) of modernity.

Like his phenomenological master Heidegger, Sloterdijk conceives of humans as world-forming beings. For Sloterdijk, however, humans are never in the world "nakedly," as it were; they always reside in spheres. And whilst Heidegger was principally engaged in the analysis of human "being-in-the-world," Sloterdijk is more interested in the process of "coming-into-the-world" [*Zur-Welt-kommen*], which for him essentially consists in the process of sphero-poiesis, the creation of protective, immunizing inner worlds or inner spaces. In contrast to Heidegger then, who examined above all the temporal dimension of human being-in-the-world, Sloterdijk focuses on the spatial dimension of this basic ontological or better onto-anthropological *Ereignis*. In that regard he adds an *ontotopology* to Heidegger's *ontochronology*. The *Spheres* trilogy in fact presents a grand cultural-historical panorama of the process of the sphero-poietic "coming-into-the-world"—and, thereby, the "coming-into-being"—of the human being

as the ek-sisting and world-disclosing being Heidegger described in *Being and Time*. As such it is a huge *Weltbildungsroman* of the human species (and it was initially also conceived by Sloterdijk as a big literary novel).

Its first volume, entitled *Bubbles* [*Blasen*], published in 1998 and translated in English in 2011, is dedicated to the small and intimate *microspheres* in which every human being starts its existence, first of all the womb or uterus, a zoological sphere. It is one of the guiding thoughts of Sloterdijk's *spherology* that all greater spheres or *macrospheres*, the subject of the second volume, are modelled after the smaller intimate spheres, in particular the uterus. All macrospheres are microspherologically inspired and Sloterdijk characterizes the process of sphero-poiesis frequently as one of "uteromimesis," i.e., as the reconstruction of intra-uterine conditions in the outside world. As such, sphero-poiesis is a process of *transference* (of small inner worlds onto the greater outside world).

The second volume of the trilogy under review here, entitled *Globes* [*Globen*], appeared in 1999 and was translated last year (2014). In this volume Sloterdijk re-tells the grand narrative of (mostly but not exclusively) Western history, focusing above all on the history of Western religious and metaphysical ideas, as a process of spheric or sphero-poietic expansion, through which human beings have managed to occupy increasingly bigger collective inner spaces, including all the problems of "format stress" this periodically entails for those involved because of the need for adaptation to these ever increasing spheres. This volume only counts no less than 1019 pages, which gives an idea of the monumental scale of this work, which also includes a lot of pictures, which not only serve as illustrations by the way but also constitute a narrative of their own, something featuring also in two of his earlier works: *Critique of Cynical Reason* and *Eurotaoism*.

The third volume of the trilogy is entitled *Schäume* in German and appeared in 2004. It will most probably be translated in English as *Foam* in the near future. The *Foam* volume deals with the *plural spherology* which characterizes our contemporary, postmodern time, after the implosion of the great metaphysical monospheres (Sloterdijk's spherological redescription of the figures of God and the Cosmos in religion and metaphysics), which leaves a humanity bereft with metaphysical shelters—a condition Georg Lukács fittingly characterized once as "metaphysical homelessness [*metaphysischer Obdachlosigkeit*]"—and confronted with the task to re-create its

(collective) immunity through the construction of a plurality of technospheres. *Foam*, however, does not only describe the contemporary postmetaphysical world but also details pre-historic processes of sphero-poiesis and their anthropogenetic effects.

It is impossible in a review like this to provide more than a glimpse of the vast territory that is covered in the *Globe* volume. Its theme is the macrosphere in the broadest possible sense, from the village and the city to the nation and the wealth of religious and cosmological ideas about the world order developed through the ages, and it narrates the human epic of sphero-poietic expansion as a process of cosmo-poiesis that operates, as already mentioned, through the *transference* of inner spaces upon the unknown and uncanny outside, terminating so far in the project of *globe-alization* through which humanity attempts, to no avail most certainly, to include the whole of the globe into its symbolic and technological inner worlds. To a large extent, as Sloterdijk shows, the metaphysical conquest of the globe or what he also calls the project of “metaphysical globalization,” in which the symbolic sphero-poiesis of the pre-modern tradition consists, can be understood as an attempt to “en-soul” the world, to conceive it as an enclosing, sheltering “world soul” in which human beings are contained and protected, be it in the sense of an all-encompassing and caring “mother nature” (as in mythical worldviews), a Platonic or Neo-Platonic *anima mundi*, a providential Christian divine creation or a Hegelian world spirit. Metaphysical cosmology, Sloterdijk claims, was at bottom always a matter of psycho-cosmo-*therapy*, an insight by the way that has been put forward earlier in some sense by Stephen Toulmin in his 1990 book *Cosmopolis*.

It is in modernity, and according to Sloterdijk as a result of the impossibility to contain the infinity of the universe within the finite cosmological spheres projected by metaphysical cosmo-poiesis that became gradually disclosed since the Copernican turn (one of the pioneers of this uncanny “infinetism” of course being Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake for this heretical view), that this process of transference became conscious of itself as it were and disclosed itself more and more as an illusory attempt. Since then, humanity has learned that it exists in a *radical outside*, on a fragile (and due to humanity’s ignorant exploitative recklessness since the Industrial Revolution increasingly endangered) planetary life support system in a vast, cold and “unlivable” universe that is indifferent to human existence. It is this condition of radical exteriority that has convinced humanity more and more that it is forever responsible for its own immunization, one that it can maintain effectively only through technology. It has

inaugurated what Sloterdijk calls the “immunological turn” in thought, Nietzsche being its principal founder. The future of the human species on Earth, therefore, will rely decisively on the possibilities of *technological* (co)-immunization and will depend on eco- and atmotechnology and it is the spaceship, Sloterdijk suggest, that will become the model for the design of social systems in the future. We are all astronauts now, and in fact always have been, as Sloterdijk affirms in the words of the American architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, whose 1968 book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* is an important reference in the third volume of the *Spheres* trilogy.

Globes, again, is a rich and massive tome that showcases the treasure trove of religious and metaphysical spheropoietic imagination that has been enacted by the animal symbolicum through the ages for immunitary purposes. It deals, among a welter of other things, with ancient and early-modern metaphysical system-building seen as projects to “geometrize” the uncanny (translated as “the Monstrous” in the English edition), with the creation of early social systems and structures (or what Sloterdijk generally refers to as “anthropotopes”) as processes of re-creation of womb-like and maternal conditions outside the womb, with the earliest and also the imperial cities (Jericho, Marduk, Niniveh, Babylon, Rome), with the immunological meaning of the ontological proofs of God as the all-encompassing monosphere, with the invasion of the infinite and the explosion of metaphysical monospheres, with the Christian inferno as an “anti-sphere,” with metaphysical ideas of intra-spheric divine telecommunication, and at the end of the book with the discovery of the planetary globe and the process of “terrestrial globalization” that started with the age of discovery ignited at the end of the Middle Ages and finally the process of “electronic globalization” that is currently still going on and fundamentally redefining our human condition.

It is to these last two phases in the process of globalization that *In the World Interior of Capital*, subtitled *For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization* and originally published in German in 2005 under the title *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, is dedicated. As a matter of fact, the first part of this book is almost identical (barring some slight differences in phrasing now and then) to the last chapter of *Globes*. The second part is about our current globalized, capitalized and synchronized world understood as a “grand interior” or “crystal palace” in which parts of humanity, those lucky to have been born in the affluent zones of the globe, live intensely “unburdened” (“relieved” as the English translation has it), “pampered” and

“frivolous” lives as “airy” consumer-subjects, enabled by the “sorcery” of capitalistic relations, the other part of it excluded in an increasingly barren outside.

The *Spheres* trilogy can be considered a “grand meta-narrative” in the Lyotardian sense of the term like no other, be it that it offers an immuno-critical meta-meta-narrative *about* these grand meta-narratives, unraveling as it were their internal mode of operation and re-thinking them from the perspective of biological and technological immunization. Unlike Lyotard, who diagnosed these narratives as “too big” and argued in postmodern fashion for more modesty, Sloterdijk claims in the introductory chapter to *In the World Interior of Capital* that the problem with the traditional metanarratives (like Christianity, Hegelianism and Marxism) was that they were *not big enough* and in fact all-too-simplistic and utterly premature. And “big enough” for Sloterdijk means “closer to the pole of excess,” i.e., to the cosmos as that immeasurable “Hyper-Uncanny” which is infinitely more wider and open and “unfoldable” and always bigger and stranger than every human attempt to contain, master and theorize it. For Sloterdijk, the human psyche is the “organon of the uncanny” and the very stage of the “original world performance” as “being-in-the-world” and “coming-into-the-world,” grasped as disclosure and domestication of the uncanny. It is to the explication of, and the reflection on, this onto-anthropological *drama* that philosophy should commit itself.

What characterizes our postmetaphysical and globalized age, according to Sloterdijk, is the recognition of the fragility of our Earthly residence and the necessity of re-thinking this new condition in techno-immunological terms. Simply put, we have to learn to become “Earthlings” on a scientifically and technologically explicated earth and, accepting the fact that as a species we are from now on forever “condemned to technology,” we should switch our immunizing efforts from locally protecting ourselves through (illusory) symbolic immuno-spheres, mainly *against* the dangers of the Earth, to globally protecting the Earth itself as the “concrete whole” on which we vitally depend. Whereas traditional *monotheism* today only survives as reaction, the belief in *monogeism*, the conviction of the uniqueness of our planet, gains more and more ground every day among the globalized masses, as Sloterdijk contends.

In the final chapter of *You Must Change Your Life*, subtitled *On Anthropotechnics*, the last book to be reviewed here, Sloterdijk imagines the emerging “world culture” as a project of inventing a technological “global co-immunity structure” or a “global immune design” (which will necessarily have to be “symbolically

accompanied” of course, to use a phrase of the Belgian philosopher of technology Gilbert Hottois, unfortunately hardly known in the Anglo-Saxon language area, who also theorizes the shift from the symbolic-logothetical to the technical-operational as the decisive event in the current stage of human history and evolution). After the failure of the communist project, an inevitably more globalizing humanity should engage in the project of “co-immunism,” as Sloterdijk half-jokingly proposes at the very end of the book.

You Must Change Your Life is a book that attempts an immunological re-description of the phenomenon of *religion*, re-interpreted and *technically* explicated, as the subtitle suggests, in terms of an *anthropotechnics* or of anthropotechnical practices, anthropotechnics being Sloterdijk’s term for all the “self-referential practicing and working on one’s own vital form,” that it to say all kinds of ‘mental exercises, self-trainings, self-elevations and self-lowering,’ known under terms *paideia*, *epimeleia*, *méletè*, *otium*, *Bildung*, *meditatio*, spiritual exercises’ etc., in short all mental and practical exercises which civilized humanity has invented over thousands of years for the purpose of “optimizing their cosmic or social immune status.”

In a sense, this book can be read as an extension, covering a much broader historical period and including non-Western practices as well, to the late Michel Foucault’s famous analyses of the Stoic, Epicurean and early-Christian practices and technologies of the self, yet its most fundamental inspiration is, again, Nietzschean, and can be considered as a contribution to the project of a “noble anthropology” that Sloterdijk announced in his already mentioned book *Unworldliness* from 1993, that is to say an anthropology of those specimens of the species that affirmatively respond to Zarathustra’s ethical imperative: “Not only onwards shall you propagate yourself, but upwards!” What is at stake in this book is the (self-)elevation or the “upward propagation” of man through *ascetic* practices. It is a tractate on *ascetology*.

It is not labor through which man produces himself, as Sloterdijk objects to Marx and Engels, but, as Nietzsche has suggested in a famous aphorism from his 1881 book *The Dawn (Morgenröthe)*, through “practice, practice, practice.” The core notion of *You Must Change Your Life* is that of “vertical tension.” Man is a cultural being that is as such always subject to the tension between elevation and regression, that is to say to vertical differences between ‘high’ and ‘low,’ i.e., between “excellent” and “mediocre,” “aristocratic” and “base,” “brave” and “cowardly,” “intelligent” and “stupid,” etc. He is a

creature, as Zarathustra's famous depiction of man as a "rope tied between beast and overman" proclaims, that is potentially superior to itself. Man, at least noble man, is an *acrobat*, literally a "high walker" [*acro-bainein*]. The title of the book is drawn from a famous poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo," which evokes Rilke's inner experiencing of the "metanoetic imperative" that summoned him to "change your life" while contemplating the sublime torso of a young Apollo in the Louvre in Paris. It is this imperative that puts him under the vertical tension of living a *better, nobler* life, a more *elevated* life.

It is through all kinds of ascetic practices that man elevates, civilizes, humanizes, emancipates and enlightens *himself*. And this is possible, according to Sloterdijk, because man is an "autoplastic" creature, i.e., a creature defined by the autoplastic repercussions of all actions and movements on the actor. In the case of man, Sloterdijk writes, "(The) act produces the actor, the reflection the reflected, the emotion the feeler, and the test of conscience the conscience itself. Habits shape the virtues and vices, and complexes of habits form 'cultures'." This autoplastic feedback of the acts upon the actor forms the "basic anthropotechnic law." As it produces superior specimens, this self-shaping through exercise (and think again here of Foucault's practices and technologies of the self and his notion of the care of the self, his translation of the Stoic *cura sui*) functions as a virtuous circle, a *circulus virtuosus*. Being a subject, Sloterdijk re-interprets, means being the carrier of one's activity sequences, "the apprentice of trainable modules and the holder of its habitual acquisitions" and even genius, he beautifully writes, "is simply a group of good habits whose collision makes sparks fly."

Care of the self as a practice of self-elevation means combating both the power of the inner *impulses* and that of *inertia* or the complex of (limiting) habits sedimented in oneself. Ascetic practices against this "two-headed *daimon*" inaugurate the so-called "Axial Age" (Karl Jaspers), the age of the "discovery of the spirit" (or better: the immunological *invention* of the spirit) in the period between 800 and 200 BC, with figures like Socrates, Buddha and Zarathustra. For Sloterdijk, this "Axial Age effect" of spiritual enlightenment results from the invention and application of ascetic anthropotechnics (in which the invention of the technology of writing plays a crucial role). It must be understood as a "practice-cultural turn" and from it spring all the various ascetic technologies, practices and movements that proliferate since Antiquity all through the Middle Ages. And Sloterdijk stresses of course that this takes place inside specific

spheres, such as caves (the early desert fathers) schools, academies, ashrams and monasteries. But most fundamentally, it is a matter of self-immunization through self-insulation or the retreat out of the world and into the self, which the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius will one day come to designate as “the inner citadel.” Ascetic practices produce the “interiority” that is the defining element of all “spirituality.”

Until modernity, these all remain principally focused on the individual, more precisely on an elite of individuals. From the beginning of modernity onwards, however, ascetic practices start to invade society as a whole and become a collective affair. They become secularized and collectivized. What is more, the ambition becomes the transformation of human life *as such*. Individual *metanoia* turns into the massive and radical reconstruction of the *condition humana*. And this means that ascetic practices become “democratized,” “deverticalized,” “pragmatized” and thereby “despiritualized.” And later on they become politicized as well and this marks the advent of what Foucault called the disciplinary societies and the emergence of biopower and biopolitics. As such, the whole of society becomes a school of practice and instead of “working on oneself,” the modern individual is rather a subject that is worked *upon* by others and by institutions. This leads in the “extreme” twentieth century in the project for a *total revolution* of society from the ground up. For Sloterdijk, the Russian Revolution and the Stalinist attempt to create a wholly “New Man” was not so much a political as an anthropotechnical novum, in the sense of a total externalization of the ascetic imperative, ultimately culminating in the “age of liquidation” of the GULag camps.

Our own age, Sloterdijk diagnoses, is a time of generalized “despiritualization,” of nihilism, tourism and consumerism, yet also one of a re-awakening of the sense for verticality. Yet traditional ethical imperatives are definitively exhausted and possess no persuasive force anymore. The *only* thing that currently possess the sublime ethical authority to really persuade human beings to “change their lives,” Sloterdijk suggests, although it might still take time before a majority is convinced, is the global ecological crisis, which according to him shares many characteristics with the ancient God of monotheism, including the signs it sends out from the future and the prophets who speak on its behalf (think here most recently of Naomi Klein for instance). Citing Hans Jonas’ famous metanoetic *ecological imperative* as the new categorical imperative, he proposes that a future humanity should collectively and cooperatively develop new

anthropotechnical practices with the aim of taking care for the Earth as a whole, in the sense of taking on “the good habits of shared survival in daily exercises.”

With this admonition, the book closes and this is unfortunate, since it would be most interesting to take notice of Sloterdijk’s own ideas about how such an “ecological turn” in anthropotechnics would have to be imagined. But, of course, this is a task lying ahead for all of us. And it is also and *definitely* a task, he emphasizes, that is *too big* for current humanity. However, as a central guiding thread of Sloterdijk’s radically historical onto-anthropology teaches, humans are those beings that are *always* confronted with problems that are *far too big* for them but that they nevertheless cannot avoid dealing with. This structural overburdening with what the tragic Greeks called *ta megala*, the “big things,” which puts human beings under permanent “growth stress,” is what anthropogenesis as hominization and coming-into-the-world through sphero-poietic expansion is all about. Like no other contemporary author, yet as a heir to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Sloterdijk is a thinker that attempts to think the *drama* of this process as unfolding of “the uncanny,” *through* the “being-there” of that creature which Sophocles described in the *Antigone* as “the most uncanny” [*to deinotaton*]. As all three books discussed here show, Sloterdijk is first of all a “theorist of the uncanny” and of that most uncanny of beings through whose being and coming-into-being the world itself comes to be. As such, his philosophy can be characterized as philosophical onto-anthropology.

I will close with a final word on the translation, which I found pretty good, given the inherent difficulty of translating Sloterdijk’s poetic and imaginative prose full of colorful metaphors and delicate word puns that often rely on the possibilities of the German language. All the three books have been translated by the same translator, the bilingually raised German composer Wieland Hoban, who was born in London but lives in Germany since 1998. Hoban seems to me to be exactly the right person able to translate Sloterdijk’s musical writing and he has done a very good job even of rendering its peculiar tonality in the English language quite often. Nevertheless, reading Sloterdijk in English definitely *feels* different, less sparkling and “explosive,” as if it has somehow lost its characteristic rhythm and melody, its typical “*brisanze*” and distinctive wittiness, its rather un-teutonic and more Francophone *finesse* and *esprit*. Also, I was not always happy with his choice of equivalents, for instance with his translation of “*das Ungeheure*” [*deinon*], as I said a key notion in Sloterdijk’s *œuvre* and one that is important for Heidegger and Hölderlin as well, as “the Monstrous,” which is certainly not

incorrect (and Sloterdijk himself occasionally talks about “*das Monströse*” as well) but has problematic connotations in English; yet “the uncanny,” my favourite, has its own problems as well. Another example is his frequent translation of “*das Seelische*” with “the spiritual,” whereas “soul” [*Seele*] is surely not the same as “spirit” [*Geist*]. Many more such examples could be mentioned but all in all Hoban’s translation is quite good.

Finally, Sloterdijk is actually an author who requires erudite readers who are really familiar with both the philosophical and the literary-poetic tradition, not in the least because he is a master of the creatively critical paraphrase, like “philosophy is its place comprehended in thoughts” (of Hegel’s famous phrase “*Philosophie ist ihre Zeit im Gedanken gefaßt*”), having elevated such paraphrasing into an artful philosophical instrument even. The more erudition a reader brings to the table, the more he will be able to profit from, and *enjoy*, Sloterdijk’s writings. If there is one author today who demonstrates through his writing style the sheer *joy* of thinking, particularly in the Nietzschean sense of *gaya scienza*, it must be Peter Sloterdijk. For all the problems more analytically minded thinkers would most certainly have with his kind of thinking (would they ever take the effort of trying to read him), Sloterdijk surely must count as one of the most original and important thinkers of our time. These three brilliant books serve as a confirmation of that and I can therefore recommend them greatly.