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TOK Graded Writing Assignment No. 3

1. *Perception*: “Seeing conditions what we believe; believing conditions what we see.” Discuss.

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I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this work. –Shirin
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1. Perception: “Seeing conditions what we believe; believing conditions what we see.”
Discuss.

Often one hears the phrase “I wouldn’t have *believed* it if I hadn’t *seen* it with my own eyes.” In fact, this type of automatic connection between believing and seeing has become so prevalent that many people are willing to refuse a certain reality until they see it for themselves; seeing has become believing. But, is it really seeing that conditions believing, or is it vice versa? Must one *believe* the tangibility of something in order to see it, or does the tangibility of something make it believable? A person’s beliefs, I believe, dictate what he or she is able to see. As such, the eyes cease to be the “organs of sight” (Panchatantra) and instead it is the combination of the brain, the heart and its emotions, and knowledge that allow one to see.

One’s emotions and past experiences, among other subjective factors, condition one’s belief, which in turn affects one’s knowledge, and therefore one’s beliefs. Therefore, the heart influences the brain, which influences the eyes in allowing them to see what it thinks is appropriate to be seen. Let’s take the movie *Signs*, by M. Night Shyamalan, as an example. In this movie, the main character—who is a former priest—and his family observe a series of bizarre events, starting with the discovery of a crop circle in the middle of their cornfield in rural Pennsylvania. The situation gets even more peculiar when the priest’s young daughter enters her father’s room one night to inform him that there is a “monster” outside her window. In an investigation to comfort his daughter, the father sees the “monster” outside his daughter’s window. Though a series of other crop circles all around the world had led a majority of the people to *believe* that aliens were upon us—and thereby prepared the people of earth for *seeing* these extraterrestrials—the father refused to believe the existence of extraterrestrials and therefore believed that what

he saw outside his daughter's bedroom window was the environs' prankster. After all, it was easier to accept the joking nature of a few neighborhood kids than admit the possibility of an insecure future and an existence that is yet to be understood, which caused a great deal of fear and confusion for many people. As such, by *not believing* a reality, the father *did not* see what was really there to be seen: the horrifying truth of an existence beyond our imagination, an existence threatening our own. His beliefs and fears, therefore, limited what he was prepared to see.

But *why* do one's beliefs affect, or rather condition, what one *sees*? The answer can be found in the nature of the human brain, the knowledge therein contained, and its reactions to certain things that the heart feels. The human brain dictates how other organs and systems of the body should react to certain circumstances. For example, when one is cold, homeostasis—led by the brain—dictates the shivering of the body to keep it warm through movement and prevent possible death. It is also the nature of the human brain to want to know everything; a fear of the unknown combined with a desire to see all, lead the brain to fill in the fragments of the mysterious focus under study to satisfy its own speculative character. In the same manner, when the brain sees something that it has little prior knowledge of, it perceives it as something else, perhaps something more fearful than what there really is to be seen. For example, the young child who is afraid of the monster in his room turns on the lights to see that what he perceived as a voracious monster a few moments ago is nothing more than his own bath towel that he threw on his chair right before going to bed. By believing in the existence of monsters, therefore, the child sees them in his room, though they do not really exist. As such, beliefs are capable

of playing tricks on the brain, leading it to percept things other than the reality through the eyes.

The nature of the relationship between believing and seeing is an important aspect of art, especially a special type of art known as *Trompe l'Oeil*, in which the artist intentionally attempts to fool the eye of the observer. Because believing dictates what one sees, many pieces of *Trompe l'Oeil* art rely on tricking the brain into believing that it sees something other than what is really there. For example, in the *Ghost Clock*, a wooden statue made entirely of one piece of wood, the observer is fooled into believing that the clock is covered with a white sheet and therefore sees a soft, delicate, and clean white sheet covering a wooden grandfather clock. Only through a closer examination does it become clear that the sheet is nothing more than delicately carved hard mahogany and is in fact a part of the same clock, only bleached.

The influence of believing on seeing is not only significant in the world of art, but also in the word of history, particularly in the areas of archaeology and anthropology. When the archaeologist discovers a strange piece he observes it carefully and draws certain conclusions. Just as the observer seeing the *Ghost Clock* may at first glance see a sheet covering the clock because he believes a sheet is there, the archaeologist may perceive the unearthed piece to be something than what it really is because he believes to be so. Such was the case in the discovery of Lucy in the world of anthropology, more specifically physical anthropology. When the remains of Lucy were discovered in Africa in the 1970s, some anthropologists were baffled and their lack of knowledge led them to comfort themselves by believing that what they saw was no proof that humanity was a

result of evolution, and that the remains of Lucy were that of an ape, because the reality frightened them, just as the reality of a round earth frightened Columbus' Spain.

Perhaps it can be argued that seeing conditions what we believe; this argument will be backed up by those who claim that they would not "have believed it if [they] hadn't seen it with [their] own eyes," the group introduced at the opening of this paper. These are the same people that would only believe the existence of such inexplicable entities as God only if they saw a sign. But how can they explain the young child who sees monsters in his room? The monsters don't really exist, yet he sees them there. Just because he sees them, does that mean they really exist or that he should believe their existence? No. Therefore, to argue that seeing is believing is erroneous.

The impediment of seeing what is really there to be seen is "indeed a task to be accomplished and a problem to be solved...[because] it is an active inquiry and not passive reception" as explained by Reuben Abel. Therefore, since perception—in this case seeing—is an active inquiry, the brain will automatically involve certain beliefs, emotions, and archival data in assessing what is being observed as determining the nature of the focus of study. Abel goes on to say "the influence of belief...on perception is so striking that one might almost say, not that seeing is believing, but rather that believing is seeing. ...What people report about their own afterimage depends on what they are told to expect." The influence of belief on visual perception is so striking that when one is told that, for example, that a cloud looks like a rabbit, he or she will see a rabbit where he or she had not seen it before. Therefore, believing conditions what one sees. But even more interesting is the fact that "our five senses...are usually held to be the foundation of all our knowledge of the world" (John Tomkinson). This claim combined with the fact

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that our perceptions are imperfect make me wonder: what is the world around me *really*
like?

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- Abel, Reuben. "The Task of Perception." *Man is the Measure*. New York; Free Press, 1976.
- Tomkinson, John L. "Chapter 3: sense Experience." *The Enterprise of Knowledge*. Leader Books; Athens.
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Appendix 1:



Wendell Castle's Ghost Clock

Appendix 2:



Lucy's remains