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Technology beats the eye on Manning play

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Once again, the naked eye has been dressed down by modern technology in sports. Anyone who thinks he saw quarterback Eli Manning beyond the line of scrimmage, when Manning threw that third-quarter pass that tipped Sunday night's game in the Giants' favor, officially doesn't really know what he saw.

Updated, sophisticated slow-motion replay served to convince observers -- or, at least, the NFL authorities who reviewed the incident -- that Manning in fact had not proceeded beyond Philadelphia's 20-yard line before releasing the ball.

Applying the league's letter of the law, and using that computer-generated red line to mark the line of scrimmage, plus enhanced stop-action, evidence was produced to reveal that, while Manning's head, neck, shoulders, arm, upper body, hips and legs all were across the 20, the cleat on the heel of his trailing foot still intersected with the plane of the scrimmage line.

So what had unfolded in real time, witnessed by thousands of human eyeballs, was reduced to an apparent illusionist trick.

"I saw that play on ESPN," said Dr. Kevin Gee, University of Houston optometrist and founder of the Sports Vision Performance Center at the school. "And, yes, we're going to be talking about this sort of thing for a long time, because we really have come to the point where technology can replace the human eye, as far as judgment goes."

It was one thing for broadcaster Jack Buck, startled by the hobbled Kirk Gibson's unlikely winning home run in the 1988 World Series, to holler his famous, "I don't believe what I just saw!" That was based on the jolting drama of surprise.

The bottom line in the Manning play, though, signals how we already have entered the next generation of sight -- way beyond 20/20 -- that is on the verge of redefining reality.

"When you don't slow down," Gee said, "you have the aspect of dynamic acuity, where you have to watch something in motion and you have a cognitive decision to make: Is the ball fair or foul, or is he in front of the line of scrimmage or not? That's a cognitive process. Is the eye able to see it, and then is the brain able to process it?

"But now that I can stop it for you, and show it to you in segmented milliseconds, is the brain able to spit that back out accurately?"

What, in fact, is accurate? What is real?

"That's a good question," Gee said.

Next month will mark the 45th anniversary of instant replay's first use, when an entirely different challenge of believing one's own eyes was tested during coverage of the Army-Navy football game, prompting TV play-by-play man Lindsey Nelson to shout: "This is not live! Army did not score again!"

From those simple days, when spectators could derive some satisfaction in comparing their eyesight to their perceived blindness or corruptness of game officials, we now are employing cutting-edge science to split some very fine visual hairs.

"There's going to be push-back in sports," Gee said, "to the tradition of human beings making the decision versus robotics. We've made it this far in sports without this type of technology, and I do think we probably should embrace the opportunity to take sports to a more accurate level.

"But now we've come to a different age of technology and we might want to revisit the rules, because you can get down to the blade of grass on the edge of the cleat from last night."

Are we going to believe all of the "upon further review"? Or our lying eyes?