2. FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

IT IS, IN FACT, A PICTURE OF NO
EXPRESSION WHATSOEVER!

THIS IS A FACE
IN WHICH NONE
OF THE FACIAL
MUSCLES ARE BEING
USED, EXCEPT MAYBE
THE EYELIDS
KEEPING THE EYES
OPEN.

IF I ASKED YOU TO
DESCRIBE THIS
EXPRESSION, YOU
COULD PROBABLY COME UP
WITH A FEW WORDS.

CALM,
THOUGHTFUL,
REVERENT,
REFLECTION...

THIS MIGHT BE THE
MOST COMMON
EXPRESSION OF ALL.
PEOPLE DO IT
OFTEN, EVERY DAY.

BUT
YOU'LL ALMOST
NEVER GET TO
SEE IT HEAD-ON
LIKE THIS --

--BECAUSE, AS
SOON AS THAT OTHER
FACE'S EYES MEET YOURS,
YOU'LL PROBABLY GET A
REACTION -- AND
RESPOND IN KIND.

IN FACT, YOUR
OWN EXPRESSION
MAY HAVE SOFTENED
A BIT JUST NOW, SIMPLY
FROM LOOKING AT THIS
PICTURE!
Expressions aren't something we can opt out of easily, as with words. They're a compulsive form of visual communication all of us use.

We all know how to "read" and "write" them with our faces --

-- but few of us can consciously reproduce them in art with as much style and grace --

-- as we do in life.

Yet, as comics artists, we need to do exactly that if we want the emotions of our characters to come through on the page.

Almost any story can be evaluated by its ability to provoke emotion in the reader, even if emotions aren't its primary focus --

-- and there's no stronger conduit to your readers' emotions than through the emotions of the characters you create for them.

And with four senses, most notably sound, unavailable to you --

-- you'll want to get the most out of the one you have.

Tap tap.
PUTTING FACIAL EXPRESSIONS TO USE IN COMICS REQUIRES YOU TO TACKLE FOUR SUBJECTS:

1. **The Different Kinds of Facial Expressions and Where They Come From.**
2. **How Those Expressions Are Formed by the Muscles of the Face.**
3. **The Various Strategies for Rendering Those Expressions Graphically.**
4. **And How Facial Expressions Work in Comics-Style Sequences.**

**The Human Face Can Take on Any Number of Shapes in the Course of a Day.**

**Some Indicate Physical States Such as Pain or Exhaustion.**

**Some Are Meant to Communicate with Others Directly.**

**But the Lion's Share of the Face's Power to Move Us Lies in Its Ability to Convey Basic Human Emotions.**

**The Results of That Process Can Be Varied and Complex, But at Its Source Are a Few Simple Building Blocks.**

In 1872, Darwin wrote that some expressions might be universal, a view shared by modern expressions experts like Paul Ekman.

**Six of Them, to Be Exact.**
Now, some of you might be thinking: “That can’t be it! There are far more expressions than those.”

And there are! But just as three primary colors can be modified or mixed to achieve every color of the rainbow—

-- so too can these emotional primaries be modified and mixed to create many of the expressions we see every day.
For example, by varying the intensity of our primaries you can see other familiar emotions emerge.

- Sternness
- Indignation
- Anger
- Rage
- Disdain
- Aversion
- Disgust
- Revulsion
- Concern
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Terror
- Satisfaction
- Amusement
- Joy
- Laughter
- Dejection
- Melancholy
- Sadness
- Grief
- Alertness
- Wonder
- Surprise
- Shock

So ingrained are these intermediate emotions that each one carries a specific meaning --

-- and each gets its own name.
And by mixing any two of our emotional primaries, we can produce a third expression — which, in many cases, is also distinct and recognizable enough to earn its own name.
Throw in mixtures of the other intensities --

Mild Disgust + Mild Sadness = Puzzlement

Mild Joy + Mild Sadness = Pity

Strong Sadness + Moderate Anger = Remembering a deceased loved one.

And the number of distinct emotional expressions you have at your fingertips can grow to well over a thousand.

And there are other factors which can add even more variety.

For example, notice how all of the faces stemming from the emotional primaries have been largely symmetrical?

Emotion has no direction. It comes from within.

But there's a world outside those faces that can also play a part in facial expressions.
PHYSICAL STATES ARE AS INBORN AND ANCIENT A FACTOR IN FACIAL EXPRESSIONS AS BASIC EMOTIONS --

-- BUT BECAUSE THEY INVOLVE OUR ChaOTIC INTERACTIONS WITH THE PHYSICAL WORLD, THE SHAPES THEY TAKE CAN BE LESS BALANCED AND PREDICTABLE.

GRAVITY, BODILY SENSATIONS AND THE EXTERNAL SOURCES OF STIMULATION ALL COME INTO PLAY.

AND NATURALLY, THESE EXPRESSIONS CAN BE COMBINED WITH THE VARYING INTENSITIES AND COMBINATIONS OF THE EMOTIONAL PRIMARIES.

ARE YOU OKAY?!

SNHH! I'LL LIVE...

THIS LEADS TO AN EVEN GREATER NUMBER AND VARIETY OF EXPRESSIONS -- YET IT'S STILL JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG --
These are the visual signals we send to each other directly, often in combination with body language signals like head and hand position and gaze direction.

-- Because when you throw in all the many ways we use our faces as a form of direct specialized signal --

-- No system of analysis could ever begin to catalog all the different types of facial expressions your characters could wear!

-- But they add an ever-changing glossary of culturally-specific signs and symbols understood by both sender and receiver.

They're deeply rooted in our inborn emotional expressions and still affected by physical states --

They are, for all intents and purposes, a language -- though a language only partially under our conscious control.
Some of these signs have become as formalized as traffic signals.

The wink. The outstretched tongue. The "Oh, mom..." look.

But most are more subtle and idiosyncratic, tailored to specific people in specific situations, and subject to the individual style of the sender.

By adding head position and gaze direction to the mix, and allowing for asymmetry, they achieve far more variety than the basic emotional expressions --


-- But they're also harder to pin down, or make universally recognizable, so context is important when separating "pleading," say, from merely sad, or "regretful" from forgetful.

Each expression has to match a few key features to be recognizable.

But, once those key features are in place, the sender can spin that expression in any number of directions.

Four variations on suspicion:

- Mistreat my daughter and I'll have you killed.
- Oh, c'mon. You don't really expect me to believe that?
- We catch you making personal calls again, you're fired.
- Yeah, you're a liar... but you're my kind of liar!

Head turned away

Plus

Narrowed eyes & eye contact

Plus

Lowered brow

Equals

Suspicion

A bit of an emotion like disgust can be added, for example, to give suspicion a disdainful air.

But if that emotion becomes the face's dominant visual statement, the expression can be hijacked.

In real life, we achieve these kinds of precise effects without much conscious knowledge of how we do it.

Yet, we must understand on some level how our faces achieve these looks --

Because we can also consciously imitate any of these expressions, and even add an element of stylization or exaggeration to produce a mock version of each one.

--

Real  Mock  Real  Mock

Real  Mock  Real  Mock

Real  Mock  Real  Mock
In some cases, an attempt to stop showing emotion can actually be one of the key factors that make a given facial expression recognizable.

Embarrassment:
Averted, fearful gaze.
Mouth expressionless.

Resentment:
Averted, angry gaze.
Mouth closed tightly.

In fact, adult society relies, in large part, on the suppression of basic emotions. The ways in which we suppress and redirect them are the source of much of our expressions' variety and depth.

Look at the smiles in snapshots and each will seem as unique as a snowflake.

As part of human society, we all want to see past each other's faces to the person within.

We don't want to deconstruct them to the point where the human face seems like a machine.

But as artists hoping to reproduce those inner personalities in the minds of our readers --

-- we need to understand that the human face is a machine of sorts, for all its beauty and subtlety.

And the only way to understand that machine is to go beneath the surface --

-- and see its parts in action.

But underneath them all are these same basic principles played out again and again.