

THE SALK INSTITUTE

February 21, 1979

Professor Fabio Metelli  
c/o Institute of Psychology  
University of Padova  
Padova 35100, Italy

Dear Fabio:

I am honored by your faith in me, dear friend. I would love to be a Doctor of the University of Padova, Honoris Causa, and I enclose herewith a vita that (I hope) will sufficiently impress the Rector and the Deans of the Faculty to make it possible. Thank you for your efforts. But, they may very well say "who is this pretentious American psychologist compared to Galileo and to hell with him."

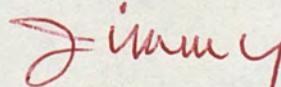
Heretofore Jackie's three honorary degrees outnumber my two (from Uppsala and Edinburgh) but now I may be catching up with her.

We like it very much here at the Salk Institute but we are very busy and will be away for a good part of the coming month. On or about April 1st we return to Ithaca.

We too hope that Beck's plans for the Italian Conference are successful and that we shall see you in June. I know you like to visit Fritz and Grace Heider in Florida and I am sure you will have enjoyed seeing your daughter, and the city of New Orleans. Its a great place.

With all our very best wishes and affection.

Yours,



James J. Gibson

JJG/eas

JAMES J. GIBSON

CORNELL

James J. Gibson, già professore alla Cornell University e tuttora attivo come ricercatore e guida di giovani ricercatori nella stessa Università, è uno studioso di fama mondiale. Sperimentatore originalissimo, ha lavorato in vari campi della Psicologia, ma i suoi contributi più importanti, teorici oltre che sperimentali, si riferiscono allo studio della Percezione. Fin dal 1952, anno di pubblicazione del suo libro The perception of the visual world, il suo laboratorio è diventato la meta degli studiosi interessati alle nuove importazioni di ricerca da lui introdotte, costituite nello studio della percezione come una funzione che rende possibile l'adattamento attivo e quindi la sopravvivenza nell'ambiente. Tale ~~percezione~~ gettando importanza teorica ha ispirato una serie di esperimenti, condotti dallo stesso Gibson e da numerosi collaboratori, <sup>(miranti a)</sup> per dimostrare la funzione degli apparati sensoriali nel costituire uno spazio ed un tempo stabili.

Il ~~vol~~ suo volume del 1966 The senses considered as perceptual systems l'importazione teorica è fondata su una serie di esperimenti un insieme di esperimenti, in gran parte già compiuti e in parte nuovi, che si contrappongono alle ricerche classiche compiute in questo campo, e costituiscono il fondamento di quell'Ottica ecologica che rappresenta il suo ultimo approdo.

Le teorie di Gibson, dato il loro carattere profondamente innovatore e quasi rivoluzionario in un campo di studi coltivato da psicologi sperimentali e psicofisiologi fin dai tempi di Helmholtz, hanno suscitato vivaci critiche e polemiche. Ma anche chi dissente dalle teorie

non può non riconoscerne il carattere euristico e  
provocativo; e soprattutto i risultati sperimentali  
da lui raggiunti rappresentano una <sup>conquista</sup> ~~risultato~~ durevole  
per la scienza.

James G. Gibson è stato oggetto di numerosi riconoscimenti nazionali e internazionali: qui ci limitiamo a ricordare che è ~~un~~ membro dell'Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze degli Stati Uniti ed è stato recentemente nominato Dottore honoris causa dell'antica e prestigiosa Università di Uppsala in Svezia.

## THE PERCEPTION OF THE VISUAL WORLD THE SENSES ~~BE~~ CONSIDERED AS PERCEPTUAL SYSTEMS

HELMHOLTZ

UPPSALA

VITA

James J. Gibson

Education: B. A. Princeton University, 1925  
Ph.D. Princeton University, 1928

Positions Held: 1928-1949 Instructor to Professor, Smith College  
1949-1972 Professor, Cornell University  
1972-present Professor Emeritus, Cornell University  
1942-1946 U. S. Army Air Force, (Captain to Lt. Col.)

1936 Visiting Professor, Yale University  
1954-1955 Visiting Professor, Univ. of Calif.,  
Berkeley  
1973 Visiting Professor, Mass. Inst. of  
Technology, Cambridge  
1978 Visiting Professor, Univ. of Calif, Davis  
1979 Visiting Scientist, The Salk Institute,  
La Jolla, Calif.

Membership in Professional Organizations:

Sigma Xi  
Fellow American Psychological Association  
(President Division 3, 1954-55; President  
Division 10, 1958-59)  
Eastern Psychological Association  
(President, 1957-58)  
Psychonomic Society  
Fellow AAAS  
Society of Experimental Psychologists

Honors: 1955-1956 Senior Fullbright Fellow,  
Oxford University  
1958-1959 Fellow Institute for Advanced Study,  
Princeton  
1964-1965 Fellow Center for Advanced Study in  
the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford

1952 Howard Crosby Warren Medal for  
Experimental Psychology  
1961 Distinguished Contribution Award, A.P.A.  
1967 Elected to National Academy of Sciences  
1977 Elected to American Academy of Arts and  
Sciences

1974 Honorary D. Sc., University of Edinburgh  
1976 Honorary D. Phil., University of Uppsala,  
Sweden  
1977 Honorary Member British Psychological  
Society  
1978 Honorary Member Spanish Psychological  
Society

Publications: Research papers and articles in all American psychological journals and in numerous foreign ones (British Journal of Psychology, Scandanavian Journal of Psychology, Leonardo, etc.)

Books

Motion Picture Testing and Research. Vol. 7,  
Army Air Force Aviation Psychology Research  
Reports, 1947.

The Perception of the Visual World. Boston:  
Houghton-Mifflin, 1950

The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems.  
Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966 .

The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.  
Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, in press.

## Obituary

### James J Gibson, 1904-1979

After being ill for some time James J Gibson died on the 11th December 1979. A student of the neobehaviourist E B Holt at Princeton, much of Jimmy Gibson's working life reflected his struggle to extricate himself from behaviourist thinking. For over thirty years he refined his aims into the development of a new, ecological approach to visual science, grounded in an articulate philosophy in which perception can only be understood by reference to the relationship between an organism and its particular visual world. The growth of Gibson's ideas was marked by three books<sup>(1)</sup>: *The Perception of the Visual World* (1950); *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966); and *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1977). The earlier books were highly influential and are still very widely read—an extraordinary fact considering the short lifetimes of most modern writings. Apart from these major statements Gibson contributed extensively to the experimental study of perception: numerous pieces of work, particularly in collaboration with his wife Eleanor J Gibson and many students, remain landmarks.

Perhaps the most central of Gibson's principles was that organisms are adapted to move through the world, not merely to observe it. Hence they are adapted to pick up and adjust to information about the changing layout of surfaces in the environment. He was convinced, and constantly reminded us, that visual scientists are prone to the error of treating perception as the interpretation of flat, static pictures. However innocuous some may feel this to be, Gibson saw it as profoundly misleading and regarded the laboratory tachistoscope and the cathode-ray tube as nothing short of a menace.

Always ready to place himself as a radical in a historical perspective, Jimmy Gibson saw his ideas of "direct perception" as the antithesis of Helmholtz' doctrine of "unconscious inference". By offering an alternative he made it possible for us to become much more aware of this tension which pervades visual science: any course of study that omits Gibson's contribution will be sadly out of balance.

Above all Jimmy was an enthusiast: new arrivals at Cornell were rapidly drawn into his seminars and were delighted by the zest and humour with which they were conducted. A little thing like retirement could not stop him working. At the end of the day late-leavers would invariably find him at a small table in the corridor of the psychology department writing intensely with a soft, stubby pencil. If he was not entirely absorbed at the moment you passed, it was likely you would find yourself caught up in some new (or old) debate and finally arrive home much later than intended.

J J Gibson made friends throughout his career; the regard as well as respect felt towards him is reflected in the many contributions made to the volume<sup>(2)</sup> *Essays in Honor of J J Gibson*, edited by Robert B Macleod and Herbert L Pick (1974). Everyone engaged in the study of visual science or visual philosophy, has lost an old friend.

John Fox

<sup>(1)</sup> J J Gibson's books are all published by Houghton Mifflin, Boston and London.

<sup>(2)</sup> Houghton Mifflin, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, NY.