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Air

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Technical illustration of gasmask in use during World War I, ca. 1916.

air

At first we feel nothing, we are insensitive, we are naturalized. And then suddenly we feel not something, but the absence of something we did not know before could possibly be lacking. Think of the poor soldiers on the front line, deep in their trenches, the 22nd of April 1915 near Ypres. They knew everything about bullets, shells, rats, death, mud, and fear—but air, they did not *feel* air, they just breathed it. And then, from this ugly, slow-moving, greenish cloud lingering over them, air is being removed. They begin to suffocate. Air has entered the list of what could be withdrawn from us. In the terms of the great German thinker Peter Sloterdijk, air has been made *explicit*; air has been reconfigured; it is now part of an air-conditioning *system* that makes our life possible.¹

One could protest that this has always been the case, at least as long as planet Earth has been “polluted”—as Lovelock claimed—by oxygen.² Is not air one of the four elements? “Everyone knew” that air was one of the conditions of (aerobic) life. Yet this knowledge was not *explicit* in the sense Sloterdijk wishes to elaborate. Air was not felt, it was not experienced, no laboratory scientist was able to place his laboratory in between ordinary living creatures and air itself. Air did not count as something that had to come to our collective, political attention. To be sure, Boyle could make a bird suffocate inside his air pump by withdrawing the oxygen—and kids, as we see in the famous picture by Wright of Derby, could witness this experiment with some horrified delight, but they themselves were

not inside the glass dome: The bird’s agony was lived only by proxy. Nineteenth-century hygienists had also brought the air to the attention of physicians, statisticians, educators, and city planners. But it was the air of miasmas that was in question, the infected mephitic air of lower classes, polluted cities, and dangerous industries. What happened in Ypres was different: Air had become public; gas had become a branch of the military; a whole science of atmospheric manipulation had been declared.

Sloterdijk’s argument is that if you want to understand what it is to feel something, it’s not by rehearsing the tired old scenography of empiricism, the positivist protocols of sensation, the tiny repertoire of situations that philosophers like to use for their best examples: “Suppose I see a rock.” “Let me touch a mug.” “Have a child burn herself on a fire rod.” “Look at this Manet.” No, feeling is something much less direct than this face to face between a sentient being and some object to be felt. Feeling is more roundabout; it’s the slow realization that something is missing. It resides, in a way, behind you, behind your back, or maybe even outside of you in an untouchable greenish cloud—something you don’t exactly understand

and in charge of which are people you can only see through peripheral vision. As if you were resting in a hotel on a hot day and, after the air conditioning broke down, you overheard the hesitant conversation of the repair crew. Or suppose that you wake up in the Space Station, and realize that every single one of your innocent and inconsiderate gestures might break something essential to the breathing condition of the place you have “landed,” so to speak. This is Sloterdijk’s explicitness: You are on life support, it’s fragile, it’s technical, it’s public, it’s political, it could break down—it is breaking down—it’s being fixed, you are not too confident of those who fix it. Our current condition merely relies on our more explicit understanding that this tentative technological system, this “life support,” entails the whole planet—even its *atmosphere*.

The movement to make all this explicit has been hidden during the preceding century by other movements, those of revolution, modernization, emancipation. These describe our history as a move *out* of the sensorium, a great lesson in insensitivity and liberty. Less attachment. Finally, the great unmediated direct access to things. Nature a stable object at last. But although this process of desensitization, of indifferenciation certainly occurred, it’s nothing for Sloterdijk but mere escapism. Modernisms, revolutions, avant-gardes (from the Right or from the Left) are but so many variations in escaping from an explicit awareness of what we are here calling the sensorium: how to avoid being caught up by the great inverse movement of folding in, of envelopment, of attachment, of things becoming explicit. At first air itself is being made part of our normal routine, our military-industrial complex (and “complex” itself is another word for being tucked in, embedded, implicated, attached). Since Ypres, of course, many more of those taken-for-granted life supports have been made explicit and have become part of the necessary management of the sensorium, part of industry, commerce, laboratory science, surveillance technologies, public debates. The whole ecology has become part of this explicitation/management routine. Now the gentle hum of the air conditioner is heard at all times, and at all scales—including that of the global warming of planet Earth itself—even though some people don’t hear it, remain somehow still insensitive to it, don’t feel the broken mechanism, don’t see why some repair crews should be sent to fix it.

Sloterdijk is the philosopher who began to take seriously what Heidegger meant when he said we are “thrown in the

world.” Fine, but what does it mean to be “in” some place? It always means being inside some sphere, (some atmo-sphere), hence recasting philosophy as “spherology.” And hence a whole series of very practical, irreverent, funny questions. What is the envelope of this space? Through which door do you get in and out? What sort of air do you breathe in it? How do you become aware of the living conditions inside this glass house? What sort of technical crew is in attendance? To answer those questions, however, Sloterdijk does not share Heidegger’s spite for science and technology; he does not take them as so many instances of mastery, control, domination, or emancipation. He takes the sciences very seriously, but sees them as just so many examples of a continuing exploration of the sensorium. He considers the sciences and their technical apparatus as an expansion of the sensorium, a set of elaborated and fascinating ways to make explicit the fragile envelopes inside which tiny bubbles of life sustain their existence. As if laboratories had been conceived as a huge, expanding Crystal Palace, as in some of the work by the artist Olafur Eliasson, with whom he shares an obsession for artificial atmospheres. Hence Sloterdijk’s interest in obstetrics, botany, immunology, architecture, media studies, every discipline concerned with what it is to be “inside” something. On this account, Biosphere 1 (the Earth) becomes a back-formation of Biosphere 2, this strange (and failed) experiment on life support pursued in the Arizona desert inside a huge glass house.

For the first time in philosophy since the time of German *Naturphilosophie*, it might be possible to get a different feel for nature—a feel that would no longer alternate between the two present forms of escapism: “naturalization,” on the one hand, this desensitized version of what it is to be thrown in the world; and, on the other, “symbolization,” this

strange idea that something “human” should be added to the sciences, as if those sciences were not precisely exploring what sort of life supports humans need to live in. “Once out of nature,” says the poet Yeats. Sloterdijk may explain this strange expression. It does not mean that we are going to flee out of “Space Ship Earth,” but that we are finally out of this strange idea of a nature that could remain infinitely distant from the fragile life-support system that we are slowly making explicit. Art and nature have merged, folding into one another and forming a continuous sensorium. “Once back to nature?” But a nature, O so very different.

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NOTES

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III—Schäume* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004).
2. James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia. A Biography of our Living Earth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988).