

WR2- POSITION

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The previous iterations allowed us to understand that the comprehension of an image (as well as any tangible object) can pass through the linguistic metaphor of two fundamental levels: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the level of the expression. It is the physically perceptible part of the image: the sum of graphic elements which, after an act of interpretation, can be associated to a signified, that is the level of the content. In the case of the picture displaying the greeting between Trump and Macron the signifier is represented by a series of pixels (or ink jets if the image is printed) which gathered together form chromatic stains. At a later time, our knowledge and previous experience intervene in order to mould the signified. We first realise that those chromatic stains have the shape of two hands that are clasping each other, and we recognise them as a gesture of greeting. After subsequent exercises of interpretation, also considering the context and the people involved, we may respectively see the hand squeezing the other's arm and the finger pointed as two implicit attempts of self-imposing, exerting control and displaying authority.

The process of searching new elements of the signifier which refer to a signified is potentially never ending and enriches the comprehension of the analysed subject. For this reason, in order to understand the relationship between the two levels and how they reciprocally influence each other, an accurate dissection is necessary, hence the question that arises spontaneously is whether it is possible to isolate signifier and signified in order to examine them separately. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, who is considered the father of semiotic and gave the first definition of the two terms, that could never be possible. Saussure (1959) argues that signifier and signified are intertwined by a reciprocal presupposition, this connection is neither natural nor conventional but radically arbitrary, hence necessary. The expressive form organises the content, which can be manifested only through an expressive form. For this reason, signifier and signified are considered as the two side of the same coin.

However, Saussure's assertion refers to the discipline of linguistic, which is not exactly a pragmatic concept, therefore a further exploration is imperative in order to verify its veracity in other fields, such as graphic design. It is probably simpler to pin down the signifier first, since it is an intrinsic feature of the object. We experience the signifier through our senses, so we could say that the signifier starts to exist when we see (or: hear, smell, touch, taste) it. The signifier deprived of its signified would be a meaningless sign. For instance, an Arabic writing is simply a sequence of signs which look like a decoration for someone who does not know the language. In this case the interpretation is determined by a code, and the understanding of the code is necessary to get the signified behind the written words. Nevertheless, Saussure claims that the signified linked to the signifier is always arbitrary, therefore someone could examine the Arabic writing for its calligraphy, making assumption regarding the extremity of the nib, the ink used, or other sorts of interpretation which are not conventional. With this in mind, it becomes arduous to imagine a sign which cannot be interpreted completely and in any way: even an abstract painting raises distinct feelings to different observers. The act of interpret is inherent in human nature and drawing lines of connections to recreate explanatory patterns of the surrounding reality is an instinctive exercise. What is presumably the closest manifestation of a pure and detached signifier is the impression of an infant when he or her first opens the eyes.

On the other hand, the signified is a mental concept, it does not exist by itself and is always generated by an act of interpretation. "To interpret" is indeed a transitive verb, in other terms, the action has to be addressed to an object, the signifier. Even the most abstract and recondite emotions can be traced back to either an image or an impression. So, how can we produce a signified with out any sensory stimulus? To reach an absolute signified we may have to leave the plane of logic and embrace the mysticism. In the last Canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante (1921) comes into sight of God, but while he tries in vain to see and understand the divine mystery, he is stunned by an intuition which satisfies all his desires. Dante experiences a blind contemplation of sorts which provokes an enlightenment, a pure signified which is totally ideal, hence indescribable.

It becomes clear that, if we turn to mysticism in order to grasp an isolated signified, we are admitting our inability to find a rational demonstration. So, it really seems that two independent signifier and signified are a chimera. Nevertheless, the deeper it is possible to reach into the distinction of the two elements, the more accurate the comprehension of the phenomenon becomes. Therefore, if in our case the aim is to comprehend the phenomenon of greetings in relation to social expectation we have to ask ourselves how the tools of graphic design can be used as an "electrolysis" in order to separate what is believed inseparable, to deconstruct the gesture into examinable layers.

With this purpose, I modeled a 3D representation of the gesture between Trump and Macron. By doing that I got inspired by the artwork *KING* by David Claerbout (2016). Like the Belgian artist, I transposed a two-dimensional photograph into the space, in a process which is simultaneously of retracing the visible parts and guessing the hidden ones. I ended up with a sculptural group of two identical and asexual mannequins, immobilised in the peak of their physical expressiveness. The mannequins are deprived of any recognisable traits and they are plunged in an aseptic metaphysical space. A virtual camera moves within the scene like the flight of a fly and allows to explore the subject from many different angles and distances.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Dante Alighieri (1921) *The Divine Comedy*. Translated from the Italian by C. Langdon. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

David Claerbout (2016) *KING* [single channel video projection]. Exhibited at PARCUM, Herverlee/Leuven, 2019