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A review of Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Volume One: Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011. 664 pp., 143 illus. \$34.95 (cloth). ISBN 9781584351047.

While Immanuel Kant's wide berth around inflammatory polemics made for a boring biography, his flame-retardant manner furnished nothing to distract from his philosophical system—an enviable position for the controversial German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, whose bullish views on a myriad of sensitive topics from Islam to biogenetics will allow many readers to politely decline engagement with the first part of his three-volume magnum opus, *Spheres*, which at long last is available to the English reader. Published originally in 1998, *Bubbles* was released in September 2011 by Semiotext(e). Although it often veers into unnecessary invectives, this difficult and wide-ranging masterwork is a rewarding interpretation of the “microspheres” of human intimacy with constructive implications for aesthetics, media theory, phenomenology, theology, and psychoanalysis.

Perhaps best known in America as the author of *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983; English translation, 1988), Sloterdijk began his *Spheres* project in the late 90's in response to what he saw as a relative neglect of “spatialization” theories in comparison to the vast amount of post-Heideggerian work on temporalization and historicization. At the forefront of the so-called “topological turn” in cultural theory, within which one might also include Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, and Edward S. Casey's *The Fate of Place*, *Spheres* could be thought of as Sloterdijk's attempt to write *Being and Space*, or, according to the book jacket, “the late-twentieth-century bookend to Heidegger's *Being and Time*.”

Volume 1 delimits the contours of the intimate “microsphere,” which, unlike the isolated interior of the modern subject, is a “shared inside.” Sloterdijk draws from a wide range of examples to define this “encompassing situation” of “inhood” where “I” and “other” overlap: the “Catholic heart theologies” of late medieval mysticisms (chapter 1); representations of the face from Giotto to Cindy Sherman (chapter 2); proto-formations of European depth-psychology (chapter 3). However, the primary source of his meditations on intimacy is introduced in chapter 4, which kicks off a cycle of reflections on the pre- and neo-natal

experiences that go under the psychoanalytic heading of “early object relations.” In the chapters and excurses that follow, Sloterdijk offers a tour of the “interior of the absolute mother,” where the theological becomes gynecological.

The fifth chapter, for instance, titled “The Primal Companion: Requiem for a Discarded Organ,” is an extended treatment of the primal “With,” which, after a few pages of linguistic contortions, is revealed to be none other than the placenta, that “disgusting afterbirth” deemed medical waste. Though subject to parody, Sloterdijk makes a compelling argument for the coincident emergence of the lonely modern subject with the devaluation of the placental “double” and its symbolic sublimations (the protective amulet, the spirit animal, etc.). He gives the project of “thinking the With” the title “omphalodicy,” or “the justification of language, which constantly wants to go across to the other, in the face of the severed umbilical cord and its trace on one’s own body” (391).

Chapter 7 (“The Siren Stage,” Sloterdijk’s answer to Lacan’s Mirror Stage) argues that ego structure building is essentially an acoustic process, in which “the subject hooks itself into a sonorous phrase, a vocal sound, a sonic image” (492). This “vocal umbilical cord” both keeps the child anchored in its most “intimate hymn” at the same time that it connects her to an ever-expanding “outside.” Continuing with his microsphereological redefinitions of theological concepts, Sloterdijk argues that “what we call the soul” is but “a system of resonance that is worked out in the audio-vocal communion of the prenatal mother-child sphere” (510).

In the last chapter, Sloterdijk provides his most concise sketch of the intimacy relationships that comprise the microsphere through the lens of Christian theology, which until recently “had a virtually unchallenged monopoly on fundamental intimacy-logical reflection” (544). In Sloterdijk’s telling, it was the accomplishment of ancient theologians to have “arrived at a completely de-physicalized concept of person space,” which finds its most coherent articulation in the doctrine of the trinity, or, in an awkward but apt hyphenated monstrosity that captures the core insight of *Bubbles*, the theological representation of “never-being-able-to-fall-out-of-the-inside-position.” The problem with this idea when raised to the level of the “macrosphere” is that it involves “a high psycho-political risk: if inclusion fails, the non-integrable face the threat of elimination” (616). Thus the need for the further “sphereological research” undertaken in the second volume of *Spheres: Globes* (to also be released by Semiotext(e) “in the coming seasons”).

Undoubtedly the strength of *Bubbles* lies in Sloterdijk’s seamless synthesis of material ranging from Homer’s *Odyssey* and Augustine’s *Confessions* to Andy Warhol’s self-portraits and fringe French psychoanalytic theory. The many neologisms coined in its pages—sphereology, omphalodicy, negative gynecology, etc.—prove surprisingly concrete in their application and bear potentially devastating and fruitful consequences for theology. In addition, Sloterdijk complements his masterful whirlwind of analysis with a panoply of images, which serves to illustrate his brief and oftentimes obscure references and, at the same time, provides a kind of parallel but independent visual narrative of its own.

Unfortunately, Sloterdijk's work suffers from the trappings of any self-proclaimed innovator: more often than not, "microsphereology" covers territory well-worn by psychoanalysis, all the while disingenuously mocking its predecessor. Early on, for example, Sloterdijk claims that "the dimensions of interiority spread out in this microsphereology are, in their structure, worlds apart from the serial three-room-apartments of the Freudian soul apparatus" (98). Disavowals of this sort persist in almost every chapter in the form of scathing words about "object relations" theorists, jokes about "Lacan's tragically presumptuous theorem about the mirror stage," and fleeting dismissals of the "psychoanalytical Vulgate," a jab doubly ironic for its mockery of *Bubbles'* two primary influences: psychoanalysis and theology. These polemics are not only unnecessary but theoretically damaging: Sloterdijk would have done well to engage someone like Hans Loewald, whose theory of early mother-infant relations anticipates many of the revelations made in chapters 4-7 of *Bubbles* without departing from the classic language of psychoanalysis, or Nicolas Abraham, who reminds us that Freud too thought of the human being as a kind of sphere composed of "a shell and a kernel," a trope that Sloterdijk himself employs.

In addition, his awkwardly transparent desire to prove himself better than his intellectual fathers leads to some truly overblown claims. Obviously making religion a matter of "placentophany" comes to mind, but the boldest of his assertions comes in chapter seven, where he upholds the psychological priority of sound to vision in an overreaching criticism of Lacan. One wonders why this matter is an either/or and further why the other senses (touch, notably) would be neglected in defining the "intimate," from the Latin *intimare*, meaning, amongst other things, "to impress."

As problematic as *Bubbles* can be, however, better a disingenuous return to phenomenological and psychoanalytic territory than another attempt to make sense of religion in terms of cognitive science and neuroscience. As Abraham explained back in 1968, it was because Freud's discovery, and now the re-discovery of sphereology, that there is such a thing as psychic space that is neither subjective (introspective) nor objective (neurological). This space is increasingly reduced by a violently empirical and regressive psychological discourse or else by the total abnegation of psychological questions as inherently reductive. In effect, in illuminating the contours of *intimate* space, Sloterdijk reopens a *discursive* space within which it is possible to ask psycho-theological questions anew, in such a way that the wonder at the heart of human closeness is neither ignored nor objectified.

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