MOTION.ILLUSIONS.IM

A star that seemed to wander

A small, steady light in the dark can be reported as moving when it is not.

Encyclopaedia Britannica's article "movement perception" describes the autokinetic effect as an isolated point of light in a dark room, reported as moving when it is not. Official wording says Alexander von Humboldt described it in 1799, watching a star through a telescope, and attributed the movement to the star itself.

The official story	Official wording
1799	Humboldt watched a star through a telescope and attributed its apparent wandering to the star itself. This sheet does not invent a star name, a place, or a telescope type beyond that official wording.
About sixty years later	The effect was shown to be subjective, apparently arising from instability in the sense of eye position without a visual frame of reference. "About sixty years later" is kept as written. A more precise year is not invented, and the later finding is not read back into 1799.
Not a portrait of the observation	A later painted portrait of Humboldt is a portrait. It is not a picture of the 1799 observation, and is not used as one on this sheet — this sheet has no photographs at all.
Not the aftereffect	The autokinetic effect is a light that seems to wander now, in the dark, without a frame. The waterfall aftereffect is a still surface that seems to move after you have been watching motion in one direction. Official wording keeps them as different members of a family.

A short quiz

1. In 1799, what did official wording say Humboldt attributed the star's apparent motion to?
2. When was the effect shown to be subjective, in official wording?
3. Is the autokinetic effect the same official thing as the waterfall aftereffect?

Answers. The star itself. About sixty years later. No — official wording treats them as different members of a family.

Wording from Encyclopaedia Britannica, "movement perception," re-checked 18 November 2026. motion.illusions.im is independent of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Typographic sheet: no photographs inside.