

Introduction

My project asks one main question: How can the same motion create different emotions when shown in different visual contexts?

I used a simple running motion and placed it in several scenes to observe how people's emotional responses changed. My main idea is that emotion does not come from the motion itself but is shaped by the context around it.

Psychological studies often argue that movement alone can denote emotion. For example, Alaerts et al. (2011) found that individuals could identify feelings through dots that moved without the presence of any faces or backgrounds. Therefore, their experiment and my own differ in approach—some take away the context in search of some sort of emotional universal meaning, while I added context to explore how meaning shifts.

My experiment showed that one and the same indifferent action may obtain quite different emotional coloring depending on a context of its appearing. This essay is dedicated to Alaerts et al.'s Action and Emotion Recognition from Point-Light Displays and explains how my project offers a contrasting view. I argue that emotion is shaped by both culture and visual environment.

Analysis of the Reference

Alaerts et al. (2011) studied how people understand emotion from body movement. They used point-light displays, where small lights were placed on a person's joints to show only movement. They removed the face, color, and background. Even with this simple display, people could still tell if the motion showed happiness, sadness, or anger.

The study asked two questions: Can people know emotion only from motion? And does gender make a difference? The study's main goal was to compare men and women. But it also showed that emotion might live inside the movement itself. The authors said that body motion can show many things—what the person is doing, their gender, their goal, and even their mood.(Alaerts et al., 2011)

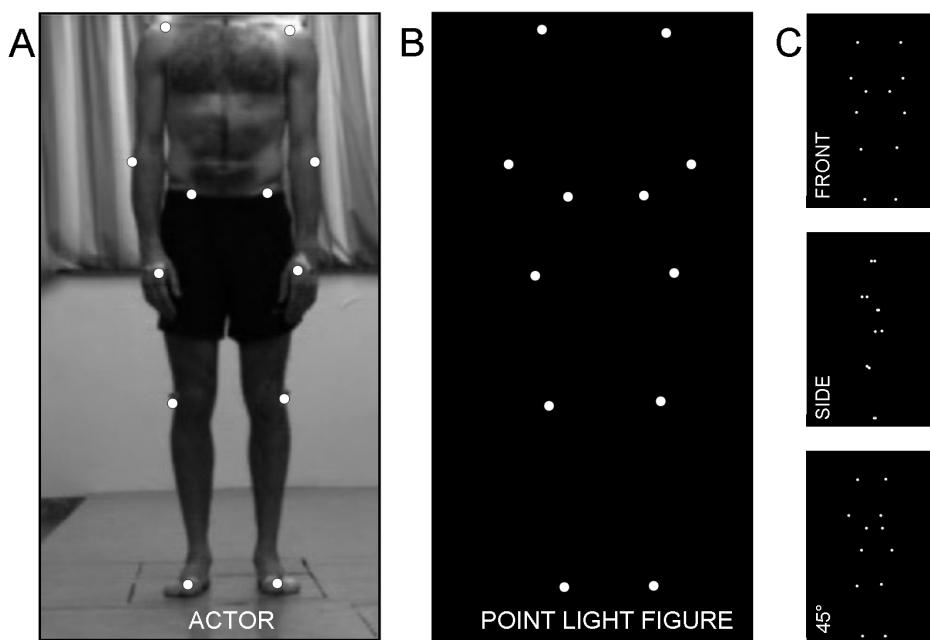


Figure 1. Point-light display from Alaerts et al. (2011)

The study saw emotion as something that could be shown through numbers like speed or angle. For example, when the arms or legs moved faster, it was seen as anger, and when they moved more slowly, it was seen as sadness. To make the study more scientific, the researchers removed all cultural and visual details. They wanted to show that everyone understands emotion in the same way. The results showed that most people guessed the emotions correctly, so they believed that motion alone can express feeling.

My project takes a different view. Alaerts and his team showed only moving dots—no faces, no backgrounds—trying to find one fixed answer to what emotion a movement shows. I did the opposite. I kept the same running motion but placed it in different settings: film scenes and real locations. Each time, the emotion changed. While they removed context to make emotion measurable, I added it back to make emotion visible and open to interpretation.

Dialogue with My Project

I explained how one running motion could mean different things in different locations in my project. I filmed my friend running, both from facing sides and across the frame, captured at both sides. I removed her face because that way the body was neutral—no emotional hints—and this made the gesture more open to interpretation. Influenced by *Wearing Masks* of Gillian Wearing from 2021, I wanted to see what happened when expression is taken away and meaning has to derive from the surrounding context.

I placed the same running figure in two kinds of scenes: In the film context, I inserted it into cinematic backgrounds—war films, romance scenes, and *Forrest Gump*—where running already carries strong emotional meaning. In the real context, I placed it into everyday environments I photographed around the UK: city streets, parks, and public spaces during both day and night. These were ordinary yet familiar places without fixed emotional tone. I asked the viewers to describe what they felt in each of them. For the film scenes, answers repeated themselves: “sad,” “urgent,” or “hopeless.” There, color, light, and framing of cinema already dictate the keys for emotional reading. Actually, Bruno Munari stated in 1963 that it is due to the same cultural code shared that gestures can take on meaning. The answers were utterly different for real-life scenes: some said “Peaceful,” others “Lonely” or “Free.” People drew from their memories and experiences. Such a fact confirms that emotion is actually created through the dynamic relation between the image and the viewer, shaped by culture and experience.



Figure 2&3 Same running figure placed in film (left) and real-life (right) contexts. (publication, 2025)

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) provides additional context about how context shapes emotion. As Berger points out, we can never see an image 'neutrally'; our background and experience will always influence the act of seeing. This supports my project, which suggests

emotion comes with the act of seeing rather than the movement itself. In placing the same figure in a film or a real place, viewers bring different 'ways of seeing', and the emotion shifts. My work acts as a visual test of Berger's idea that emotion is made through perception.

This is in contrast to Alaerts et al. (2011), who utilized point-light displays—dots on moving joints, with no faces or backgrounds—to test whether people could recognize emotion purely from motion. They treated emotion as a form of data measured by speed or angle. From their results, people could recognize emotion even without context. My project takes a flip side: I reintroduced context to show emotion is fluid and changes with space, light, and interpretation. Barrett and Kensinger (2010) found that when reading the emotion of others, people draw on contextual cues to support the idea that context is not decoration but part of how emotion is built.

Publication design makes this interaction visible. It invites viewers to read emotion through comparison between the two contexts. The book consists of two sections, Film Context and Real Context, combining images and viewer feedback. An interactive cut-out silhouette allows the readers to place the same figure in new settings, turning the publication into both an archive and an experiment. This reflects Roland Barthes' (1977) idea that meaning is created by the reader rather than the author—the viewer becomes the “author” of emotion through participation. Through this process, my project reframes emotion as a relationship. It is not fixed in the body or the scene but emerges between gesture, context, and perception.

Conclusion

Alaerts et al. simplified emotion by reducing it to pure motion. In this process, research focused on being clear and measurable. Human feelings were set aside. Ideas like memory, culture, and personal meaning were not given much attention. My project brings emotion back into everyday life, showing that context always shapes how we feel.

This very concept can be represented in the design of my publication as well. By turning pages, moving cutouts, and placing the figure into new backgrounds, the viewers create emotion themselves by taking part in its generation. It is another form of understanding emotion, not through statistics but through visual and personal change. Each time a page is turned or the figure is moved, it shows in a simple way that emotion changes with its surroundings.

In future work, I plan to explore more types of actions, such as walking, turning, or reaching, and invite a wider range of participants. By comparing people's reactions to different gestures in different places, we can see whether some settings create the same feelings or if emotion keeps changing. I am also hoping to be able to develop this publication into a digital or interactive one, gathering viewer's reactions in real-time and showing collective emotional patterns.

If movement alone cannot define feeling, perhaps context can. My project suggests that emotion is not fixed in the body but shaped through what we see and where we see it. In this way, perception becomes a form of design—a process of creating meaning through seeing and interpretation.

References

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