On Anthropospheres and Aphrogrammes.
Peter Sloterdijk's Thought Images of the Monstrous

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show that (and how) Peter Sloterdijk throughout his oeuvre develops a specific position on *Welt-Bild*, thanks to a steady contention with Martin Heidegger's position. Unlike Heidegger, Sloterdijk denies the possibility of a world-pictureless existence, trying to supplement Heidegger's ontology with an evolutionary anthropological perspective: an onto-anthropology which takes into account the metaphorical imagery and visual thinking that shape the contemporary human coming-into-the-world. Sloterdijk's spherology can thus be intended as an effort to produce thought images that can make us see and navigate within the "world images" of which the contemporary world itself is made.

1. Introduction

In an essay on the changing forms of the religious in the modern world, Peter Sloterdijk writes: «One can measure the rank of philosophers in the modernisation process by their role in the emergence of that monstrosity which is beginning to reveal itself to radical thought as the totally secularising world» (Sloterdijk, 1997, p. 22). In the present essay we will apply this standard to its author himself. To outline the anticipated outcome of our investigation: we intend to demonstrate that (and how) Peter Sloterdijk throughout his oeuvre, and especially in the *Spheres* [*Sphären*] trilogy, produces thought images [*Denkbilder*] of «that monstrosity» which reflect the world image [*Weltbild*] and world-shaping [*Welt-Bilden*] that mark the present

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stage of unfolding of the mind [*Geist*]. We also intend to show that, and how, these mental images distinguish their author as one of those obstetricians of the coming-into-the-world [*Zurweltkommen*] of the human being or – which amounts to the same thing – of the emergence of world [*Welt*], who deserve to be called "philosophers" in the eminent sense.

According to Sloterdijk, the world has become something monstrous after the "death of God" – which is to say something unbounded, unconstituted, something that can no longer be located. Among many other things, this event means the collapse of the traditional metaphysical threefold relationship between God, the soul and the world. This in turn means that the world, which used to be complemented, structured and held in a well-bounded form by the transcendent pole, has now been inflated into an immanent Absolute, into an «unconstituted whole with no outside», for which only one name is appropriate: the monstrous (Sloterdijk, 1997, p. 22). When looking for the right word to articulate the incommensurable and astonishing or even terrifying aspects of our cosmic sojourn as post-metaphysical beings, Sloterdijk also speaks in superlative terms of the «hypermonstrosity» that the world has become since the dawn of radical modernity (*ibid.*). Even if we cannot immediately oversee all the implications of this process – which, we might add, distinguishes modernity as a cosmological and spiritual event of the first order – it is clear that conventional world pictures [*Weltbilder*] of whatever hue are too innocuous to continue giving a face to the hypermonstrosity which is the world.

Assuming that philosophical thought does not wish to do without the "picture" (or "image" as we prefer to call it) as a medium of cognition also in the future – and as the works of Sloterdijk show, it can afford this less than ever before – then the aspects of visuality and imagination in the cognitive process, which have never quite been eliminated despite the sustained attempts at cognitive cleansing mounted by scientific purism, would need to be further developed into a quality of the thinking process that I have previously termed «hyperimagery» (Jongen, 2008). Although Peter Sloterdijk himself does not use this term – instead he speaks of morphological thinking and of spheres – his frequent use of the prefix *hyper-* suggests that the expression would be terminologically justified. We will try to prove the applicability of this term to his thinking as we proceed.

2. Back to Heidegger and Beyond: The World as Picture and Globe

If we take the term world-picture [*Welt-Bild*] at its word – and as everyone knows, according to Heidegger's philosophical thought is nothing but a kind of etymological contemplation – then it must of its own accord prompt the elementary question what it means to say that the "world" is "put in the picture", or to put it another way "shaped by enframing". For what historical and cognitive reasons is an operation of this kind performed, and what actually happens when it is? Could we do without it, or is it subject to necessity? Might it possibly lead to a situation in which the picture gradually *takes the place* of the world? What do we mean here by "world", what do we mean by "picture"? This is one reason for beginning our investigation by turning our thoughts to Martin Heidegger, because it was he who first subjected the term "world picture" [*Weltbild*] to a fundamental reflection of this kind, and in so doing set benchmarks for all further thinking on the matter (Heidegger, 2003a). The other reason is that Peter Sloterdijk develops his own position on the *Welt-Bild* – and beyond that on thinking in "images" [*Bilder*] – along the lines of Heidegger up to a certain point, before striking out in a direction of his own. In a nutshell, Sloterdijk transforms Heidegger's "Old European" way of thinking, which is contemplative and technophobic, and tends to be imagophobic, into a transclassical, technophilic and *eo ipso* imagophilic form [*Gestalt*] – though not without borrowing heavily from the phenomenological method.

To first of all understand how technology and the picture belong together indissolubly, we must recall Heidegger's famous essay *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* [*The age of the world picture*], published in 1938. In that essay, Heidegger attributes the emergence of technological civilisation – and its main deficiency: the «forgottenness of Being» – to the fatal tendency of modern man, who has become a "subject", to make a "picture" of the "world" for himself, and to connect with the world only by using this picture. On this view, the world picture [*Weltbild*] is a kind of intellectual prosthesis that the human being himself has implanted, and that in the course of history increasingly disguises and replaces his "original" Being-in-the-world [*In-der-Welt-Sein*]. For Heidegger the terms "world picture" [*Weltbild*] and "modern world picture" [*neuzeitliches Weltbild*] are synonymous, because it is only during modernity that this kind of re-presentational thinking arose that enabled the human being to picture the world *in toto*.

Peter Sloterdijk provided the necessary clarity on these processes in *Sphären II. Globen* [*Spheres II. Globes*] (1999). In these detailed studies of cultural history he draws attention to the huge importance of terrestrial and celestial globes in the dawn of so-called modernity. These globes, at once objects of scientific study, symbols of domination and navigation aids for sailors, can indeed be considered as embodying the quintessence of all that Heidegger meant by "world picture" [*Weltbild*]. Above all, their initial form of twin globes, in which the terrestrial globe was never shown without its celestial counterpart, made them depictions of the world in a literal sense — models of the entire world as it was then known. The fact that they are usually mounted on a wooden or metal frame makes them prototypically symbolic of the "enframing" [*Ge-stell*] — the Heideggerian term for "technology" that he distilled from a family of German words configured around the root *stellen* (meaning to place, to set, to position, to locate) and compounded with various prefixes to form *vor-stellen* (to re-present), *her-stellen* (to manu-facture), *nach-stellen* (to re-adjust), *fest-stellen* (to fix).

Thus the early globes provide a central link between depiction and technology, as described by Heidegger, at an elementary level. They also deliver evidence in support of his basic tenet that the depiction of the world — or the emergence of the world as picture — is the converse face of the emergence of the human being as subject. It is evidently no coincidence that the production of globes began in the age of discovery and world conquest in both the physical and intellectual senses, i.e. in an age of extremely "strong subjects". In Renaissance portraits, the hand of the ruler not infrequently rests on a model of the terrestrial globe, as can be seen in several illustrations in *Sphären II*. When Heidegger pointedly remarks «The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world [*Welt*] as picture [*Bild*]» (Heidegger, 2003a, p. 94), he is, however, emphasising that it is not, as a trivial view might lead us to expect, primarily the picture (i.e. the globe) that makes the conquest of the world possible. According to Heidegger, what the physical conquest of the world actually aims to achieve is the transformation of the world [*Welt*] *as such* into the picture [*Bild*].

Without a doubt, the conquest of the world as picture by the re-presenting subject has made enormous advances since Heidegger's day. Not only have the cartographic technologies for depicting the planet made huge leaps forward in terms of detail and depth. With Google Earth, Google Streetview and similar virtual imaging services they have entered into a new stage of evolution in

which their impacts on everyday culture are immediately noticeable, and in which their progress can be felt in real time. That the world itself could become the picture, that the boundaries between territory and map could become increasingly blurred – in Heidegger's day still a bold philosophical hyperbole – is nowadays beginning to be realised through hard technology with the forms of pervasive gaming in which real and virtual space merge.

In accordance with Heidegger's understanding of the picture, which encompasses all forms of systematisation and modelling,[1] the emergence of the world as picture goes far beyond the aforementioned geo-graphical technologies. From the organisation of large companies, to the imaging methods of the natural sciences, to the logistical control of goods flows, there is no longer any segment of technological civilisation in which "systems", model calculations and the management thereof do not play a fundamentally important role. Back in the 1980s, these developments led Jean Baudrillard (1981) to conclude that good old reality had been dissolved in the hyper-reality of the «simulacra». If we believe Baudrillard and the postmodern thinkers, then even the subject, which still appears in Heidegger as the re-presenting, manu-facturing master of the world picture, is today just an image within worlds of images. So in this case too it once again proved true that the revolution (the world becoming picture) ate its children (the subjects).

Be that as it may, today we find ourselves in a world mediated by technological imagery in which the traditional European concepts of truth and reality are no longer applicable. In this situation it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine what an original, "imageless" Being-in-the-world [*In-der-Welt-Sein*] would mean, what it would mean to do without the supporting artefacts of systems, models and mental concepts, and to embrace Being directly – pure and naked, as it were. In the more than ninety volumes of his complete works, Heidegger tried time and time again not so much to answer this question, but rather to develop it. We would therefore not be entitled to attempt an answer in passing here. Nonetheless, Heidegger's tree meditation in *What is called thinking?* [*Was heißt Denken?*, 1954] does provide us with a pointer as to what a world-pictureless existence or Being-there [*Dasein*] might

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[1] To the essence of the picture, according to Heidegger, belongs system: «When the world becomes picture, system achieves dominion – and not only in thought. Where system takes the lead, however, there always exists the possibility of its degeneration into the externality of a system that is merely fabricated and pieced together»; Heidegger, 2003a, p. 101.

require. In the said lecture he speaks of a «leap» out of science and even out of philosophy, which would have to first of all bring us down to the ground «on which we live and die, if we do not deceive ourselves» (Heidegger, 1992, p. 26). Only once we have as it were leapt into the «Clearing of Being» [*Lichtung des Seins*] – which is always and everywhere "there", and for that very reason so difficult to reach – do we really and truly come face to face with the «blooming tree», without betraying it to physics as a swarm of particles, or to neuroscience as a pattern of brain current.

This is reminiscent of the *satori* of Zen Buddhism, or the mystical «picturelessness» of Meister Eckhart, and makes clear how far removed a way of thinking and perceiving that is cleansed of all (*eo ipso* false) re-presentations and pictures is not only from the models of science, but also from the average consciousness of people in technological civilisation. Clearly, this need not mean that it is not true – one could even argue that it is precisely *because* of its "truth" that it is in conflict with today's world, in which, to quote Günther Anders, «the lie has lied itself true». Anyway, it has by now become clear what price would have to be paid for a world-pictureless existence. The disguising of the world through picture and system may be a violation of the "thing itself", of nature perceived by senses not upgraded – without it, though, there would be no formation of scientific models, no technological design, no discovery of the New World and no global civilisation. In short, without a "world picture" [*Welt-Bild*], humankind as a whole would, in Heidegger's words, have «remained in the province» (see Heidegger, 2002).

3. The Next House of Being: The Emergence of Hyperimage

Heidegger's world picture essay ends by noting that no matter how much we might (wish to) criticize technology-dominated modernity, it is not enough «merely to negate the age» (Heidegger, 2003a, p. 96). Anyone hoping to learn from Heidegger what the alternative might be, discovers that they will be dependent on a future humanity that must muster the «strength of genuine reflection». «Those of us here today» might «perhaps lay some foundations» for such reflection, but «never quite manage it just yet» (Heidegger, 2003a, p. 97). This deferral of what would actually be sorely needed is due to the aporia of Heidegger's thought, whose notion of truth is gauged by the (pre-Socratic) perception of the *physis*, in whose light new scientific truths and technological artefacts must appear as illegitimate ontological monsters. At the same time,

though, this same way of thinking must grant these results of «*lethe*-breaking procedures» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 84) a pivotal role in the history of truth due to their massive facticity. If the late Heidegger failed in the face of the technological-cybernetic challenge, then he did so in the most productive way. For he went to the limit of the traditional European, indeed the traditional human contemplative mode of thinking, set an example by living through its passion to the end, and insofar pointed the way forward for his successors *ex negativo*. Anyone thinking «after Heidegger» (Sloterdijk, 2001a) – and therefore anyone thinking «after philosophy» in the traditional sense – at least knows quite certainly *how it can no longer be done*.

What we want to claim here is that the future invoked by Heidegger is right now, and Peter Sloterdijk is one of the (few) thinkers performing the "reflection" that Heidegger called for. In his major essay *The domestication of being. Clarifying the clearing*, Sloterdijk demonstrates in one of those bold twists characteristic of a "free spirit" how Heidegger's phenomenological fundamental ontology needs to be crossed with a second perspective, namely an evolutionary anthropological perspective, if the monstrous processes of human- and world-becoming (ultimately two sides of the same process) are to come into stereoscopic, three-dimensional focus. He expounds the view that positivist research is *per se* deficient because it already takes for granted the "human" that it intends to explain; it has «the ape come down from the trees [...], and then goes on to trace the evolution of the human from the ape that has descended» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 155). The Heideggerian meditation on the "clearing" is vastly superior to that kind of scientific "non-thought"[2] in that it exposes itself to the miracle of human existence through contemplative *ekstasis*. Yet it refuses to explore how the opening up of the human and the pre-human to the world came to be in the first place. According to Sloterdijk, it is only once the Heideggerian clearing has been explained in terms of evolutionary theory and techo-anthropology that we have the whole truth.[3] This means that the meditative understanding of the expansion of souls in the human coming-into-the-world has to be combined with a reflection on the

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[2] See Heidegger's dictum «Science does not think».
[3] We need not even to remind ourselves of Heidegger's lunges at "anthropology", the emergence of which in the eighteenth century he saw as a direct consequence of thinking in terms of world picture and subject, to see that he would have found it impossible to accept Sloterdijk's proposal. See Heidegger, 2003a, p. 93.

material conditions of their emergence from a cultural science perspective, and thus the dual perspective of an «onto-anthropology» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 156) has to be adopted.

This is not the place to reproduce in detail the way in which Sloterdijk derives the anthropospheres onto-anthropologically from the paradoxical condition of the world monstrosity as non-trivial spaces of human sojourn, immunisation and security.[4] In our context it is important that he is ultimately able – «thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 156) – to designate the human spaces termed «spheres» on the basis of their proto-technological genesis as «the good enframing» [*das gute Gestell*]. Held out into the monstrous, humans can only survive and thrive if they create for themselves a «technologically enclosed external uterus», in which they «enjoy the privileges of the unborn all their lives» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 189), or in other words if they move into a «human greenhouse» fabricated through material and symbolic «anthropotechnologies», in which they nurture, protect and immunise themselves against the unliveable outside. The clearing that emerges as the world comes into being is *created by technology*. This is the crucial point: it is the result of a human «technology of self-domestication» (2001b, p. 197).

Heidegger responded to technology-infested world picture thinking [*Weltbild-Denken*], and its systems and models steeped in the forgottenness of Being, with a mode of thinking drawn entirely from language and its poietic, world-constructing force. Language, according to his famous dictum, is the «house of Being». Only as speaking beings – and as beings who compose and recite poems – do human beings come to be at home in the world. For only through language is the distant brought close, only through language is the strange translated into something familiar. However, if we go along with Sloterdijk and focus on the technological genesis and constitutedness of the housing [*Ge-Häuse*] of the anthropospheres, then language is downgraded to the mere «second home of Being» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 197), to one of several cultural techniques and communication media in a world whose constitution is technoid throughout. In this world «the production of text

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[4] In *Domestikation des Seins* Sloterdijk enumerates four mechanisms whose interaction he sees as responsible for the emergence of the human: the insulation mechanism, the mechanism of disconnection of the body, the mechanism of pedomorphosis or neoteny, and the mechanism of transfer. See Sloterdijk, 2001b, pp. 175ff.

follows [increasingly] literal and ametaphorical paths. Language is – or was – the general medium for making friends with the world, to the extent that it is – or was – the medium for transferring the homely onto the non-homely» (2001b, p. 210).

Language may have played the dominant role in domesticating Being as a whole for an entire epoch, thus creating the impression that (linguistically constituted) thought and being converge at an innermost point. (In this sense there is an unbroken line of tradition stretching from Parmenides to Heidegger and Wittgenstein that can be identified *grosso modo* as being co-extensive with "Philosophy" and *the* Western World.) However, in the age of digital codes and genetic transcriptions, it is the case that: «The province of language is shrinking, the plaintext sector is growing» (Sloterdijk, 2001b, p. 213). It is becoming increasingly naive to continue ascribing to the *logos*, i.e. the word, the judgement and the conclusion, an ability to grasp what it is that holds the world together at its core. For at that core dimensions have long since arisen – genes in cells, neural impulses in the brain, and computer programmes in machines and social systems – that are entirely inaccessible to language-based understanding and language-induced operations.

According to Sloterdijk these spiritually and linguistically (which amounts to the same thing) unassimilable externalities and outside truths are «products of explication»[5], *lethe*-breaking, monstrous visitors from outside of language that have put down roots in the old world and turned it into an un-homely place. Whereas Heidegger in the face of these circumstances speaks with a holy shudder of «homelessness» [*Heimatlosigkeit*] as the modern «fate or destiny of the world» [*Weltschicksal*] (Heidegger, 1981, p. 30), Sloterdijk – working under the pressure generated by those circumstances – seeks to transform thinking into a new type of «medium for making friends with the world» – a medium for making friends with the monstrous. His writings are the trace of a heroic but jovial endeavour to transcend his own language-based condition, in favour of an extra- or hyper-linguistic one.

It is true that philosophy has always faced the problem of how to force the "golden tree of life" into the dry branches of concepts and terms – and the constant suspicion of thereby committing errors of gross reductionism. Yet after the end of the logocratic age, which is to say after grammar has been

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[5] On the notion of explication, see Sloterdijk, 2004, pp. 74–88.

debased to a kind of user interface of the mind, this situation has once again been fundamentally exacerbated. The post-logocratic philosopher, who must continue to make use of language *nolens volens*, assuming he wishes to avoid permanent literal self-contradiction, finds himself condemned to a permanent performative self-contradiction. He or she must find a way to use the means of language to go beyond it. And as the examples in Sloterdijk's thought and writings demonstrate, the "spheres" he or she then arrives at assume the nature of images – or as we prefer to say "hyperimages".

The hyperimage is situated at precisely the position within the history of truth at which thinking no longer works using the means provided by the old *logos*. In view of the non-linguistic technologies that are increasingly re-forming the world and creating new worlds, a "visual thinking" is called for that is "above" (*hyper*) discourse, emerges from it and in the course thereof takes on a figurative quality of a higher order. We are using the term "image" here not in the sense of "representation" that traditionally goes along with the "idea", but in the sense of an "image that means ideas", adapting Vilém Flusser's definition of what he calls the «techno-image» [*Technobild*] (Flusser, 1998, pp. 137ff). The natural and life sciences have long since felt compelled to give the opaque realms they have penetrated (and which possess barely any reality beyond their own models) a techno-image-induced-clarity by subjecting them to "imaging procedures". In the same way, the most advanced mode of thinking today must as it were make use of image-giving techniques, in order to illuminate the landscapes of ideas, discourse and data through which it navigates with a new kind of conscious formal seeing.

4. Making the Monstrous Explicit: From the One Sphere to the Foam Universe

Sloterdijk's rehabilitation of the mental image as a world-shaping [*weltbildender*] factor and as a medium of cognition – as opposed to Heidegger and as opposed to the imagophobic tradition of the *logos* as a whole – is already reflected in the title of his monumental three-volume work *Sphären*. And even more so in the subtitles of the three volumes: *Bubbles*, *Globes*, *Foam* [*Blasen, Globen, Schäume*] – all metaphors, thought images [*Denkbilder*] that claim to capture in foundational terms and in foundational *images* the real and surreal spaces in which people «live, weave and have their being», i.e. the spaces that constitute their "world". At this point, to avoid going down the wrong track we should bear in mind that we can only speak of

the «imagery» of the spheres in a transferred, in a morphological sense.[6] Sloterdijk highlights the distinctiveness of his own morphological view when he refers to Oswald Spengler's «so-called morphology of world history», which he considers to be a «brilliant», though ultimately failed theoretical precursor of spherology. According to Sloterdijk, Spengler conducted a forced «coup» by declaring cultures as a whole to be «living beings of the first order», self-contained «windowless units». In so doing he did a disservice to their historic «obstinacy» by «projecting» onto them an inappropriate morphological concept (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 79).

Sloterdijk, on the other hand, is very much concerned to avoid the danger (which Heidegger emphasised) of mis-conceiving or dis-guising [*Ver-stellen*] the world by projecting any kind of pictorial or morphological concept onto it: «When we speak here of spheres as forms that realise themselves, we do so in the belief that we are not projecting any concepts. And if we were projecting any, then only as encouraged to do so by the referents themselves» (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 79). In other words, the term "sphere" is intended to be as media-based, in-comprehensible and elusive as that to which it refers. In its triune form of the microspherical (bubbles), macrospherical (globes) and polyspherical (foam), it represents a morphological thought image [*Denkbild*] that claims to be largely free from the congenital defect of all previous world pictures incriminated by Heidegger as well as from the deficiency of the outdated attempts to construct a cultural morphology – i.e. free from the mis-conception and violation that results from the "projection" of alien constructs onto the "thing itself".

For this to succeed, the author must permanently think not only against the reifying tendency of language, but also against the entire history of European science, whose «approach and outcome were an enterprise designed to avoid addressing spherical *ekstasis*, given its orientation toward concrete representation» (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 80). According to Sloterdijk, even the figure of speech of "gaining access" to the spherical would be misleading, because discovering the spherical is less a matter of accessibility «and more a matter of decelerated circumspection within the evident» (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 80). In this sense the entire *Spheres* trilogy can be seen as a single para-

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[6] In his introduction to the trilogy Sloterdijk introduces the "sphere" as a morphological term. See Sloterdijk, 1998, pp. 78ff.

magical evocation, designed to transport the reader into the contemplative *ekstasis* of his or her own Being-in-spheres [*Dasein-in-Sphären*]. Readers who are not disposed to be enchanted by Sloterdijk's philosophical siren song – or not even willing to give it a try like an Odysseus shackled to the mast – are bound to miss the quintessence of his message.

It is the aforementioned onto-anthropological twin perspective, i.e. the inclusion of the technological production of «spherical ekstasis» that takes Sloterdijk's spherological vision beyond Heidegger's *ek-static* meditations and beyond phenomenology as a whole, and enables it to assume the specific nature of hyperimagery. Before we illustrate this by considering an example of morphological imagination in *Spheres III. Foam* [*Sphären III. Schäume*], we can at least identify a hint of how the morphological change in thought from Heidegger to Sloterdijk – from Old Europe to hypermodernity – takes place, by referring to a point in Heidegger's essay *What are poets for?* [*Wozu Dichter?*, 1946]. There, Heidegger comes within a hair's breadth of the spherical thought of hyperimagery by presenting pre-Socratic "Being" [*Sein*] as a hypersphere, before – as it were recoiling in the face of his own courage – passing the torch of imagination on to Sloterdijk:

> The spherical of the One and this itself possess the nature of the clearing, within which being-present [*Anwesendes*] can be present [*anwesen*]. This is why Parmenides (Frgm. VIII, 42) calls the *eón*, the presence [*Anwesen*] of the being-present [*Anwesendes*], the *eukyklos sphaíre*. We must think of this well-rounded sphere, as the Being [*Sein*] of the Be-ing [*das Seiende*] in the sense of the clearing One. (Heidegger 2003b, p. 301)

This throws the door wide open to the hyperimagination. The morphological imagination is invited to find free expression. Heidegger, meanwhile, continues:

> We must never imagine this sphere of Being and its spherical nature as an object. Should we imagine it as a non-object instead? No, that would be mere evasion into a figure of speech. We must think of the spherical from the essence [*Wesen*] of the initial Being [*Sein*] of the revealing presence [*Anwesen*].

What makes a promising start («never imagine…as an object») ends abruptly with a prohibition on the imagination and the nailing down of the idea to the word. But is «revealing presence» not a «figure of speech»? Mustn't this concept remain worryingly empty if we refrain from associating it with the

appropriate imagination? Sloterdijk will not shy away from piling figure of speech upon figure of speech over hundreds of pages. He will do this to re-evoke the traditional metaphysical world-picture [*Welt-Bild*] with its psycho-physical hybrid cosmology, whose logical nucleus Heidegger specified above, from the realm of the faded world pictures, as colourfully and multifariously as possible. His *Spheres* trilogy is thus – either despite or because of his comment that it is the working out of the «sub-theme of *Being and space* squeezed into *Being and time*» (Sloterdijk, 2001c, p. 403) – one long denial of Heidegger's claim that the world picture [*Weltbild*] is a purely modern phenomenon.

According to Sloterdijk, both Antiquity and the Middle Ages were downright obsessed with the sphere as a symbol of unity and wholeness. As such they were much more caught in the grip of a (morphological) "picture" than modernity, whose constitutive event was the very disintegration of the «well-rounded sphere of Being».[7] As the trigger of this event in the High Middle Ages, Sloterdijk identifies the following sentence from the hermetic *Book of 24 Philosophers*: «God is a sphere, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere» (Sloterdijk, 1999, pp. 538ff). This paradoxical wording challenges the reader to transfer the spherical form onto something entirely unseen, abstract and above all infinite. This infinitisation unhinged the closed monosphere of metaphysics, which then dissolved in the formless – the monstrous. The consequences of this were the "death of God" and the infinite universe. Our comment on this is that it was evidently the hermetic instruction to think in terms of the hyperimage, i.e. an impulse coming from within the very core of metaphysics, which led to the latter's collapse. Metaphysics imploded as a result of nothing other than the attempt to formulate its own foundational intuitions more appropriately, which is to say in a more "non-representational", non-concrete way.

As this very impulse to explicate the spherical hyperimage is also located at the generative pole of spherology, Sloterdijk is able to say:

> Once the mechanisms of appropriation through simplifying globes and imperial totalitarisation have been seen through, this does not provide us with the reason why we should do away with everything that was considered great,

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[7] See Chapter 5: "*Deus sive sphaera* oder: Das explodierende All-Eine", in Sloterdijk, 1999, pp. 465-581.

> inspiring and valuable. [...] Once the grand hyperbole has had its day, swarms of discrete uprisings emerge. (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 26)

The spherological quest for morphological concepts and mental images that make visible the monstrosity of the modern world is directly linked – albeit heterodoxically – to the tradition of metaphysical and even pre-metaphysical spherical creations.[8] Yet the psycho-physical laws of morphology that the metaphysical thinkers projected with such vigour onto the entire world, which they construed as a monosphere, are still at work even after its collapse. Today they are producing a «multifocal, multiperspectival and heterarchic» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 23) variety of spheres – the «foam». «The One Sphere may have imploded, but the foam is living!» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 26). This aphorism captures in a nutshell the shift from the metaphysical world picture to the post-metaphysical world image, according to Sloterdijk.

Foam and the bubbles that compose it are so to speak products of the decomposition of the metaphysical monosphere. They are the atmospheric and symbolic human spaces, manifesting themselves in material architectures, in which societies, cultures and sub-cultural units are linked: the scientific community, political pressure groups, associations, circles of friends and households, and more recently bloggers, gamers and flash mobs. They are linked through their various traditions, moods and world pictures [*Weltbilder*] in a conglomerate of larger and smaller psycho-mental soap bubbles on the basis of the co-isolation principle. They all form «breathable milieus» that are distinct from the monstrous space of the outside into which they are held out [*hineingehalten*]. Unlike in the metaphysical, the one and whole sphere of Being, in a foamy universe of this kind there is no longer any centre from which the "whole" – which is in fact no longer a whole – might be overseen and explained. Nor is there any longer a circumference that would give boundaries and clear contours to the foam in its entirety. What there is, is different perspectives and views that shift from one bubble in the foam to the next, and the possibility for the observer of changing places between the bubbles.

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[8] If we construe hermetics as the heterodoxy of metaphysics that attempted to think the hyperimage on the basic of metaphysical premises, then this makes Peter Sloterdijk a hermetic – the "25th philosopher" so to speak – with a contemporary level of reflection. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Jongen, 2009.

5. Aphrogrammes: A Spherological Fantasy

According to Sloterdijk, in a situation like this, searching for a panoramic overview, for a single grand theory, is a «nostalgic longing for a world picture» that will be «driven inevitably into resignation» (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 77). Nonetheless, his spherology delivers nothing but a meta- or hyper-theory of theories and perspectives on the hypermonstrosity that is the world. Is this not self-contradictory? It is not self-contradictory — or is so at most in the good sense of the word hinted at above — if we recognise that spherology does not produce another world picture, but seeks — through hyperimages — to shape the perception of and navigation within those "world images" of which the world itself is made (at least as far as it extends beyond the mere *physis*). The fact that this trans-logical, morphological mode of seeing must be articulated in the same linear medium of writing as any ordinary worldview-philosophy, and must use the same alphabet and the same vocabulary, should not blind us to the yawning intellectual abyss that divides the two. We can rule out the possibility that eventually the most advanced thinking will seek new non-linear, post-alphabetic forms of notation.

In the chapter entitled *Neither contract nor organic growth* in *Spheres III* (Sloterdijk, 2004, pp. 261–308), Sloterdijk mobilises the foam metaphor in explicit opposition to both the traditional contractual and the organicistic, holistic theories of society. He considers both of these to be examples of the "projection" of false pictures and ideas onto the world, i.e. as "world pictures" in the pejorative sense of the term. In both cases, he believes, we are dealing with «hyperboles of pronounced constructivist recklessness that impress by renouncing everyday reality and replacing it with elaborations of an abstract metaphor» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 287). The traces of this «abstract metaphor» can be followed right into the concept of "society" itself, which deceitfully suggests an association of its members established by contract or some other conscious means. For this reason, since *Spheres III* Sloterdijk barely ever writes the word "society" without placing it in inverted commas. What we should be doing instead, he believes, is «describing the togetherness, the communication and the cooperation of the multiplicities, who are held together under the stress of coexistence in their own space, but who are unfortunately still referred to as societies, on their own terms» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 293).

So, entirely in the spirit of the phenomenological call to return "to the things themselves!", and similar to Heidegger's tree meditation mentioned at the outset, Sloterdijk would like to leave human togetherness in the spaces where it is present – and which are created through its presence in the first place. Unlike Heidegger, who remained in the idyllic province (of language), Sloterdijk cannot do without the means of metaphorical imagery, because he finds himself face to face not with a *physis* that is simply there with no awareness or conceptualisations, but with a thoroughly artificial reality generated by humans and their cultural technologies. This artificial reality has no ground onto which one might leap, and most certainly no "image-less" ground. When we leap into the bottomless, present, billowing world of foam, our only aim can be to replace the false pictures and «abstract metaphors» that we have projected onto it with the appropriate images and metaphors:

> Although "society" can only be understood on the basis of its original spatiality and multiplicity along with the syntagma that hold them together, the geometric spatial pictures of the land registries do not yet provide the valid image of togetherness between people and their architectural "containers"; no conceptualisation in terms of mere containers is suitable for articulating the self-willed tautness of animated forms in their aggregations. If such conceptualisations were available, we would have to operate with psycho-topological maps based as it were on infrared images of internal states in polyvalent hollow bodies. (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 302).

Here, and below, we quote at greater length, for at this point we can observe Sloterdijk gradually producing a hyperimage in the process of writing. Once he gets going with the image of «psycho-topological maps», he spins this spherological imaginative yarn further and envisions «aphrographs or foamy snapshots» (from the Greek *áphros*, meaning "foam"), which identify the foam as a whole and at the first glance as an always «unstable synthetic snapshot of a teeming agglomeration» (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 303).

> A high-resolution aphrogramme of a "society" would give us a clear image of the system of honeycombs and neighbourhoods within air-conditioned bubbles, thus enabling us to understand that "societies" are polyspherical air-conditioning systems, in the physical and the psychological sense. [...] From then on, the political realm would need to be studied using a theory of fluid dynamics for semantic loads or vectors of sense. (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 304)

What rationalistic critics would dismiss as one of Sloterdijk's typical bursts of semantic delirium without any specifiable scientific sense, on closer inspection

proves to be a product of "precise imagination" in Goethe's sense which, using its morphological "infrared vision", scans our present highly-complex "societal" reality for these forms, and translates them into linguistic metaphors that are suggested by the matter itself. Of course, this goes along with the end of the «traditional bright and clear alliance between eye and light» that Goethe appropriated in exemplary fashion and that Sloterdijk still ascribes to traditional phenomenology (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 81). Phenomenology, he writes,

> was a rescue service for phenomena in an age when most of them no longer fall of their own accord on the eye or the other senses; they are rather extracted, brought to the surface and rendered visible [...] by research, by invasive explication and by related measurements. (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 79)

If these «new visibilities» continue to be treated like shoes, jugs and blooming trees, this will disguise the fact that they have assumed the appearance of «phenomena» only thanks to technology-based methods of producing images. Conversely, this means that in the technology-based world, which has itself long since become an image, the «clarifying quality» of phenomenological cognition, which Heidegger wanted to protect against all «world pictures» and «systems», can paradoxically only be rescued by making the image a part of thought – or even better, by making thought a part of the image.

6. Conclusions

We can summarise as follows. Through his onto-anthropological twin perspectives, Sloterdijk responds to the "age of the world picture" in a way that is diametrically opposed to its discoverer Heidegger.

Unlike Heidegger, instead of sifting through archaic strata of thought in search of a "different beginning" located *before* the "world became picture", Sloterdijk accepts the latter as an inevitable fact. Then, in an avant-garde and at the same time homeopathic gesture, he proceeds to cure the errors and dire consequences of the modern way of thinking in terms of systems and models: not by reducing the importance of "picture" [*Bild*], but by increasing it, turning it into "image", which means moving away from purely pictorial re-presentation and toward metaphorical hyperimagery. The "world" [*Welt*], which was caught in the abstract system of schematic concepts developed by modern rationalism, and as a result has become opaque, can only be clarified and made transparent again by stepping forward toward a morphological mode

of thought based on the hyperimage. The fact that this mode of thought takes us even further away from Being [*Sein*], is something that we consciously accept. Contemporary Being-in-the-world [*In-der-Welt-Sein*] is not a question of finding ourselves amidst the original circumstances of nature, it is not a bivalent arrangement in which subjects stand face to face as more or less pure mirrors of given objects. Even less can we opt for the solution of logical monovalence: the melting of the subject into the world as a whole, into "Being" [*Sein*] *sans phrase*. We should rather recognise – by applying logically polyvalent onto-anthropology – that we ourselves have produced the world in which we are (which is to say the spheres) using anthropo-technological means. As the philosophical fantasy of the aphrogrammes demonstrates, spherological hyperimagery is the medium that makes our highly artificial, highly abstract world accessible to a no less artificial contemplation. In turn, this makes the world once again comprehensible and "homely". (As we can see, in post-metaphysical times too, "like for like" remains the valid guiding principle for cognition.)

In this context we should draw attention to a tension within Sloterdijk's thinking that his writings elegantly smooth over. Once we bring the appropriate intellectual energy to bear upon this tension, it will inevitably put things to the acid test, yet might lead to productive overlaps with Sloterdijk's thinking as it stands. This tension is basically due to the fact that Sloterdijk, as we already mentioned, radicalises the Heideggerian history of truth as a gradual *unconcealing* of Being [*Sein*] (see the Greek *aletheia*, meaning "unconcealedness") toward a history of *explication*. In so doing he removes the ontological ground from beneath the feet of phenomenology – a method from which he himself borrows heavily. He concedes that the phenomenology of the twentieth century was a major part of modernity's movement of cognitive explication, because it articulated clearly and systematised for the first time things that human beings had always known and experienced. However, in the face of its epistemological optimism he raises the question:

> But how, if we can demonstrate that as the implicit becomes explicit, something entirely wayward, strange, different, something never meant, never anticipated and never assimilable, occasionally infiltrates thought? [...] If there is something new, which evades the symmetry of the implicit and the explicit, and penetrates the orders of knowledge as something that remains ultimately alien, external, monstrous? (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 78)

The fact that spherology assumes *a priori* a primacy of the exterior – «we are in an exterior that supports interior worlds» (Sloterdijk, 1998, p. 28) – means that it is clearly situated *after* the ruptured symmetry of interior and exterior that marks the beginning of hypermodernity. However, Sloterdijk's method of investigating how the monstrous exterior truths make themselves felt in the spherical interior worlds remains, as we have seen, heavily tinged by phenomenology. Whether and how, as a result of the continued intrusion of unassimilable exteriority into the human spheres – and their involuntary re-shaping as a result – will force the most advanced thinking to remove more of its phenomenological apparel, and force hyperimagery to become increasingly technoid, would have to the made the subject of a separate study.

Sloterdijk's aforementioned aphrogramme mediation is illustrated on the opposite page of the book with a satellite image taken by NASA over North and South America on a cloudless night, which shows the urban agglomerations brightly illuminated (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 305). A «hellish machine for the eye»[9] delivers from a stratospheric height an image designed to prise open the nature of our psycho-spatial interior spaces and their cohesion. (This is a splendid illustration of the juxtaposition and intertwining generated by a radical interior perspective and a no less radical exterior perspective that is typical of Sloterdijk.) We should note that the photograph is not itself an aphrogramme – that would mean a trivialisation of the hyperimage. In itself it is just a picture, or rather an image, a metaphor thereof. Like all illustrations in Sloterdijk's books, it is not merely an illustration of the ideas developed in the text. These illustrations are designed to plant in the reader's mind an awareness of the figurative, encouraging them to "see" or to "imagine" what is written. In Sloterdijk's works both elements, text and image, can be interpreted as the two halves (each of which is incomplete in itself) of a mode of thought based on the hyperimage for which no system of notation as such has yet been found. Should this one day be the case, future historians of ideas will pick up *Spheres* and look at it as one of the earliest documents in which the new medium of the monstrous clearly strove to find expression.

Translated from the German by John Cochrane

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[9] Sloterdijk uses this phrase in the context of the emergence of microscopes and telescopes in the 17th century. Cf. Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 81.

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