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Terror From The Air (Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agents)



Synopsis

According to Peter Sloterdijk, the twentieth century started on a specific day and place: April 22, 1915, at Ypres in West Flanders. That day, the German army used a chlorine gas meant to exterminate indiscriminately. Until then, war, as described by Clausewitz and practiced by Napoleon, involved attacking the adversary's vital function first. Using poison gas signaled the passage from classical war to terrorism. This terror from the air inaugurated an era in which the main idea was no longer to target the enemy's body, but their environment. From then on, what would be attacked in wartime as well as in peacetime would be the very conditions necessary for life. This kind of terrorism became the matrix of modern and postmodern war, from World War I's toxic gas to the Nazi Zyklon B used in Auschwitz, from the bombing of Dresden to the attack on the World Trade Center. Sloterdijk goes on to describe the offensive of modern aesthetics, aesthetic terrorism from Surrealism to Malevich--an "atmo-terrorism" in the arts that parallels the assault on environment that had originated in warfare.

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Customer Reviews

At times Sloterdijk is hard work, but he more than compensates for that with virtuoso passages in which insight is piled upon insight. [The book] is above all a plea for realism in the face of the monumental difficulties of modernity and in the wake of a century of huge destructiveness. It creeps up on you, and leaves you breathless. (William Wiles Icon Magazine Online)

Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947) is one of the best known and widely read German intellectuals writing today. His 1983 publication of *Critique of Cynical Reason* (published in English in 1988) became the best-selling German book of philosophy since World War II. He became president of the State Academy of Design at the Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe in 2001. He has been cohost of a discussion program, *Das Philosophische Quartett* (Philosophical Quartet) on German television since 2002.

I am a fan of Sloterdijk's work. I loved reading this book, read it in one night, just couldn't stop. It's very interesting the discussion he elaborated about soldier, environment of terror, the transition from the classical warfare to terrorism.

Utterly disappointing: poorly translated, the English text reads like a translation, with rather confusing grammatical structures; chock-full of completely idiosyncratic and unhelpful definitions (Sloterdijk at one point defines terrorism as using a part to attack the whole and elsewhere as simply an attack against the enemy's environment or later as an attack in which the victim is forced to become an unwilling accomplice in his own annihilation! Really?); elision, through ignorance or otherwise, of evidence that would contradict his theories, especially regarding the history of Western warfare and the interrelationship between technology, morality, strategy and tactics. (Sloterdijk seems to imply a straight line causality whereas the relationship is clearly multidirectional.) Sloterdijk is so focused on showing that terrorism (and thus for him total war) is unique to post-WWI 20th Century, that he misses out on, for example, the Napoleonic focus on the complete destruction of enemy forces, historical efforts to "poison" the environment (smoke, poisoning wells, scorched earth tactics), or even "terrorist-like" (for Sloterdijk anyway) attacks on the environment such as Sherman's March to the Sea during the USA Civil War. These are not minor problems for minor details. On the contrary, it shows that his major points are not well supported or are simply assumed. As a result, his conclusions are useless. I will not comment on the final chapters and their discussion of surrealism as I feel that I do not have the appropriate background. Perhaps specialists will find his analysis interesting, perhaps not. But if the first half of the book is any indication, it is beyond worthless.

My daughter had to complete a book review based on interpretations and understandings of the content. A very hard read I must say.

Peter Sloterdijk's "Terror From the Air" is a marvelous genealogy of a specific type of terrorism that involves an assault upon the enemy's very living conditions. Sloterdijk insists that the twentieth century began in 1915 at Ypres with the German attack upon French-Canadian troops using chlorine gas. This was the first time, he says, that an enemy's atmosphere came under assault rather than a particular army or fortification. Twentieth century terrorism, from the gassing of the Jews to the Tokyo subway attacks using sarin nerve gas by the AUM Shunrikyo cult, unfolds from out of this one moment, pregnant with devastation. The book is apparently a slice cut from Sloterdijk's larger epic three volume work entitled "Spheres," in which he examines the implications of the disintegration of the various womb-worlds that have hitherto enclosed Western civilization. "Terror From the Air" is impressive because of its very lucidity, clarity and its lack of the usual technical verbosity that tends to plague critical theory texts. It is apparent from this book that Sloterdijk can analyze culture along with the best of them, and he clearly deserves a wider audience. One hopes that more of his work will be translated, especially "Spheres." Sloterdijk belongs on the same shelf beside Baudrillard, Žižek and Virilio. I proofread this book for Semiotexte, and I must say that it impressed me greatly. Sloterdijk manages to pack a lot of insight into his paragraphs, for the book is short and gets directly to the point. If you like good Critical Theory books, then you should try this one. SEE ALSO MY YOUTUBE VIDEO "JOHN DAVID EBERT ON PETER SLOTERDIJK"--John David Ebert, author of "The New Media Invasion" and "Dead Celebrities, Living Icons."

Fairly retro positivist account of terrorism. I recommend you read Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus* instead.

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