From Theatrum Mundi to Experimentum Mundi

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Philosopher Sjoerd van Tuinen calls for a perspective on publicness he derives from Peter Sloterdijk and his 'critical awareness of atmospheres'. In this, intimacy is not seen as something obscene that excludes public interaction, but rather as something that actually needs to be taken seriously on a public level. For the visual arts this implies balancing exercises between observation and participation: a socializing art that is not made for an audience but instead creates an audience.

Although public space is usually seen as the stage for the arts, art is increasingly the stage for publicness. Not only has it been a long time since art in the Netherlands and Belgium has been as prominent in the public sphere as it is now, but it is taking on tasks that were formerly ascribed to another public domain, such as politics, science or philosophy. Everywhere one finds artists' debates, street theatre and political engagement in which art, to cite just one quote, 'examines and critically questions our ideas about national identity and the current processes of inclusion and exclusion in the Netherlands.[1] These attempts to aestheticize shared existence are not isolated. They are part and parcel of an evolution that has been identified by various thinkers, from Richard Sennett to Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek, as the end of the age of representation. In their view, a structural transformation of the contemporary public sphere has taken place – from the classic republican spectacle of detached and critical interaction to intimate and obscene forms of communication. Are these developments in art and the public sphere at odds with one another? In this essay I shall examine their connections. I shall begin by tracing the pessimistic analyses of the aforementioned writers and proceed to supplement these with the more affirmative work of Peter Sloterdijk. What is at stake is a non-classical concept of publicness as theatre. The Baroque theatre, with its water displays, trompe-l'oeil and mechanical inventions, was primarily centred on illusory effects that had to compete with reality. Since the French Revolution, this has made way for critical theatre, in which the dialectic interaction between staging and reality and between social and psychological conflicts are instead the focus. It is this form of theatre that is the basis for the present interpretation of the public as drama and that is increasingly the subject of debate.

Ideology of Intimacy and Cult of Distance

In his classic 1977 study, *The Fall of Public Man,* Sennett describes how Western societies have experienced a shift, since the 1960s, from the aesthetic ideal of a *theatrum mundi*, with its actors (those who play a social role), its stage (institutions and media) and its audience (society), to a psychological ideal he labels with the psychoanalytical term narcissism. A narcissist, out of fear of alienation, cannot play a public role; he can only 'be himself'. Neither is he interested in the carefully maintained appearance of other people, only in the authentic and therefore credible self underneath. The result is that while there used to be a possibility of a private / public double life, today we are less and less capable of adopting an impersonal role or even of simply being polite. From head scarves to Moroccan boys and from bike-shed sex to goat shaggers: an ideology of intimacy has deprived us of the possibility of role playing and its requisite detachment by flooding the public with the private. The expansion of television in particular has played a significant role in this. In his later writings, the increasingly left-leaning Sennett adds that the public in turn increasingly capitalizes on and corrodes the private in the form of flex time, telecommuting and overtime, as well as the constant alternation of different 'roles' within the intimate non-theatre of the soul itself.

More recently and with a similar grounding in psychoanalysis, Žižek has also demonstrated how our narcissist emphasis on self-expression leads in fact to self-repression. A 'shared, collective privacy' implies a lack of subjective detachment from the other and makes intersubjective articulation of self-interest increasingly impossible. The democratic struggle towards emancipation has been perverted into subjugation. We are no longer interactive, but *interpassive*: our emotional engagement is greater than ever, but it is paradoxically coupled with an unprecedented sense of powerlessness. We only meekly take part in the public spectacle. Interpassivity creates indifference and generates resentment, expressed for instance in a chronic distrust of the institutionalized political theatre. False antagonisms between consensus politics on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other obscure what Žižek calls 'the obscene object of postmodernity': the dichotomy of the Saudis and Pakistanis between McWorld and Jihad, or, closer to home, of Pim Fortuyn between right and left. [2] They represent an intimate supplement that itself cannot be adequately represented on a political stage but through which that stage is increasingly defined.

Žižek's diagnosis is not new. At about the same time as Sennett, Baudrillard – a writer who, undeservedly in my view, is hardly read today – was already describing how, after the stage, or scene, of the public play had first turned into a 'spectacle society' (Debord), it would be more appropriate to speak of an *ob-scene* instead of a society: the intimate transparency of contemporary mass-media communication takes the entire society hostage, at the private as well as the public level, by negating the theatrical difference between appearance and reality. Our much-discussed constitutional crisis of democracy, for instance, is not a matter of a so-called gap between citizen and political establishment, but rather of the lack of such a gap. Populist politicians share with terrorists the fact that they operate beyond any representation. That means that – before we can resist – they have already 'seduced' us. It is impossible to distance oneself publicly from them without reinforcing their effect. The moment the presiding speaker of the Dutch parliament asks Geert Wilders to moderate his offensive language, this creates the impression of censorship, which gives Wilders credence. According to the same principle, attention from the news media or a 'political' response only reinforces a terrorist attack. An excess of communication causes the critical distance to 'implode' in the hyperreality of an indifferent intimacy. [3]

What does all this have to with art? First, according to the psychoanalytical framework within which Sennett, Žižek and ultimately Baudrillard argue, a public, impersonal life is

only possible on the basis of role playing. While the narcissist shuts himself off from his audience and prefers to wallow in resentment and indifference, an actor instead operates in full awareness of the presence of an audience. Second, intimacy can best be symbolized and, as it were, placed at a remove from the inside out in the theatre. From this perspective it seems evident to fall back on this when something that has nothing to do with art needs to be 'examined' and 'critically questioned' on a public platform. Žižek's interest in art and film can be traced back, for instance, to his interest in political-economic conflicts. To him, art has the militant task of creating new, non-governmental platforms and symbols for 'genuine' antagonisms and thereby guaranteeing a critical difference between semblance and being. In spite of all the appeals for more tolerance, these conflicts can not be resolved through the neoliberal farce of a dialogue. [4] For they are taking place among parties who are excluded from the classic theatre of politics. Indeed Žižek's theatre or cinema is more akin to an arena. The inhuman freedom fighter Lenin is a better stage actor than the obscene Pim.

But is such a distinction still viable? According to Žižek, who bases his argument on the work of the father of psychoanalytical cultural criticism, Lacan, art confronts us with 'the excess of the real' and so offers an opportunity to 'resist'. But Wilders does this too. Our problem is in fact that, when theatre moves into the street, the dialectic interaction between theatre and reality is eliminated. We no longer live in the semi-open transcendence of the theatre of Greek republican democracy, but in the total immanence of the Roman amphitheatre. This arena, furthermore, coincides with mass culture as a whole, a 'culture' that immediately absorbs and neutralizes all differences. As far as Baudrillard is concerned, this explains why any attempt to break through the symbolic order by means of a symbolic guerrilla war will only reinforce the unleashing of the obscene. In his view we are doomed to 'aesthetic indifference'. Is another conclusion possible?

Whereas Baudrillard writes from a perspective *following* what he himself called 'the apocalypse of the real', Žižek adopts a perspective situated just *prior* to it. Both, however, adhere normatively to a conflict between being and seeming, of which the opposition of scene and obscenity is a modern variant. Critical communication either takes place through symbolic performance or it does not take place. This reduces the public, however, to a typically modern cult of distance, at the cost of a culture of intimacy itself. In looking for an alternative to the militancy of Žižek and the nihilism of Baudrillard, we might draw a critical distinction between a negative appreciation of the obscene and an affirmative appreciation of the intimate. Psychoanalytical cultural criticism is based on a personal or familial energetics, reined in by a socially and politically charged semantics or scenography. An inversion of this arrangement would instead offer an ontology of sociopolitical relationships in which intimacy would be the most natural thing in the world. The intimate is that from which we can achieve critical distance only with difficulty, because it does not lend itself to unequivocal representation. Yet that is precisely why not all intimacy is obscene. Neither can the intimate be made equal to the personal or the private. On the contrary, the modernist division between private and public is now itself a function of the intimate. It is precisely this intimacy with which we must play without alienating ourselves once again. The question is whether a concept of theatre exists that suits this game better than the critical theatre of modernity.

‘What One Has No Distance From, One Must Play With’

One art and media philosopher in whose work all aspects of the diagnoses I have just described is Sloterdijk. Žižek’s interpassivity, in his writings, is called ‘cynicism’, Baudrillard’s indifference becomes ‘contempt’, and distrust, resentment, obscenity and the apocalypse of the real are all key themes in his oeuvre. He reaches entirely different conclusions, however. As early as in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983. he made a radical break with the modern representation paradigm: ‘The secret is intimacy, not distance: one achieves a non-analytical, convivial knowing of things. [5] Shortly thereafter it becomes ‘What one has no distance from, one must play with. [6] And more recently, in his *Spheres* trilogy (1998. 1999. 2004. – under the motto ‘what was despair must become media performance [7] – he demonstrated like no other that intimacy is the greatest unexpected product of modernity. According to Sloterdijk, intimacy is an anthropological constant that must be taken seriously as such. On the one hand he subscribes in this to Baudrillard’s view that symbolic warfare only leads to greater evil; on the other hand he is now concerned instead with a revaluation, in terms of a pathos of distance, of the ontological and political status of presymbolic forms of communication. To this end he initially relies, rather than on psychoanalysis, on its prehistory: in particular, in addition to the magical Neo-Platonism of Ficino and Bruno, the animal magnetism of eighteenth-century Austrian psychiatrist Franz Anton Mesmer and the magnetic sleep discovered by his disciple, the French Marquis de Puységur. Later would come, via Deleuze, Gabriel Tarde’s mimetic microsociology as well.

Animal magnetism – to use an important concept by Deleuze and Guattari from *Mille Plateaux* – is a sort of *science mineure* of immediate, affective communication via magnetic fields and hypnotic suggestion. The advent of Freudian psychoanalysis replaced its attendant problematization with that of indirect communication through symbolic transference. The concept of transference purified analysis from the influence of the more physicalistically oriented psychiatry and was better suited to the humanist ideology of the autonomous subject. [8] In his 1984 novel *The Magic Tree: The Birth of Psychoanalysis in 1785*, Sloterdijk describes how, under the pressure of nineteenth-century standards of civic and scientific-positivist distance, the emancipatory aspects of the selfless and immersive experiments in group hypnosis and collective erotic energies – the ‘subversive effects of the sweet, the sticky [9] – were abandoned. The magnetists in the theatre investigated not the semantic aspects, but the energetic aspects of social existence. As on the stage of modern mass-media communication, fascination is the rule and symbolic interaction is the exception. What matters is not what symbols mean or even whether they mean anything at all, but only what they *do* and how they *affect* us. To the magnetists, therefore, the theatre is more an immunological play with publicness and impenetrability. It is a platform for pre-subjective and pre-symbolic forms of communication. Whereas to psychoanalysts only a lack of intimacy constitutes an individual public role, the pre-individual, that is to say the collective as well as intimate theatre of the magnetists itself is constitutive. The intimacy between the magnetizer and the magnetized – an affective, literal interest in and with the other – constitutes not a representation of shared reality but rather that reality itself.

Based on this magnetic psychology, the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904. also later argued that no distinction can be made between being and semblance. Although Baudrillard argues that both the public and the private have evaporated in the unbridled proliferation of obscene simulacra – signs without content or copies without an original – to which we are irresistibly subjected, he does not say whether simulation replaces a reality that genuinely used to exist or whether there was always nothing but simulation. Tarde, on the other hand, defends the affirmative view that it is precisely the infinite series of reciprocal simulations without originals that constitute reality. Social and political reality is an illusion, which is ‘effectuated’ by hypnotizing and infectious streams of simulation facilitated by mass media. Social actors are not actors, but sleepwalkers. They do not play

a public role in the classical sense, but they are not narcissists either. Their agency or subjectivity is literally distributed among and constituted by pre- and trans-subjective, network-like and affectively embodied entanglements. Tarde thus shifts our attention from a performative understanding of drama to the formation processes of political collectives. Even before there is such a thing as symbols or performance, there exists something like a *con*-figuration of actors, in which it is not actors but shared hypes, issues or events that are in the limelight and define social reality. [10] To describe these configuration processes he harks back, in *Monadology and Sociology* (1895), to Leibniz's typically seventeenth-century, Baroque 'theatre of nature and art'. For Leibniz both physical and psychological reality – which includes, for the sake of convenience, sociocultural reality as well – consists of an infinite number of atoms or 'monads', each of which reproduces for itself the same common world as a whole according to its own, largely unconscious 'programme'. Although Leibniz repeatedly insisted that there can be no such thing as direct intersubjective communication, there is an affective or unconscious communication in the form of the global theatre that is present in its entirety within each individual and that in fact constitutes his individuality. [11] As in a hypnotic state, an autonomous experience of the self and the world is for the most part determined by the collective unconscious and there is an active individual contribution only to an extremely limited degree. In an analogy to this, for Tarde society exists only in the mirror of each separate individual. Structure and identity, audience and actor are one: every individual is actually a 'dividual' product of an immanent, 'constitutive theatre [12] in which simulation is the collective but unconscious production process of social reality. The spatial character of modern representative democracy is nothing more than a self-generating fiction, which derives its effectiveness solely from its presence in time. 'Society' has never been anything more than a continuum of resonances and echoes, a 'programme' of affections and simulacra that is continually re-effectuated through the analogous sequences of self-actualization by its participants.

Art as a Relay within Intimate Communication Networks

If we start out from these parapsychoanalytical and parasociological interpretations of theatre rescued from oblivion, it is no surprise that, according to Sloterdijk, there is 'today not a crisis of publicness, but, on the contrary, a crisis of our stage awareness'. [13] In *Critique of Cynical Reason* he already defined Enlightenment as a form of consciousness hygiene. [14] *Spheres* ultimately aims to develop not only a physical but also a social and mental ecology. In a mass-media society, the public (atmo)sphere may be the most endangered, but it is simultaneously the new vector of power. Ecology and bio-politics therefore converge in the reflective intercourse with the intimate, in *Psychopolitik*, as it is called in Sloterdijk's later book, *Anger and Time*. Psycho-politics explicates (literally 'folds apart') the affective relationships in which symbolic forms of sociality are implicated. Its leitmotif is air conditioning: maintaining the presumably requisite conditions for intimate forms of togetherness. From the psycho-political perspective, the public sphere is not an indifferent, transparent platform upon which or a backdrop against which public life unfolds, but a symbiotic stage within which this takes place. 'The old ecology of stage and performance is out of joint. [15]

A critical atmospheric consciousness, in an era in which everyone claims the right to back up a private opinion about the weather through the mass media, is more urgently needed than ever. In the total immanence of today's cultural arena, a journalist can be as vulgar an air polluter as a terrorist; symbols can be as toxic as poison gases. Our habitat, from television to Web 2.0. is constantly endangered by tsunamis of emotions, cynicism, contempt, hysteria and delusions of participation. A mentally and socially ecological consciousness faces the task of making the intimate public without lapsing into obscenity. This explication can take place through an appropriate symbolism, but that is not required.

The artificial *Gesamtkunstwerk* of a spaceship is also an explication of a previously implicitly assumed habitat. For Sloterdijk, this is the challenge of contemporary art. From biomorphic architecture to the interactive theatre of Christoph Schlingensief and from Ilya Kabakov's installations to the relatively new immersion art:[16] they are each balance exercises between observation and participation. As in the theatre, this art – because the audience watches itself watching – is a natural and communal reflection. The audience turns its own subjectivity inside out; it is immanent to the theatre because it operates not only as a spectator but also – usually unconsciously as an interpassive extra and only very occasionally interactively – as an actor. The audience takes part in the work of art and produces itself as a work of art: *eineExtraversion der Spieler zu ihrer Bühne hin*.[17] You could also call this the Natascha Kampusch strategy: if your whole life has been made public, you start a talk show. Or like Sloterdijk, who, after a whole army of journalists and Habermasians had drawn him into a public scandal, started a philosophical discussion programme on the zdf.[18] A critical ecology is no longer based on the critical-revolutionary theatre of modernity. It is a theatrical constructivism that represents nothing, only actualizes concrete forms of 'conviviality'. Art is not militarizing, but socializing: it is not made for an audience, but creates an audience. To put it atmospherically, art breathes life into the public space by inspiring it with *Luft an unerwarterter Stelle*[19] (air in an unexpected place) or an *Atem des Freispruchs*[20] (breath of relief). By breaking with the coercive resentment and the disinhibiting logic of an obscene common sense, or at the very least by diverting or channelling it, it creates breathing room and a breathing pause – necessary conditions for any cohabitation, since sometimes nothing stinks like home. A new audience is created when art functions as a relay within intimate communication networks. This makes it possible to experiment with new potential connections and new social syntheses. From that point on, the *theatrum mundi* – to quote Sloterdijk one last time – becomes the equivalent the *experimentum mundi*.

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Footnotes

1. From the programme description for the project *'Be[com]ing Dutch'*, for which the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven received no less than 500,000 euros from the Mondriaan Foundation.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso Publishers, 2001), 82.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *De fatale strategieën* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Duizend & Een, 1983), 76-106.
4. See also Chantal Mouffe's contribution to this issue.
5. Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, translated by T. Davids (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1992), 235
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Denker auf der Bühne. Nietzsches Materialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 80
7. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I: Blasen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998), 478.
8. Compare Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, *A Critique of Psychoanalytical Reason. Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, translated by M. N. Evans (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).
9. Sloterdijk, *Sphären I*, op. cit. (note 7), 92.
10. For a comparable shift from *actor-oriented* drama to *issue-oriented* drama, see Noortje Marres, 'There Is Drama In Networks', in: Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder, *Interact or Die!* (Rotterdam: V2-Publishing / NAi Publishers, 2007), 174-187.
11. It is revealing that Žižek compares our collective privacy with the impossibility of intermonadic communication to show the obscene 'zombification' of our political non-theatre, and thereby ignores the fundamental communal philosophy of Leibniz. http://www.gazette.de/Archiv/Gazette-August2001/Zizek1.html .
12. Concept taken from Gilbert Simondon's *L'individuation psychique et collective: A la lumière des notions de Forme, Information, Potentiel et Métastabilité* (Paris: Aubier, 2007).
13. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), 138.
14. Sloterdijk, *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, op. cit. (note 5), 487.
15. Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoïsme*, translated by W. Hansen (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1991), 316.
16. On 11 October 2007. under the evocative title 'Immersion – The Art of the True Illusion', a symposium on this theme was held at Vooruit in Ghent, with such participants as Christa Sommerer, Oliver Grau and Marnix de Nijs.
17. Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoïsmus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 243.
18. For the 'Human Zoo Scandal' of 1999. see Peter Sloterdijk, *Regels voor het mensenpark. Kroniek van een debat* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2000). Since 2001 Sloterdijk and Rüdiger Safranski have presented *Das philosophische Quartett* once a month on German television.
19. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III: Schäume* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), 27
20. Sloterdijk, *Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen*, op. cit. (note 13), 165.

Tags

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