Making Emotions By Making Sense

"When I was looking out of the airplane's window that I took when I first left home to college, I had tears in my eyes." This was the first sentence in a short story I wrote in college. Picture it: someone sitting by the window, quiet, eyes filled with tears as the plane moves forward. The interpretation of such an image can vary. Was I crying out of fear? Happiness? Expectation? Melancholy? These are all valid interpretations for such an image, but each conveys a very different emotion.

Without context, the image is simply lost.

If my whole story depended on that sentence, its meaning would rely on my audience's interpretation for it to make sense. Most probably, they would conclude how I felt based on their own experiences rather than on my intention with the story.

In order to make sense, context is needed. Good context to make better connections with the factfinder, emotionally, while developing characters and the story itself.

However, context is something one works on. It comes in many forms. I'd like to discuss one in particular: expressions made by faces.[1]

Faces Don't "Just" Make it

The great Charles Darwin is perhaps best known for his work with evolutionary biology and his theory that states all species of life descend from a common ancestor.[2] However, one of his most widely accepted theories is that every human being on Earth expresses emotions with similar kind of faces. Based on his book, "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals", there has been a "generalized understanding that our faces hold the key to assessing emotions objectively and accurately."[3] Darwin claimed that emotions and their expressions are an ancient part of universal human nature. Hence, all people, everywhere in the world, exhibit emotions with the same facial expressions, even without prior knowledge of how others express them or any special training. This theory has found a special place in pop-culture, with the famous gallery of faces and emotions, such as this one:

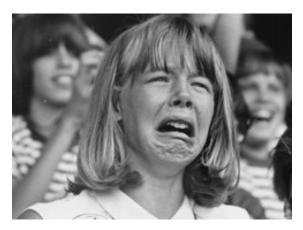[1] This is the first of a series of commentaries on context in storytelling.
[2] *Coyne, Jerry A., "Why Evolution is True" (2009).*
[3] Feldman Barrett, Lisa, "How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain". Pp 3 (2018).

Nonetheless, recent studies suggest that Darwin's theory is not entirely correct. The brain does recognize several important facts from just watching a face, like who they are, whether they are female or male, and if they are attractive or unattractive.[4] But can the brain also determine if someone is, for example, happy, sad, angry, desperate, or in terror?

Take a look at this photo of a young woman taken in 1965. Most, if not all people, would interpret her expression as one that conveys sadness.[5]

However, her true emotion is the absolute contrary. She is watching the Beatles on stage, live in Chicago, probably for the first time. Her expression is one of joy, excitement or even euphoria.

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[4] Feldman Barrett, Lisa, "How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain". Ch. 1 (2018); Martínez, Aleix M., "Context May Reveal How You Feel" (2019).

[5] Citing G-B Duchenne de Boulogne *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* (Cambridge Univ Press, New York, 1990), Aleix M. Martínez explains that to understand why there is a perception to an all universal expresion for emotions, "consider the following: When we find ourselves in a specific situation, our central nervous system executes a number of computations intended to keep us from harm and to maximize the likelihood of achieving our goals. Some of these computations yield facial muscle movements that are observable to friends and foes. Because of this, we tend to assume that we can always interpret what a person is feeling (i.e., their affect) by visually examining their facial configuration." Martínez, Aleix M., "Context May Reveal How You Feel" (2019).

Studies suggest one simple solution to make sure that the facial expressions are correctly interpreted by our audiences: context.[6] Seeing only the face of the Beatles' fan does not reveal the whole story. But we know that it's 1965, at a Beatle's concert, it makes sense to turn from a negative, wrong message of sadness, to the correct, positive one of happiness. The brain's interpretation of facial expressions is dependent on the context in which the expression is situated.[7]

For a storyteller, this question is of the ultimate importance: How can I accurately communicate the emotion I want to convey? Am I being effective with my storytelling, considering the importance of having an emotional reaction of my audience? While people tend to express their feelings through facial expressions, the real question is how these expressions are perceived by others. Is it possible to correctly conclude what people are thinking or feeling? In fact, the brain does not relate the faces and the emotions in a precise, all-universal way.

Take fear, for example. Fear does not have a single expression. Its expression varies depending on the situation. Some people pout, while others bite their lips. Some close their eyes, while other open them as wide as possible. Some cry, while others stand petrified like statues. In fact, we judge the authenticity of the emotion, depending on the circumstances. If the fear seems too exaggerated or minimalist, we tend not to believe the person is truly feeling the emotion. Context supports the particular expression and is necessary for it to make sense.

A couple of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, Zhimin Chen and David Whitney, studied precisely the context in facial expressions and concluded that people

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[6] Feldman Barrett, Lisa, "How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain" (2018); Martínez, Aleix M., "Context May Reveal How You Feel" (2019); Z Chen, D Whitney, "Tracking the affective state of unseen persons" (2019).

[7] Z Chen, D Whitney, "Tracking the affective state of unseen persons" (2019).

could predict the correct emotions a person is feeling, but only when contextual information is known. Those predictions could be made even when the person's body is not seen, preventing any body language or posture from influencing the conclusion about the true emotion of the facial expression. That means that context "is not only necessary for a correct interpretation of how others feel but, in some instances, it is sufficient".[8]

These findings are key to a good storyteller.

A whole story is not only a series of facts dropped on someone's lap like a to-do checklist. A close-up on a face can convey emotions, but its effectiveness depends on how well we give it context. For instance, seeing me crying while looking out the window of an airplane can only be understood if a prior explanation of how close I was to my family back home would convey the feeling of melancholy. Or perhaps explaining that I did not know anything about the place I was going to and that I was all by myself would

Emotions create a true bond with the factfinder. A good emotional expression also humanizes the story, turning a general scene into a personal and relatable one. Plus, a good face expression will help in the description of a scene and characters; even subtle expressions can help reveal a character's personality and true feelings, while helping isolate a subject without the distraction of too many verbal details.

In sum, a contextual facial expression simply helps sells the story by connecting emotionally with the factfinder, humanizing, while supporting the development of characters and the scene.

An attorney "sells" the "story" of the people they represent. Telling a story requires the right context in many ways; not only faces we make to try to connect emotionally with our factfinder, but also in the choice of words, the right pause or silence, and the appropriate eye-contact. If we "come on behalf" of a person, a human being with emotions, a real life, and a real-life problem, we must become the best at what we do. The responsibility is just too great. Lives and livelihoods depend on it.

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[8] Martínez, Aleix M., "Context May Reveal How You Feel" (2019). The psychologist and neuroscientist Lisa Feldman explains in "How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain", supra, that "faces are constantly moving, and your brain relies on many different factors at once—body posture, voice, the overall situation, your lifetime of experience—to figure out which movements are meaningful and what they mean. When it comes to emotion, a face doesn't speak for itself". Supra, p. 9.