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DOI:

[10.1016/j.conb.2018.05.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2018.05.003)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Khan, A. G., & Hofer, S. B. (2018). Contextual signals in visual cortex: Systems Neuroscience. *CURRENT OPINION IN NEUROBIOLOGY*, 52, 131-138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2018.05.003>

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Contextual signals in visual cortex

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Highlights

- Visual processing can be strongly influenced by intentions, expectations or actions
- Recent work has uncovered novel top-down and modulatory circuits influencing vision
- Understanding these circuits gives insights into cortical function and flexibility

1 Abstract

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

11 **Introduction**

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

20 However, we understand only a small fraction of activity even in V1 [2], and many aspects of
21 visual responses cannot be predicted by feedforward models [3]. This is not surprising given
22 that less than 10 % of synapses received by cortical neurons stem from feedforward projections
23 [4]. It is now well established that in behaving animals, visual responses can be strongly
24 influenced by contextual cues, such as visual scene context, attention, self-movement, task
25 requirements, spatial location and expectations [5–11]. Visual processing therefore is likely to
26 be an active process, involving internal models of the world and dependent on the behavioural
27 and perceptual needs of the animal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

133 **Predictive coding**

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

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

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

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

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

189 Evidence that stimulus expectation strongly influences visual processing is not restricted to
190 sensorimotor interactions. As mice learn to navigate a VR corridor, some neurons in visual
191 cortex develop predictive responses to upcoming visual stimuli based on their spatial location
192 [43,10], and omission of expected visual stimuli or landmarks evokes strong activity in V1,
193 potentially reflecting prediction errors [10,73].

194 **Conclusions and Outlook**

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

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

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

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

229 **Acknowledgments**

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

233 **Competing interests**

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

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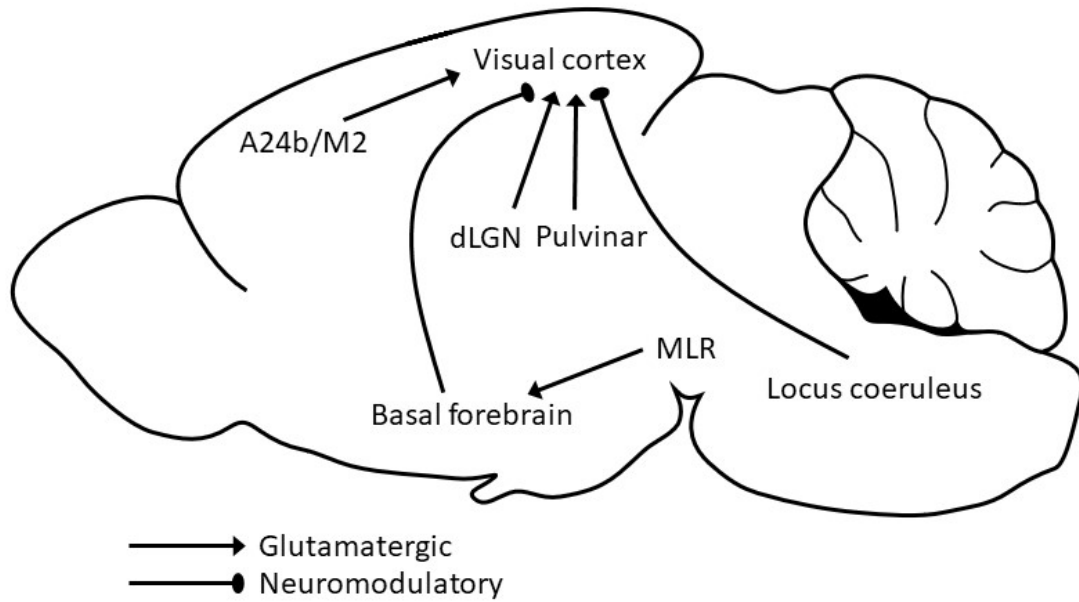
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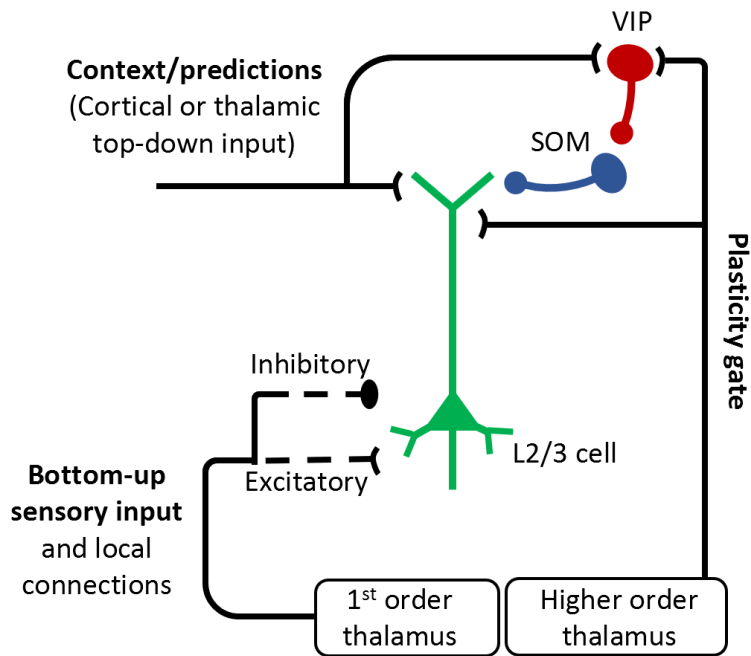
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275

276 **Figure 1**

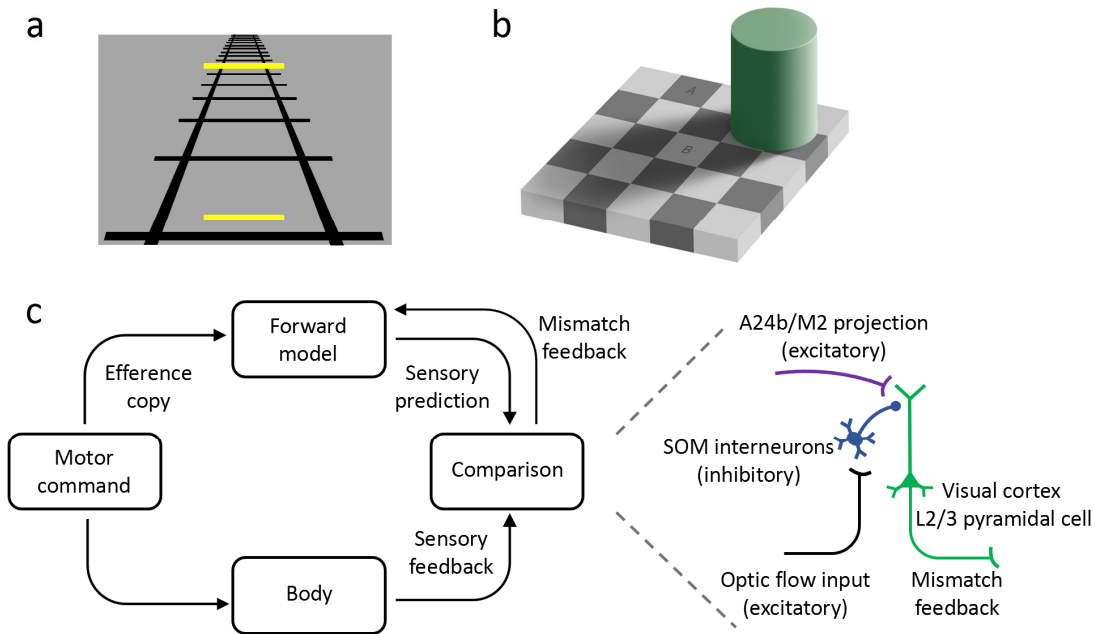
277 Schematic depicting the pathways conveying locomotion-related signals to V1. ACC/M2, anterior
 278 cingulate cortex and secondary motor cortex; dLGN, dorsolateral geniculate nucleus of the thalamus;
 279 MLR, mesencephalic locomotor region of the brainstem.



281

282 **Figure 2**

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



289

290 **Figure 3**

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