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THE
NEW YORKER

SECOND SIGHT

By Teju Cole, June 12, 2017



Saint Moritz

Movement in the peripheral vision is easy to observe. Even when you fixate on a central static point, that peripheral observation continues. However, if the peripheral stimulus is regular, it soon fades away, and becomes invisible. The effect, known as Troxler's fading, is easy to demonstrate. It is so named for its discoverer, Ignaz Paul Troxler, born in Switzerland in 1780. Let us say that Troxler's fading has consequences, by analogy, for political thought. Movement in the margins is not enough. Regularity becomes invisible. You switch up the moves, you introduce irregularity, in order to maintain visibility.

Troxler was a politician in addition to being a physician and a neuropsychologist. He played a leading role in the Swiss adoption of a more liberal constitution in 1848, a constitution deeply influenced by the American one and its language of equal rights.

The neurons in the visual system adapt to the stimulus, and redirect their attention.

Lagos

I was around fifteen. I had myself been wearing glasses for many years. But perhaps I thought my problem was less urgent because it was less severe. The kid had Coke-bottle glasses on. He was on the edge of blindness. This was at a time when God had been moving through me, saving souls with my preaching gift, raising up a band of faithful fellow-students. I told him to take the glasses off. I placed a thumb on each closed eyelid. "Open your eyes. Look in the distance. What do you see?" He squinted. "It's blurry." He put the glasses back on. I explained to him that without absolute faith there would be no healing. "Do you believe that you can be healed?" "I believe." "Then be healed in the name of Christ. Take off your glasses." He took them off and blinked. "Do you see now?" He was wary of disappointing me. "I'm sorry . . . it's still blurry." He walked away, puzzled, though there was no puzzle there, really, beyond his lack of faith.

São Paulo

Years later, I lost faith. One form of binocular vision gave way to another. The world was now a series of interleaved apparitions. The thing was an image that could also bear an image. If one of the advantages of irreligion was an acceptance of others, that benefit was strangely echoed in the visual plane, which granted the things seen within the photographic rectangle a radical equality. This in part was why signs, pictures, ads, and murals came to mean so much: they were neither more nor less than the “real” elements by which they were framed. They were not to be excluded, nor were the spaces between things. “We see the world”: this simple statement becomes (Merleau-Ponty has also noted this) a tangled tree of meanings. Which world? See how? We who? Once absolute faith is no longer possible, perception moves forward on a case-by-case basis. The very contingency and brevity of vision become the long-sought miracle.

Brooklyn

The stage is set. Things seem to be prepared in advance for cameos, and even the sun is rigged like the expert lighting of a technician. The boundary between things and props is now dissolved, and the images of things have become things themselves. Perhaps the artificer’s gold paint is still wet on such scenes in which we play at kings. Wandering around, I find this theatricality of city life especially visible at the edges. The sleeping docks, the decrepit industries, the disused railroads: at such places, the city is shorn of all superfluity and reduced to its essentials, as in a play by Beckett. Flutes! Drums! Let the players in.

Brienzersee

I opened my eyes. What lay before me looked like the sound of the alhorn at the beginning of the final movement of Brahms’s First Symphony. This was the sound, this was the sound I saw.

New York City

The Greek fleet was ready for war, but there were no winds, and they could not set sail. Why were there no winds? The goddess Artemis’ anger was turned against them. Agamemnon had killed a doe sacred to her, in her sacred grove in Aulis. There would be no winds, and no sailing, and no war, and no destruction of Troy, until she had her satisfaction. Agamemnon agreed to give away his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis as a sacrifice. (Men are always giving women away.) In the scene the great painter Timanthes painted of Iphigenia’s departure, Calchas was sorrowful, Odysseus was more sorrowful, and Menelaos was overcome with sorrow, all of which Timanthes portrayed with stunning accuracy. But the father Agamemnon’s grief was greatest of all, a shattering extreme of grief, and Timanthes could not, or would not, go beyond the limit of what he had already shown. And so he depicted Agamemnon without depicting him: turned away, with a veil over his head.

London

The body has to adjust to the environment, to the challenges in the environment. The body isn’t wrong, isn’t “disabled.” The environment itself—gravity, air, solidity or the lack of it, et cetera—is what is somehow wrong: ill-matched to the body’s abilities, inimical to its verticality, stability, or mobility.

She said her husband had said their infant daughter, whose mind is conventional but whose limbs struggle to accomplish their given tasks on earth, is, in this sense, like an astronaut: far away from home, coping.

Rivaz

If you walk along the northern lip of Lac Léman, between Montreux and Lausanne, you will see before you the lake’s flat shine all across to Évian-les-Bains, in France.

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On steep slopes you wend your way past the wine-growing villages of Corseaux, Saint-Saphorin, Rivaz, and Chexbres, feeling in your legs the pleasure of a long walk along narrow old roads, some of which have new surfaces. We are a small group, we walk in solitude. There are people working in the vineyards. In one grove, a man harvests by hand, onerous-looking work. Farther along, in about half an hour, we will taste the white wines of Lavaux. Our mouths will be explored by the nectar of the landscape we have crossed. For now, below us are brown-roofed hamlets, and a pair of twin boys, around ten years old, come laughing up the road. "Do you live here?" "We have always lived here!" "Do you like it?" "We love it!" Their answers are in unison.

I rest at a concrete outcrop with a bunting of vintners' blue nets, a blue the same color as the lake. It is as though something long awaited has come to fruition. A gust of wind sweeps in from across the lake. The curtain shifts, and suddenly everything can be seen. The scales fall from our eyes. The landscape opens. No longer are we alone: they are with us now, have been all along, all our living and all our dead.