

Becoming human in anthropogenic hothouses

Sloterdijk's foam anthropology of breathability in times of atmospheric crisis

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Abstract

Well on our way into the 21st century, the rapidly unfolding ecological crisis keeps on problematising our human condition of being-in-air. From Covid-19 to rising levels of CO₂ and suffocating political climates, we are faced with less-than-breathable atmospheres whereas we – human beings just like other earth inhabitants – are conditioned by that which we breathe in. As our lifeworld turns out to be also our life support, we are in need of a philosophical anthropology to help us make sense of our role and responsibilities.

In this article, such anthropological approach is developed based on Peter Sloterdijk's *Foams* (2016). Starting from Sloterdijk's description of being as 'being-in' and 'being-with' in 'atmospheres', the question in this article is to what extent atmospherical thinking can help us make sense of our human role in ecological crises, and of our relatedness to other beings in them. In elaborating Sloterdijk's (mostly implicit) anthropology with an eye especially for the openings he offers towards addressing ecology-related questions, three topics demand further attention: being-in and being-with are by Sloterdijk conceptually related to human *becoming*, yet *Foams* is easily read as an (essentialising) explanation of man's confinement to/in places. In order not to get stuck in increasingly suffocating structures (Morin, 2009) nor with a 'killer story' as origin of human becoming (Le Guin, 1996), *becoming-in* and *becoming-with* need to be better embedded in the theory. Next, even though Sloterdijk makes note of bubbles as places of multispecies becoming and relations, *Foams* is rather anthropocentric: It takes on a human perspective, but also seems to confine moral/ethical consideration to human experiences. Such anthropocentrism needs to be addressed in light of the inherently multispecies climate crisis. Last, Sloterdijk posits human's openness to a larger world. This openness (including its apparent status as a sole human attribute), however, comes somewhat as an afterthought in *Foams*, and it needs further inquiry if it is to help make sense of the crises we are facing and our human role in them.

Introduction

After the end of the twentieth century, the doctrine of homo sapiens as a pupil of their air took pragmatic shape. People began to understand that humans not only are what they eat, but also what they breathe and what they dive into. (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 158)²

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² The choice of the English translator for 'dive into' can be misleading. In the original German, the verb reads 'eintauchen' (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 168) which can – and might in my opinion - also be translated as 'to immerse' or 'to immerse oneself in'. This suggests not only an active, but at least *also* a passive reading – a nuance lost with the choice for 'diving into'. See also Ten Bos (2008, p. 9) for a similar passive and active reading of Sloterdijk on the topic of 'eintauchen'.

In 2020, the words of German philosopher and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk suddenly took on a very concrete meaning: a pandemic of the respiratory disease Covid-19 shook the world to its human core by laying bare the uneven distribution of globalisation and human's physical, socio-economic and psychological vulnerabilities. George Floyd's murder by suffocation sparked protests by millions, recollecting Eric Garner's words "I can't breathe" into a global slogan against police brutality and (institutional) racism. And five years after the Paris agreement, earth's atmosphere now counts approximately 410.5 particles of CO₂ per million, steering firmly towards 1.5 degrees warming by 2024 (The State of, 2020; Steffen et al., 2018a, p.13; Steffen et al., 2018b).

All of this makes urgent those things we – humans – breathe in:³ be it physical, social, political or mental, there has not been a year in which human dependency on *atmo-spheres* (literally: spheres of air) was made this explicit and on such a public level. Those of us who survived 2020 know: we will inhale the air around us even in blatantly toxic environments. We will breathe in Covid-19 and particles of CO₂. We will breathe in the spirit of protests but also that of hate. We will wear face masks even if we know they might not shield us (enough), and we will depend on our soil even if it gets too exhausted to feed our foods. Yet as all of us are aware: in the middle of that disaster, we will breathe out too.

Well on our way into the 21st century, the rapidly unfolding ecological crisis thus keeps on problematising, and in Sloterdijk's words explicating (making visible), our condition of being-in-air, until we are now at a point that we can no longer disregard it. With the breathability of earth's 'natural' atmosphere at stake (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 122; Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 100-108), we, humans, find ourselves asking: what is it that we need to – or can – *do*? But before we can hope to answer that question, we need to reflect: for who are the people included in that 'we', and can we unproblematically continue such anthropocentrism and first world thinking in light of the climate crisis? What is 'our' relation to these atmospheric crises, to these crises of breathing and breathability? And (how) does atmospheric thinking help respond to them?

In this essay, I will look to develop a better understanding of our human condition of being in less-than-breathable atmospheres via a philosophical anthropological approach based on Sloterdijk's *Foams* (2016[2004]). Although Sloterdijk is not an often-heard reference in debates on ecological thinking and also does not explicitly develop a philosophical anthropology in *Foams* (Sloterdijk, 2017), I will argue that with the publication of *Foams* he introduced an ontology for understanding humans in the twenty-first century that places him at the intersection of both fields.

Exploring that intersection, I thus mean to not only give a first indication of foam *anthropology*, but I want to consider especially the openings Sloterdijk offers towards addressing ecology-related questions. I will therefore start by introducing being-in-atmospheres and being-with-others in atmospheres as the two central concepts of an anthropology based on Sloterdijk's foams. Upon elaboration, I will address breathing and immersion in atmospheres, as well as Sloterdijk's atmosphere typology. After such introduction, I will reflect more elaborately on three issues that come up when reading *Foams*, and that need to be further explored if foams are going to help us think about problems of an ecological nature. With them, I want to address the anthropocentrism in

³ In this article, for reasons of readability and because the aim is to develop an anthropology, I will mean *human beings* when using 'we', 'our' and 'us' unless specified otherwise. This, however, does not yet solve the problem of Eurocentrism in Sloterdijk's work. For a reflection in that direction, see Bille et al. (2015). For an extension of foam theory beyond European contexts, see for example Boos (2013).

Sloterdijk's work, as well as shift the emphasis in reading Sloterdijk from being to becoming and from isolation to connectedness. These openings are all suggested by Sloterdijk at some point in his text, yet they have not been elaborated and addressed as central features in such application of Sloterdijk's work. With this paper, I hope to incentivise research on the value of foam theory for questions concerning ecological crises and indicate possible starting points for developing this framework further.

Environments, (atmo-)spheres and soap bubbles

Human beings are '*not only what they eat, but also what they breathe and dive into.*' In the last book of his Spheres trilogy, Sloterdijk sensitises us to the ways in which our being in a plurality of concrete and multi-dimensional 'environments' (*Umwelten*) is made increasingly explicit in the 20th and 21st century (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 85; Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 89; Wambacq & Van Tuinen, 2017, p. 3). His often-cited introduction 'Airquake' discusses how gas warfare, greenhouse experiments and space travel mark the increasing explication of human's dependency on air: the design of specific liveable and unliveable air-conditions pushes us to re-evaluate 'being' as 'being-in-air'.

Sloterdijk thus sets out to write a *Being and Space* after Heidegger's *Being and Time* (Rashof, 2018, p. 132). Read that way, being-in-air suggests that existence is always existence some-*where*: foam ontology is a spatial approach to existence. And as explicated by Rashof (2018, p. 132), being-in-air is therefore also being some-*time*, since we are talking about actual air conditions, which are subject to change and can only be discussed in their temporal specificity.

This being-in spatially and temporally specific air-conditions leads Sloterdijk to loosely reiterate Herder's idea of human beings as 'pupils of air' (Waldow, 2016, p. 155). Yet, what Herder could not have foreseen, and what Sloterdijk takes as a starting point, is the potentially *terrorising* extent of this 'background explication' (i.e. the becoming visible and thus knowable/controllable of that which we usually see as background) (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 121). For 'environments' are the actual air we breathe (which is bad enough considering air pollution and the use of chokeholds in policing), but they are also the physical, social and other relevant surrounding things, beings, and processes, that make our existence possible (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 291). If we reconsider the impact of Eric Garner's words "I can't breathe", both of these dimensions become apparent. Explicating being-in-air is thus potentially terrorising, since it means that one's environment can be made into one's enemy: through direct attacks, or through attacks on our cultural, political and social surroundings.

So, what is this 'air' that we are pupils of and that is so vital to us? Moreover, how specific is it to human beings? Taking his cue here from the early 20th century biologist Jakob von Uexküll, Sloterdijk considers organisms (among which humans) as they are surrounded by their *environment* of that which is significant and perceptible to them (Wambacq & Van Tuinen, 2017, p. 2). Von Uexküll suggests that to understand an organism, we should imagine to blow a 'soap bubble' around them representing their world, 'filled with the perceptions which it alone knows' (Von Uexküll, 1992[1957], p. 319). This leads us to understand 'air'-conditions from the perspective of a being/organism itself, widening our understanding of 'air' to denote those environmental qualities that make life possible, and explicitly connecting this not to abstractions only, but also to our physical bodies (Ernste, 2018, p. 274). Imagining the perspective of a bee, for example, we might discern flowers, the bees wings,

hairiness and sting, the grass, the changing air currents, but also the hive, and the activities or duties it performs. This is not to say that humans can take on any perspective. Rather, as Von Uexküll writes, the bubble is inherently linked to the organism's perspective and we may only imagine it.

Notably, this way of thinking makes explicit how organism and environment *produce* one another: we should not think of singular pre-existing individuals at the centre of their personal spheres (a picture that is surely called up by the 'bubble' image), but instead see how beings cannot exist nor come into being outside of/without their environment, and whom/what it is they encounter in it. Sloterdijk follows Von Uexküll and continues to think *human* beings in this way as much as bees (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 230). He thus quite expressively positions himself against the notion of a sovereign individual and instead suggests – following Nietzsche – that we create the space we inhabit *dividually* (Ernste, 2018, p. 275): through being related, through our being-with-others. The *spatiality* of these relations is what makes up our 'environment' (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 284; Elden & Mendieta, 2008, p. 6) or as Wambacq and Van Tuinen say: 'coexistence precedes and conditions existence' (Wambacq & Van Tuinen, p. 48).

Now, this space created through being-with is central to Sloterdijk's project and it is this kind of space that we must envision when trying to understand his foam ontology. Foam ontology is somewhat similar to a networked ontology such as we find in Latour or Deleuze, but it takes these spatially manifested relations, these 'foam bubbles', as its core analytic component. Foam ontology considers the world as a great congregation of bubbles unevenly distributed and tightly pressed together (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 235). Yet it is exactly these bubbles, or places, that are difficult to pin down: as described above, they are ordered affectively/relationally, they move and change alongside our relations, and they contain and produce multiple beings.

To make sense of this strange ontological bundle, Sloterdijk utilizes the metaphor of atmospheres. In formulating his foam ontology as such, he picks up on philosophical anthropologist Gernot Böhme's approach to make sense of the 'ontologically indeterminate' state of atmospheres, making them difficult to gain knowledge of, or to make explicit (Bille et al., 2015, p. 33): reading the atmosphere in a room, for example, is something we do by *experiencing* it rather than by looking at it from an outsider's perspective or by thinking about it in logical terms. Moreover, we are never sure how atmospheres come about or by whom/what they are produced, and we tend to be affected by them but to an incalculable extent. Notwithstanding their ambiguous character, atmospheres are seemingly able to 'fill the room' as if they were a substance, and yet it might be that the place or moment you enter them, or become aware of them, differs from the place and/or moment they 'let you go.' (Böhme, 1993, p. 114; Bille et al., 2015, p. 35)

Being on life support

Sloterdijk thus gives the ingredients for an atmospheric *anthropology* of being-in and being-with (Latour, 2016; Choy & Zee, 2015, p. 217). In this account, humans, as do all organisms, exist-in and exist-with in their dividually constituted, atmospheric environments. These surroundings are the concrete as well as metaphorical surroundings that make existence possible: they can be the concrete walls of our apartments or the air particles in our spaces of work and pleasure; or the linguistic, habitual and other 'human' bubbles that we find ourselves in. Understanding these environments –

dubbed 'spheres' by Herder and 'foam bubbles' by Von Uexküll – as 'hothouses' is arguably the central conceit of the *Spheres* trilogy, especially if we look to construe a foam anthropology in terms of its openings to ecological questions: for the characterisation of atmospheres as hothouses signals the immunizing quality of spheres and how they make (human) life possible (Morin, 2008, p. 61) and moreover places 'us humans' inside nature, or nature as that which is non-external, a 'housemate' (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 458).

Thinking of what it means to be human, therefore, means making sense of our *immersion* in atmospheres as well as our *breathing of/in* them. Being immersed in/immersing ourselves in atmospheres draws attention to our (non)human surroundings and the way in which we are co-produced through them, but also create them through our physical and non-physical relations. Latour concedes that Sloterdijk hereby makes visible that we – humans, just like all other beings – are on life support, thereby arguing that the atmospheric crises mentioned at the opening are actually crises of our – human *and* nonhuman – breathing equipment – or breath-ability (Latour, 2016, p. 3).

Breathing in these atmospheres is therefore a direct consequence of being immersed in them and dependent of them, but it simultaneously brings to the fore that atmospheric thinking *must be* embodied thinking (Bille et al., 2015, p. 36): just like the physical earthly atmosphere permeates and moves through us because we breathe it in and out, so do the more metaphorical atmospheres. As the introduction signifies, we breathe in CO₂ but also anger (and hope) can be part of and shared through the atmospheric environment, intimately connecting our bodies to these shared air-conditions. The environments we find ourselves in therefore cannot simply be seen as separate from ourselves, and they pass through us by the simple fact that we're alive.

A second consequence of thinking about immersion and breathability is the inevitable component of breathing *out* (into) atmospheres, and therefore contributing to it, or polluting it, *by the simple fact that we're alive*. Turning our attention to breathability, therefore, does not only help to visualise potentially terrorising threats to humanity, but it simultaneously shows us that humans are active contributors to their environments and the constellations/networks we are in.

Breathability, therefore, is important both on the physical level and the metaphorical. Zooming in on the Covid-19 pandemic, we see a crisis of breathability: we are not only dealing with a disease that attacks the lungs and respiratory system, the virus also spreads atmospherically (through the air) and at the same time the pandemic highlights the versatility of our human breathing needs. For, if we look at Covid-19 as only a physical disease, we are missing an important part of the picture: the lockdown measures are experienced as *suffocating* to the extent that '*getting some fresh air*' has been characterised as an essential human need (De Graaf, 2020; Ten Bos, 2008, p. 12). It appears that 'breathability', for human beings at least, is not only a question of physical air, but also of other atmospherical dimensions that can be considered more, or less, breathable.

Here, we must also wonder to what extent breathability for humans differs (geographically) between cultures, levels of wealth, and/or habituation. Imagining the bubble once more, it makes sense that differently conditioned environments lead to different breathability needs. Moreover, looking at the use of 'breathing' and 'air' in everyday language, a broad connotation with several types of freedom is apparent: the physical necessity of breathing is connected to issues ranging from 'taking a breather' in difficult conversations, 'coming up for breath' after a stressful week, 'needing

room to breathe' when feeling closely monitored, while on the opposite side we find expressions like 'suffocating', 'taking the air out of the room', and 'I can't breathe'. It is not surprising, then, that 2020 has led to a call for a 'Universal Right to Breathe' (Mbembe, 2020).⁴

Ultimately, says Sloterdijk, we might best approach foam ontology and anthropology through the topic of breathability (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 242) addressed in a twofold or possible threefold way: as beings (humans/nonhumans) with a need for oxygen, food, water and shelter, as humans in need of further life-sustaining relations and conditions, and in terms of the breathability of the bubbles themselves. Let me elaborate briefly on the latter.

From local confinement to biotopes and life worlds.

How can we make sense of the breathability of foam and bubbles? Starting from atmospheric surroundings, being-in and being-with presents us with borders to think about. *Foams* includes a convincing yet unnerving description of contemporary (city) life, in which every human body seems to be contained in its personal bubble: the apartment. Humans have everything they need in their apartments: from the objects to which they relate, social connections, tv, telephone, (social) media, and work, to everything they might need for sustenance (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 504-508). This begs the question whether foam ontology paints a picture of solitary confinement. Are we inherently disconnected from anything 'outside', and are cross-cultural and long-distance relations by the same token impossible? In other words: do we become exclusionists or localists if we adopt foam ontology and anthropology?

Even though the two topics of isolation and immunisation figure centrally in Sloterdijk's texts and among his adepts, I do not think we should read *Foams* only from the perspective of closed spaces or protective measures against outside threats. Still, it is important to acknowledge that atmospheric explication necessarily creates *exclusivities* (insides and outsides) and thus (im)permeable borders that posit resistance against potential threats (Wambacq & Van Tuinen, 2017, p. 3). Even more, I think these characteristics inspired Sloterdijk to his 'experimental anthropology' of space travel. His anthropological suggestion towards human existence in a multitude of enclosed environments is simultaneously a critical stance against overly elaborate and general definitions of human existence (over and against other species) (Sloterdijk, 2017) and it is meant to present an alternative to the 'anorexic' Actor Network Theory (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 236).

Taking into account Sloterdijk's anthropological suggestion, therefore, but placing a different emphasis, I believe that if we want to understand the human condition of being-in-air, we need to not only consider *absolute* islands (space ships), but also – and more importantly – *atmospheric* and *anthropogenic* ones. For whereas absolute islands signify (complete) isolation behind impermeable borders (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 296), the atmospheric and anthropogenic islands place humans inside of nature and emphasise relations and communication between foam inhabitants as well as between bubbles.

Going into a bit more detail on the latter two, *atmospheric* islands are a metaphor for enclosures of specific *air* conditions. The lead example presented by Sloterdijk here is the *greenhouse*, the

⁴ In this brief text, Mbembe takes the idea of a post-Covid world as a starting point for thinking about 'breathing beyond its purely biological aspect' (2020, p. 4) and a possible Universal Right to Breathe as a reaction to the suffocating forces of (institutional/international) racism, anthropocentrism, and climate change.

borders of which do not isolate primarily, but mediate (through construction): for tomatoes to grow in cooler climates, the glass ceiling and walls of greenhouses are used *to trap heat*. Atmospheric islands thus call attention to greenhouse effects: modelled after the primary greenhouse effect that makes life possible on earth, bubbles – like greenhouses used for growing fruit – produce secondary greenhouse effects (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 181): their ‘walls’ encapsulate the environment that produces and is produced by its inhabitants. The ecological crisis made explicit that humans, just like exotic plants in that sense, take up their living *inside* the greenhouse. This is not to say that human beings are confined to one bubble, as they can move around and go ‘island-hopping’ (Ten Bos, 2018, p. 18). However, the idea that the earth’s atmosphere is *the* ultimate outside into which emissions just disappear has been forever overthrown. A dangerous side effect of this realisation, according to Sloterdijk, is that ‘solving’ the climate crisis now easily falls prey to techno-optimistic fantasies (Sloterdijk, 2016, pp. 331-332).

Moving to the third type of island Sloterdijk discusses, *anthropogenic* islands are those wildly varying ‘spatial types with a specific human quality’ (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 338) that Husserl suggested to approach through the ‘unsuitable’ term “lifeworld” (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 462). With his more specific reference to the human factor in these lifeworlds, Sloterdijk suggests anthropogenic islands encapsulate a combination of the two first mechanisms: they envelop humans by creating a world – the human world – that *isolates* humans from other beings (through language, culture, law, etc. (Sloterdijk, 2016, pp. 339-340)) and they simultaneously *breed* humans through a special type of greenhouse effect. In other words: we become human by existing in human worlds.

Lifeworld, for Sloterdijk, thus is a free variation on Husserl (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 462), denoting the bubble(s) we find ourselves and others in. Those, as we can now see, comprise of both our literal and metaphorical life support, and in them humans are subject as well as contributors to greenhouse processes just like all life on earth. Humans thus act towards constructing (ever more luxurious) lifeworlds, according to Sloterdijk (2016, p. 164-165), but this does not mean they are ‘free’ to ‘create’ the world they want to live in. As Rashof (2018) clearly explains it: ‘In the age of foams, humans make their own ‘climates’, however not through their ‘free will’, but through the circumstances, i.e. places, they find themselves in (p. 142).’ We have to work with the circumstances, the situations that we find ourselves in, since we are part of them.

Nonhuman co-inhabitants

In light of the climate crisis, a question readily arises. For if this *anthropo*-logy is supposed to help us make sense of *ecological* crises and of our role in them, then we cannot but persist: how do ‘we’ – human beings – relate to nonhumans – animals, plants, ‘nature’ – from such atmospherical perspective? As we already saw, many aspects of foam anthropology are equally applicable to nonhumans, so, to what extent can Sloterdijk’s anthropocentrism be justified, or, to what extent is it useful?

To start, let us zoom in on the idea of a ‘human world’. For even though we become human according to Sloterdijk by being-in human spheres, we naturally encounter plenty of nonhumans in our bubbles (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 106; pp. 458-459). In its ontological basis, I would even argue, foam theory is especially well-suited for making visible these nonhumans and our human relations with

them. If we thus want to understand human existence in atmospheres, we need to make sense of human-(non)human relations in and outside of our bubbles. Sloterdijk to this end combines the notions of lifeworld and biotope:

The place of humans must be envisaged in such a way that it seems on the one hand like the implant of a “life-world” into a non-lifeworld, and on the other like a biotope in which human and non-human symbionts coexist as hothouse mates. One of the oldest anthropic errors of reasoning is that they insist on viewing nature as an outside force; in reality, the relevant nature has always already been incorporated into the inside of the anthropic hothouse. (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 458-459)

As described above, Sloterdijk considers anthropogenic islands the human being’s ‘primary lifeworld’ and acknowledges that our experiences as humans are primarily (and usually unconsciously) pre-occupied with the human world (Sloterdijk, 2016, pp. 463-464; Ernste, 2018, p. 274). Sloterdijk goes on to use the concept lifeworld, but he keeps placing it in quotation marks, thereby signalling it as a foreign concept to his world of foam. However, in their function as isolators and breeders of human life “lifeworlds” are clearly visible in terms of foams: outside of them, *human* living does not exist (Wambacq & Van Tuinen, 2017, p. 3).

With the term biotope Sloterdijk signals that we are, *as ‘hothouse mates’* among other humans and nonhumans, take up residence inside of ‘actual’ ecological greenhouses. This becomes more and more explicit as we are confronted with less-than-breathable ‘outside’ airs. The place in which we exist is thus *simultaneously* a biotope which we share with others, among whom there are a great many nonhumans, many more even, than there are humans.

We, hothouse mates, thus not only need to make sense of being-in and being-with in atmospheres as humans with humans, but also of being-with and being-in with ‘others’ in them. This, however, is where Sloterdijk’s multispecies thinking stops. The more-than-human relations that make up the world all of us live in, which become more and more explicit in the 21st century because of the climate crisis, and which might sensitise us humans to the necessity of searching for other routes than that of techno-optimist climate construction, do not play a significant role in *Foams*. Working with *Foams* in terms of its openings towards questions of an ecological nature therefore must mean elaborating foam theory beyond Sloterdijk’s own work.

Humans exist only in becoming

As a second opening I want to address being versus becoming. Sloterdijk does not concern himself with the nature or essence of mankind as much as he is looking to understand the way in which man *became* this type of being (Lysemose, 2012, p. 122). Instead of traditional philosophical anthropology, therefore, Sloterdijk is according to Lysemose following the line of *paleo*-anthropologist Paul Alsberg, who suggests that apes ‘became’ human when they started throwing stones at their predators. This throwing is significant, because by doing so *systematically* humans ‘distanced’ themselves from their surroundings and were thus able to circumvent the flight or fight binary (Lysemose, 2012, p. 119). Since human beings were endowed with neither great speed nor

strength, distancing became humanity's principal survival technique and it allowed them to develop their intelligence among other things (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 656-657).

Distancing, therefore, means to place the body at a distance (from a predator), but not to be *dis*-embodied, nor *dis*-connected from the environment and others encountered in it. It is the quality that makes humans human, or so suggests Alsberg and thus Sloterdijk, and it therefore differs from the becoming of other organisms. This is the case because even though distancing is not uniquely human, using it *as a principle* is (Lysemose, 2012, p. 119).

Now, it would be absurd to state that throwing stones is 'the origin' of mankind, apart even from the fact that it quite obviously is a type of 'killer story' which might better be avoided (Le Guin, 1996, p. 156). What Sloterdijk takes from Alsberg, however, is that man 'exists only in becoming': he *becomes* human through the creation of certain circumstances (in this case, the distance from a predator by throwing stones), and that creation never stops. As a consequence of that distancing, man thus creates insides, bubbles which he comes to share with others, but which are also meant to keep some outside (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 657). The *anthropogenic* creation of linguistic and cultural surroundings might, for example, be understood as such distancing/connecting practices.

As mentioned before, it would be too easy to say that human beings *at will* are able to create the spheres they come to live and become in. Instead, as Wambacq & Van Tuinen (2017, p. 3) write, such creation should rather be seen as a

self-organizing process (Sloterdijk, 2011: 79); the bubble is created by the inspiration or animation that is common to the inhabitants of the sphere—subjects and objects! —, and that causes them to address one another such as to create a shared space of experience. (Sloterdijk, 2011: 45)

Here, via the topic of being as becoming, the ontologically indeterminate atmosphere returns to the scene. By now, however, we can see its inner workings better: atmospheres turn out to be affective (inspiration or animation) 'self-organising processes' taking place between inhabitants of the bubble, creating the bubble itself as well as conditioning the existence of the beings within it. Human distancing, then, is the principle through which human environments are created which can function as incubators for human becoming – turning their 'natural' surroundings into outsides.

Since we are thus constantly acting on the bubbles we reside in and we co-evolve with them, it is most adequate to speak of becoming-in and becoming-with in terms of the anthropology under way and of becoming foam or bubbles in terms of ontology. If Sloterdijk wanted to write a *Being and Space*, therefore, I suggest to turn that into a *Becoming and Space*.

World-openness

Now, the last topic I want to address concerns human's openness to that which is 'outside'. Sloterdijk describes mainly human becoming-in and -with *in* bubbles, but the topic of interaction *between* bubbles, of reaching *beyond* them or, in other words, of being *open* (and connected) to the world, is not as substantially addressed. It makes sense for Sloterdijk not to focus his attention here, because the point he wants to make is especially about human becoming-with/-in spheres over and

against the emphasis in Actor Network Theory on connectedness (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 236), or Social Contract Theory on sovereign individuals (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 251). This, however, does not mean there is no sense of connection in foam ontology and anthropology.

At the foundation of foam ontology there appears an anthropological claim that humans – unlike other animals – are directed to, or concern themselves with, a world that is bigger than just the insides of their bubbles (Ten Bos, 2008, p. 10). Humanity's initially unspecialized condition (in terms of speed, strength, instincts) reverts their attention outwards: humans are curious for the world and that makes them impressionable and pliable. This characteristic is what makes humans look out of the window when they are supposed to be working, it underlies the feeling that grass is always greener elsewhere and it therefore presents human beings with range after range of opportunities and options to choose from.

Following while simultaneously reverting Arnold Gehlen's work, Sloterdijk introduces the term 'world-openness' for this human condition. For whereas Gehlen (according to Sloterdijk in an act of activism) interprets human's openness as essentially a burden, Sloterdijk argues we must see it as *privilege*: being-open to the world endows us humans with an abundance of impressions and possibilities and we are burdened by it, in that sense, just like the next billionaire. The question according to Sloterdijk is to figure out the art of living with such wealth (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 660). An additional question not elaborately addressed by Sloterdijk would be to consider whether this *privilege of world-openness* is reserved for those humans that already enjoy many other privileges, be it by sex, race, culture, status, or otherwise. What is interesting, nonetheless, is to see that Sloterdijk addresses the character and interpretation of world-openness as a political issue. His attention was (however) caught by Gehlen's negative interpretation and thus he focused on reverting the anthropology of human deficiency in one of human privilege.

Apart from an analysis of privilege, Sloterdijk leaves aside the politically relevant questions of *relationality* from one bubble to the next and the *responsibilities* this brings forth, or, the responsibilities that come with being privileged in our ability to look beyond our confines and to move around through foam structures (Ten Bos, 2008, p. 18-19). And yet, Sloterdijk characterises his approach as 'connected isolation', demonstrating his awareness of the issue of interconnection (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 294): the 'apartment' that Sloterdijk places us in turns out to be the site of connections to others in 'neighbouring' bubbles and foam regions. This is less locally confining than you might think as neighbours are taken to be those with similar 'immunization strategies, the same patterns of creativity, [and/or] related arts of survival' (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 241), and therefore they do not need to be in physical proximity. Yet, if we want to make sense of foam anthropology in terms of its openness, including the openness to several 'others', the question is whether such definition of neighbours is helpful enough.

Conclusion

To what extent can atmospheric thinking help us make sense of the crises we are confronted with? In this article, I have attempted to answer this question by formulating an atmospherical anthropology based on Sloterdijk's *Foams*. This anthropology revolves around the idea that we

become human in anthropogenic bubbles, in which we encounter both humans and nonhumans, and which function both as lifeworlds and biotopes.

Thinking atmospherically in this way turns our attention to the breathability of those atmospheres (and their borders), but also to the breathability of all inhabitants in play. This becomes ever more urgent by understanding that such atmospheres are our (human and nonhuman) life support and that the airs we – humans – thought were endless now have become part of increasingly unbreathable insides.

Sloterdijk cannot help us answer all questions in this paper. In order to reflect on our human responsibility in these atmospheric crises and as a necessary step to answering the question ‘what can we do’ from such theoretical perspective, I argue that further elaboration of the three openings offered is needed: since human becoming is not independent from nonhuman becoming, first, we must elaborate further how it is that these relations come to matter, how they work, and what such nonhuman becoming entails. The anthropocentrism that still plays a big role in *Foams* is at odds with the topic at stake.

Second, the notion of becoming human in Sloterdijk is an interesting starting point for thinking about change and transition over and against essentialist anthropologies, yet it needs to be informed by contemporary debates. The throwing stones allegory as well as the notion of bodily distancing are above all variations on older killer stories which have been heavily criticised by among others feminists for good reasons. The question is what human becoming entails in the midst of many other types of being and becoming – and what metaphors or stories are more helpful in demarcating the kind(s) of becoming necessary in this time of urgency.

Third, the topic of world-openness could change foam theory from an exercise in navel-gazing into a way of understanding our human situatedness and reflect on our responsibilities. The connections we as humans have tie us in with a bigger world and therefore place us in a position of privilege – and as most of our parents taught us, ‘with privilege comes responsibility’. What such responsibility entails exactly, and how it can play a role within Sloterdijk’s project, is a topic for further inquiry.

But let’s return, at last, to the air: flowing through and around all of us, air connects us as hothouse mates and thereby conditions our existence. In times of air-pollution, respiratory threats, and suffocating environments, we might indeed need something like a ‘universal right to breathe.’ But before that can be claimed or actualised, breathability, as in the breathing of foam inhabitants as well as the permeability and thus ‘breathability’ of the bubbles themselves, needs to be inquired into further. Continuing research in that direction might inform those stories and help visualise those metaphors that give way to a more open and connected way of becoming, and to envisioning human existence as part of future multispecies flourishing.

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