

Assignment 4: the face

Assignment: [\[web link\]](#)

Go to a public place and observe 4 different people you do not know. Write down what your impression is of each of them. How much is your impression drawn from their face, their clothing, their actions, etc? Concentrating on the face, what sense of the person do you derive from it? Can you articulate why? Do you think any of the "overgeneralization" processes that Zebrowitz describes played a role in your interpretation? What about other categorization processes?

When do you think seeing someone's face is important in a mediated environment? Why? In what form? What about videophones - do you think they will eventually replace or supplement the audio-only phone or is there a deeper reason why they have never been successful?

Conceptual response:

One of the most important uses of faces is for trust building. By abstracting out people, it's easier to not think of the impact of a lie or a decision, but by seeing their immediate visceral response, the impact is obvious. It is easier to tell someone painful news via email or phone because you don't have to feel the full impact of your statements, you don't have to see it. Likewise, it's more difficult to build faith in someone who exists simply through text or voice, partially because it requires more honesty on their part.

Aside from all of the exceptionally valid points that Judith makes in her overview article, i think that one of the problems with technological replacement of the face is that it's missing that visceral feeling. You can't smell someone's bad breath, but you can't also feel the effects of being in the same environment. Phermones asides, you don't feel the same breezes, the same smells, etc. Depth can be artificially conveyed but the nuanced details are not picked up by the camera, let alone by computation. It just isn't real, and i don't see it being real anytime in the near future.

And, although i truly agree that artistic and abstract versions of faces provide a lot of information, they do not provide the key salient features that do things like trust building. It's just as easy to lie to a smiley face as it is to lie in text. You don't *feel* the consequences of co-presence; there's a distance that the abstract can't bridge.

I am really interested in how close-but-not-perfect representations of the face are more problematic than completely abstract representations. Taken a little bit further, i am imagining what problems would occur if the face felt completely natural. A lot of what we read into a face assumes co-presence. If i can't feel the wind, seeing a face that looks like it's been blown by the wind seems peculiar. If the face that i'm looking at feels real, than i expect certain things that will not happen if we aren't sharing the same space. This is confusing and could lead to a slew of other miscommunications. Returning to my biggest use of the face, i could only imagine how these representations would not only fail to build trust, but potentially tear it apart.

Also, i genuinely believe that the videophone will *never* be a common tool for most communication. There's a lot of advantages in not being able to see the person on the other end. I happily answer the phone when i am naked, regardless of who is calling. I walk around the house, fold laundry, websurf; some of these tasks can be shared while others indicate that i am not paying attention (and depending on the person at the other end of the line, i might not be). I don't clean the room to talk on the phone; i don't have to adjust the light. Also, since you aren't sharing a space, you can't share the same physical feelings of it. Sitting in your kitchen while your mom is cooking is much more enticing than sitting on a videophone watching her. I can have a phone conversation while playing with my kitten and watching her; this would be annoying over video because there's no other sense that i'm paying attention and the recipient can't reach over to pet the cat too. I can walk and talk, while a video phone would not give me that freedom. Since we are not sharing a physical space, we can't share physical experiences. In videophones, video is extra information that doesn't make a conversation more relaxed and comfortable, just more formalized; it takes away a lot of the things that people do while they are talking on the phone that they would not do if they shared a physical environment, for better or for worse.

Observation:

This observation was completed at a goa club. Goa is a type of music that attracts people from a variety of cultures; this party was approximately 1/2 Israeli, 1/4 German or French and a mix of other people. I decided to watch four individuals at the beginning of the night as they interacted with people over time. Many of the people at this club were on hallucinogenic drugs or alcohol. Most of the clothing resembles European rave. The party goers are between 21 and 60, with most of the crowd being 25-35. Given the absurdity of this environment, i figured this would a be perfect observation space. I should note that my motivation in attending the night was to see how a party was promoted/produced and, as i was the driver, i was completely sober. Thus, this absurdity described is not filtered through any alcohol or other substances; it's completely entertaining on its own.

KingdomRuler. This is a character who i've heard about although i've never met him, but was quickly able to distinguish at the party. At the beginning of the night, he was wearing a tuxedo, had his ears molded into the shape of an elf and

had colored those ears with fluorescent paint. Many people appeared to know him and were constantly approaching him. Although the greeting was typically a hug or a hand shake, it was done with a certain amount of aloofness so that the observer knew who was in control; girls also received kisses. Although he was not throwing the party, he was acting as though this was his kingdom and he was the ruler. Along with his body language, his face had a certain amount of arrogance - one eyebrow being raised, a smile for the guys that resembled a smirk (one side of the lip raised up). I am also assuming that he had access to drugs, because many girls would go up to him, dance around and then poise in a begging-like position. He would wrap his arm around her and then take her off somewhere else. During the night, he changed his outfit 3 different times, getting more and more casual as he started dancing. Although most of the audience was dancing most of the night, he spent his evening walking around talking to people. He had hand-crafted a pair of glasses that had different flashing lights in them that he wore; they used a bright white light that made him hard to miss amongst the crowd. Without a smile on his face, with his chin raised all night (although almost everyone was shorter than him), with a smirk on his face and a condescending gaze that often turned into raised eyebrows, it was hard to see him as anything other than egotistical, acting as the mighty ruler of the space. [To magnify this picture, i tracked this character down online. He has developed his own religion, produces websites intended to be irritating, including information on worship.]

WolfGirl. This girl was pretty small, had long dirty blonde thick dreadlocks and was wearing a bunch of layers of clothing including a rawhide vest that was handmade and had a statement about saving the world written in a dark red that could have been blood. Her t-shirt read "Terrorists win" and there were holes in the shirt everywhere. All of her clothes were completely tattered, either due to hippie style or her being a genuine traveler (common for this scene). Her face was small beneath the dreadlocks, noticeably thin with a nose that pointed upwards and a smile that wrapped around her nose, quite large for her face. Her eyes were brown and distinctly noticeable (magnified by her thinness). Most of the night she was running around the club, shaking her dreads in people's faces and then pausing to raise her hands to the sky and start screaming, only to run and scream some more. Her rawhide vest had tassles on it that moved as she moved, as did her many layers. Her face was mostly noticeable when she was screaming, with pursed lips in a wolf-like form, barking at the ceiling. At one point, she went up to MachineElf and licked his face; he put his arm around her, tossing her hair and she nuzzled up to him. Because of his glasses, she followed him around for about an hour, making him look at her as she stroked and kissed his face (this did not help the arrogance about which he held himself). In another moment, she came running up to me, dreads shaking, arms flailing and looked me straight in the face, eyes as wide open as possible, tongue rattling random sounds. Her name is wolf girl, simply because her presence, her mannerisms were so animal like that it was hard to imagine her in any other way. At one point, i followed her into the bathroom and watched as she made fringe-rock/Animal faces at herself in the mirror.

Meditator. About 50 and balding, this guy wandered around the club all night to the beat of a very different drummer. At most points, i would look around and everyone would be in tempo with the music, except him. In fact, i'm not certain if he noticed the music since he rarely even faced the DJ let alone the other partygoers. And he didn't really

notice them either and he would wander around eyes closed bumping into other people unless they moved, which they usually did. He would scratch his head, go into meditation form, all with a content smile and open face. And then suddenly, his eyes would open as though he had just solved the world's problems, he would get a _huge_ smile on his face, look up to the sky, raise both hands, appear to give thanks or express that he found god and then go back to thinking. In a few instances, he would go up to random people, not look them in the eye and then suddenly perform his "i've solved the problem" look. Sometimes, he would wander around, drop to the ground and start bowing Zen-form. He also did random yoga movements, all in serious thinking face, yet with this odd content smile. His face was thin, nose pointy. He looked like he had found peace with himself when his eyes were open and mouth smiling, but otherwise he looked like he was lost deep inside, oblivious to the rest of the world, happily glowing.

AngryGuy. This guy ran around the club in speedwalker position all night, both eyebrows furrowed downward, cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk, mouth pursed as tightly as possible. In some instances, he had a clipboard with him that he would occasionally stop and stare at for clarity, without chipmunk lips, but usually he was racing around the floor, head and neck first, arms square in speedwalker form. Sometimes, his arms would be rubbing his blown lips violently as he walked or tossing his hair. During some stops, his hands would be at his face in thinker mode. Never did the v-shaped eyebrows disappear, even in pauses. As a result, he looked like there was something he needed to do, something that he had forgotten; he was puzzled and rushing, trying to figure it out. Should it have been Wall Street, he would have fit right in, appearing rushed, concerned and in need of a million things to do; in a party setting, it just seemed absurd.

All four characters, as well as the other 100 people in the club, had a distinct character about them, developed in part by their dancing style but also by their consistent facial expressions all evening (often adding to their dance style). Assuming that most people were far from sober, i have no idea what these people look like on the street, but their characters here could have been equally a party or an insane asylum. I chose to watch 4 characters that didn't rely on anyone else to be happy, but it should be noted that there were a lot of of people who weren't like that. One guy would get a huge grin on his face, dance spastically and elegantly in front of this one girl looking like the world was perfect and he was having a great time, but the moment that she would turn away, his face would droop, shoulders would droop and all of a sudden he looked desperate and about to cry, with every element in his face going from absolutely ecstatic to absolutely depressed. There are also ways of characertizing the people at a club based on the characterization of their dancing style (and there are a few very common forms) - the Israeli stompers, the angry arm flailing girls, the lost in space bobbing dance, the animals (last nite, some of the dancers could best be described as horses, birds, wolves...), the thin goa girl marchers. In each of these categorization, not only is there a particular look to their dance, but there is a look to their faces, showing the "emotion" that allows for them to get typed as "lost" or "angry." Without their faces, they just look like they are moving to a beat in a peculiar way; it is the face that gives them a "character."