

## Images of Organization

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As Martin Jay notes in his *Downcast Eyes*, the optical mechanism of vision has been understood principally as a biological function, at least since the time of Kepler whose work was instrumental for establishing the modern laws of the biological physics of human seeing. According to these laws, we are able to see because light rays are transmitted through the cornea and the lenses of the eyeball to the rear of the retina. This visual information is then passed on to the human brain through the optical nerve. The brain then processes this information and produces an 'image', which we are able to see with the impression that the object in question is 'in front of us'. Image, light, vision, perception. It's a biological process like any other.



Science also reminds us that human vision is not always perfect. But nevertheless, the brain helps to overcome many of the gaps in vision (partial failures, things approaching but not including blindness) by coordinating the motoric movement of our eyes in order to produce a coherent image in front of us. Thanks to our brains we have the impression of a more or less perfect vision so that there are no blind spots. Even if we cannot 'see' properly, our brain will fill in the blanks, making it appear as if we are seeing, even when we are 'actually' not.

The perfection of our understanding of human vision has been, of course, science's ambition for a long time. In the name of this project eyes have been dissected, brains cut open and other scientific experiments carried out. It seems that in order to perfect the vision of something, to improve understanding, one has to cut open, to dissect, to anatomise. We must 'open up a few corpses', as Foucault once noted.<sup>1</sup> One has to look inside in order to get a grasp of how something works. To understand how human vision works, one has to cut open the eye in order to study its properties. 'Cutting', it seems, is a basic scientific tool.

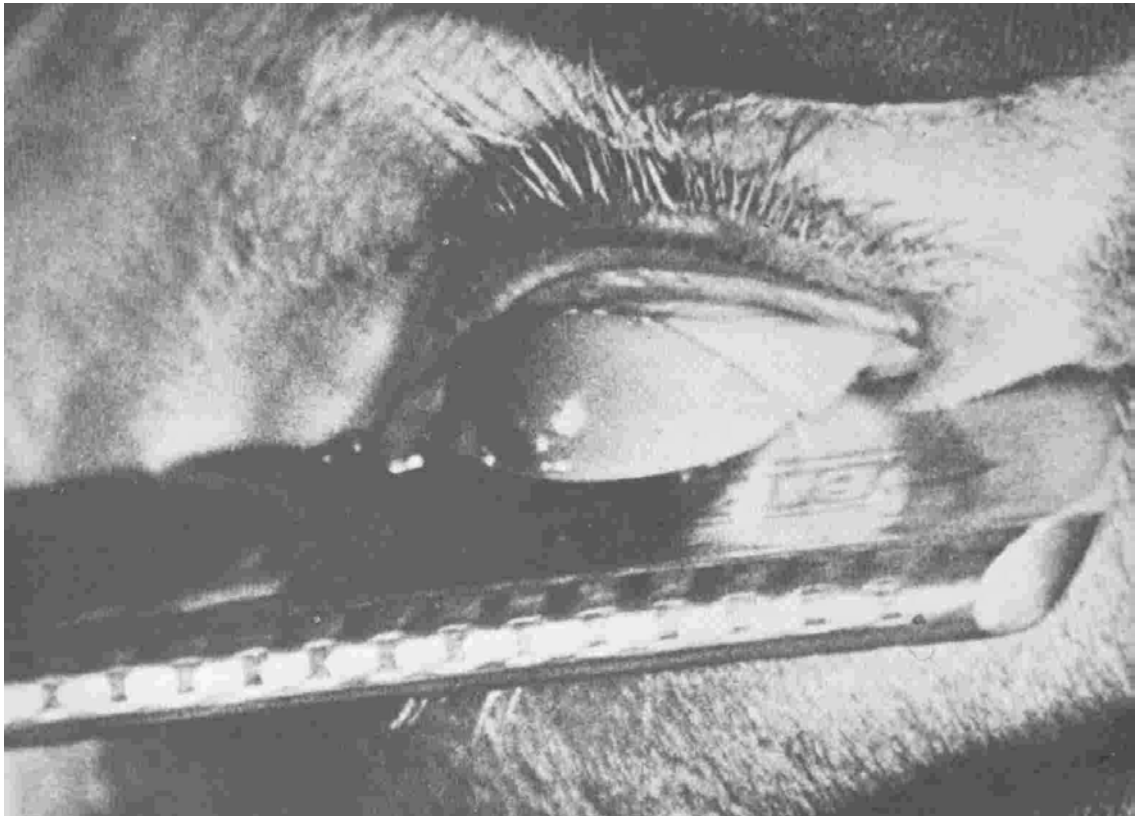
But cutting does not always have to serve the project of Enlightenment. It can also simply shock. Cast light, but not enlighten in the sense that we expect it. When, for example, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí shot their film *An Andalusian Dog* in 1929, they clearly were out to shock their audience. Very early on in the film a man strops an open razor until it is 'razor sharp'. The man (in fact, it is Buñuel himself) takes the razor and slices through the eyeball of a woman. Shock, horror, disgust – these are probably the most common reactions to what has become one of the most famous scenes of surrealist cinema. When the film was first seen at the end of the 1920 and the early 1930s, many people simply walked out of cinemas.

While science 'cuts' in order to explain and understand, film and art use the technique of 'cutting' to shock an audience. It is a shock that aims to put taken-for-granted images of reality into doubt and cut open some possibilities for seeing different realities or different aspects of reality. According to Buñuel, the idea for the 'sliced eyeball' scene came from a 'dream image': "I have dreamt of my mother and of the moon, and of a cloud which crossed the moon, and then they tried to cut my mother's eye"<sup>2</sup>, he once said. The whole idea of psychoanalysis is, of course, to show that reality is not that what it seems. Or better, to show that *the way that reality seems* (that is, its presentation to consciousness) is not the way that it seems. Following Lacan, the real is always already accompanied and subverted by the Real, those images that escape symbolisation. The Imaginary pretence of wholeness and unity is fractured by the Real, which contains images that do not 'make sense' to consciousness and hence call that unity into question. The Real cuts.

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1 Michel Foucault (1973) *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Vintage; see, in particular, chapter 8.

2 Luis Buñuel in Joan Mellen (ed.) (1985) *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Perhaps, what Buñuel and Dalí's film tries to do is to cut up the real in order to provide an access point to the Real, to the space that cannot be easily overlooked by the human eye. This is the image of the film that they construct for themselves (perhaps again the very real, yet competing reading, which notes the gendering of the figures that cut and get cut, and exposes the misogynistic violence being justified as art). Buñuel explanation misses this, somehow: "This film draws its inspiration from poetry, freed from reason and traditional morality. It has no intention of attracting or pleasing the spectator – indeed, on the contrary, it attacks him to a degree to which he belongs to a society with which surrealism is at war...this film is meant to explode in the hands of its enemies".<sup>3</sup> Meaning is not the aim of *An Andalusian Dog*. It simply shocks its audience, a shock that might generate a new consciousness by connecting us to the blind side of reality, the 'dark side of the moon'.

People are, understandably, afraid of losing their sight. Cutting through an eyeball is probably one of the most horrible things one could imagine. Instead of 'cutting up' reality, we are usually concerned to perfect our vision. Glasses and microscopes, for example, improve our ability to see the world. And scientific models and theories (even 'theories of organization') are tools for seeing, so we are told. But seeing is not simply an act that can be explained by biology and perfected by science. While science surely has its legitimacy, it seems important to see science as something that is a product of a particular 'world-image', something that aims to improve a particular view of the world. The science of organization, for example, is historically produced and puts forward a

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3 Buñuel, *ibid*.

particular view of the organized world. What has become clear is that this view can be contested on various grounds.

The implications of seeing exceed biology, and can take us into the philosophical, as has been insisted by various philosophers. Perhaps this is reflective of a basic instability in vision. We see, but there is always the chance of seeing differently. And we can deal with this risk in a variety of ways. On the one hand, we can deal with the risk of having the wrong image by denying the validity of all others – this is absolutism. On the other hand, we can claim that any image is as good as any other, and that all images tell us something about the world. But perhaps this second, which is all the rage in certain circles today and claims for itself all of the virtues of democratisation, hides another variety of absolutism. An absolutism that tells us that we can see any old way we like, that we can change our mind with the weather and have the suppleness of youth when we change our minds. Anyone for *real* change?