

PETER SLOTERDIJK (2009) *TERROR FROM THE AIR*. TRANS. A. PATTON AND S. CORCORAN. LOS ANGELES, CA: SEMIOTEXT(E). ISBN: 1584350725.

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The twentieth century began on April 22, 1915, for Peter Sloterdijk, when a German regiment launched chlorine gas over the Ypres front towards French troops. Wind blew the gas towards the target, who were puzzled. At 6.20pm, the French general, Mordacq, rode towards the gas to investigate. By 7pm, a six kilometer breach had been opened for German troops to march through. The French were carved open without being attacked with direct shots. But more importantly, the German military had shown that environments could be harnessed to cause harm. Beyond the immediate kinetic effect, they created an awareness that our environment, the air we breathe, is not necessarily safe. Sloterdijk argues this first act of gas warfare initiated and exemplified a principle that characterized the twentieth century: the increasing explication of our environment. The ecologies we depend on have been opened up, made an object of reflection and manipulation, to inflict violence, terror and anxiety upon civilian populations for military purposes. In the Heideggerian terms Sloterdijk uses, humanity has been banished from its 'natural air-envelope' (60), our dwelling space now forever a potential mortal danger to us.

Explication meant finding new ways to design air environments to kill. This 'atmoterrorism' or 'negative air conditioning' (47) required knowledge, of gas concentration and diffusion, of chambers and systems, of persistence and after effects. Through the muddy fronts of World War I, the creation of firestorms and urban zones of oven-like lethal heat in the bombing of Dresden in World War II, the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the various mechanisms used to execute death row prisoners in the US, Sloterdijk offers a succinct account of how the principle of explication was extended. While water wells have been poisoned and buildings torched for many centuries before, the explication of our

dependence on air in the twentieth century marked a new phenomenon, the deliberate exposition of an enemy's vulnerability. 'A terrorist is anyone who gains an explicative advantage over the implicit conditions of the enemy's life and exploits it for the act', writes Sloterdijk. 'That is the reason why when large terrorist interventions occur one may feel that they foreshadow the future. The future lies with that which breaks open the implicits [sic] and transforms the harmless into a combat zone' (p28-29). From this perspective, the attacks of 11 September 2001 successfully showed, in a way visually amplified around the world, that the infrastructure of modern global living is also a vulnerability which could be exploited at any subsequent point.

A glance at the relationship between technology and terrorism suggests the principle of explication operates today. Until even recently, many terrorist acts involved human and material destruction that national and international media made public and spectacular, from the 1972 Munich Olympics to the attacks of 11 September 2001. Now, however, media technologies themselves, because of their association with extremist materials and other threats, become a source of insecurity. The way terrorists and counter-terrorist organizations position the internet itself as a source of anxiety and danger is entangled with fears about identity theft, child pornography and other online acts, such that the digital technologies we depend upon for a functioning social life, economy and polity are explicated as a diffuse threat. And as Richard Grusin has argued (2010), the images of abuse of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison may have shocked because of what was represented – torture, humiliation – but also because it exposed American soldiers doing with media what American civilians do with media, namely to record fun activities and send pictures to friends. The technologies in our pockets are implicated in, and expose us to, a continuum of activities from the mundane to the extraordinary, threatening and horrific.

Once weather can be controlled by humans, it can be militarized. In June 1996 the US Department of Defense drew up a project paper, "Weather as Force Multiplier: Owning the Weather in 2025". To control weather would assist one's own forces in many ways, such as creating visibility in air space or making your troops more comfortable. Certain effects could also be inflicted on the enemy, for instance the creation of an artificial drought through the prevention of rainfall, the creation of thunderstorms, or the disruption of communication. Following the logic of the race for nuclear

weapons, if such weather control is possible, then a state must move first to gain an advantage. Sloterdijk cites the Department of Defense paper:

A high-risk, high-reward endeavour, weather-modification offers a dilemma not unlike the splitting of the atom. While some segments of society will always be reluctant to examine controversial issues such as weather modification, the tremendous military capabilities that could result from this field are ignored at our own peril.
(65)

Weather modification is already in use. In November 2009 Chinese aviation authorities and meteorologists induced heavy snowfall in Beijing by shooting 186 doses of silver iodide into the sky (*The Straits Times*, 2009: A13). Though intended to alleviate a drought, the snow angered many commuters when airports were brought to a standstill (the manipulation of weather itself was not the issue). But managing weather is just one more stage of explication. Sloterdijk considers US efforts to develop high-energy magnetic fields that can be transmitted into the ionosphere to produce certain effects, in the High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP), launched in 1993. Could such technology be used to create earthquakes or effect human brains? Such technological advances create political and moral questions. How can the control of weather for military purposes or the development of 'a quasi-neurotelepathic weapon' be justified, given that such techniques could harm civilian populations, deliberately or otherwise, on a potentially catastrophic scale? At a minimum, Sloterdijk argues, the absolute moral otherness and non-humanity of victims would need to be established beyond doubt for those using these weather weapons, otherwise those aggressors would face ambiguity and guilt, thus harming them too.

If Sloterdijk is correct then we should expect the Twenty-First Century to be marked by propaganda about the legitimacy and desirability of ecological interventions for military purposes. The development of each new explicatory weapon in the Twentieth Century created a standard dichotomy between the small section of humanity using the latest technology or victim to it, and a large uninformed or disbelieving mass. We cease to share a common world. We are either agents or deniers, 'collaborators of the explicit' (69) or 'inner aborigines, regionalists, and the voluntary curators of

their own untimeliness' (70). We might ask whether the majority of the world's population was unaware or in denial of US nuclear strikes on Japan in the 1940s. Today however, given the proliferation of information through broadcast and web media, how will large sections of the world's population respond to the first explicit or decisive act of weather-weaponry in war?

To show that explication defined the Twentieth Century beyond acts of warfare, Sloterdijk makes the case that the principles of design and air-control guiding military developments have informed cultural relations too. In art, surrealism aimed to occupy and lay bare the workings of our symbolic relations: to explicate what so-called 'art' is, how it is produced, and how we could break from these understandings. But the bourgeoisie who were supposed to be shocked by the opening up of assumptions about, say, the boundaries of a work and its environment, came to enjoy these plays and blurrings, and to market them. Sloterdijk's analysis that modern aestheticians, advancing their war of novelty and horror upon an apparently stultified mass public, were akin conceptually to atmoterrorism, allows him to write, 'the so-called postmodern is not totally wrong to define itself as the anti-explicit and anti-extremist reaction to modernity's aesthetic and analytic terrorism' (80). Modernity develops new technologies and new forms of art so as to shock and explicate, but this creates new anxieties. Sloterdijk draws on Hermann Broch's interwar exploration of mass media as the producer of mass insanity, leaving the reader with a picture of cultural 'information wars' in parallel with air terrorism. So how do we escape these logics?

Cultural theory has been outpaced by technological developments, Sloterdijk writes. It must catch up with atmo-science. He calls for cultural analysis of how we talk about weather, how media report it, how we became spectators of national climates, asked to comment on our experience of weather, yet all the while continuing to think of weather as un-controlled. If weather can be controlled, affected by our industrial activities – and now that some describe themselves as guardians of climate – so we *should* have opinions about weather. Phenomenologists such as Irigaray have described our being-in-air, but Sloterdijk invites us to consider our political and technological responses to this condition. If, as he believes is the case, our air ecologies are fragmenting, if we experience different breathing spaces, how does this orient our ability to understand others' air spaces and our ability to share matters of concern? How can we talk

about common matters when subjected to an equally fragmented and poisonous media environment?

To ignore these problems would be untimely and to invite harm upon ourselves. To evacuate semantic environments (cities, shopping centers) would require us to re-construct new environments. Instead, Sloterdijk proposes a new strategy: 'The idea according to which life insists less in its being-there, by its participation in the whole, but instead by its stabilization through self-closure and the selective refusal of participation' (110). He argues that a shared or universal ethics is impossible because the context and conditions for thinking in universal terms – the earth, the air – are potentially harmful. Instead, we must each seek to find integrity and immunity through our own efforts. We must carve out a space. We must find tactics, resources and literacies to avoid full immersion in any bubbles.

Readers may ask whether this is Bartelby politics, a call to opt out rather than contest and transform. We might also question the utility of remaining wedded to container conceptions of politics and culture. Is it still helpful to think in terms of spheres, domains and realms? What is lost in the process? And what alternative metaphors could we create? Nevertheless, *Terror from the Air* is a provocative invitation to pay attention to the logic of explication, the social effects of opening up aspects of our lives previously taken-for-granted, and we should await the first movie treatment of the tit-for-tat weather wars.

References

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