

Cataract Surgery Blues

By Raymond Barglow
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Two weeks ago I handed myself over to a medical team at Kaiser-Oakland that did a cataract surgery on my eyes. My symptom? I couldn't see clearly, and no eye-glass prescription was sufficient any longer to fix the problem. A doctor told me: there's clouding in the lenses of both of your eyes that's been building up for many years; to repair your vision we'll replace those lenses with new artificial ones.

Immediately following the operation, I discovered that I could now see blue as never before in all my years (within memory) of viewing the world around me! Turns out that an eye cataract sometimes adds yellow to the visual field, and the surgery corrects that. Before the surgery, it had been as if I were unknowingly wearing a pair of sunglasses that painted everything with a veneer of yellow. Now, when I view the world through born-again eyes, I see an astonishing gamut of shades and textures of blue.

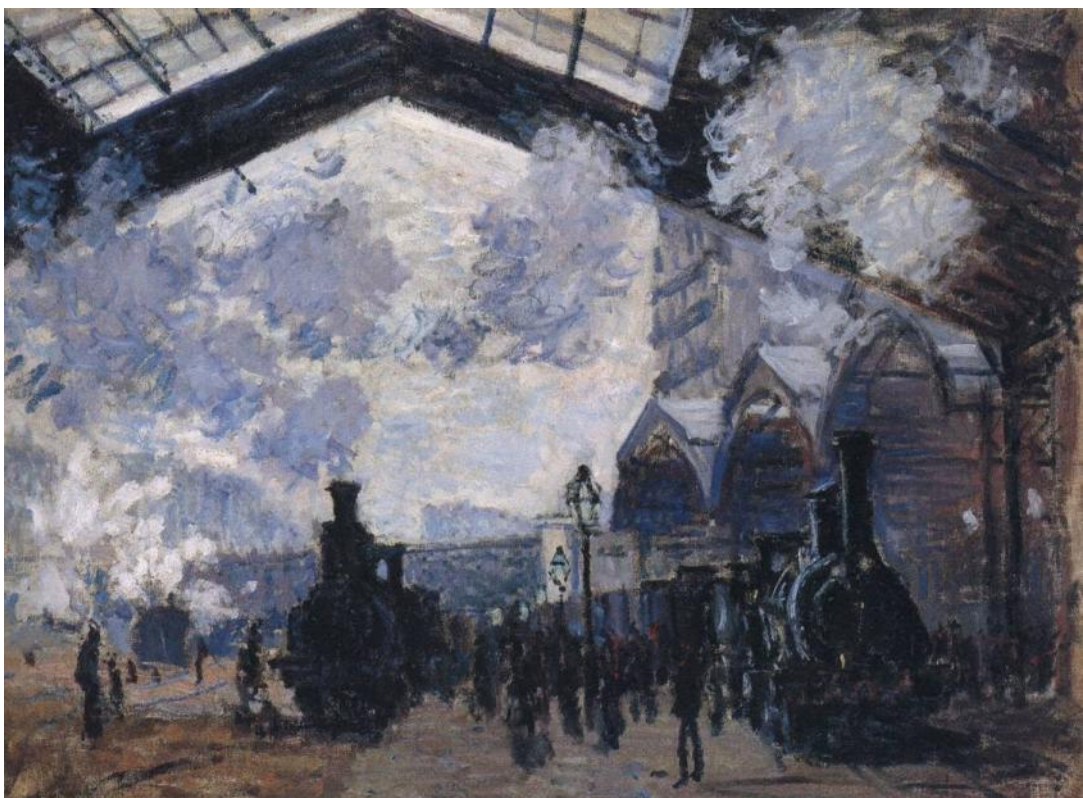
There's a bower of blue-violet flowers above the gate just outside my house, and it's breathtaking to let my eyes fall upon it. And when I see a shadow now, I often notice that it carries just the slightest shade of blue. I'm reminded of what the 19th-century French impressionists did with shadows, although I used to believe that they were inserting color where none at all exists in reality. I was wrong! And two centuries earlier, Vermeer also had imported blue masterfully to the canvas.



Renoir, The Swing



Vermeer, Young Woman with a Water Pitcher



Monet, Gare St. Lazare. The painter found abundant blue in the smoke-filled station.

I can scarcely find words to describe my new experience of the blue glass vase sitting over there on the table. My reborn vision seems to be taking me back in time – but how far back? “All the way back!” I feel like exclaiming. “Through eyes from which the scales have fallen, I’m now seeing the world like a child on the first day of Creation.” By removing an obstacle (the cataract), this operation appears to have re-opened an original optical pathway, recreating in me a raw sensation of “true” color, pure and sublime, the original experience, the real thing!

That’s a tempting reading of what surgery of this kind can accomplish – but I believe that it’s mistaken. I doubt that I’m seeing blue now as I did when I was a babe exploring the world and came upon a blue ball or looked up at the sky. Invested in my perception of the blue of the glass vase is a lifetime of experiences: the sky on a clear day, blue jays in an elm tree, blueberries for breakfast, a blue lake in a picture book (I grew up in Southeastern Colorado, which is dry chaparral country, so my lake exposure was mostly imaginary).



Now, I don’t remember that any of these experiences affected me very much at the time. I was not a vision-centered child; I didn’t like to paint or draw (and was lousy at it). Yet I’ve made countless associations with the color blue over the decades, some of them emotionally laden, and these are what I experience, in condensed form, when this morning, with newly minted sight, I view my familiar surroundings and am moved by the color to which I’ve abruptly become more sensitive.

Color is the strangest quality – held in the mind of the beholder but also resident on the surface of the object. But wherever it may be located, I don’t know that there is any such thing as simply seeing blue – having the sensation itself, unadorned and unaffiliated with everything else that’s happened to us and that we’ve made happen. What I see, down to the last drop, may just reflect my own life story, bound up I suppose with the evolutionary story of life forms that, eons ago, began to respond to, then to actually perceive, a colorful world.

Vision may be thought of as more self-sufficient than that – even as a source of direct and immediate access to reality; profound truths are often represented as “seen” rather than “understood.” This cataract operation reminds me, though, that our sense of sight is very much a biophysical affair, dependent on light rays, a lens, a retina, etc. It’s a social and historical affair as well. In his 1844 manuscripts, the young Karl Marx notes that “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.” Not everything that the great advocate for working people conceived is correct, many of us would say today. But sometimes he comes up with an insight that remains as illuminating now as it may have seemed to its author at the time he was exploring how profoundly history is written into nature.