

Last week I handed myself over to a medical team at Kaiser-Oakland that did a cataract surgery on my left eye. My symptom? I couldn't see clearly out of that eye, and no eye-glass prescription was sufficient any longer to fix the problem. Then a doctor at Kaiser told me: there's clouding in the lens of your eye that's been building up for many years; cataract surgery will replace that lens with another, thereby repairing your vision.

One day after the operation, upon removing the temporary eye-patch that I had been wearing, I discovered that not only was my vision in the left eye corrected, but I was able to see blue as never before in all my years (within memory) of viewing the world around me! Turns out that an eye cataract typically adds yellow to the visual field, and the surgery corrects that.

The contrast with my vision before the surgery is especially striking because the world around me, when I view it only out of my right eye, still has a yellow cast. My right eye still has a cataract in its lens, which I'll have removed by the same kind of operation later this month. Before the surgery, with both eyes affected by cataracts, it had been as if I were unknowingly wearing a pair of sunglasses that painted everything with a veneer of yellow. Now, when I close the right eye and view the world only through the born-again left one, I see an amazing range of blues that had been obscured by the cataract.

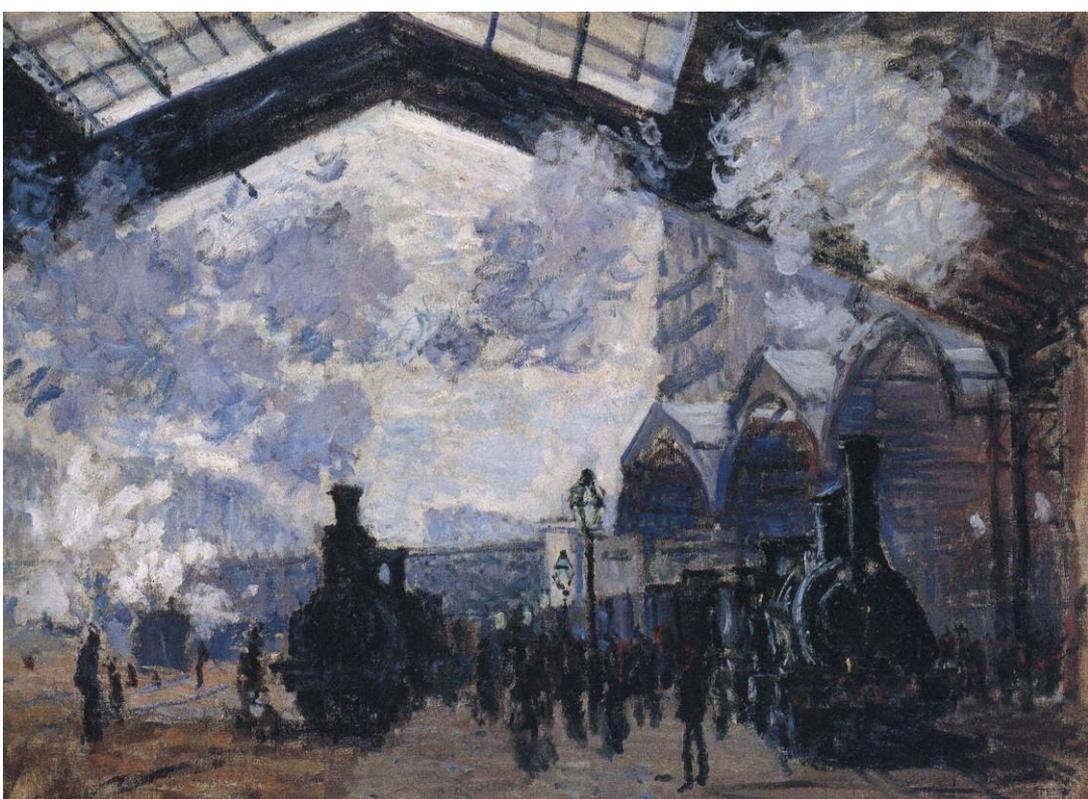
There's a bower of blue-violet flowers above the gate just outside my house, and it's astonishing to let my eyes fall upon it. And when I see a shadow now, I often notice that it carries just the slightest sheen of blue. I'm reminded of what the 19th-century French impressionists did with shadows, although 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.

Can I describe my new color experience? The blue of the glass vase sitting over there on the table strikes me as ... I want to say "sublime" or "transcendent," although such esoteric vocabulary feels foreign to the possessor of the eyes in question. My reborn eye seems to be taking me back in time – but how far back? I feel like exclaiming, "All the way back! Through an eye from which the scales have fallen, I'm now seeing the world as if I were a child on the first day of Creation." By removing an obstacle (the cataract in the lens), this operation appears to have re-opened an original optical pathway, recreating in me a raw sensation of "true" color, 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 on a clear day. Here's my take on what has happened: When I see the blue glass vase in front of me, there lies invested in that blue a lifetime of experiences. I recall only a few early ones: the sky on a clear day, blue jays in an elm tree in the park, blueberries for breakfast, a blue lake in a picture book (I grew up in Southeastern Colorado, which is dry chaparral country, so I didn't have any first-hand lake or ocean experience).



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). But I suppose I've inadvertently made countless associations with the color blue over the decades – some of them emotionally laden in ways that I have yet to understand – and these are what I experience, in condensed form, when this morning, with newly minted sight in one eye, I view my familiar surroundings and am moved by the color to which I've abruptly become more sensitive.

Is there 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? My visual experience, 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.

A cataract operation reminds me that vision is very much a biophysical affair, dependent on light rays, a lens, a retina, etc. But it's a social and historical affair as well. In his 1844 manuscripts, the young Karl Marx remarks 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 was correct, many of us acknowledge 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.