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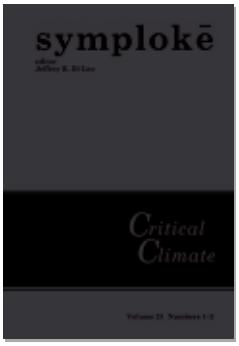
Gregers Andersen



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Greening the Sphere: Towards an Eco-Ethics for the Local and Artificial

Gregers Andersen

> *Today we can build space stations about two-hundred kilometers above the earth and so we already have a strong impression of operating in an anti-world milieu. Everything human beings need up there they have to take along with them, including the air they want to breathe.... This life-in-capsules has something trend-setting about it. In my view, the third millennium will be the world age of atmotechnics and of integral container technology. The space station is a key metaphor for the social architecture of the coming world age.*
>
> —Peter Sloterdijk and Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs (2007, 214)

In our time of climatic crisis, this dark vision formulated by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk to Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs in the conversation book *Die Sonne und der Tod* (*Neither Sun nor Death*) (2007) has an even more sinister ring than when formulated a decade ago. As the conditions for human existence deteriorate in numerous places on the planet due to anthropogenic climate change, the *anti-world milieu* that Sloterdijk talks about is, with increasing pace, becoming *world*. One could even say that one of the main psychological consequences of anthropogenic climate change is the meeting with what in German goes by the name of *das Unheimliche*, or the uncanny experience of the familiar becoming strange.[1] On the other hand, the age of atmotechnics is already here and has been for some time. From the supermarket to the apartment, from the airport to the car, air is artificially produced to create a pleasant climate indoors. This production is so ordinary that we as consumers of air may easily forget that air-conditioning and the technological tempering of climate provide us with protection and comfort in an environment we might otherwise experience as hostile. Sloterdijk is, of course, well aware of this, as he has even devoted a trilogy of more than 2600

[1]This term can, with different theoretical implications, for example, be found in the works of Freud and Heidegger. See Freud (2003, 148) and Heidegger (1977, 250).

pages to philosophical analysis of integral container technology or of spheres (*Sphären*).

In this essay, I will use Sloterdijk's analysis to outline an environmental ethics that I place between two other eco-ethics: on the one hand, the local eco-ethics that can be found in Heidegger's philosophy, and, on the other hand, a global eco-ethics proposed by Timothy Morton—though Morton's ethics will be presented in less detail than those of Heidegger. The aim is to show that Sloterdijk's conceptualization of the sphere can facilitate a much-needed shift in ecocriticism by turning the ecocritical imagination towards a space that it has until now neglected: the space of the local and artificial. Being either consistent with the advocacy for the shepherding of local nature that was strongly voiced in literary (eco)criticism from the early 1960s on to the late 1990s, or with the advocacies for a more global eco-ethics that have followed, the local and artificial has virtually been left unnoticed by ecocriticism (Heise 2008, 10). It seems simply to have fallen into an abyss between these two ways of imagining environmental engagement.

The current climate crisis makes it clear that ecocriticism can no longer afford to ignore the fact that all over the world more and more people are dwelling in a local environment that is highly artificial. As more and more people live in an urban climate, where they only experience nature as pastiche, an imaginative approach to environmental engagement is needed that takes its starting point in the place where people are actually located. For the majority of people who emit the most greenhouse gasses, this place is some kind of air-conditioned capsule, which is Sloterdijk's favorite term for the modern apartment. Even though such an approach may instantly appear to apply only to the Western world or even be accused of inheriting a latent Eurocentrism in Sloterdijk's thought, this is not the case. One must remember that the rise of the megacity is not only equivalent to the rise of the *planet of slums*, as suggested by the American urban theorist Mike Davis, but also implies an increasing "apartmentalization" (2007, 4).

Thus, it is time to consider ecocriticism from the perspective of atmotechnics. To substantiate what this actually means, let me here take Sloterdijk's critique of his self-proclaimed mentor Heidegger as a starting point. In an interview with the German magazine *Archplus* in 2004, Sloterdijk described his trilogy on spheres as an attempt "to criticize Heidegger with Heidegger" (*mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger*) (Sloterdijk, Kraft, and Kuhnert 2004; 23) and made the following remark:

> Heidegger, who we must regard as the last great thinker of rural life, thought of existential time as waiting time and because of that as boredom. The event that this waiting was grounded in was something both natural and mysterious: that the things on the fields of Being matured. The philosopher equated the field with world history without recognizing that the worlds of the cities no longer were "field-like." In the city things do not mature. They are produced.

> (*Heidegger, den ich in diesem Zusammenhang als den letzten wirklichen Denker des bäuerlichen Lebens sehen möchte, begreift die existentielle Zeit weiterhin als Wartezeit und daher auch als Langeweile. Das Ereignis, auf das dieses Warten hinführt, ist naturgemäß etwas abgründig Einfaches: daß die Dinge auf dem Acker des Werdens reif werden.*
>
> *Der Philosoph setzt diesen Acker mit der Weltgeschichte gleich, ohne zu bedenken, daß die Welt der Städte nicht mehr ackerförmig sein kann. In der Stadt reifen die Dinge nicht, sie werden produziert.*) (Sloterdijk, Kraft, and Kuhnert 2004; 20)[2]

It seems to me that Sloterdijk here makes a strong argument against the advocacy for the shepherding of local nature and its—in an ecocritical sense—avant-garde thinker. What is lacking most profoundly in Heidegger's thinking, in light of the evolving climate crisis, is an attempt to imagine how urban experience in a positive sense converts the imperative to shepherd. In a millennium where the majority of the people on the planet no longer live in the countryside, it is not plausible to deposit one's hope for a sustainable future in an imperative that calls for a shepherding of agrarian fields and woods. Thus, the Heideggerian way of thinking caring for nature as "setting it forth" (*her-vor-bringen*) in accordance with the rhythm of the seasons, and otherwise "letting it be" (*gelassen*) does not mark a way forward in the age of anthropogenic climate change (Heidegger 2000, 13). However, according to Sloterdijk, this does not mean that we must depart from Heidegger's thought entirely. On the contrary, what can be learned by looking at life in cities all over the planet is that Heidegger's understanding of "*Dasein*" as "Being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-sein*) still forms a fruitful perspective in the quest to understand human existence (Sloterdijk 2004, 79-80). What modern urban architecture explicates is that technological air-conditioning supports the round world that encircles the subject today and that human existence should therefore be thought as *In-Sphären-Sein*, or as "life in a sphere" (Sloterdijk 1999, 46).

In a more detailed philosophical reading, this means that the round "shelter" (*Unterkunft*) or protecting "region" (*Gegend*) that Heidegger described in his works from the mid-1930s onwards, especially in *Gelassenheit* (1959), as a result of meditating and dwelling in nature is, to Sloterdijk, something that humans create themselves (Heidegger 1960, 40). When Sloterdijk criticizes Heidegger in *Archplus* for thinking of existential time as waiting time, it is because he cannot accept Heidegger's description of the human as the "ecstatic clearing" (*Lichtung*) that waits to set forth "the being of beings" (*des Seins das Seiende*) in a region sheltered by nature (Heidegger 1976, 330). In the urban worlds of atmotechnics, shelters are produced,

[2]This interview appeared as the editorial, "Architekten machen nichts anderes als In-Theorie" ("Architects Do Everything but Theory") in a special issue of *Archplus* entitled *Architekturen des Schaums* ("Architecture of the Foam"). All translations from Sloterdijk, apart from *Neither Sun nor Death*, are mine.

and therefore the ecstatic moment is, according to Sloterdijk, a moment of self-creation (autogeneses) of *immunity*, which is the term Sloterdijk uses to describe the feeling of protection inside the sphere. Thus, Sloterdijk, in his introduction to *Sphären,* defines spheres as "spaces created by ecstatic beings that seek immunity from an outside" (*Sphären sind immunsystemisch wirksame Raumschöpfungen für ekstatische Wesen, an denen da Außen arbeitet*) (1999a, 28).

In the first two volumes of *Sphären,* titled *Blasen* (*Bubbles*) and *Globen* (*Globes*), Sloterdijk explores the protection or *immunity* provided by religion. However, his focus shifts to the *immunity* provided by technological air-conditioning in the third volume, titled *Schäume* (*Foam*). This shift from religion to air-conditioning may seem odd, but Sloterdijk uses it to make an important point. The point is as follows: after the death of God—a moment that Sloterdijk links to the proclamation by Nietzsche—it has been clear that the human subject is "thrown" (*geworfen*) into a world without any metaphysical protection and is therefore in principle without protection or is on the outside of protection (1999b, 591). In the modern world, the ecstasy of human beings is therefore, according to Sloterdijk, connected to the production of *immunity* through integral container technology and air-conditioning, since this technological encasement restores a feeling of protection and safety related to the mother and life in the womb (1999a, 62).

In other words, we here return to Sloterdijk's description of modern existence as *In-Sphären-Sein*. However, what Sloterdijk is really interested in describing in his analysis in *Schäume* is the sociality of modern urban societies. To Sloterdijk, *foam* is the word that best describes the sociality of these societies, since they are mostly made up of a gathering of air-conditioned capsules (apartments, offices, stores etc.), wherein residents and users only share a minimal feeling of connectedness, even though their capsules are clustered together like bubbles of foam. The social contract between the residents and users of these capsules can thus be summed up, Sloterdijk argues, as an agreement to promote a general *immunity* that ensures that the individuals living and using the capsules can realize themselves in the utmost way (1999a, 137).

Now, if one agrees with this description of modern urban society (as I tend to), *foam* becomes the condition from which various solutions to the crisis caused by anthropogenic climate change must be imagined. This also means that ecocriticism should take neoliberal capitalism as its imaginative starting point, since neoliberal capitalism is the political and economic frame of *foam*. Or, in more simple terms: since *foam* is where most of us seem to be not only in a spatial sense, but also in a psychological sense, a change towards a more green modernity—and what the British sociologist John Urry recently dubbed "resource capitalism" (2011, 118-119)—must be critically imagined as a change of neoliberal capitalist culture from within. To those, such as Slavoj Žižek, who regard capitalism itself as the real problem behind the "pseudo-problem" (2010, 334) of anthropogenic climate change, this will hardly sound convincing. However, by not imagining a communistic end to anthropogenic

climate change or using critical theory to imagine a radical reformation of the political and economic system, I do think Sloterdijk's description of *foam* marks out a more pragmatic arena for the critical imagination.

In fact, what I think critical imagination should imply in our time of climate crisis is very *banal*, in the sense of the word that the British social scientist Michal Billig has used in his research on nationalism. Banal, in this case, does not mean easy at all. Instead, it means the promotion of new practices of everyday life by invoking a new set of socially shared imaginaries through popular culture and the mass media (Billig 2002, 6). Ecocriticism can help facilitate such a critical reimagining of the socially shared imaginaries of neoliberal capitalist culture, but I do not think it is an imaginative task that ecocriticism can manage on its own. Creators of commercials, journalists, and others who have a creative platform on the Internet, television or through other popular cultural products play a vital role in this regard. For example (as it is also about how language is used), journalists should stop referring to oil as "the black gold," as it is even more so the gooey stuff that we are destroying our planet with. New practices need new storytelling, and the story of a good life through sustainability needs to be retold over and over again if the banal practices of everyday life are to change.

One practice which in this regard certainly needs to be imagined anew is the relation we as inhabitants of *foam* have to our local air-conditioned space and technological capsules. As there is an increasing probability that the space station will be a "key metaphor for the social architecture of the coming world age," as Sloterdijk is visioning, some eco-ethical rules for the spheres of the future need to be imagined. However, this rather grim vision of a future in which life all over the planet needs technological air-conditioning as its support system does not mean that we shall suspend our engagement and wait for such a future. An eco-ethics for spheres should imply more than that. Thus, the first imperative of the eco-ethics I am proposing implies a greening of local spheres through insulation and a more energy effective caretaking of our households. As one of the major challenges of anthropogenic climate change is to provide enough energy through sustainable energy sources, increasing the effectiveness of our energy use will be an important step in ensuring a sustainable future for both humans and animals. Let us start with our local apartments, cars and other owned life-containers, and from there we can expand our greening to the airports, offices and commercial centers that the French anthropologist Marc Augé has termed *non-places* (1995, 34).

On an individual level, this means a turn towards a more disciplined and caring lifestyle. In the age of atmotechnics, we must accept that it is by greening our artificial air-conditioned surroundings that we contribute to a positive change in our common climate. Again, Sloterdijk provides our imaginations with the philosophical details that can make such a change possible. In one of his most recent books, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropoteknik* ("You must change your life: On anthropotechnique") (2009),

Sloterdijk formulates what could be viewed as a new imperative for the societies of *foam*. Defining the term *co-immunity* (*Ko-immunismus*), he writes:

> Co-immunity means civilization and the rules of this civilization are now or never to be understood. These rules code the anthropotechnique in such a way that individual existence fits into the context of all contexts. The subject, who wants to live under the immunity of civilization, must now take the decision to turn all practices into the good habit of common survival.
>
> *(Eine solche Struktur heißt Zivilisation. Ihre Ordensregeln sind jetzt oder nie zu verfassen. Sie werden die Anthropotechniken codieren, die der Existenz im Kontext aller Kontexte gemäß sind. Unter ihnen leben zu wollen würde den Entschluß bedeuten: in täglichen Übungen die guten Gewohnheiten gemeinsamen Überlebens anzunehmen.)* (2009, 713-714)

"The context of all contexts" here means our common atmosphere presiding over our local spheres. However, when Sloterdijk describes how we, as residents of spheres, must now turn our everyday practices "into the good habit of common survival" by making our bubbles of foam fit into their atmospheric context, it gets more complicated. The reason is that Sloterdijk here is playing on the double meaning of the German word *Übung*. This word means "practice," as I have translated it above, but (like "practice" in English) it also means "training." Thus, what Sloterdijk is trying to underpin in *Du mußt dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropoteknik* is that our everyday life is already full of practices, where we in various ways use training in order to avoid risk and decrease the probability of acute death (2009, 23). One example of this, which Sloterdijk also refers to, is fitness-training (2009, 691). This popular phenomenon, which is often regarded as a narcissistic occupation with the fetish of the body, also contains an element of extreme discipline and self-improvement that decreases the risk of lifestyle diseases. Detached from its narcissistic occupation, it is this kind of discipline that we must learn to use in its full potential, because it is only through daily reoccurring training that we will gradually become capable of reducing the energy use in our practices. In this sense, we are today forced to rethink the positive effect of a value (discipline) scandalized by totalitarian ideologies and aesthetics.

At the same time, I do not think it is possible to split the *Da* ("there") and the *Sein* ("Being") of the Heideggerian *Dasein* ("Being There"). We are all in a world we more and less keep returning to and therefore have a special reason and imperative to care for. To care for the atmospheric context means first of all to care for one's local sphere and then from there outsource the caring or greening to other spheres. When I go to the airport or the supermarket, there are certain limits to my possibility to green. I cannot, as Morton makes it clear in *The Ecological Thought* (2010a, 22), envision the whole systems of transactions I take part in. But, in opposition to Morton (28), I do not think this lack of a panoptic vision enables me to step into an

even bigger *world*, where I—exactly because I cannot envision the whole, but only my place in a larger *interconnectedness* (mesh)—can identify myself with every strange creature and thing on the planet. Where the *ecological thought*, according to Morton, says: "Give us nowhere to stand, and we shall care for the Earth" (24), I propose we reply with Sloterdijk in mind: "No, let us start by looking out for our local spheres." What Morton, along with many others advocating a global eco-ethics, eco-cosmopolitanism or a planetary sense of belonging, seems to forget or neglect here is the social contract of *foam* or the egocentric attachment to the local sphere. What Sloterdijk is applying with his description of *co-immunity* as a fitting of the individual context into the context of all contexts is exactly that human beings cannot be wrestled out of their attachment to certain spheres. This attachment is simply part of their ontological status as ecstatic beings that seek *immunity* from an outside.

However, this should not lead us down the political path Heidegger took. Literary science fiction is already filled with visions of neo-fascist bubble-communities, who live under an *immunity* their lifestyles are leading others to lose.[3] Thus, to be attached to one's local sphere and being its green caretaker does not mean accepting the injustice of a global economy that leaves those that are currently excluded from the *immunity* of spheres outside to suffer without any rights. What solidarity should mean in a forthcoming era of atmotechnics is, as Sloterdijk has formulated it in *Die Sonne und der Tod,* "to conceive finitude and opening simultaneously" (2007, 189-190).

This rather ambiguous formulation points to a middle road between the too small *world* marked out by Heidegger's phenomenology and the too large *world* marked out in Morton's ethics. We cannot be honest to ourselves without conceptualizing some kind of cynical finitude to our spheres. *The strange stranger*, which is Morton's term for the uncanny Other, can also be a nuisance, a nuisance we in our everyday life continually refuse to deal with and thereby refuse the comfort of our spheres. On the other hand, we have ethical, practical and all kinds of life-enriching reasons to let the uncanny Other into our communities of *foam*. The issue at hand here is to expand the *co-immunity* of the societies of *foam* to such a degree that it can include all beings without breaking down the walls of the individual's spheres. This also means that the role of politics in the future will be to produce atmospheric solidarity or shelter for all creatures. This cannot of course be regarded as anything other than a very techno-optimistic and idealistic aim, but on the other hand the fact that we as humans are beings that create our own spheres should also mean that we should strive at securing *co-immunity* for all, or, as Sloterdijk has described it in *Die Sonne und der Tod*:

> For present-day cultures the question of survival has become a question of the way in which they are produced as atmospheric communities. Even physical atmospheres have passed to the stage

[3]See, for example, Spinrad (1999, 6-7).

> of their technical producibility. The future era will be climate-technical, and as such technologically oriented. It will be increasingly seen that societies are artificial from the ground up. The air that, together and separately, we breathe can no longer be presupposed. Everything must be produced technically, and the metaphorical atmosphere as much as the physical atmosphere. Politics will become a department of climate techniques. (2007, 245)

My supplement to Sloterdijk's thought is in this regard to state the somewhat obvious. That is, to reaffirm the important enhancement of Kant's categorical imperative suggested by the German philosopher Hans Jonas (1984, 8), so that it also implies an imperative to care for beings other than humans. If the future means more spheres and more sheltering in air-conditioned containers, then it is our eco-ethical obligation to produce the technological communities that Sloterdijk talks about in ways that allow beings other than humans to thrive. This does not mean we should leave what a majority of people still refer to with words such as "wildness" or "nature" to melt or dry out. These words must still be dear to us, even though anthropogenic climate change has shown us, once and for all, that we as humans are destructively territorializing the whole globe to such a degree that it is no longer possible to speak of authentic nature or wilderness (Latour 1993, 50). To work as an individual for the *co-immunity* or sheltering of all beings also means to work for the preservation of the areas known as wilderness or nature, because it makes the production of atmospheric solidarity for all creatures a lot easier. However, my call for an eco-ethics for spheres is at the same time grounded in the recognition that it may not be possible to save what is called nature or wilderness. The training and disciplining of everyday life will take time and therefore an eco-ethics that attempts to look ahead is needed, in order to save what may otherwise be forgotten in a possibly chaotic future. The call for an immediate and future greening of spheres is an attempt to imagine some eco-ethical rules that work against such forgetfulness.

To green the sphere thus means to transfer an ethics of caring and guarding of beings on to the architectonical air-production of modern societies. It is possible that this caring will mean the taming and artificial production of wilderness that various environmental movements often seem to become offended by. However, as the British ecocritic Greg Garrard has made evident in his *Ecocriticism* (2004), hybrid constructions such as the Eden Project in Cornwall, which unites an artificial technosphere with the local ecosphere, may very well be the most effective way to secure a biodiverse future (181-182). If the space station will be a "key metaphor for the social architecture of the coming world age," such hybrids may be the sole and therefore optimal habitat for endangered ecosystems. Thankfully, we are still in a position where we are not forced to acknowledge such a future. Instead, the fact that we live in a more and more urban and artificial century should compel ecocriticism to turn its attention to the local and artificial in order to think in critical accordance with it. That is, to use criticism and the creativity

of the imagination to give a new and sustainable meaning to the idea of living a good life in a consumer-oriented society.

In this essay I have striven to outline an eco-ethics for the local and artificial. The first imperative of this ethics is the greening of our local spheres through insulation and a more energy effective caretaking of our households and air-conditioned surroundings. The second imperative is the eco-ethical obligation to produce the spherical communities of the future in a way that allows beings other than humans to thrive. In a deeply capitalistic and egocentric world, it is everyday life—dominated by the imaginaries of popular culture—that must be critically reimagined in new and sustainable ways. It is, so to speak, in the autogenic process of spherical creation that a critical climate for change must be placed and nurtured in order to mature. The fact that we are now—returning one last time to Morton—beginning to experience the effect of *hyperobjects* (in the sense that we are living on a planet where it is becoming more and more obvious that things are interrelated) does not, in this regard, mean that we do not need a place from which we can take action (2010b). Even though the Heideggerian *Dasein* has been dressed in new spherical clothing, humans are still local beings. The increasing rootlessness caused by globalization has not changed this in a substantial way. So even though I sympathize with Morton's ethics, I do not find it philosophically sustainable. The local is still a term ecocriticism should continue to explore. In fact, it is in the abyss between the old Heideggerian imperative to save authentic, local nature, and the abstract recognition of *the strange strangers* of an artificial world, suggested by Morton, that ecocriticism should seek its future place for action.

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