Emotions as Objects of Visual Perception

Can we see other people's emotions? I will attempt to answer this question by distinguishing between three types of seeing. They are: (i) seeing x, (ii) seeing x as S and (iii) seeing x by virtue of seeing y.   According to this distinction, when I see that the gas tank is almost empty by seeing the gauge, I see x by virtue of seeing y.   If, on the other hand, I see a bright dot as a star, I see x as S. Finally, if I see a bright dot and I do not see it as a star, I simply see x.   It is a common philosophical view that perceptual knowledge of other people's emotions should be explained in terms of seeing x as S or, alternatively, in terms of seeing x by virtue of seeing y. In line with this view, if Mary is happy and she expresses it, I see her expression as one of happiness or, alternatively, I see her happiness by virtue of seeing her expression. In either case, I can see that Mary is happy only if I know (explicitly or otherwise) that there is a reliable correlation between characteristic expressions and specific emotions.   In this paper, I explore the alternative view that we see other people's emotions in the sense of seeing x. My argument is two-fold. First, I argue that expressions are events that carry information about the emotions that produce them. Second, I develop a speculative account of the processes necessary to extract such information. This approach has three potential advantages. First, it may cast some light upon the role of low-level vision in the acquisition of a theory of mind. Second, it may help characterise the specific type of information on which simulation processes are likely to operate. Thirdly, it may provide a conceptual framework for the explanation of specific deficits in emotion recognition.