

A comunicação esférica de Peter Sloterdijk

Peter Sloterdijk's spherical communication

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ABSTRACT

In *Spheres*, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk elects the human vital space as an essential anthropological category. As per his work, we only become humans when sheltering under self-created spherical forms – both symbolic and concrete – able to provide immunization, comfort and protection against the exterior. The trilogy, formed by the volumes *Bubbles*, *Globes* and *Foams*, dialogues with the communication field by proposing morphological metaphors to describe the communication spaces. The work offers tools to interpret communication contemporary phenomena while providing a poetical and essay-like approach to the complexity of the human condition.

Keywords: Metaphor, spherology, history of language, morphology, essay

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RESUMO

Em *Esferas* o filósofo alemão Peter Sloterdijk elege o espaço vital humano como categoria antropológica essencial. Somente nos tornamos humanos, segundo a obra, ao nos agruparmos dentro das formas esféricas – simbólicas e concretas – por nós edificadas como forma de imunização, conforto e proteção contra o exterior. A trilogia, formada pelos volumes *Bolhas*, *Globos* e *Espumas*, dialoga com as comunicações ao propor metáforas morfológicas para descrever os espaços comunicativos. A obra oferece ferramentas para interpretar fenômenos comunicacionais contemporâneos ao passo em que nos aproxima, de forma poética e ensaística, da complexidade da condição humana.

Palavras-chave: Metáfora, esferologia, história da linguagem, morfologia, ensaio

The language is the house of being.

Martin Heidegger

THE SPHERES TRILOGY, by the German Peter Sloterdijk, is an audacious play. In its more than 2,500 pages, it seeks to narrate the history of the *Homo* that constructs and shelters under spherical forms – metaphorical and concrete – to become *sapiens*. For the philosopher, the spheres that accompany and enable human existence have topological, anthropological, immunological, and semiotic properties, and their primary purpose is to protect, nourish, empower and immunize the *sapiens* against the unknown exterior.

The audacity of the venture is, first of all, in its scope: all human creation, from the beginnings of hominization to contemporaneity, originates in and reflects the spherical condition. Religion, science, culture, social and political organizations, manners and customs, architecture, art and the media are spheres created by humans to shelter themselves. In the same way, also cell morphology, intrauterine development, space between mother and child during lactation, sexual pairs and cosmos are cozy spheres.

Former rector of Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, in Germany, Sloterdijk is known for the transdisciplinarity of his work, which balances on the tripod of philosophy, science and art. The relational character of his thought – for which the being exists only in relation to its technique, its artifacts, and the habitations it constructs for itself – agrees with other contemporary authors whose reflections have been grouped within the philosophical concept of posthumanism.

Boldness is another particularity of the German's work, expressed in the audacity of thematic and temporal frames in *Spheres* (which, for good and bad, reveals pretensions of a cosmological treatise), and in the apparent naturalness with which the author – at least since *Rules for the Human Zoo* (2000) – puts himself in conflict with thinkers such as Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Habermas. In *Spheres* first volume, *Bubbles*, a digression entitled “Where Lacan starts to go wrong” shows the easiness with which the author diverges directly from his interlocutors.

In any case, *Spheres* brings to our field a comprehensive understanding of the conditions of birth, uses and mutations of human language, understood as the central device that forms our cognitive *habitat*. In the work, co-evolution between medium and system, nature and culture, reveals a disposition to approach human language through its forms and appearances. Not surprisingly, more than

a hundred images are part of the treatise, which, unlike what we usually see in the Western epistemological tradition, not only *illustrate* verbal concepts but also give substance to the philosophical concepts themselves.

Divided into the volumes *Bubbles*, *Globes* and *Foams*, the trilogy was originally published in German between 1998 and 2004, and later in Spanish and English. First volume *Bubbles* Portuguese version was published in 2017, translated by José Oscar de Almeida Marques. As per the work, the spheres are presented as morphological metaphors of Western human existence. By focusing on the historical periods presented in each volume, there is suggestion of a sequential chronology of historical-evolutionary character that begins in the *Bubbles*, passes by the *Globes*, and then finally reaches the *Foams*.

Bubbles refer to the protective structures created during the process of hominization. The original groupings emerge as rigid communities of worship, effort, intimacy and inspiration. They turn inward to create gods and customs, turning their backs to the outside, recognized as a threat. Tribal architecture is – as the circle around the bonfire – centripetal. Subjectivity and consciousness are collective and the notion of horde prevails. The idea of an individual radically nonexistent: ultimately, it is unknown for sure whether the face by the firelight is that of my peer or my own.

In fact, the other is central in the trilogy. Contrary to common sense, Sloterdijk establishes the *Bubbles* as the primaverbal units, but ones which are formed in pairs. It updates, therefore, the monad, indivisible substance of Leibniz's philosophy, replacing it with the dyad. The dyad (duo or pair) appears – symbolically, magically and physiologically – in a series of themes of the life in the *Bubbles*: the heart, organ that physiologically sustains one's life and, conceptually, projects love onto the other; the intimacy between lovers' faces; the coexistence between consciousness and hypnotic states; maternity; the placenta as fetal company; the companions which are physically (Siamese) and conceptually (twins and guardian angels) inseparable; and the resonant spaces of intrauterine life, created by the maternal voice or by its duplications (messiahs, shamans, evangelists). Therefore, otherness is the premise of identity.

Thus, *being-there* – central Heideggerian concept in the trilogy, which evokes the presence in the world as a necessary condition of existence – is transformed into *being-together*. This notion of coexistence preceding existence allows a multiperspective approach that, in its relational view, approaches the communication field.

Bubbles historical moment suffers its first destabilization during the Neolithic, with the rise of sedentism through agriculture and settlement. Growth population and trade lead to the constant incorporation of what was previously on the

outside to the inner sphere of human intimacy and immunization. Rooting and adherence to territory are the embryo of the notion of property, which weakens the collective consciousness which the groups once possessed. The spherical expansion of the *Bubbles* has thus its beginning.

Globalization – a set of processes that for many authors begins in the 20th Century – has, for Sloterdijk, two inaugural milestones separated by more than a millennium: Euclid and Pythagoras’ thought, which mixes ontology and geometry to shape the world; and the maritime expansions which begun in the 15th Century. Both are part of *Bubbles* expansion to imperialist and hegemonic, agglutinating expansive forms, typical of Modernity. In the *Globes*, antagonistic and contradictory movements are the pacesetters of the expansion: the birth of the idea of art, but also the scientism; colonialism, but also Enlightenment; tradition and exoticism; maritime expansion, but also urban concentration; the telescope and the microscope; Catholic reform, agnosticism, and the announcement of the death of God; the Impressionist painting and the Mercator projection; psychoanalysis and mass media; individuality and crowd.

In *Spheres*, globalization is the set of processes that transform distance into intimacy, it encompasses, by expanding the interior, the external oddity. What was formerly *outlandish* now becomes *incorporated*. However, as one of the primary functions of the spheres is the cozy reception of its inhabitants, *Globes* begin to lose their protective and intimate character as they expand. Deprived of the bubble-like, comforting sensation of dwelling at the inner center of the sphere, the modern being finds itself unsteady, wandering through countless global epicenters.

The limit of this expansion precedes the collapse of global totalitarianism that inaugurates the *Foams*, the postmodern spherical moment. *Foams* are marked by overlapping, plural, merged, mobile, *connected insulation*. Following Sloterdijk’s metaphorical disposition, *Foams* arise in the present as microclimates (air-conditioners, greenhouses, diving equipment); architecture (apartments and co-working systems); air domain (drones, satellites, space stations); media (social networks, cell phones, customized digital entertainment), and, finally, social (ephemerality, nomadism, hybridizations), and semiological (de)constructions (cult of the self, post-truth, and the end of avant-garde art). In the *Foams*, *being-there* gives way to multifocal, multiperspective and heterarchical atopism.

If, in *Spheres*, “the mystery of life cannot be separated from the mystery of form”¹ (Sloterdijk, 2006: 47, my translation), we can focus on the dual format of the spheres to propose interesting reading paths for communication studies. If *being-there* is invariably *being-together*, there is no possible act or space other

¹ In the original: “el misterio de la vida no puede separarse del misterio de la forma”.

than communicational act or the dialogical space. By disregarding the media as interstitial entities, this relational approach of the communications reinforces the inclination – present for some decades in Latin American – to focus on the mediation of subjectivities instead of media studies and analysis.

Being-together speaks not only of the collective essence of the human being, but also of its determinant relationship with its technique: we are not humans *who have* technique; we are humans because we possess it. Thus, *being-together* refers not only to humans, but also to their relationships with the worlds they produce. There is no possible separation between human beings and the objects, artifacts and concepts created by those beings. This approach is timely because it reflects the adoption of technologies that result in hybrid forms of contemporary life: the corporal hybrid – a fusion between biology and machine – that enhances existence, but raises ethical and moral issues for being junction of biology and machine; the cognitive hybrid, which mixes human and computational languages and intelligences; and the communicational one, mix of analog and digital, which generates atopisms and multiple temporalities.

Nowadays, the communicational hybrid produces effects broadly discussed not only in academia but also on the media and society in general. The fact that the communicational space – formerly marked by a single, shared, definite sense of place and time – has, using a Sloterdijk's expression, lost its *unifying power* (2006: l. 3567), has latent consequences. It marks the transition between a *Globes*-like, political-communicational process based on a stable system of center and peripheries, translated as emitters and receivers, to a new one in which all emit and receive, momentarily occupying centers and peripheries as they navigate through liquid contexts, in movements full of erosion and fusion.

The implosion of the old communication policies and the resulting arguments and rhizomatic architecture is a metaphor that helps understanding several current phenomena: post-truth and fake news; multi-polarization and radicalization in cultural and political spheres; disputes over speech standpoints and the current epidemic of egotism on social networks. If the basic purpose of the spheres is to provide immunization, the collective sharing of a large and solid global network produces not only protection against the outside but also a sense of solidarity and empathy among its co-inhabitants. On the other hand, inhabiting the interior of the fragile spheres of the *Foams* may prove to be a conflicting experience: their thin walls expose its inhabitants to the risks of the unknown just as much as their reduced size induces the certainty of occupying the center of the living space. Consequently, life in the *Foams* may convey a harmful combination of constant fears and absolute certainties.

Finally, the greatest contribution of the work is in the possibility of approaching the trilogy in a multilinear manner, emphasized by the author himself (*Foams* are, after all, an infinite set of *Bubbles*). Apart from the historical periods they are capable of delineate, the three spherical forms coexist and indicate the complexity of the human condition in both societies and individuals. *Bubbles*, *Globes* and *Foams* appear in isolated oral communities and postmodern megacities as well as in the ceaseless daily production of new humans and their identities. They rise from a constant boiling melting pot of ontogeny, technological and a sociocultural contexts. It is no wonder that Sloterdijk opens *Spheres* with the image of a boy blowing bubbles of soap and contemplates them dancing in the air... ■

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