

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2020 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857570020, DOI 10.7413/18258630092

SPHEROLOGY

By Gianluca Bonaiuti

(First published November 30, 2020)

It. *Sferologia*; Fr. *Sphérologie*; Germ. *Sphärologie*; Span. *Esferología*. In the last decade, the notion of spherology is strictly related to the philosophical project of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In particular in his trilogy on spheres (Sloterdijk 2011, 2014, 2016), spherology is a morphologic theory of enlivened spaces, namely a specific human topology, seen as a theoretical-narrative science of places inhabited and created by human beings. Spheres are interpreted as “morpho-immunological constructs” through which human life becomes biologically, psychologically, politically and metaphysically possible. According to this perspective, human beings always live within mostly self-created and self-maintained interiors. The philosophical formula “Being-in-the-world” is thus first and foremost “Being-in-a-sphere”. For this reason, spherology is an attempt to revision concepts such as the Grand Narrative of history of human culture and to outline the cognitive path to present human condition (Sloterdijk 2017). Monosphericity ruled the morphology of classical metaphysics: it can thus be said to function as a human effort to embrace the monstrosity of the experience and of the world itself in a perfect and safe form. Even present conditions of existence can be understood through this form, albeit in a plural perspective. Nowadays the spheres offer a defence against meaninglessness in the terms of proxemics and symbolic protection. To do this it’s necessary a revision of the concept of space, which focuses on the relational dimension of being, in particular the milieu itself in which human beings live is entirely a relationship itself. Humans are not to be localized in external spaces, because they create themselves, through their relationship, the place where they are. Since now it’s clear how the style of spherology’s narrative is therefore ironic and idiosyncratic: “[T]he terminological surface of spherology is already a deterrent against anything geared toward seriousness, power, and ratings.” (Sloterdijk 2016: 807).

THE CONCEPT AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Spherology relies on Heidegger's doctrine of existential place, while recovering and developing it. Then, spherology suggests a theory of the minimal *conditions* for the initially impersonal process of creative self-organization which isolated and distanced the proto-hominids from their environment in what can be called 'anthropogene islands' or 'anthrospheres' (van Tuinen 2009: 110). The *topos* of man is a far more decisive aspect of human existence than the *essence* of man (ten Kate 2011: 103). Drawing from Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, for whom "geometrician's sphere is an empty one, essentially empty" (Bachelard 1994: 235), Sloterdijk reconsiders sphericity as the spatial form in which human beings find the container-relation which defines their intimacy (Flusser 2006: 282-284). A sphere is a "world" formatted by its inhabitants, or an internal and enlivened space, marked by a radical and intrinsic plurality, where humans actually live. As topological animals (Lasch 2012: 266-271), humans can transfer the inner onto the outside world and give birth to macrospheres – macroscopic *replica* of their domestic and familiar inner spaces (Claessens 1980). Human culture lies on this spheropoietic drive. Spherology conceptualises spheres in different sizes and forms: on one side, microspherology, as a "proxemics anthropology", concerns the basic dyadic structure of shared, intimate, and disclosed inner spaces that humans inhabit as an external recreation of the womb; on the other, macrospherology encompasses the reflections with which the theory of intimate spheres (microspherology) is 'elevated' to a theory of large immune structures (states, realms, 'worlds', universe, God). The former are named bubbles, and are protectors and incubators where subjectivity is constituted and ontologically exists; the latter are named, after the Latin word *globus*, globes, and set out the leading "thought-figures" of classical metaphysics. Bubbles establish a resonant space in which all processes of individualization take place. Globes epitomize the human need to live in a totality which is perfect in form, just like the Greek description of Cosmos or the Christian description of God testify. The end of metaphysical monospherology entails the development of a new plural spherology. Classical ontology was a spherology, meant as a doctrine of the world and of God – it offered a theory of the absolute globe in both forms. The form of actual ontology, meant as a plural spherology is rather Foam. Human foam is an agglomeration of bubbles: systems or aggregates of spheric neighborhoods in which "each individual cell" constitutes a self-augmenting context (more colloquially: a world, a place), an intimate space of meaning whose tension is maintained by dyadic and pluripolar resonances, or a "household" that vibrates with its own individual animation, which can only be experienced by itself and within itself" (Sloterdijk 2016: 52). Collective aggregations, such as society, shall be described as aggregates of microspheres (couples, households, businesses, associations) of different formats "that, like the individual bubbles in a mountain of foam, border on one another and are layered over and under one another, yet without truly being accessible or effectively separable from one another" (Sloterdijk 2016: 56). In a spherological perspective, foamology is a field of experimentation in which animated spaces of co-subjectivity can be described anew.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

Whatever one may think about the kind of new descriptions spherology suggests, its representation of the real introduces an interesting development in human sciences. With spherology, in fact, it's possible to attempt to create an original "philosophical mediology", to be considered as a full development of a not-naive philosophical anthropology. By introducing a concept of life which is inseparable from the secret of form, "or more precisely from the formation of interiors according to spheric laws" (Sloterdijk 2016: 50), the spherological project provides an "introduction of a medial poetics of existence" (Sloterdijk 2011: 80). This is why it meddles with parallel developments in anthropological, mediological, sociological and philosophical recent achievements. First, it constitutes a significant chapter of actual German *Kulturwissenschaften*, especially for the incessant dialogue with the work of Thomas Macho. Via Macho, for example, Sloterdijk develops the concept of bubble as a unity of two poles that form a resonance, whose components are not interpreted as subjects or objects, rather as "nobjects", namely small interior comings-towards-the-world which cannot conceive of themselves as objects since they have no other to oppose to yet. With the help of Macho's theory of pre-objective psychosomatic mediality (Macho 1993), spherology criticizes the Freudian object theory involved in the oral, anal and genital phases of the Freudian proto-subject. Furthermore, the spatialized ontology of human existence proposed by the spherological project interlace with the sets of concepts suggested by Bruno Latour in his Actor-Network theory ("Without knowing it, I had always been a 'spherologist'", Latour remarked; Latour 2009: 139). Both approaches take up the challenge of the classical metaphysical divide between nature and society, and, therefore, the divide between two utterly different distributions of spatial conditions for life. Instead of the classical representation of space life-conditions as an external factor to life itself, they both claim that there are only "insides", "networks" and "spheres", but where the artificial conditions for the deployment of life forms are fully provided and paid for. In Latourian words, this common rehash of human life spatialization is well expressed by a pun by Henk Oosterling, a Sloterdijk's specialist, when he says: "*Dasein* ist design" (Latour 2008: 7). The conceptual repuzzling involved in the spherological and Latourian approaches may function as well as a critical way to reconsider the debate about globalization. By a spherological viewpoint globalization is a three-phase process whose beginnings, therefore, lie in the rationalization of the world's structure carried out by the ancient cosmologists and metaphysicians, who were the first ones to construct with conceptual, or rather morphological seriousness the totality of the existent in a spherical form (defined as "onto-morphological globalization"). A five hundred-year middle section of the sequence (the time between 1492 and 1945) which went down in history as the "age of European expansion", is interpreted as "terrestrial globalization" and has been realized by the Christian-capitalist seafaring and politically implanted through the colonialism of the Old European nation-states. The third stage of the drama "electronic globalization", is the one we live within. What distinguishes these three stages of globalization-drama are primarily their symbolic and technical media: it makes an epochal difference "whether one measures an idealized orb with lines and cuts, sails around a real orb with ships, or lets aeroplanes and radio signals circulate around the atmospheric casing of a planet" (Sloterdijk 2017: 10). It's ontologically different to envisage the unique cosmos, which fully encloses the world of essences, or the one earth, which serves as the bearer of various world-formations. More widely, however, spherology

helps to reframe the discussion of different issues: this revision of spatial forms concerned with the new morphology of human life tries to correct the theory of system's spatialization. With the concept of spheres, a gap in the field of theories of space is mended, one which yawned between the concept of environment and the concept of world. If having-an-environment can be ontologically understood as being enclosed by a ring of relevant circumstances and co-conditions for organic life and if being-in-the-world, in contrast, is to be interpreted as an ecstatic towering up into that which is open and cleared, then it must be assumed that there is a mid-world-position or a in-between that is neither inclusion in the environmental cage nor the pure terror of being held out into the indeterminate. The transition from environment to world takes place in spheres as between-worlds. Spheres have the status of an 'intermediate openness.' They are the membrane shells between "inner" and "outer" and thus media before all media. That's why spheres can be interpreted as a medium of immunity, as "morpho-immunological buildings" whose purpose is to enable a "symbolic climatization of shared space". Spherology makes explicit the spatial ground of all immune systems: it interprets the 20th century 'spatial revolution' as the "explication of human dwelling or residence in an interior with the Machine for Living, climate design and environmental planning" (Sloterdijk 2016: 503). This marks a primary difference between spherology and other philosophical efforts to describe immunity as the key-word for the understanding of (i.e. Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben). Atmospheric immunity's management is an ordinary commitment to be performed by human beings. It fixes the path for the exploration of the inhuman spatial structures that precede and are associated with the human: the cosmic (macro and micro) and the virtual. In the morphology of Foam architecture is the medium which gradually expresses the human dwelling in artificial interiors and which may also work as an immunity stabiliser in non-residential contexts (Barthélémy 2013). For this reason, spherology deals with architectural drawings, mechanic blueprints, scale models, prototyping, such as the geodetic experiments by Buckminster Fuller, who may be considered one of the most important "spherologist" of 20th century (Krausse, Lichtenstein 1999).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994 (orig. ed. 1957).

J.-H. Barthélémy, *La "révolution de l'espace" et l'architecture comme "réalisation de la philosophie" dans Écumes de Sloterdijk*, "Appareil", 11 (2013): 1-12.

D. Claessens, *Das Konkrete und das Abstrakte. Soziologische Skizzen zur Anthropologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1980.

J.-P. Couture, *Spacing Emancipation? Or How Spherology Can Be Seen as a Therapy for Modernity*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 27/1 (2009): 157-163.

H. Ernste, *The geography of spheres: an introduction and critical assessment of Peter Sloterdijk's concept of spheres*, "Geographica Helvetica", 73/4 (2018): 273-284.

V. Flusser, *Räume* (1991), in J. Dünne et al. (eds.), *Raumtheorie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2006.

- M. Jammer, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics*, Cambridge (Mass), Harvard University Press, 1954.
- J. Krause, C. Lichtenstein (eds.), *Your Private Sky. R. Buckminster Fuller: The Art of Design Science*, Zurich, Lars Mueller Publishers, 1999.
- B. Latour, *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)*, in F. Hackne et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society*, Falmouth, 3-6 September 2009, e-books, Universal Publishers: 2-10.
- B. Latour, *Spheres and Networks. Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalization*, "Harvard Design Magazine", 30 (2009): 138-144.
- S. Lash, *Deforming the Figure: Topology and the Social Imaginary*, "Theory, Culture & Society", 29/4-5 (2012): 261-287.
- P. Lemmens, Y. Hui, *Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler's Anthropotechnological Diagnoses of the Anthropocene*, "Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy", 2 (2017): 26-41.
- A. Lucci, *The Limits of the Spheres: Otherness and Solipsism in Peter Sloterdijk's Philosophy*, "Angelaki", 5/25 (2020, in press).
- T. Macho, *Zeichen aus der Dunkelheit. Notizen zu einer Theorie der Psychose*, in R. Heinz et al. (eds.), *Wahnwelten im Zusammenstoss. Die Psychose als Spiegel der Zeit*, Berlin, Akademie, 1993: 223-240.
- M.-E. Morin, *Cohabiting in the Globalised World: Peter Sloterdijk's Global Foams and Bruno Latour's Cosmopolitics*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 27 (2009): 58-72.
- S. Rashof, *Spheres: Towards a Techno-Social Ontology of Place/s*, "Theory, Culture & Society", 35/6 (2018): 131-152.
- W. Schinkel, L. Noordegraaf-Eelens, *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011.
- P. Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2011 (orig. ed. 1998).
 — *Globes: Spheres Volume II: Macrospherology*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2014 (orig. ed. 1999).
 — *Foams: Spheres Volume III: Plural Spherology*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2016 (orig. ed. 2004).
 — *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013 (orig. ed. 2006).
 — *The Domestication of Being*, in P. Sloterdijk, *Not Saved. Essays after Heidegger*, Cambridge-Malden, Polity Press, 2017: 89-148 (orig. ed. 2001).
- T. Sutherland, *Peter Sloterdijk and the 'Security Architecture of Existence': Immunity, Autochthony, and Ontological Nativism*, "Theory, culture & society", 36/7-8 (2019): 193-214.

- L. ten Kate, *Zwischen Immunität und Unendlichkeit. Der Ort in Peter Sloterdijks Sphärologie, im Hinblick auf seine Durchdenkung der christlichen Erbe*, in M. Jongen et al. (eds.), *Die Vermessung des Ungeheueren. Philosophie nach Peter Sloterdijk*, Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink, 2009: 120-130.
- S. van Tuinen, *Air Conditioning Spaceship Earth: Peter Sloterdijk's Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space", 27 (2009): 105-18.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

G. Bonaiuti, *Spherology*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2020 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2020/autumn/Spherology.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630092.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe's* archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the first volume of *ILAe's* printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects *ILAe's* Spring and the Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

G. Bonaiuti, *Spherology*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 3, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.