

# Moving Away From the Single World in the Classroom

Conversation between **MIJKE VAN DER DRIFT & PHILIP COYNE**

Mijke van der Drift is a philosopher whose work revolves around non-normative ethics, radical transfeminism, and transformative justice. A thesis tutor for the MA Non Linear Narrative programme at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague (KABK), Mijke has been drawn into the current reorganisations at the institution, promoting the democratisation of the academy and urging collective practices to replace manager-driven organisation. Mijke also lectures at the Royal College of Art in London (RCA), and has authored various articles, including 'Radical Romanticism, Violent Cuteness and the Destruction of the World' (2018), and 'Management and Rights Amidst Plural Worlds' (2021).

**Philip:** What does critical pedagogy mean to you? When did it become meaningful for you? And why is it important?

**Mijke:** My mom was an educator, a feminist educator, and quite a good one. Hers was the first generation within the family to receive higher education. From an early age, I would hear her talk about education and what it means. After graduating she returned to various working-class communities to teach about the 'family'; about how family structures are not static, but mobile. She also taught about how people can learn to navigate the pressures of their environment. This stuck with me as something that education is about. But entering my elementary and secondary schools, and later university, it was a huge disappointment, because very few educators think that this is an aim of education. 'Critical pedagogy' is a pedagogy where the students are given the possibility to navigate their context in a more helpful manner and, for me, this is always a collective endeavour. This is why education and consciousness-raising are often close to each other, in whatever we teach.

However, when it comes to the word 'critical', I remain very suspicious of the Kantian framework of 'criticality' as an indication of limit conditions, which is what the western 'critical tradition' is often about. What criticality also does, and I lean on Isabelle Stengers here, is 'disembody' you, it brings you out of your particular context.<sup>(1)</sup> By indicating limits, you take the position that you are not entirely

part of those limiting conditions anymore. So, 'criticality' can at the same time elevate somebody and cause a loss of relation, whereas a radical pedagogy would be about retaining the relations around a given topic; to return to the relation, to go back into the fray, or to just sit with it. As I'm writing now with my colleague Nat Raha, a radical pedagogy is to be part of the problem, whatever the problem is.<sup>(2)</sup> To return into the fray as a form of pedagogy is to claim yourself to be part of the situation that you teach about.

In assuming that we have already transcended the problem (that we teach about), we also elevate ourselves as tutors above our students. Then we've lost our connection. This is seriously not what pedagogy is about. Pedagogy moves in the other direction. It's sitting with, together. If I learn, my students learn. If I don't learn, my students don't learn.

**Philip:** One of the refrains that we heard regularly in this year's Hear! Here! sessions is that critical pedagogy is about letting the world into the classroom. It is about acknowledging the material conditions and power relations already at work within the classroom, and their effects on what and how we teach. Within your work, you complicate the word 'world' in a couple of different ways. Could you expand on the differences between the world, its destruction, and a plurality of worlds? And how might we bring many worlds into the classroom?

**Mijke:** When I wrote the article 'Radical Romanticism, Violent Cuteness and the Destruction of the World', it was a time when people were talking about 'ending the world as we know it', in Denise Ferreira da Silva's phrasing.<sup>(3)</sup> The reason I talk about the 'destruction' of the world is because I lean on Bernard Williams, a much more conservative philosopher, who nevertheless has some very good insights about what constitutes forms of ethics. Williams, similarly to many anti-colonial philosophers, always takes on board that we are ensouled and embodied beings. You bring your practical truth into the conversation and if you lose that practical truth you also lose part of who you are, and perhaps you can never get that back. This is quite helpful for me when thinking about transness.<sup>(4)</sup> What is transness? It is not a pathology, but when we see it as an action, what is at stake? Partly what is at stake is that our form of 'ensoulments' (and, therefore, our practical truths) have the possibility to transform into something else, and in order for something to become something else, something has to be released; we have to let go of it.

If we talk about the single world, or in my work I often call it the 'monological order', we're talking about hegemony in the Marxist sense. The hegemony where we cannot think anything but that which is already known and validated. For example, within the neoliberal world it is almost impossible to think about anything without

individual actors and without the market.

Of course, I am still part of the single world, because the world is all around us and we cannot necessarily escape it, but I have worked on re-training and re-learning and re-understanding throughout my life in various forms. It is this movement, moving away from the single world, that is the process that I want to undertake in the classroom. To move from a world that you know into a form of thinking where you're willing to give up something of yourself in order to allow for new possibilities.

**Philip:** How then do we move between worlds in the classroom? I'm thinking particularly about the classroom as a collectivity, where perhaps the classical model is that we are coming together to centralise our understanding into a single episteme, even if this is never really possible.

**Mijke:** In the 'classic classroom', with its single episteme, it will always be the teacher who is in the know and the students who have already failed before they enter. This is why it's such a violent situation. Whereas if we approach the classroom by acknowledging that each of us already has different forms of being in the world, then there we are already doing something else. There we're finding ways to open up, to make new relations to the things that are present, or even those things outside of the context that we're engaging with. But how do we travel between worlds? María Lugones questions: How to dare to lose the way we think?(5) How to dare to lose a form of reason, in a more or less horizontal shift, to travel to other ways of understanding or being in the world, practising the world? It's not only an episteme that we are daring to lose, it is also a whole set of relational activities.

**Philip:** A lot of the practices of critical pedagogy rely on a radical openness and trust within the classroom, which must be mutually entered into and, if transgressed, can immediately bring the whole process to a halt. How do those who act in bad faith or with managerial tendencies so effectively sabotage these practices? And how do we find space within the institution to carry out the trust-building work?

**Mijke:** When you are in a space of education that isn't organised around one episteme, a space of education that is vulnerable, you need to build the vulnerability on a basis of trust. And trust is not a zero-sum game, it's something that is remade every day. In contrast, the managerial attitude in the classroom wants on the one hand trust and openness, and on the other hand wants to curb the space into an institutional format. Here we see that these two different worlds slide away from each other. And what we see are managers who actually say, "I don't do content, I only do structures" (and thus choose the

institutional format). The weird thing is that, partly because they're not disciplinary managers anymore who structure knowledge, as Michel Foucault explained, but they're neoliberal managers, what we get is a 'content-free patriarchy'. This actually leaves quite a lot of freedom in the classroom; we can often do what we want *because* they're not interested in content anymore. Managers are only interested in structure that keeps them empowered, and then also, of course, rich. We have a lot of precariously employed tutors, but at the same time, these disempowered tutors are also fairly free to do what they like. I think this is a really strange tension. The mistrust that a lot of students have towards the institution is based on this curbing and this institutional authority that is growing and growing. It's getting more authoritarian, and at the same time you see students dealing with issues of trust because the space in the classroom actually becomes freer – curiously – because of this process.

**Philip:** If we want to take seriously the lessons of critical pedagogy, it's also important to take into account things that happen outside of the classroom; whether that's the students' living conditions, or their relationships with the institution and with each other. This usually means taking on a much broader and more complex set of responsibilities, responsibilities that are often made necessary by the duress the school is under and yet can antagonise the institution, as something that it doesn't identify as one of its roles. How do you view these responsibilities and how can we respond to them without having to take on and propagate the arguments of the institution or managerialism?

**Mijke:** Yeah, it's interesting. Sometimes the institution's managers say you should not be too attentive, simply because they don't want to pay you for it. But at the same time, I think as you already said, you cannot leave the world outside of class behind. When Nat and I say 'go into the fray', it means being part of the collective. I don't mean that you have to always be available or take on more than your fair share. If the collective cannot run without you, then maybe you're not part of the collective; maybe then you're the divider. So I think there is something about extension here. My students bring the world to me, partly because I bring the world to my students. Of course, the collectivity does not cease to exist at the end of class. But I'm open about my (limited) working conditions and about their conditions in life. As soon as we have that on the table, we all know what we're navigating and we all know what we can do for each other. Sometimes as tutors we can listen, but we can't always solve things. This is very important. Sometimes educators want to intervene in the students' lives, rather than try to understand how the students need to grow.

When I come to the classroom I'm also learning; I'm learning how to teach about the topic, while often my students are learning how

to read about it. And later, in the second year, we are learning how to write about it. We're learning together, and at the same time learning how to be human together. The intergenerational work of transness shows that you have to keep learning from younger generations of trans activists, because languages change, insights change, the medical conditions change, the social conditions change. Sometimes they get better, sometimes they get worse. Sometimes I notice that my political pain that I had to live through is now politically irrelevant. It just became pain. So I have to deal with my shit, and I think it is the same in the classroom. I see some tutors that stick with discussions that were very relevant twenty or thirty years ago, but sometimes we need to move on. As a tutor you need to leave things behind for a while and then maybe pick them back up, and sometimes you need to learn when this is necessary from your students.

**Philip:** This isn't a fully formed question, but I hope we can muddle through it together. In your 'Generosity Against Duress' text there is a short section connected to your notion that a transfeminist strategy might be to act without a clear aim, where you uncover the direction of the action through its process.<sup>(6)</sup> In this section you speak about 'call-outs', alongside a number of other practices, as a process of 'uncovering our patterns of escape'. Recently there seems to be a growing ambivalence within Dutch art schools about call-outs, and particularly instagram meme pages, often from the tutors who have their own antagonistic relationships with the institution. It seems to be precisely the lack of clear aims that is causing this ambivalence. In the text you also posit that there are important lessons to be learned from abolitionism for when we enact these patterns of escape. For example, lessons about how not to be punitive or conflate the individual with their position.

So my question is, in light of the aforementioned transfeminist strategy, can we think about the call-out as a practice of community generosity? And how can abolitionism reshape this practice for the better?

**Mijke:** A call-out is not always helpful because it can often come out of the blue and not out of a collective, especially if you're talking about meme accounts. Meme accounts can be really useful when there's not a lot of space for communication, when the power dynamics are hidden or will always be used against the students, but I think students can lack a sense of agency in general. Sometimes this is justified, sometimes unjustified. I have seen students that pre-emptively feel powerless, while the person on the other side is actually quite willing to listen, but this gets lost in the institution. This is also an issue of individualisation and the investment of hierarchy; the more hierarchical the institution is, the less of a feeling of agency the students or tutors or heads will have.

Whereas when I talk about patterns of escape, what I mean is how can

we leave these situations of duress? This can happen through call-outs, but also by having discussions, or, for example, by using theatre, in order to ask questions that you cannot always address directly. It is not always possible in social situations to say something like, "Hey, I have the sense that I'm disposable here", because then people start to act in an evasive and overcompensating manner, and you're still left with your questions or anxiety – are they now 'including' me or am I actually not disposable anymore?

What follows from call-outs is often a path of escape that asks: "If we don't want this, then in which direction do we grow? What do we grow into?" Often we don't want to call out or call in, and when the violence has already happened it is difficult to go to the person who did the violence, especially when it is one on one. But sometimes we just need to sit with our friends, colleagues, students, and say, "We're not going to cancel you, but we do need to talk about what's going on here." Then we can find new ways of doing things. I think the classroom, especially in art schools, is a very helpful space for these conversations. Social media can be part of it, but it only works if we also embrace discussions in person, because otherwise call-outs become more shrill and more violent, nothing changes, and people start to close down.

It is also not about a peculiar form of personal accountability. I have seen tutors showing up and renouncing themselves in front of the class. I'm not sure if that needs to happen. What I am sure about is that tutors, heads of department, students, and hopefully also directors should be ready to sit with each other and ready to dissolve not the differences, but the structures that keep the problem in place. Then we can escape into new forms, new forms where we will also need people to call us out or call us in, to say, "OK, this form worked for a while but now it doesn't."

If you look at collective organising, you constantly see collectives that emerge and fall apart. I think that the falling apart of collectives (queer collectives, radical collectives, left collectives, it doesn't matter) is part of this. Everything that has been built and learned will be brought into the next collective, and the next collective can grow on that basis. Whereas if you have a look at the NGO-isation of these groups, where it becomes about producing new stabilities, what you get are collectives that start to behave like institutions, and thereby immediately lose their transformative potential.

What I learned from prison abolitionist work is coming back to the problem and seeing how we are going to do things differently with people who are involved. This does not mean that everybody must do the same thing, because we don't want the same things. Importantly, we can still share the classroom because sharing is about having some things in common and other things not.

Some of the work is about love and reciprocity, to listen to the call-out, and return it with generosity, to give those who level it full credit

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for the perspective. Though it doesn't necessarily mean that they get to say what people should do.

Another part of this reciprocity is also addressing some call-outs by saying, "This is actually a really violent way to do this, and now you're not part of the restructuring." Calling out often doesn't lead to people taking responsibility for their criticism. But when the institution deals with it alone, the response can be stingy. The problem is minimally addressed until the institution feels it is 'innocent' again. This is why it's interesting to talk about complicity – it doesn't let people off the hook. If two of my students have an argument in class, perhaps I'm complicit because I am one of these twelve people in the room? So, let's go, let's sit with it. Let's sit with the person who is bringing hegemony into the classroom. Let's see how we can address this in many ways, in ways where the group can also still feel agency, because this is necessary for transformation.

(1) Isabelle Stengers, 'Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of the Modern Dualism', in: *Subjectivity* 22:1 (2008), pp. 35-59.

(2) Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift, "'They would plant the rose garden themselves' – Femme, Complicity, Solidarity and the rewiring of the sensuous", in: *Darkmatter* (forthcoming).

(3) Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability', in: *Catalogue: Incerteza Viva*, Sao Paolo: 32nd Sao Paolo Art Biennial (2016), pp. 57-65.

(4) See also: Mijke van der Drift, 'Nonnormative ethics: the ensouled formation of trans', in: Ruth Pearce, Igi Moon, Kat Gupta, and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (eds), *The Emergence of Trans*, London: Routledge, 2019; Mijke van der Drift and Nat Raha, 'Radical Transfeminism: Trans as Anti-static Ethics Escaping Neoliberal Encapsulation', in: Jennifer Cooke (ed.), *New Feminist Studies: Twenty-first-century Critical Interventions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 13-24.

(5) María Lugones, 'Playfulness, World-Travelling, and Loving Perception', in: *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, pp. 77-101.

(6) Mijke van der Drift, 'Generosity against Duress', in: Lilly Markaki and Caroline Harris (eds), *Love Spells & Rituals for Another World*, London: Independent Publishing Network, 2021.

