

Contextual signals in visual cortex

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Highlights

- Visual perception is dependent on intentions, expectations and actions
- Recent work has uncovered novel circuits influencing visual processing
- Understanding these circuits gives insights into cortical function and flexibility

Abstract

Vision is an active process. What we perceive strongly depends on our actions, intentions and expectations. During visual processing, these internal signals therefore need to be integrated with the visual information from the retina. The mechanisms of how this is achieved by the visual system are still poorly understood. Advances in recording and manipulating neuronal activity in specific cell types and axonal projections together with tools for circuit tracing are beginning to shed light on the neuronal circuit mechanisms of how internal, contextual signals shape sensory representations. Here we review recent work, primarily in mice, that has advanced our understanding of these processes, focusing on contextual signals related to locomotion, behavioural relevance and predictions.

1 **Introduction**

2 The classical model of information processing in the brain is based on a hierarchical
3 organization of feedforward connections from one brain region to the next. In the visual system,
4 information from the retina is relayed via the dorsolateral geniculate nucleus (dLGN) in the
5 thalamus to the primary visual cortex (V1), and from there through a hierarchy of increasingly
6 higher-order cortical areas [1]. In this hierarchical model, visual cortex neurons are mainly seen
7 as feature detectors that signal the presence of a specific visual stimulus in the environment,
8 while feedback connections have a minor, modulatory influence. This view remains a
9 cornerstone of our understanding of visual processing.

10 However, we understand only a small fraction of activity even in V1 [2], and many aspects of
11 visual responses cannot be predicted by feedforward models [3]. This is not surprising given
12 that less than 10 % of synapses received by cortical neurons stem from feedforward projections
13 [4]. It is now well established that in behaving animals, visual responses can be strongly
14 influenced by contextual cues, such as visual scene context, attention, self-movement, task
15 requirements, spatial location and expectations [5–11]. Visual processing therefore is likely to
16 be an active process, involving internal models of the world and dependent on the behavioural
17 and perceptual needs of the animal.

18 At the circuit level, contextual influences are thought to be conveyed via top-down projections
19 from higher brain areas, intra-areal horizontal connections or neuromodulatory inputs.
20 However, circuit mechanisms of contextual modulation have often been difficult to identify,
21 and hence our understanding of the sources of specific contextual signals and how they are
22 integrated with feedforward sensory information is still very limited. Advances in genetic tools
23 for labelling specific cell types and circuits, and monitoring or manipulating their activity in
24 behaving rodents are beginning to advance our understanding of how contextual and visual
25 signals are combined during active vision. This review focuses on a few specific areas which
26 have witnessed particularly interesting developments in recent years: contextual signals related
27 to locomotion, behavioural relevance and predictions.

28 **Effects of locomotion on visual cortex activity**

29 Behavioural state has a strong influence on cortical processing [12,13]. For instance, visual
30 responses in V1 are stronger, more reliable, and less correlated when mice walk or run
31 compared to when they are quietly resting [14–16]. These effects show similarities to
32 modulation of responses by arousal or attention [17–20,9]. Locomotion-related response
33 modulation in visual cortex is thought to be at least partly conveyed by cholinergic input from
34 the basal forebrain, which is activated by projections from the mesencephalic locomotor region
35 during running [21,22] (Figure 1). The cholinergic signals have been shown to strongly act on
36 vasoactive intestinal peptide (VIP) expressing inhibitory interneurons [21]. These inhibit
37 somatostatin (SOM) expressing interneurons, which can lead to disinhibition and thus
38 increased activity of excitatory pyramidal neurons. This disinhibitory motif involving VIP and
39 SOM cells was also found in other cortical areas [23–25] and could provide a more general

40 mechanism for state-dependent gain modulation [26]. However, other studies found that SOM
41 cells were activated rather than suppressed by locomotion when animals were exposed to light
42 or visual stimuli [27–29]. These seemingly disparate findings recently could be reconciled by
43 a cortical circuit model that included interactions between multiple inhibitory cell types [30].
44 The opposite sign of SOM cell responses during locomotion in different visual contexts
45 emerges from the dynamics of the model due to the change in input drive in the presence or
46 absence of visual input.

47 Neuromodulation by cholinergic and noradrenergic signalling [19,21,27] likely contributes to
48 locomotion-related activity changes in cortex, probably due to increased arousal during
49 locomotion [22] (but see [31]). However, some locomotion-related signals in visual cortex are
50 inconsistent with unspecific gain modulation, but instead provide specific information about
51 self-motion. Pyramidal cells in V1 are active during running in the dark and their firing is
52 modulated by running speed [16,29,32,33]. These motor signals could be inherited from the
53 visual thalamus where locomotor-related activity has been observed both in the dLGN as well
54 as in the higher-order pulvinar complex [16,34]. In addition, anterior cingulate and
55 neighbouring secondary motor cortex (ACC/M2) convey strong motor signals to V1. These
56 projections specifically activate running-modulated V1 cells and silencing ACC/M2 decreases
57 locomotion-triggered V1 responses [35]. Such motor signals could represent an efference copy
58 that informs visual processing of the animal's self-motion (see below).

59 Locomotion has further effects on visual responses in V1, including decreased surround
60 suppression and increased spatial sensitivity [16,36,37]. Together, the described changes might
61 adapt visual processing to the needs of an animal moving through its environment.

62 **Learning the behavioural relevance of visual stimuli**

63 When a sensory stimulus becomes behaviourally relevant, its representation in sensory cortical
64 networks is enhanced, including expanded cortical representations, increased or more reliable
65 and selective responses, changes in stimulus tuning and decreased response correlations. Many
66 of these changes are already visible at the earliest stages of cortical processing. Repetitive
67 practice in a perceptual task can further improve sensory responses. These can facilitate the
68 read-out and interpretation of sensory signals relevant to the task to better inform behavioural
69 decisions, and may even directly couple to behavioural output through projections to the
70 striatum [38]. Previous reviews have comprehensively covered the effects of behavioural
71 stimulus relevance and learning on visual cortical areas, focusing on various contributing
72 factors, including perceptual learning, different forms of attention, reward expectation, and
73 flexible circuit adaptations to the requirements of a task [8,9,39–41]. Here we focus on recent
74 studies that have started to elucidate the circuit mechanisms of learning-related changes in
75 visual circuits as well as the role of top-down signals from higher brain areas.

76 Two-photon imaging of genetically-encoded calcium indicators enables tracking the neuronal
77 responses of identified neurons over the time-course of learning [42]. Using this method, Poort
78 et al found that when mice learned a visual discrimination task, V1 population responses

79 become increasingly better at discriminating the task-relevant stimuli. This improvement in
80 stimulus encoding resulted from an increase in the number of selective neurons and greater
81 day-to-day stability of selective responses [43]. Visual response selectivity decreased when
82 trained mice engaged in a non-visual task, but was still higher than before learning, even under
83 anaesthesia. This suggests that learning the behavioural relevance of sensory stimuli engages
84 task-dependent top-down influences which act in concert with more permanent circuit
85 modifications in V1 [43,44]. Local circuit changes in V1 are associated with increased stimulus
86 selectivity of parvalbumin-expressing interneurons [45], which thereby provide more selective
87 inhibition during processing of behaviourally relevant stimuli.

88 Top-down inputs potentially contribute to learning-induced neural response changes in several
89 ways. Learning can change the strength and/or nature of signals conveyed to visual cortex from
90 specific higher brain areas. For instance, axonal projections in V1 from retrosplenial cortex
91 increase their activity as mice learn to react to a visual input in order to escape an aversive
92 stimulus, thereby altering visual responses of layer 2/3 cells [46]. Anterior cingulate cortex
93 (ACC) is another major source of long-range input to V1 [47], and has been shown to convey
94 task-dependent, contextual signals during visually-guided behaviour [10,35]. Moreover,
95 optogenetic activation of ACC enhances V1 responses and improves behavioural performance
96 in a visual discrimination task [47]. Changes in top-down influences also likely underlie the
97 emergence of stimulus anticipation and behavioural-choice related signals in subsets of V1
98 neurons during visual discrimination learning [43]. Interestingly, these signals develop
99 preferentially in cells with stronger responses to the rewarded compared to the non-rewarded
100 stimulus, suggesting that during learning top-down signals selectively target subsets of
101 functionally defined cells. Intriguingly, cortical top-down signals may not always exert their
102 effects directly, but might also act through the thalamus: a recent study indicates that prefrontal
103 cortex projections to the thalamic reticular nucleus modulate the gain of visual cortex responses
104 during cross-modal attention [48].

105 Top-down signals may also enable or gate learning-related plasticity in visual circuits. Top-
106 down projections often densely innervate layer 1, where they can depolarize apical dendrites
107 of pyramidal neurons, potentially facilitating the association of other long-range or local inputs
108 with bottom-up information (Figure 2). This has been shown to be the case in mouse
109 somatosensory cortex (S1), where higher order thalamic inputs evoke dendritic plateau
110 potentials which are crucial for whisker-evoked LTP [49]. Lesions of the pulvinar (the higher-
111 order visual thalamic nucleus) also lead to visual learning impairments [50] suggesting that
112 similar mechanisms may exist in the visual system. Enabling plasticity in the dendrites of
113 pyramidal cells might involve the release of inhibition from SOM interneurons, which have
114 been suggested to regulate learning-related changes in V1 and S1 [46,51,45]. The notion that
115 learning can be gated by top-down signals has been formalized in a biologically plausible
116 model of reinforcement learning [52,41]. In this model, synaptic tagging mediated by top-down
117 signals is followed by a global reinforcement signal which results in subsequent strengthening
118 of the tagged synapses. A likely candidate for the reinforcement signal is the neuromodulator
119 acetylcholine, which signals behavioural outcome or salience [53], modifies top-down

120 processing [54] and induces reward-related changes in V1 activity [55,56]. In addition, after
121 learning, general effects of task engagement or arousal on neuronal responses might also be
122 caused by cholinergic or noradrenergic neuromodulation [19,27,57,58].

123 **Predictive coding**

124 Through experience and learning, the brain builds internal models of the world around us.
125 These models continuously generate predictions about our environment which help to
126 interpret sensory information and thus shape perception, as apparent in various optical
127 illusions which play with our expectations about a visual stimulus [59] (Figure 3a,b). Hence,
128 visual processing is strongly influenced by internal models and expectations. The theoretical
129 framework of predictive coding [60–62] postulates that stimulus representation in sensory
130 cortical areas is mainly constructed from top-down prediction signals conveyed by higher-
131 order brain regions, while feed-forward information carries a so-called prediction error, the
132 difference between what is predicted and the actual sensory input (Figure 3c). This error or
133 mismatch signal is then used to update the model prediction. According to this theory, in a
134 sensory cortical area, one subset of neurons encodes the current ‘best guess’ of the stimulus
135 while another subset is dedicated to encoding how the actual sensory input deviates from
136 the predictions. The relative balance of top-down predictions and external drive may be
137 flexible, for instance, depending on the fidelity of sensory input, certainty of a prior
138 expectation, or other behavioural demands.

139 However, until recently direct neurophysiological evidence for this framework in cortical
140 processing has been very scarce (but see e.g.[63–67]). A series of recent studies have provided
141 strong evidence for predictive coding in neocortical circuits, including top-down prediction
142 signals, a circuit for cancelling out predictable sensory input, and prediction error signals in an
143 early sensory region. These studies mostly utilized locomotion of head-fixed mice on a
144 spherical treadmill in a virtual reality (VR) environment. Self-motion causes highly predictable
145 optic flow, and in a VR environment this visual feedback signal can be manipulated and
146 uncoupled from the locomotion of the animal to create visual input that deviates from what
147 would be expected from the animal’s movement. Keller and colleagues found that a subset of
148 neurons in V1 selectively responded to such mismatches between the predicted and actual optic
149 flow [68]. These error signals were specific to particular locations in visual space, resulting in
150 mismatch receptive fields [69]. Importantly, these mismatch responses only developed with
151 normal visuo-motor experience [70] and were therefore consistent with prediction error signals,
152 which require top-down predictions from learnt, internal models. A local circuit mechanism in
153 V1 may underlie such error signals resulting from optic flow that is absent or slower than
154 expected when animals are running: subsets of V1 neurons receive excitatory drive from an
155 efference copy input carrying information about the animal’s running speed, and are suppressed
156 by optic flow via SOM cell-mediated inhibition [70] (Figure 3c). In the absence of optic flow,
157 SOM cells are less active, inhibition is released, and the continuing optic flow prediction signal
158 therefore induces pyramidal cell firing giving rise to mismatch responses [70].

159 Where does the prediction signal arise? In a recent study, Leinweber et al. characterized motor-
160 related input to mouse V1 from area ACC/M2 that can provide the prediction of self-generated
161 visual feedback. As expected from the predictive coding framework, suppressing ACC/M2
162 input decreased visuomotor mismatch responses in V1 [35]. Moreover, inputs from ACC/M2

163 to V1 - as assessed by calcium imaging in axonal boutons - differed depending on the nature
164 of visuo-motor coupling: motor-related responses changed when mice were trained to navigate
165 through a 2D VR environment with left-right inverted optic flow: ACC/M2 signals now
166 reflected the newly learnt consequences of self-motion. Interestingly, this change occurred
167 despite the fact that mice experienced this reversed world for only an hour each day, and
168 responses reverted when trained mice ran without optic flow feedback or with optic flow
169 uncoupled from their movements. This top-down signal is thus highly dependent on visuomotor
170 experience, and presumably is able to flexibly update predictions about incoming sensory
171 information depending on the context and learned internal models of visuomotor coupling.

172 Visuomotor mismatch signals have also been found in the pulvinar, a higher-order visual area
173 in the thalamus which is thought to be important for visual attention and coordination of
174 information flow between cortical areas [71,34]. Pulvinar is highly interconnected with all
175 levels of the cortical visual processing hierarchy, and is well situated to balance top-down and
176 bottom-up influences. For instance, error-related signals from pulvinar to visual cortex could
177 control the gain of cortical error responses, thus increasing the saliency of novel or unexpected
178 visual signals [34,72].

179 Evidence that stimulus expectation strongly influences visual processing is not restricted to
180 sensorimotor interactions. As mice learn to navigate a VR corridor, some neurons in visual
181 cortex develop predictive responses to upcoming visual stimuli based on their spatial location
182 [43,10], and omission of expected visual stimuli or landmarks evokes strong activity in V1,
183 potentially reflecting prediction errors [10,73].

184 **Conclusions and Outlook**

185 It remains to be shown to what degree top-down predictions and other contextual signals
186 influence or even dominate visual cortex responses and sensory representations in general.
187 However, the reviewed studies, together with extensive previous literature, emphasize that
188 sensory processing is highly dynamic, allowing animals to flexibly access and process sensory
189 information according to their current perceptual and behavioural demands. The strong
190 influence of contextual information on sensory representations, even at the early stages of
191 sensory cortical processing, is not specific to rodents, but has also been demonstrated in
192 primates and humans [66,8,74–76,41]. However, contextual influences may vary substantially
193 across species depending on ethological relevance. For instance, eye-movement related signals
194 in visual cortex of the afoveate mouse [77] are only partially reminiscent of those observed in
195 primates [78].

196 This brief review highlights research that has begun dissecting the circuit mechanisms of how
197 specific top-down signals are integrated in visual cortex. However, under natural conditions in
198 the behaving animal, individual contextual signals will rarely occur in isolation, but instead
199 contribute to a rich barrage of contextual inputs from various sources. Future work will have
200 to elucidate how these diverse contexts are combined to inform sensory processing and
201 perception. This will require the refinement of existing theories (such as predictive coding)
202 along with further identification of the underlying circuit mechanisms, which likely involve
203 complex interactions between long-range projections with different inhibitory and excitatory

204 cell types. To complicate matters further, the role of a given cell class may itself be flexible:
205 VIP cells have been shown to both disinhibit or inhibit principal pyramidal neurons in different
206 contexts [21,26,47,79]. Moreover, different cortical layers might play distinct, complementary
207 roles for the integration of top down and bottom up information [61,80].

208 Finally, our knowledge of the sources of different contextual signals is still very limited. Top-
209 down signals are typically attributed to projections from higher cortical areas [81,8,82].
210 However, recent work has provided intriguing evidence for the importance of non-cortical
211 structures such as the superior colliculus, the cerebellum, and the basal ganglia in providing
212 contextual information about sensorimotor and internal variables [83–85]. Signals from
213 subcortical structures converge on diverse thalamic nuclei, which, rather than just relaying
214 information, likely integrate subcortical signals and dynamically interact with cortical
215 pathways [48,34,86,87]. We suggest that visual perception, rather than relying on the simple
216 summation of feedforward and top-down signals from different brain areas, might arise from
217 complex, reverberating cortico-cortical and cortico-subcortical loops. Future studies will be able
218 to prove or disprove this idea and shed further light on the mechanism of visual perception.

219 **Acknowledgments**

220 We thank Thomas Mrsic-Flogel for comments and feedback on this manuscript. This work was
221 supported by the European Research Council (SBH, HigherVision 337797, and an Ambizione
222 grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (AGK).

223 **Competing interests**

224 The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial interests

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** This study shows that mismatch signals in V1 – responses to deviations of actual from expected visual feedback during locomotion – are dependent on experience and do not develop if mice are reared with random optic flow feedback during locomotion. Further results indicate that these mismatch signals are driven by an excitatory efference copy signal and a transient release from inhibition mediated by somatostatin-positive interneurons.

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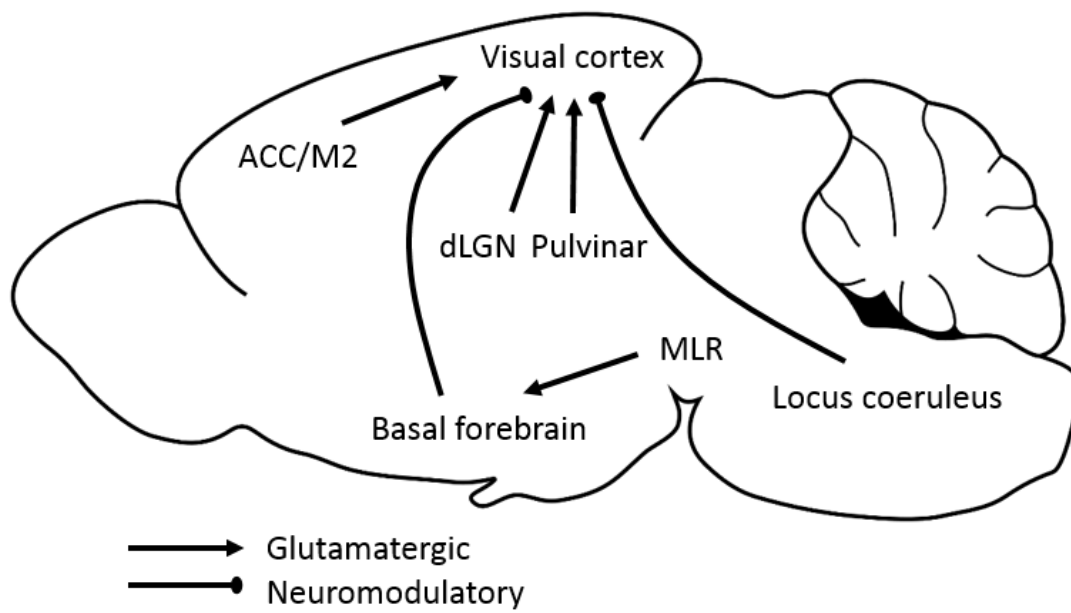


Figure 1

Schematic depicting the pathways conveying locomotion-related signals to V1. ACC/M2, anterior cingulate cortex and secondary motor cortex; dLGN, dorsolateral geniculate nucleus of the thalamus; MLR, mesencephalic locomotor region of the brainstem.

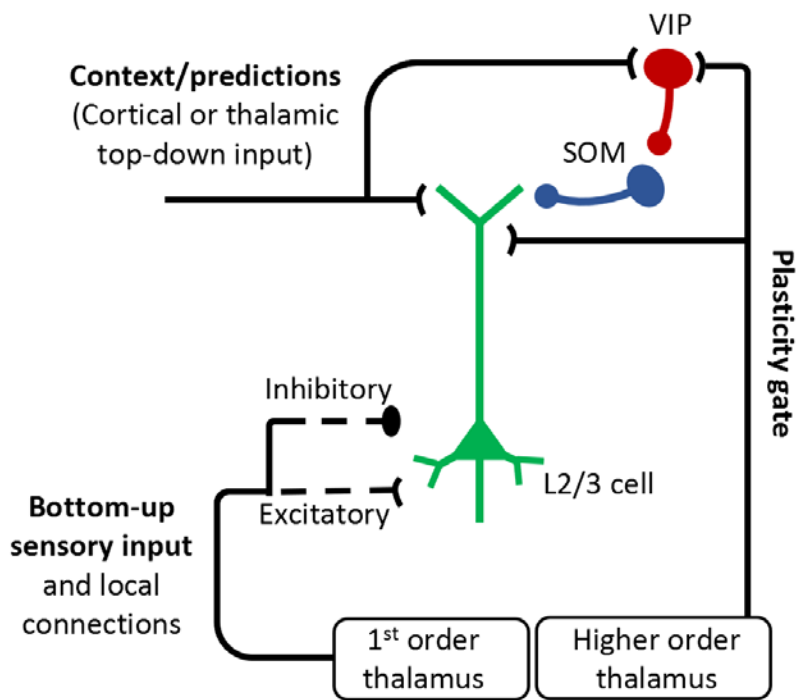


Figure 2

Schematic of a model in which input from higher-order thalamus gates plasticity in pyramidal neurons. Depolarization of pyramidal cell apical dendrites via this gating signal may enable either the association of top-down contextual and bottom-up sensory input, or allow potentiation of bottom-up or local connections. This potentially involves dendritic calcium spikes, facilitated by VIP-SOM interneuron-mediated disinhibition.

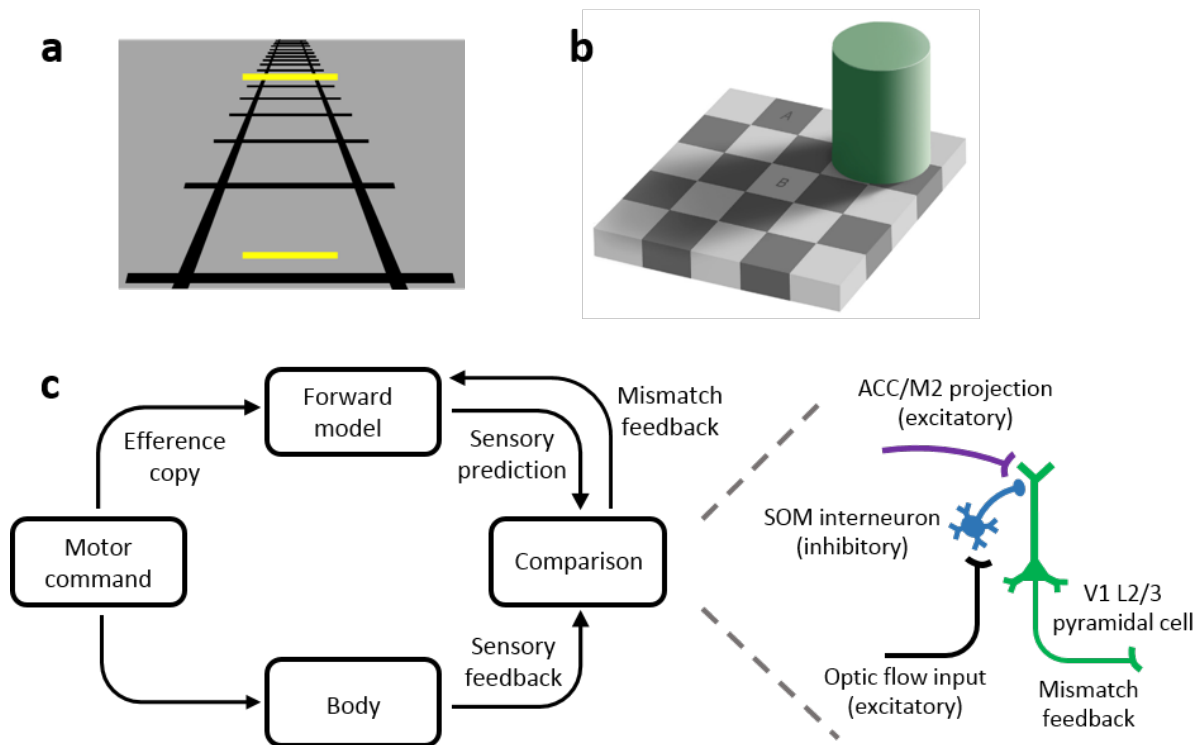


Figure 3

a, b) Visual illusions illustrating the powerful influence of expectation and internal models on visual perception. **a)** The yellow lines are the same length, but appear to be different, because of the image perspective and our expectation that objects that are further away appear smaller. **b)** The squares labeled A and B are of identical color, but appear different, because we take into account the darkening effect of the shadow when judging their brightness. **c)** Left, schematic depicting how internal models and predictions can inform sensorimotor processing. When a motor command is sent to the motor system, an efference copy of this command is used by a forward model to predict the sensory feedback that will result from the movement. This prediction and the true sensory input are compared, and if they do not match, a prediction error or mismatch signal can be fed back to the model to improve its predictions. Right, the circuit proposed by Keller and colleagues to compute a prediction error in layer 2/3 of V1, specifically for slower than expected or absent optic flow during locomotion. Top-down excitatory projections from ACC/M2 carry the running-related sensory predictions. Running-induced optical flow stimuli activate SOM interneurons which in turn inhibit L2/3 pyramidal cells, cancelling the excitation from the top-down predictions. If optical flow is absent during locomotion, SOM cell inhibition is removed evoking a mismatch response in a subset of pyramidal cells. Image in **b)**, Wikimedia Commons.