

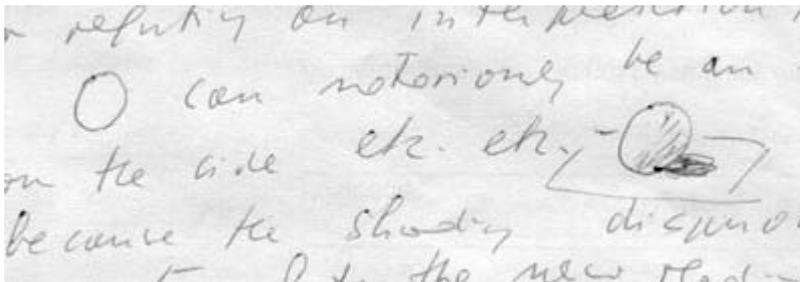
E. H. Gombrich, Letter to Prof. David Topper, 1986

15 December 1986

Dear Prof. Topper,

Many thanks for your paper on Gibson which I read with much pleasure & interest. I was very fond of "Jimmy" & remember him with gratitude. I also remember how we met on my return to Cornell & he said more or less "off hand" [-] "about the Matterhorn, you are of course right." It saddened me a little that he never put this acknowledgement in print & I was doubly [?] glad to read that he made it in a letter to you.

As an inveterate Popperian I have never been able to see the problem as he did. For me all perception is more or less conjectural, of course a snapshot or painting has infinitely fewer resources for disproving or refuting an interpretation, though there are degrees! [A drawing of circle] can notoriously be an egg, a hoop seen from the side, etc. etc. [A drawing of a sphere on a plane with a shadow to the right] has fewer readings because the shading disproves the hoop hypothesis etc. but the new reading is also conjectural. After all it depends on the assumption that the light come from the left, that the black on the table isn't an inkblot - etc. etc.



How the various readings must dovetail has after all been beautifully demonstrated by Escher. I wonder if J.J.G. took notice of him? When we once talked about transparency (apropos an article in Scientific American), and I pointed out the inherent ambiguity, he turned on me [saying,] "you think too much," a very revealing remark! Incidentally we don't have to refer to the Matterhorn - any tree silhouetted against the sky allows of any number of "readings" or, if you want to be precise, could be matched by any number of different 3D models. We tend not to bother our head about these indeterminacies, for why should we? Even so I think J.J.G. deserves all praise for having turned the account of visual perception inside out, as it were. He was right that biologically speaking we seek the invariants and that parallax & movement often suffice to eliminate false readings very quickly - moreover, we have two eyes! Certainly the history of art has to be partly re-written, acknowledging that painters are discoverers. Cicero writes Quam multa vident pictores in umbris et eminentia quae nos non videmus! [How many and eminent is the things painters see in the darkness, but which we do not see!] Incidentally, if I may say so, I have also made the point you rightly make about the richness of visual experience (in "Visual Discovery through Art") in The Image and the Eye. I hope this hand written scrawl doesn't impose too much of a burden on you.

Yours sincerely,

E. H. Gombrich