Prelude: Dew from the Bermudian Islands

The spirit Ariel, a living telefax, a medium transmitting messages and a tool fulfilling wishes as quick as the winds, sets out - in Shakespeare’s last play the tempest - to fetch a little dew – quote - from the “still-vex’d Bermoothes” for his master Prospero. This rarest of all liquids, descending from the heights of night and collecting on blossoms and grasses only, needs to be collected with
uttermost diligence and care. Why does Shakespeare value this substance so highly in his play? Why does it seem to be worth more than gold and capital, and more than Prospero’s most pronounced talent, knowledge? And, if it must be the subtle, quasi-transcendental symbolism of dew, why then from the Bermudian islands? Why not from Bethlehem or Rome. Or why not from Oxford, for example. Bermudian dew does seem to neither represent the power or magic of entrepreneurial spirits, nor those of Christian Belief, nor those of science and knowledge.

The region of the Bermudian islands is further West than West, so to speak, not only geographically but also symbolically it is even behind those regions standing for the early modern adventure of seafaring and conquest. Already during Shakespeares’ times they have been all too well known by seafarers for their great danger – people there mysteriously get lost, swallowed, without ever being found again, so the story goes.

Peter Sloterdijk has named a short little booklet after Prosperos magic essence, published in 2001, a booklet which in my opinion suggests an abstract but reasonable frame for most of his philosophical quests. Verum et fictum convertuntur - with this formula he ends the introduction to this essay, which he announces to be about the convergence between the phantastic and the real. Having grown up in terms of a fundamental opposition between the two for many generations, Sloterdijk says, we are irreversibly starting to become aware of how primitive and pre-complex our binary figures of thought appear today – even if operable alternatives may not yet be within reach. Nevertheless, he formulates poignantly, "we are living in a logical dawn, somewhere between late-Aristotelian and early-complex, yet the new way of thinking so far has neither gained authority nor a proper profile. Thus, with all
our theoretical ventures we remain sentenced to unease, because it is all too apparent, how much we remain involved with each thought almost, into antithetical primitivisms.”

In Sloterdijk’s interpretation, the Bermudian dew that Ariel is setting out to collect comes to symbolize a “transatlantic fifth element”, that ought to be included into the conceptual toolbox both of philosophy as well as of so-called natural science. For him, Bermudian dew represents something like the essence of transfiguration, bearing simultaneously ultimate risk and the greatest possible magic.

1. An exactitude of proximity

One of the major intuitions of modern European thought since Hegel is that there exists a connection between truth and fate, implying the idea of a history for the eternal. In his attempt to provide for the spirit a path that is modeled on the old-European scheme in which the sun’s course is traced from Orient to Occident, Hegel has summed up these intuitions and given it its geopolitical symbol as the farthest extreme of the West, the inevitable West End of history. Sloterdijk’s notion of a phantastic philosophy involves an inversion of this schematism. What has traditionally been taken as the existential givenness, namely the ontological condition of our fundamental Ek-Stasis, is being reconceived in active terms.

Not so much unlike the momentous insight animating the dawn of the modern era, namely that of changing the contemplative model of gaining knowledge

1 Tau von den Bermudas. Über einige Regime der Einbildungskraft. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2001. S. 10
about the world into an active one, we currently ought to invoke a further
twist along these lines and consider the possibility of what Gilles Deleuze has
called “noology”—a science of thought-images concerned with modeling, and
eventually, perhaps, with synthesizing different topologies of thinking.

This emerging manner of thinking is quite strange, implying as it does that
thought may leave the interiority of the thinking subject. It seems to be
resonant of a kind of thinking that Michel Foucault called “la pensée du
dehors”. The thought of the outside situates itself in an inherent relation to an
outside, as well as denoting the thought of the outside. Difficult
inconsistencies would certainly arise from conceiving of this relation in terms
of a relation to an objective reality to be interiorized; rather, it makes thought
leave the realm of subjectivity in a much more radical way. Unlike the
interiority of the traditional philosophical reflection, the thought of the outside
is not autonomous, but might perhaps be called “heteronomous.” To conceive
of a philosophical framework in which such a manner of thinking could be
embedded is at the heart of Peter Sloterdijks philosophical project.

Such a thinking invokes an “exactitude of proximity” as well as a “thinking of
the Outside”. This indeed involves the fascination for what might be called
even an “impossible” exactitude, or an exactitude within the potential, within
that which cannot properly be called “the given”. The proximity to Gilles
Deleuzes interest in what he called the virtual, and his corresponding Logics of
Sense, is quite evident here. To conceive of Sloterdijk as a systematical
thinker seems to make sense foremost from this perspective. A specific view
on the relation between the analytic and the phantastic is crucial for such a
project, both for Deleuze (metaphysics of the differential, surface of
phantasmas, simulacras), for Foucault (method of the differential, the
referential as an operative micro-mechanism for doing history), as well as for Sloterdijk (and his prosthetic anthropology).

The question I would like to foreground in this paper thus concerns the problem of perspective: what stance could one possibly choose to speak from, with regard to such an undertaking? One of the greatest credits we owe Sloterdijks philosophical project is the closer characterization of such a stance in its existential involvement – as spelled out by him in a most radical way.

2. The troublesome outside

Analysis is at work in specific discursive formations, so we are well used to accepting today. Michel Foucault even goes as far as ascribing discursive formations a specific mode of being. He was radical enough and has found a characterization for this ontological challenge, without either falling into traditional metaphysical backgrounds nor into logical formalisms either. Foucaults as well as Sloterdijks crucial move consists in taking up the challenge of attempting to deal with the issue of foundation and method in radically analytic terms, without the ancient and traditional recourse to the (euclidean) systematics for fundamental support. Sloterdijk departs from such an Archaeology of Discourses, and focuses on the phantastic he sees inevitably at work in the melée of their ceaseless formations. The phantastic, as he sees it related to the new mode thinking, "acts within a coordinate system whose axis are composed in an orbital, synchronistic, and combinatoric manner."²

² Peter Sloterdijk, Tau von den Bermudas, S. 49.
To found analysis within the phantastic (and not within some sort systematic representability, whether Euclidean or directly mechanical, if not positivistic), means to allow for a manifoldness of potential stances to each and any situation – without postulating the principle need for them to be consistent in the logical sense (either / or). With this move towards a radically discursive analysis, Peter Sloterdijk welcomes the relativization of discursive one-dimensionality as a great triumph of philosophical thinking over its all-too mechanicistic explications. How has it been possible at all, Sloterdijk asks, for a word like discourse, (coming from the latin word discurrere), to lose its airy, dancy, swingy flavor and become a mere servant to analysis, an actor within the linear errands from A to B in the mission of merely “transporting” sense? ³

Sloterdijks philosophy centers around the meaning of technology for mankind. While the roots of technology, at least before the information paradigm, may well lie in the construction form of the Cartesian Grid, it is precisely this figure of thought which today can be regarded as providing merely one particular kind of rationality. In particular, the Cartesian Grid conveys the “the rectitude constituent of the method of geometric support,”⁴ in other words, the grid is the paradigm of the assumptions of linearity and additivity.

With his radically discursive analysis, Sloterdijk seeks to address thinking by turning towards the relation it maintains with spatiality. Traditionally, Descartes Grid had – precisely because it allowed to free the purely formal from the substantial – been conceived to be the outmost post of achievable abstraction. Together with Michel Serres, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault,

⁴ Serres, M. [1], p.274, i.o. French “la rectitude dans la méthode à support géométrique.”
Peter Sloterdijk is one of the first to stress that it has, in fact, turned out not to be so. Today, we know of rather different elements suitable to construct mathematical thinking, e.g. the vector field as a representation of all possible mappings of a certain kind. And this has consequences for philosophy. In terms of figurative representation, the vector field still fits within the construction form of the grid, by adding movements along the axes. As a figure of thought, however, it cannot be reduced to a movement along the horizontal alone, it also adds a verticality to it.\(^5\)

3. A timeout in the contest of critical thinking

The effect of such new figures of thought is a mobilization and transformability with regard to what we conceive as “thinking.” They introduce a new dimension of abstraction. In a certain manner, any particular one determination is but an actualization of other potential actualizations. Thereby, thinking itself acquires a kind of “volatility.” This concept, that of a certain volatility of thought seems to be but another way to put Foucaults quest for a thinking of the outside, and they both introduce the need for another language game\(^6\) - one that is capable to abstract from the grid-logic.

There are two approaches we have historically cultivated for reflecting if not directing our thinking, that of operationalization as well as that of description;


\(^6\) The notion of the “language game” has been introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein. It denotes a conventionalistic approach on how to use concepts in language, and on how to distinguish different categories of statements that are effective in discourse. According to Wittgenstein, each language game must be determinable by rules which specify it as a whole, its properties, as well as its possible usage. These rules find their legitimacy outside of themselves in an explicit or implicit contract among its “players.” Cf. Wittgenstein, L. Philosophische Untersuchungen. § 23. Werkausgabe Bd. 1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a/M. 1984.
both of them seem to fall short with regard to allow for such a new language
game. While the cultural technique of description relies on representation, on
tying words to an independent and external frame of reference, the concept of
“operationalization” delineates, in its tight relationship with the genealogy of
“rationality,” just about the very scope of the grid-logic which the new
volatility is leaving behind. It seems almost obvious that this volatility itself, at
which Sloterdijks project of a phantastic philosophy aims, must be seen as
transcending its origins. Hence its evasive character: strictly speaking, the
dimension of this outside can neither be represented, nor operated, nor
grasped.

With that, the question regarding meaning and sense of symbols is bound to
reappear, even though we had already gotten quite used to operate them in
purely formal terms. Interestingly enough, it is indeed due to the natural
sciences – more than due to the humanities – especially those investigating
the ‘nature’ of matter and life/being on very small scales, that, today, we have
entered a new era of symbolization. We find ourselves thrilled as well as
avalanched by the uncanny “reality of modeling” that goes along with the
proceedings of virtualization.

The virtualization of a given entity consists in determining the general
question to which it responds, so Pierre Lévy in one of his recent texts.\(^7\)
Virtualization concerns not only the advances of applied research in material
and life sciences, but along with that also the very concept of the human itself.
Along with thinkers of so called Trans- or Posthumanism, Peter Sloterdijk

departs from the legacy of radical difference thinking in the tradition of Heidegger, Merlau-Ponty, Adorno, and Derrida. Yet he asks for a timeout in the contest of critical thinking, which – at least since the foundational crisis of science as it flamed up in the 20th century – is bound to formulate apt ethical policies of one kind or another, solely on the basis of one ideology or another, each as troublesomely as equally resistant to further analysis in the strict sense of the word. With his urge for a timeout, Sloterdijk asks for a broader perspective onto this situation. His position holds that in order to contribute an ethics - in the broadest sense – which would be able to meet what is at issue in contemporary technoscience, or technoculture respectively, the irreducible ambiguity of meaning, being the touchstone for critical thinking, now needs its logical and ontological correspondants: Semantic polyvalency (Mehrdeutigkeit) needs its counterpart of a pluralistic ontology (Mehrstelligkeit) beyond the existential properties of either being or not-being, as well as the formal complement of a logical polyvalency (Mehrwertigkeit).  

4. Analysis is a final project, ever again

With the question of humanism, as Sloterdijk understands it, nothing less has always been at stake than what he calls an “Anthropodizee” – meaning for him “a determinability of what it means to be human vis-à-vis man’s biological openness and his moral ambivalence”. And this question, for him, needs to be posed as one of mediality – if media be very generally what allows for

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communalities to emerge and be maintained in a sustainable way. As such, they are the means by which human beings can train themselves to become what they can be and what they want to be. The latent insight Sloterdijk stresses out to be at the heart of Humanism is the affectability of man to influences – and thus the idea that culturalization means to find ways of helping the right kind of influences to gain over other ones, or in other words, to find a maintainable balance between inhibitions and the letting loose of inhibitions. This is the background to his famous lecture called ”Rules for the human park”, which he significantly wrote as a reply to Heideggers Letter of Humanism”.

It is well know that unlike Heidegger, Peter Sloterdijk holds a less categorical stance towards our dealings with technology. This is to be understood in a quite literal sense: In his reply to Heidegger, Sloterdijk thinks about the ancient problem of analysis, the one that has most prominently been articulated in this century by Ludwig Wittgenstein as the problem of rule-following:

“*Our paradox is this: a rule could not possibly determine a course of action, since each course of action would have to be brought into agreement with the rule.*”¹⁰

The notion of the ”language game” gains its shattering power from this background. According to Wittgenstein, each language game must be determinable by rules which specify it as a whole, its properties, as well as its

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possible usage. These rules find their legitimacy outside of themselves in an explicit or implicit contract among its “players.”

5. The possibility of philosophical phantasy

In his reply to Heidegger, thus, Sloterdijk raises this problem with regard to human beings affectability. In accordance with Heidegger, Peter Sloterdijk regards the existential ek-stasis, the meditation on everyday being in terms of our own and proper monstrosity and alienness, as the key characteristic for the human being: in other terms, the possibility to marvel – not only at the phenomenologically accessible Lebenswelt in its givenness, but at the human possibility of marveling itself. Philosophical thought finds itself per se exposed to a monstrous outside, to a vacuum of outer space. But against Heidegger, and close to Foucault and Deleuze, Sloterdijk does not trust in the cultivation of Gelassenheit, as the only (potentially) “responsible” way to approach the increasing importance of techné. In his collected essays entitled “Not saved. Essays after Heidegger” (from 1999) he proposes to think in terms of the “domestication of being”. As Heidegger, he is well aware of the fatality of systemically closed reasoning. But he nevertheless seeks to face the very direction where the light in Heideggers Lichtung comes from. In his own terms: “There is certain vexation rising from the zone where the reality of the real itself is being composed”12. In his opinion, it is precisely the taking of this elementary and fundamental risk, which the contemporary crisis in the

12 Peter Sloterdijk. Tau von den Bermudas. Über einige Regime der Einbildungskraft. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2001. S. 1
biological self-definition of the human asks us to do. Well aware of Heidegger’s own repellement of any empirical or philosophical anthropology, Sloterdijk sets out to explore a configuration between ontology and anthropology via his conception of *anthropotechnics*.

Dew from the Bermudian islands, representing the possibility of philosophical phantasy, thereby becomes of crucial importance for Sloterdijk. In his short text entitled “Etsi homo non daretur”, he points out that telling the story of hominization too often gets intertwined into evolutionisms, which usually invoke two typical mistakes. First, there seems to be a spontaneous affection towards either pre-supposing the human being in search for its descent, or, secondly, to forget all about him in the eagerness of explanations. Even a third could be added, which claims that there is no such history of descent at all, that the appearance of human beings is a singular event.

Sloterdijks scandalous philosophical move now consists in trying a differential analysis of the human existence. In order to develop his philosophical models, he operationalizes transcendence, so to speak, in a Deleuzian and mathematically inspired gesture. He works out the notion of a relative transcendence, relative because departing from an irreducibly pluralistic ontology. The story of hominization can only be told in a *polyvalent style* as “philosophical phantasy,” in Sloterdijks view. For each ontological version of a genealogical story of hominization, we need not only focus on the becoming-human of what has been before-human, but also on the becoming-world of what cannot be called world previous to the existence of human beings (if we want to avoid some pre-modern, inherently dualistic and anthropocentric notion of nature). Thus, Sloterdijk does not intend to *once and for all* transcend the impossible point of departure for ontological investigations as
defined by Heidegger, the *Lichtung*, but he sets out to unfold “phantastically authentic Sapiens-Cultures, focusing both on pre-humanness and pre-worldliness”\textsuperscript{13}, always bearing Heideggers voice pointing to the most important danger in mind: namely “to presuppose “the human” in any sense, only in order to then find him emerging from some pre-human evolutionary level.”\textsuperscript{14}

And just as false would it be to presuppose an open and equipped world, "as if we only needed to wait until an early ape would take the pain of arriving in it as if it were the main station to the Lichtung”\textsuperscript{15} as the existential point of departure for the evolution of the human being.

Through such a comparatistics, Sloterdijk seeks to enter the onto-anthropological circle which for him is not a hermeneutical circle anymore, but an ontogenetic anthropotechnical circle. Sloterdijk suggests, that the story of hominization might be told in terms of the quiet, complementary drama of his own dealings with space and spatiality.

\textsuperscript{15} Peter Sloterdijk. Nicht gerettet, Versuche nach Heidegger. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2001. S. 156
6. A philosophical culture of „climatological precision“

In his (so far) major project entitled “Spheres I-III”, consisting of three volumes of more than 2500 pages all in all, Peter Sloterdijk introduces the concept of the Sphere as a fundamental term for Daseins-Analysis. Human beings have, he argues, been misunderstood because “the space where they exist has always been taken for granted, without ever being made conscious and explicit”\(^6\).

The problem between relating thinking to a proper spatiality consist in the troublesome threat of thereby falling back into some sort of substantialistic thinking. Let us see how he seeks to avoid this. For Sloterdijk, substantialist thinking is deeply correlated to a philosophical preoccupation with individualism. Thus, his conceptual tool of the sphere for Daseins-Analysis in the tradition of Heidegger, consisting of many co-dependent poles that mutually evoke and contain each other, allows to depart from an initial plurality which he postulates against the philosophical preoccupation with the scale of the individual: *there are no individuals, but only di-viduals* [in the least dividual, or many-vidual, as we can add from another quote of his, VB]—human beings always already exist as particles or poles of spheres. [...]\(^7\).

In this sense, Sloterdijk sets out his Sphere project to strengthen the most fragile and lofty structures of our commonalities as a primary category. He strives to shape them up so that they may function as our common grounds. The concept of the sphere operates as a fractal, self-similar and blurry structure, providing a conceptual metrics operative throughout many scales

\(^6\) Zitat aus Sphären I (?) auf www.petersloterdijk.net

\(^7\) Peter Sloterdijk. Sphären I. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1998. S. 83ff.
and floating dimensionality. Spherical structures are being analyzed in terms different actualizations throughout different scales, respectively that of personal identity in terms of *Bubbles* (Vol.I), national identity in terms of *Globes* (V.II) and global identity in terms of *Foam* (V.III).

It is the category of *relationality*, of being literally *com-posed*, carried from what he calls the *Mit-einander* (being together with) in an ever pending and floating milieu of an *in-between*, that he suggests to treat as a primary category. Sloterdijk suggest the figure of *autogenous containers* for relations of such intimacy. This is a bizarre expression, at least at first sight, because it expresses that here, the content is containing itself. It is the thought image of a self-container – and a generative one too, a container where the containing formal structure is the content, which thereby not only *contains* itself but also *generates* itself.

The humanist discourse assumes it to be an ontological characteristic of human beings to be held into the existential *Nothing*. In Sloterdijk’s view, the Void, the ontological – or in fact, the ontogenetic - Outside comes to grow out of the intimate relation to that which is most proximate. The *existential human condition* of the increasingly dense, globalized world of today and the near future is for Sloterdijk best characterized as a state of *ecstatic immanence rendered explicit*.

The narrative of self-creation is that of evolution - of course, one might say. Sloterdijks thinking is preoccupied with the question of how to preserve an open systematics, an undetermined dynamics for evolutionary thinking. He is very close to Gilles Deleuzes suggestion to interpret Foucaults archaeology as the method allowing for a theoretical practice of „infolding the outside“. And indeed, Sloterdijks idea for a subtitle to his first volume of the Sphere Books
was to call it „Archaeoloy of Intimacy“\textsuperscript{18}. One easily understands why - in order to do what he intended, namely to philosophically explicate and solidify the most ineffable and atmospherical we live in, it was necessary to explore and at the same time to generate, a specific \textit{Aussagefeld} of the intimate as a discursive field for statements to emerge in the Foucauldian sense.

This is the overall project of Sloterdijks’ sphere-theory, to open up a philosophical culture of „climatological precision“ – as increasingly within the near future, we will have to create climates, ecological as well as social ones, synthetically.

\textbf{Coda: Prospect onto a future exhibition entitled “Binary”}

A logics of the complex is still to be awaited, Sloterdijk is well aware of that. But he assures us, that inspired curators of the late 21\textsuperscript{st} century will present conceptualizations of the times we currently live through in a large exhibition entitled “Binary”.\textsuperscript{19} It will travel around the world, from Paris to Tokyo, Chicago, Bonn and Sydney, so Sloterdijks story continues. Most of what seems irresolvable to us today will then be exhibited as instances of mere conflict-folklore. On the exhibited thought-images with which we are operating today, entire classes of school boys and girls will pass by, giggling and saying ‘these were those people who still believed in an opposition between fact and potential, and between the positive and the phantastic’. The girls, Sloterdijk assumes, will leave the museum of binary thinking with dancy steps, a little

\textsuperscript{18} Peter Sloterdijk und Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs. \textit{Die Sonne und der Tod. Dialogische Untersuchungen}. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2006.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Tau von den Bermudas. Über einige Regime der Einbildungskraft}. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2001.
bit disgusted maybe, but also fascinated. And they will go home asking themselves what it might have been like, being in love in our current times.