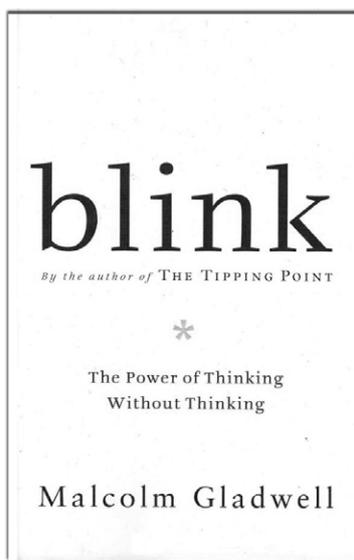


Could have been shorter

Matt Cottrell reviews
*Blink: The Power of
 Thinking Without Thinking*
 By Malcolm Gladwell
 (Brown Little, 2005
 288 pages)

'If each man's perception of the world is truth, then any man is as wise as the gods, yet no wiser than a fool.'

Plato



seems.

The Müller-Lyer illusion is not of mere experimental interest—it can be applied to many life experiences. What we see is not always the truth. Take two judges, a Russian and a Canadian, judging a sporting event such as gymnastics. When we see strong disagreement, is it because the Russian judge is cheating, or is it a matter of honest subjective difference? It is impossible for both judges to be sitting in exactly the same spot, so both are viewing something slightly different from the other. Then we must take into account the previously mentioned factors—memory, expectation and bias.

Our past experiences (memories) play an important role in what we see. The Russian judge may have watched the gymnast perform before and brings his preconceived judgements about how she will perform. The Russian judge enjoyed the previous performance and thus automatically judges the gymnast through positive eyes. This in turn creates bias in what the Russian judge sees, altering the perception of the routine.

Overall, the general impression of the Russian judge is positive and a good score is given, but why did the Canadian judge score so low? Was it because she was there the night the gymnast slammed face-first into the pommel horse? Can we make snap judgements? Sure. But it is less sure that our judgements will be accurate.

Gladwell uses a myriad of engaging anecdotes to highlight how snap judgements are made, and where they can go wrong. But is it the accuracy of snap judgements or sheer luck that people make the right decision? Gladwell relays the story of the casting call for the movie *Splash*, in which the producer first met Tom Hanks and 'in that first instance knew Hanks was special'. Was this more about the producer's

Illusions aside, perception of the world around us is a subjective experience, with memories, expectations and bias fuelling the way we analyse the millions of stimuli we experience each day. Every second, our body interprets information flooding the five senses, and generates opinions of them based on previous experience as chemical signals are translated into electrical impulses. But despite the complexity in interpreting the environment, Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* proposes that we can discern the truth in the blink of an eye; that being fully informed is a needless waste of time and energy.

Gladwell presents an engaging array of stories aimed at overwhelming the reader under the theory that more is better. The irony is clearly evident as he attempts to argue that decisions can be distilled in the "blink of an eye", through *thin-slicing*, a technique which narrows down the factors necessary to making a correct decision.

Gladwell wows the reader with

tales of a retired Marine Corp. Lieutenant General beating the entire US army in war games using only instincts, and intrigues them with details about predicting marriages from psychologist John Gottman's 'Love Lab'. He scares the reader with a tale of a black peddler being gunned down after police mistook his wallet for a gun, and confuses them with exceptions such as the 'Warren Harding' error.

The practical application of the propositions in *Blink* would do away with scientific accountability and rock its foundations. Gladwell ignores individual difference and considers the human mind a constant.

It is true that every person possesses *coup d'oeil*, an ability to see things and make sense at a glance. However, do we all perceive the same target and therefore make the *right* sense of what we see? The Müller-Lyer illusion is a common perceptual illusion involving two parallel lines of equal lengths, but one with lines on the end angling out and one with lines angling in. This creates the sense that the line with the ends angling out is longer than the other, when in fact they are the same length. This simple illustration underlines how the world is not always as it

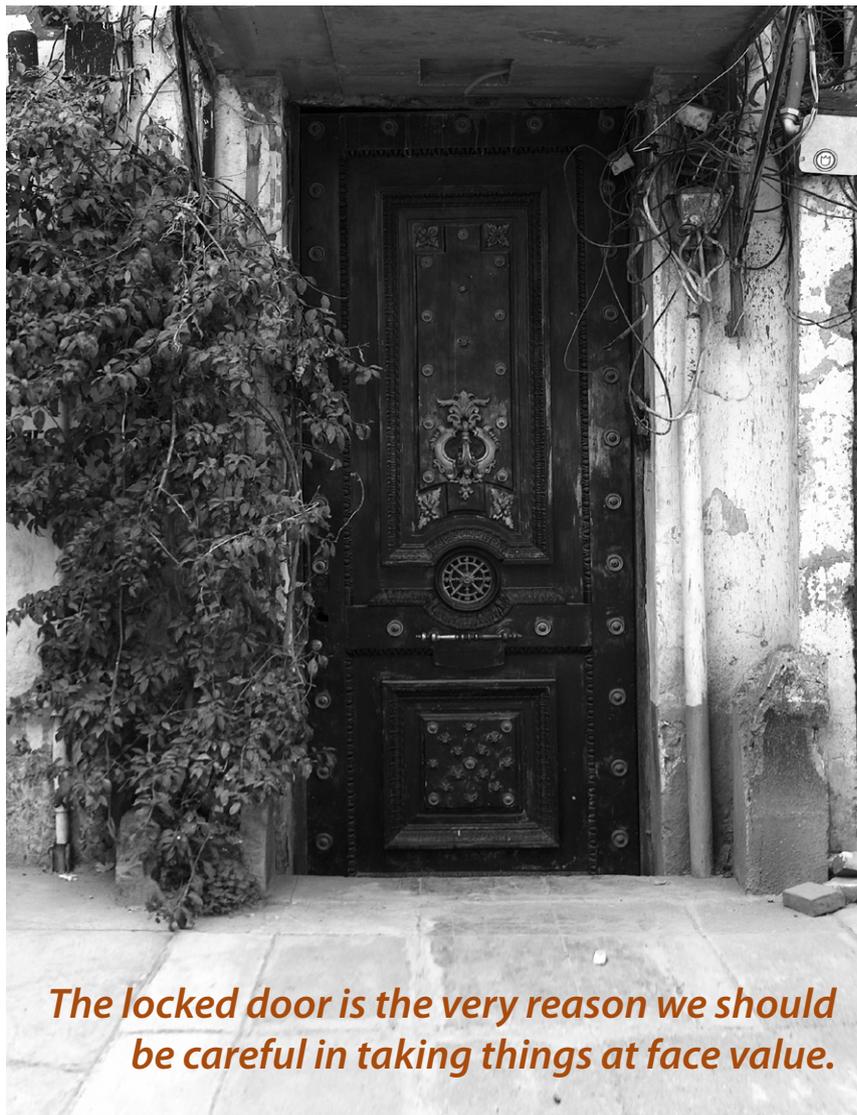
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ability to judge based on his first impression or more about the luck that someone of exceptional talent such as Tom Hanks would walk into the casting room? If this was the way business was conducted, legal issues resolved and medical decisions made, the lack of accountability would cause chaos.

Gladwell endorses this lack of accountability, outlining the neurobiological findings surrounding how the unconscious works. The 'Locked Door' as he calls it, prevents the individual in some cases from consciously knowing why they think something, why they have a hunch and why their instincts lead them in a certain direction. But this locked door is the very reason we should be careful in taking things at face value. Aren't those memories, expectations and biases also locked behind that door, influencing the decision that is made?

Imagine a courtroom in which a man is standing trial over the murder of his boss. A colleague of the accused takes the stand and says that he has a hunch—a *very strong* hunch—that the defendant killed his boss, based on snippets of conversation he overheard during the last two weeks around the water-cooler. The colleague had, as Gladwell says, thin-sliced, that is, removed those things he deemed unnecessary in the conversation and kept those that were. When asked to explain why he feels this, or what influenced his decision, he cannot answer, the information is behind the locked door, and the defendant is sentenced to life based on the 'thin-slicing' done by his colleague.

Not only have individual biases been eliminated in this scenario but it allows unsubstantiated hearsay and gut-feeling determine the rest of another individual's life. The colleague may have been influenced by a conversation he had with the accused, or an unconscious memory based on something he was told about the accused which itself may not have been accurate. If we were to adopt a world in which snap decisions were taken more seriously,



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accountability for the thoughts and ideas would be stripped away, leaving a chaotic world in which unjustified statements influence outcomes.

Mergers and acquisitions made on the first impression an executive gained from the operation of the company. Surgeons making decisions about an individual's diagnosis based on a two-minute consultation. The world has so many variables, so much nuance and so many uncontrollable factors, relying on your gut does not always work. It is true that impressions can be made in the blink of an eye, but do we really know about how accurately they are processed?

Blink is a synthesis of some of the most recent ground-breaking research

in the field of unconscious processing. Gladwell successfully highlights the power of the human mind and outlines how the individual can harness this to bolster decision-making power.

Many of the proposed applications, however, disregard the need for accountability and subvert scientific method. The individual is individual, each of us with our own needs and wants, influencing every sense we feel and decision we make. The accuracy of snap decisions must be taken with caution.

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