

WR3- POSITION

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The research process is non linear and full of false steps. When driven by practice, it may land on unexpected tangents, sometimes far from the initial intention. As a result, it can be difficult to envision a meaningful continuation. My previous iterations led to a surprising reflection upon the nature of an image, composed by a signifier and a signified. While those considerations were perhaps interesting and relevant to graphic communication design, they were too broad and not specific to the phenomenon of greetings, analysed in my investigation.

After some new attempts, where I tried to deconstruct the 3D model into its fundamental elements and then reassemble them in a quasi-totemic representation of the greeting, I realised I was losing the sense of the gesture because the representation was too impersonal and inhuman. Therefore, I decided to take a few steps back in order to re-center my focus on evocative power and perception of the greeting.

With this purpose, I proceeded to gather more data. I had already noticed how the greeting is charged with added values when it involves public figures, so I decided to put the focus on politicians. In fact, the origin of the handshake seems to lie precisely in politics, according to art historian Glenys Davies (1985). The first representation of a handshake is on a Babylonian relief, dated around 1800 BC, which depicts a scene of an annual ceremony where the Babylonian monarch has to accomplish a gesture of submission towards the divinity Marduk. The gesture consisted of touching the hand of the divinity statue as a sign of respect, and through that contact receive the legitimation of his political powers.

Throughout the centuries the handshake evolved, holding both peaceful and cautionary intentions. In Ancient Greece, people greeted each other with the arm stretched with open palm as a sign of trust, and to demonstrate that the hand was not carrying any weapon. Romans used to grab each other's forearm when they met, to ensure they were not hiding weapons in the sleeves of their robes, and Medieval knights accompanied the handshake by a brief up and down movement, which again was intended to make sure nothing inimical was concealed inside their clothes.

Nowadays, the handshake has become an ingrained social habitus widespread all over the world, and is now the most common form of casual greeting. However, in political communication the handshake still plays a very important role, so politicians try their best to take the most advantage from the moment of greeting. The videos I collected show the rituality of political greetings, a ceremony which is part of the political protocol and cannot be avoided, especially when the greeting is happening publicly, in which case both parties are not even looking at each other, but at the cameras. This is the most fictional version of the greeting, because the real subject, rather than being the pacific union between the two politicians and the underlying deal reached, becomes the greeting itself. In other words, the only thing that matters are the two hands shaken. It can be seen as a meta-theatrical performance where the fourth wall is broken and the two performers are directly addressing the audience. During this performance, politicians use the body language as a vehicle to portray themselves in the public eye. There is a plethora of analyses explaining the handshake's techniques, and politicians who pay attention to appearances are highly aware of these nuances.

For instance, a "palm down" handshake communicates domination, whereas the "upper hand" approach is a sign for submission. In a balanced scenario of an equal handshake, the camera angle tends to favour the person on the left. In fact, the person on the left of the frame shows the back of the hand closer to the cameras, visually prevailing on the hand of the person on the right. If disadvantaged by this camera's positioning, a politician can counterattack employing the double-clasp, which consists of clenching the other person's knuckles, regaining power and re-asserting control. The double clasp can evolve into an arm clasp, which is even more authoritative.

A case worth mentioning is Trump's manoeuvre, centre of the research conducted by social psychologist Saul Albert (2019). Trump seems to never grant these advantages to his counterpart. An interesting approach he uses consists of offering his hand with the "palm up" in an apparently submissive approach, giving the counterpart a false sense of security. Trump then vigorously squeezes the other person's hand and pull it energetically toward himself, unsteading them.

During my research, I came across many articles claiming that due to the coronavirus outbreak, the handshake may actually disappear from our daily life. In some countries, governments have already banned it. Emblematic is the case of the Netherlands, where just after announcing the ban on live television, the Prime Minister broke it by shaking hands with a health official. This provoked hilarity on social media, and showed just how deeply ingrained and almost automatic this habitus is.

It is a bitter irony noticing how the gesture, which was born as a sign to offer peace now delivers a threat of infection. The temptation of leading my investigation in this new territory is strong, but I am also still persuaded that the theme of greetings and body language as a performative act dictated by social constructs and as a means to reinforce gender roles would also offer very interesting points of reflection. Thus, I believe that only practice and new iterations can indicate me which path to follow.

Glenys Davies (1985) 'The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art', *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 627-640.

Saul Albert et al. (2019) 'Conversation analysis at the 'middle region' of public life: Greetings and the interactional construction of Donald Trump's political persona', *Language & Communication*, Vol. 69, pp. 67-83