

Ruben Hordijk

*Spectral Inheritance:
Unlearning the Maturity
Trope*

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On the cover page of Ruben Hordijk's dissertation *Spectral Inheritance: Unlearning the Maturity Trope* we are faced with a terrified baby monkey – alone, shivering, isolated, its empty eyes staring into the void. The drawing refers to the experiments done by psychologist Harry Harlow, in which he separated baby monkeys from their mothers and deprived them of social contact, in order to gather scientific evidence for his attachment theory. This capturing anecdote powerfully inaugurates Hordijk's topic of interrogation: how modern Western scientific authority, subjectivity and knowledge has become conditioned on the severance from the social-maternal-ancestral and on the abjection and objectification of the non-human, immature, racialized and gendered other.

What follows is a rich and thoughtful interrogation of what Hordijk identifies as “the maturity trope” in mainstream philosophical, psychological and commonsense thinking. Famously expressed in Kant's dictum of Enlightenment as “man's emergence out of his self-incurred immaturity”

(17), Hordijk understands the rejection of immaturity as a foundational gesture, establishing the figure of the adult, reasonable, mature, truly human, pure Man against that of the Child. Adulthood then becomes predicated upon a severance of children from their maternal, ancestral and communal past. The binary that is thus created between adult/child, mature/immature, reason/stupidity, has also been mapped onto divisions between the figure of (white, heterosexual, bourgeois, able-bodied) Man – as pinnacle of evolutionary development and civilisation – and his gendered, racialized, sexualised, classed and disabled others.

Hordijk uses this immaturity trope as a productive starting point to challenge the atomistic ontology, transgenerationally transmitted through centuries of colonization and shaping of the worlds we currently live in. Hordijk not only dissects how this trope came to be a constitutive feature of “Developmental Man”, he also interrogates what it actually means to inherit the catastrophic world this figure left us. How can we overcome and unlearn the Eurocentric genre of the human that installs and reproduces itself through coloniality? Or: “How to become futural when a colonial world attempts to enclose our being and foreclose any new beginning?” (11)

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To rearticulate our understanding of identity, subjectivity, being and becoming, Hordijk engages with a rich variety of philosophers and critical, feminist, de- and postcolonial and postmodern thinkers – such as Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, Derrida, Levinas as well as Mignolo, Anzaldúa, Lugones, Maldonado-Torres, Butler, Fanon, Wynter, Lorde, Al-Saji and many others – interweaving their voices in a captivating interrogation of the tropes that constitute dominant understandings of identity, subjectivity, relationality and sociality.

One of the examined alternatives is the notion of multiplicity, which – drawing on Lugones, Anzaldúa and Moten – the author pits against the logic of fragmentation. The latter refers to the Euromodern desire for purity and unity – intent on dividing, categorizing, measuring, and controlling, and expressed in the socio-political and institutional hierarchical differentiation of “pure” identities. Multiplicity, on the other hand, recognizes the always already contaminated (or “curdled”) character of identity, as always already multiple and as refraining from a desire for authenticity or purity.

Another key figuration proposed by Hordijk is that of the “spectral heir”, opposed to the Euromodern figure of the “legitimate heir”. Those claiming legitimacy are those who position themselves as willing heirs to the legacies of fragmentation, of Developmental Man, his pure identity-thinking and his developmental trajectory from immaturity to maturity. Spectral inheritance, on the other hand, implies a recognition and continual engagement with

the lingering and violent legacies of the past. Spectral inheritance is about living with traces and with the ghosts, about learning to re-relate to the past in a way that enables us to remake the world.

While decolonial theory undoubtedly forms the bedrock of Hordijk’s work, this does not prevent the author from identifying some problematic undercurrents to decolonial theorizing – which, he claims, risk imposing new forms of purity and identity thinking. This critique is mostly directed at some strands and tendencies within decolonial thought which, through the notion of the “colonial difference”, impose a form of “pure impurity” by geospatially mapping out who is, and who is not, on the “right” (read non-Western) side of the colonial difference, and assuming that those at the “centre” cannot do otherwise than to reproduce Eurocentric knowledge. At the other side of the divide stand those whose location enables them to pronounce “true” impure epistemologies. Such a conflation of epistemic and subject positions is criticized by the author for the way it reinscribes essentialism with “purity” belonging to the West and “impurity” belonging to elsewhere. Against this, the author proposes the notion of “impure impurity”, referring to a form of relationality that takes place not “between already constituted and bounded worlds”, but “based on the prior entanglements of multiple worlds” (57).

While incredibly rich, layered and unquestionably thought-provoking, the text is also very dense and hence might be less accessible to readers unfamiliar with the varied philosophical, feminist and

decolonial theories Hordijk so productively engages with. And in his struggle with the omnipresent legacies of Western hegemonic thought, the author himself does not always escape the tendency to resort to binary categorization, as for example in his at times too “rosy” representation of the benefits of non-Western multigenerational family structures that become pitted against the overall negatively portrayed pitfalls of the Western nuclear family.

Nevertheless, for those who are in for some thought-provoking and highly relevant philosophical engagements with some of the best works produced by feminist, post- and

decolonial contemporary thought, this work is a pleasure to read. In his efforts to formulate a constructive, forward-looking rebuilding of the violent pasts we have inherited, Hordijk presents himself as an incisive and creative critical thinker. Embracing spectrality, illegitimacy, immaturity and impurity, this work will be highly inspirational for those who want to challenge the philosophical foundations on which so many contemporary injustices are built.

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