

Enigma Microsaccades

ALL SIZES

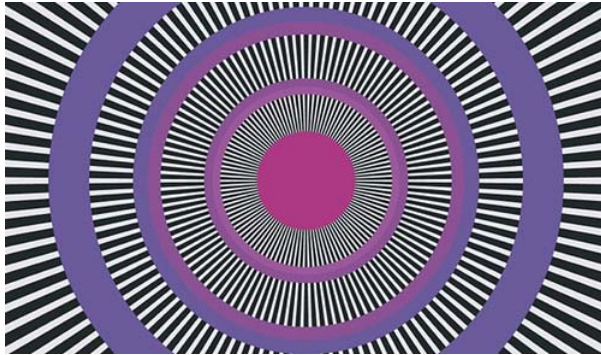


Image credit: Isia Leviant's "Enigma".

Rapid, unconscious eye movements explain a famous optical illusion in which a still image appears to move. When the eye movements, called microsaccades, were suppressed, test subjects reported that the Enigma illusion — an illustration that seems to flicker and turn — remained stationary. Scientists don't yet understand exactly how microsaccades contribute to vision, but they seem to help us perceive peripheral details while fixated on an object. (To experience this yourself, focus on the dot in the image at right. The fixation will reduce your microsaccades and cause the surrounding circle to fade.)

"Our subjective experience is that sometimes our eyes move, and sometimes they don't. But they're moving all the time," said Susana Martinez-Conde, a visual neuroscientist at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. Martinez-Conde's findings, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, do more than explain a neat trick. They also suggest an answer to an optical controversy: whether motion in static images originates in our eyes or our brains.

Source 11/22/08: blog.wired.com/wiredscience/2008/11/eye-flicker-exp.html

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