

*Thing and Thinks* - college**Context van de lezing**

In een zwart-wit televisieopname uit 1959 demonstreert filosoof Alan Watts een fascinerend experiment met een inktvlek en een raster. De opname maakt deel uit van de tv-serie *Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life* (afl. 2, “*Things and Thinks*”). In deze lezing bespreekt Watts het Indiase concept **māyā**. Met het idee dat de materiële wereld, die van de concrete “*dingen*”, eigenlijk een illusie is die door ons denken wordt gecreëerd.

Tijdens deze lezing maakt hij dit idee inzichtelijk met een briljante metafoor.

Watts laat zijn publiek een *Rorschach*-achtige inktvlek zien en vraagt het wat ze er in zien. De éne deelnemer ziet er misschien een “katten gezicht” in, terwijl de ander er bijvoorbeeld een “danser” in ziet. Hij illustreert zo hoe mensen geneigd zijn een betekenis uit *hun eigen leefwereld* (= context) te projecteren op volslagen vormeloze en onbekende patronen<sup>1</sup>.

Vervolgens vergelijkt Watts onze dagelijkse werkelijkheid (realiteit) met zo’n inktvlek. En heeft het over een *kosmische Rorschach-vlek*”, waarop we gezamenlijk namen en verhalen projecteren om er samenhang in te kunnen ontdekken. Om er zo met elkaar over te kunnen praten en ‘*het*’ te kunnen ‘bevatten’.

Zijn stelling is dan dus: de wereld op zichzelf is chaotisch en grillig en om er ‘*chocola van te kunnen maken*’ ordenen en structureren wij mensen die wereld. Daartoe creëren (construeren) wij mensen hulpmiddelen als taal en andere vormen van *aanwijzers* om die grilligheid te kunnen (aan)duiden, te kunnen beschrijven.

En dan pakt Alan Watts een transparant raster met een ruitjespatroon en legt dit over de onregelmatige de inktvlek. Door de verbindingspunten in het raster te nummeren (horizontaal en verticaal) laat hij zien hoe we dan met deze coördinaten de grillige vorm kunnen be-meten en nu dus ook kunnen beschrijven. Brilliant!

Dankzij dit *kunstmatige* raster kunnen we precieze posities op de inktvlek aanwijzen en zo ook makkelijk een bewegend ‘ding’ over die vlek volgen. En, bijvoorbeeld, zelfs het pad van een vlo die door de inkt loopt voorspellen.

Watts laat ons hier zien hoe wij mensen steeds een denkbeeldig meetnet over onze werkelijkheid leggen. Met hulpmiddelen als taal, concepten en wetenschap. Om grip te krijgen op die grillige buitenwereld. En dat is -aldus Watts- ook precies de kern van het oosterse begrip *māyā*. Het begrip waarvan onze woorden *materie, maat & meten* zijn afgeleid.

De stelling die hij hier opheldert is dus:

**Wij mensen meten en verdelen de wereld in denkcategorieën en dat is nuttig om te communiceren, maar mag niet worden verward met de werkelijkheid zelf.**

De volledige serie *Eastern Wisdom & Modern Life (1959-1960)*, inclusief de aflevering “*Things and Thinks*”, is beschikbaar gesteld op het [Internet Archive](#).

Het engelse transcript van deze film vind je [hier](#)-onder.

<sup>1</sup> de symmetrische *inktblots-test*, het idee van *Rorschach*.

**Transcript:**

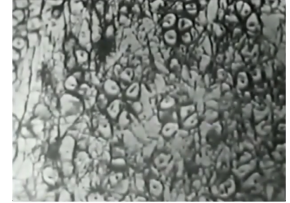
We were talking last time about the extraordinary conflict between man and nature which exists among almost all highly civilized peoples, and especially here in the Western world, where we talk so much about **our conquest of nature, our mastery of space, our subjection of the physical world.**

And I think one of the main reasons why we feel in this particular way is that each individual *experiences himself as a peculiarly separate being*. In other words, every man thinks of this world as a *collection of objects*.

The world is a lot of things, and each person considers himself as a *thing*.

And I wonder if you've ever stopped to ask yourself what a thing is and why you think you are a thing. Are you quite sure that you are a thing?

Because if we take a look at ourselves from another point of view, for example like *this*, we shall find that we are not one thing at all. We're an extraordinary number of things. For what you're looking at there is the cell structure of your own body, *a whole multitude of tiny, tiny little individuals*.



And now we might ask again what other points of view could we take to ourselves. We could of course take the sociologist's point of view, where we are not really a thing at all but a *sub-member of a group*, or still more.

If a man visiting us from another planet in something like a flying saucer were to hover down and look at what sort of creature is inhabiting this earth, what would he see?

Let's take a look and get some idea of his view. This is the kind of creature he would find inhabiting this planet, a scrawly, nubbly thing with various lines connecting bits of it. That would be, in his view, the kind of thing that we are. For, you see, how many things we are depends upon *the point of view* which one takes. Every point of view that we've taken, the point of view of the cells, the point of view of the man hovering above the earth in a flying saucer or an airplane, is a correct point of view.



And according to the way in which we look, so we *divide the things of the world*.

For, you see it's interesting isn't it, that the word *thing* is very like the word *think*, because by breaking down our world into things is the way in which we think about it.

**We break down what we call the *material world* into objects and assign to those objects the kind of words we describe as *nouns*. And then, the world of action we break into events and assign to events the kind of world word we call *verbs*.**

**But things and events are fundamentally the ways of breaking up our complex world so that we can think about it.**

I wonder if any of you have ever been to a psychologist and taken a **Rorschach test** and been asked to look at one of these extraordinary blocks. Now actually the block that we're looking at here isn't a real *Rorschach* block because you're not allowed to show them in public in case people saw them before the test. But they're something like this and they're made by splodging ink on paper and folding the paper over so that you get a symmetrical block. And the psychologist says to you when you look at that, now please will you tell me a story about it.



What do you think it looks like? And you might say well I think it looks like a



great big cat face or maybe it's a woman's handbag or maybe it's a dancer waving his arms in front of a pair of pine trees with some rocks around.

All sorts of stories you could invent about it, anything you like. And the psychologist will use the kind of information that you've given him, the sort of things that you project out of your own mind into that block and he will then form some diagnosis of the kind of person you are.

But, you see, he's not interested in the information which you give him about the block as a description of the block. He's interested in what you say as a description of what is going on inside you.

In other words what you are saying about that block is a *projection of yourself into its strange and complicated confirmations*.

Now you see our whole world is in many ways not so very much unlike this peculiar block. And you might think that there might be some persuasive person who stands up and gives a story about the block of the world and other people agree with what he says.

He says look here that's a mountain, that's a tree, that's a rock and everybody else would agree because he was so persuasive and we would all be beginning to give the same story about the cosmic Rorschach block. *Because after all our world is a very wiggly affair.*

Consider for example clouds or clouds with mountains across them or waters or stars. **All the world is a wiggly affair. Not at all unlike that block we were looking at. And we have to find out ways of making sense of it.** Perhaps one of the things that men first, one of those strangest the most difficult to understand things that men first began to make sense of in this kind of Rorschach block interpretation way were the stars in heaven.

And one of the ways in which they did this was to project upon the skies figures of all kinds of mythological monsters and beasts such as the idea of a dipper for the Great Bear those stars in the Great Bear that look you know like a ladle or some people call them the plough or here perhaps on a celestial sphere of this kind you can see quite clearly the outline of the constellation Leo the lion. A lion drawn in the sky so that men could find their way about in the stars recognize their outlines by associating certain groups of stars with familiar images.



But you see this **is fundamentally a projection of ideas out of our own minds onto nature.** Nature itself will take all kinds of different projections and no one is necessarily the right one. They work for us so long as we agree about them that is so long as we abide by convention.

And in Indian philosophy the fundamental word for this kind of thing is the Sanskrit term **Maya**. I'm going to write that down for you.

Maya and this word comes from a root in the Sanskrit language **ma**. **And the word ma is at the basis of all kinds of words that we use in our own tongue. It's at the basis of matter, of the Latin mater or mother, at the basis of matrix or metric because the fundamental meaning of the root ma is to measure.**



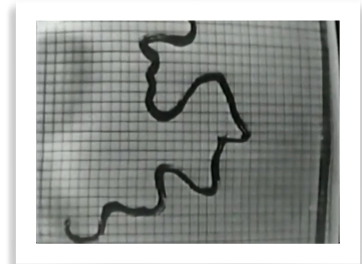
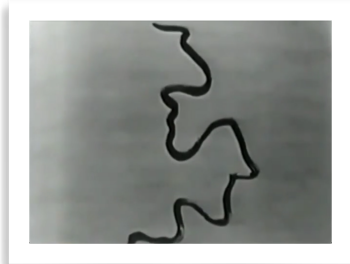
And so it works in this sort of way. I was talking about our world being *wiggly*.

You know something like this. That is the typical sort of shape that we are having to deal with all the time. *And I think you'll see at once that a shape like that is extraordinarily difficult to talk about.*

If I were talking on the radio at the moment and not on television, I would have the greatest difficulty in describing that line to you in such a way that you could write it down on a piece of paper in front of you without seeing it. But here you can see it and you can understand it at once. But it isn't enough just to be able to see things.

*We want to be able to talk about them. We want to be able to describe them exactly so that we can control them and deal with them.*

I mean supposing this were the outline of a piece of *territory* on a map then you might want to tell someone an exact spot to which he should go. And then you would have to be far more precise about it than you can be when you just get the general idea of it by looking at it.



And so we introduced then the idea of Maya by essentially doing this. This might be called a *matrix*. A line crossed, lines crossed by lines in a very formal simple pattern. And the moment we do that it becomes very easy indeed to talk about this wiggly line because we could for example number all these squares across 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 and so on. We can also number them downwards.

And then in terms of numbers across and numbers down we can indicate the exact points on this *grid* which crossed the wiggly line. And by numbering those points one after another we can give an accurate description of the way that line moves.

And furthermore supposing the line under our grid were not still like this one but supposing it was wiggling in motion supposing it was a flea or something dipped in ink who was crawling across the paper and we wanted to know where he was going to go all we would have to do would be to plot out the positions which he has covered and then we could calculate *statistically* a trend which would indicate where he would be likely to go next.



And if he went there next we should say by Jove isn't that incredible this little flea crawling across the paper is obeying the laws of statistics ..

Well as a matter of fact *he isn't*. What he is doing is or rather I should say what we are doing is *we are making a very very abstract model of the way in which that line is shaped or in which that flea is crawling*. We are breaking it up into little bits whereas in fact it is not a lot of little bits.

It is a continuous sweep but by treating it in this way as if it were broken up into bits we are *measuring* it we are making a *Maya* and these cross lines are a *Maya* just in the same way as the idea of the lion the Leo constellation in the stars is a *Maya* a way of projecting you see this thing it comes out of our minds and we project it upon nature like this.



And break nature into bits so that it can be easily talked about and handled. But, you see, this tends to give us the impression that our world is a lot of bits and that things are really separate from each other. You see, how could I demonstrate how this is?

I have an idea Mr. Cameraman will you focus the camera on one small tiny spot in the set and come very close to it and travel along bit by bit by bit by bit. Now you see this is looking at the world little bit by little bit as if we were only using the central vision of our eyes the kind of vision we use for reading and close work of that kind.

But if this were the only way we had of looking at things it would be very difficult to make any sense of life at all because we would see everything in series bit after bit after bit.

But fortunately we are also able to enlarge the whole view and take in everything at once in a single sweep. And you see this shows all the advantages and the disadvantages of looking at things in the way that Indian

philosophy calls *maya*. Because if *maya* were the only way we had for looking at things we should only be able to understand one thing at a time and our world is not just one thing happening one after another one at a time.

Our world is an enormous volume a great vastness in which everything is happening all together at once. Now being able to think of things one at a time is extraordinarily useful because this is what enables us to have science to have scientific control of nature to be able to count things, measure them, manage them and predict their behavior in the future.

But it is inclined to run away with us and give us the impression if we think too hard about things or if we put too much faith in thinking that the world is made up of a lot of separate bits so that we have a kind of bit by bit approach to nature what I might call a putt putt putt putt view of life.

It's useful indeed to break things down into things and to classify. But the moment it gives us the impression that these little bits into which we have divided the world are really and in nature separate from each other we get into confusion.

Now how do we know that divided things aren't really separate?

Look for example at me how do you know I'm here? How can you make out the outlines of my body?

Isn't it because there is a contrast between the background behind me and my figure? You know where the background ends and I begin and so you are able to see me but now what would happen if the background should vanish and disappear and I would no longer be there but the figure in the ground instead would be my button. In order to see me you have to see a background along with me and so if we go back and look again at the whole thing then we can see once again.



Now what does that tell us? Surely the thing that it tells us is not merely that the background is one thing and the figure is another. Since the two must go together it indicates that there is a *connection between them*. If you can't have the perception of a figure without a background, if you simply cannot see it if there is no background there, *doesn't that mean that the background and the figure are some way inseparable*. They're different yes, but they're inseparable differences.

Take for example a coin. When you have a coin has two sides, heads and tails, and these two sides are indeed different. You might say they are separate sides but what would happen if we take a file and start rubbing away to get rid of one of the sides? Well we would rub and rub and rub and when we finally got rid of the side the other side would have vanished too because the two sides of a coin go together.

Yes they are different but they are also inseparable and this is true of almost everything in the world because we distinguish things from their background. We distinguish one side from another as we distinguish up from down.



Now imagine what would happen if we arranged everything in the set or tried to arrange everything so that nothing were down everything had to be up. If we could really in nature separate the up from the down why we couldn't do it? Because up goes with down is unintelligible apart from down in the same way that the head side of a coin goes together with the tail side and so in this way we as individuals as separate beings are really inseparable from the whole natural environment in which we live. We go together and you cannot have the one without the other.

Without what we call things there would be no world but without what we would call the whole world there would be *no things* and this is not only true of what we call things and objects it's also true of many of our *experiences*.

Let's take for example one of the most fundamental distinctions in experience what is pleasant and what is not. Now a great many people are bending the whole effort of their lives to have pleasure and get rid of pain. This pursuit of pleasure is regarded as the fundamental aim of human existence and you know when you start to read old books on Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy they very often say that the first thing a man must understand is to give up the pursuit of pleasure and people who read these things think that these are very, oh grippy, puritans, people who have a sour attitude to life who burnt their fingers in the

game of the pursuit of pleasure and say well let's not get mixed up with that anymore but as a matter of fact this is a just a plain clear sensible statement.

It's like saying you cannot have the one without you cannot have up without down you cannot have a figure without a background and in the same way exactly you cannot experience pleasure unless there is something with which you can contrast it.

You know what happens when a person who's longed to make a great deal of money all his life and he makes it finally he gets a million dollars and he thinks this is the answer well it's fine just in the moment of transition while he's going from poverty to richness. But when he's had his million dollars for a few months everything adjusts itself and he begins to feel just the same as he always felt before conversely.

If some of you have lived near a tannery or near a public utility place like a gas producing factory you get so used to the bad smell in the background that you cease to notice it it becomes the normal smell. And so you don't notice it anymore as a bad smell. For both, the bad and the good need each other as contrasts and therefore when we try to get rid of one of the pairs and possess the other **only we do something that is profoundly nonsensical. We think we can do it because in my yarn -that is to say in conventional thinking in terms of that kind of measurement that we call *thought*- we can separate the one from the other. We can talk about up as different from down.**

We can talk about one thing as different from other things but *in actual experience* it can't be done just as in actual experience. That wiggly line was a continuous line and not a series of points and, in another way too, we can't really pursue pleasure.

Because pleasure is something that has to come to us for example you can pursue a cow and you can go out and catch it and kill it and serve it up a steak that you can do, But you can't pursue the pleasure that you get from eating steak if, in other words, you try to get pleasure out of steak.

Supposing I sit here and I have a great big splendid steak served to me and I say this is the best steak I ever ate why it's a chateaubriand and it costs 12 dollars a plate and therefore I must make the very maximum effort to enjoy it. And I cut the thing up and I put it in my mouth and say now I really got to get the most out of this piece of steak and so I chew it with all my might to get the very best out of it. And what happens? I'm making so much muscular strain I'm trying so hard to get something out of it that I frustrate the very pleasure that it should give.

Why is that? Surely it is *because pleasure is a function of nerves and you can't make an effort with your nerves*. Catching a cow is a function of muscles and you can make an effort with your muscles.

To give another illustration of the same thing, supposing I want to see an object in the far distance. I want to make out the time on a distant clock. Now my eyes are nervous rather than muscular and if I strain my eyes very hard to make out what is way off on the clock in the distance. What happens? All the images of the figure of the figures on the clock go fuzzy. But if I relax my eyes and let the image come to it as light does in fact come to the eyes then I can see the image clearly!

Then I can see the image clearly, so when we think of the world as consisting primarily of a lot of disconnected things and ourselves as one of them so that we go out and get those things or we can push those things around to suit ourselves we forget so easily that *the entire system of nature, ourselves included, is interconnected in every conceivable way*.

You know what happens when you think "*well we've got a lot of mosquitoes around here all kinds of insects that bite us and bother us let's get rid of them*"? So we bring in the DDT and we send an airplane over and spray the whole surrounding territory with DDT?

And what happens?

Suddenly we find that other insects or other pests, which those insects we destroyed were feeding upon, multiply and increase and we have *a new problem*. We have to get rid of those.

It's like when they brought *rabbits* into Australia because they thought they'd be useful there for some reason or other the rabbits multiplied because there's nothing that fed on rabbits. Then they had *a plague of rabbits!*

You see, *you cannot just push nature around you cannot regard it as something to be attacked so that you can grab bits from it and shove it around any old way as if it were a machine that you could bang around like a mechanic*.

Indeed, even machines as any good mechanic knows, are not that simple to play with but if we can get rid of them but if we do not see that our view of the separateness of the world is based on a convention of thinking, it exists as it were in here, it doesn't exist out here in actual concrete reality and if we are confused then we jump to follow our thoughts instead of our senses..



*.. and this is no sense ..*