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Visualising charisma: representations of the charismatic touch

MATTHEW IMMERGUT and MARY KOSUT

Although sociologists regard charisma as a social construct, few studies look at the explicit interactions that create and maintain this type of authority. This article examines one specific, but ubiquitous social interaction between leader and follower – the charismatic touch. The charismatic touch is a semi-formal interaction in which leader and followers exchange mutual recognition through verbal, visual and physical touch. Through touching each other this way, charisma becomes palpable, the bond with followers enlivened and the authority of the leader reconstituted. By analysing photographs from a visual ethnographic study of Diamond Mountain, a Western convert Buddhist community, and images of political leaders culled from mass media, one can observe a dynamic of intimacy and distance in maintaining and performing charisma. As data, visual representations of the charismatic touch capture evidence of its micro-interactional nature and offer a new approach to the field of charisma in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

In the popular imagination, charisma is seen as an individual attribute that certain extraordinary people possess (Turner 2003). Charisma signifies a personality trait, ineffable quality or natural disposition that makes an individual stand apart from others. Sociologists, however, have challenged this common understanding, maintaining that charisma is socially constructed (Finlay 2002; Wallis 1982; Weber 1958b, 295; 1968, 48). From this perspective, charisma is a form of authority and as such is inherently relational – the product of an ongoing interaction between leaders and followers.

Yet, even with this agreement, few sociological studies actually focus on the specific micro-interactions by which charismatic power is built up. In particular, there is a lack of analysis of the intimate embodied exchanges that contribute to making charisma a substantial force. To fill this gap, this visual essay uses a micro-interactional framework to examine what we conceptualise as the charismatic touch – a semi-formal interaction in which leader and followers exchange

mutual recognition through verbal, visual and physical touch. Through this somatic exchange, charisma becomes palpable, the bond with followers enlivened and the authority of the leader reconstituted. Beyond this main assertion, we also argue that the touch balances the critical dynamic of intimacy and distance. That is, the touch provides a moment of physical intimacy that enlivens followers and cements the bond to a leader who is customarily socially removed and very often seen in god-like terms. At the same time, the touch reaffirms the leader's distance and their salient uniqueness, as they remain the focus of collective attention and the one to be touched or touched by.

Our examination of the charismatic touch stems from a larger visual ethnography of Diamond Mountain, a community of Western converts to Tibetan Buddhism under the charismatic leadership of Geshe Michael Roach and Lama Christie McNally. We use video stills culled from this research to illustrate moments in which the touch is enacted between leader and follower. The Diamond Mountain fieldwork enables us to pinpoint a particular act of charisma within the framework of an understudied new religious movement. However, by shifting focus from religion to politics, we show how the charismatic touch works as a more general interaction occurring between other charismatic leaders and their followers. The charismatic touch, in other words, operates similarly in different social contexts. To demonstrate its general utility, we begin with an analysis of images produced in the process of fieldwork within a religious community and then turn our focus to iconic images of charismatic political figures that are easily accessible via an Internet search. We underscore how the performance of the charismatic touch works in different social realms as an intimate and theatrical exchange.

Although we will address issues pertaining to the charismatic leaders we selected in greater detail below, a few words are in order about our sample. Our selection could have consisted of a variety of other political and religious figures precisely because the charismatic touch is so ubiquitous. We simply had to limit our selection for

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the sake of space and clarity. We chose the example of religious leadership because of the rich fieldwork at our disposal and selected for comparison three political leaders all of whom are both treated as personally charismatic and defined as charismatic in academic literature.

In addition, semi-formal, public touches are ever present within the popular cultural landscape, and many appear to depict the affective qualities of charisma – adoring fans clamouring around film celebrities and rock icons, or sports fanatics reaching out to superstar athletes. What all of these touches share is the breaking of a membrane between those deemed special in some way and their followers or admirers, thereby strengthening the affective force. While recognising this similarity, we delimit our analysis of the charismatic touch to religious and political leaders because charisma is a form of authority in which leaders provide a comprehensive ideological vision and make concrete demands upon followers and followers attribute greatness to their leader. In this context, the touch must be seen as distinct in that it works to create and maintain authority and legitimacy.

STUDIES OF CHARISMA: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

Max Weber brought the concept of charisma out from the arena of theology and into sociological focus. For Weber, the study of charisma was about authority. Charismatic authority was one form of legitimate domination in his tripartite typology – the other two being rational-legal and traditional authority. The basis of legitimacy for rational-legal authority comes from being imbedded in a bureaucratic structure dictated by codified rules and regulations. A judge, police officer or corporate manager all exemplify this type of authority. Traditional authority derives from being a part of a past tradition. A king or a priest, for example, are deemed legitimate order-givers because of their position within respected traditions. Unlike the other two, charismatic authority rests on the seemingly exceptional traits of the individual that stir obedience from followers. Charisma was a gift of individual grace according to Weber, one in which the individual ‘is set apart from other men and treated as endowed supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’ (Weber 1947, 358).

Although emerging within the individual, Weber was not proposing a psychological typology, as if there were certain universal traits that make someone charismatic. Instead, he recognised that only the acknowledgment by

others can lead to the full bloom of the charismatic phenomena. As Weber writes, ‘It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a “sign” or proof, originally always a miracle. . . What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his “followers” or “disciples”’ (Weber 1978, 241–242). What Weber articulates here is a relational view of charisma, charisma as a social construct.

It is important to note that Weber treated all three forms of authority as ‘ideal types’. By ideal, Weber did not mean that these were perfect nor did he mean morally right or best. Instead, ideal types were ‘mental constructs’, created from a variety of observed characteristics and then used as a heuristic tool to make sense of a messy reality, to see patterns and to compare seemingly non-comparable cases in order to elucidate their similarities. In Weber’s own words, ‘An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasised viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. . . In its conceptual purity, this mental construct. . . cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality’ (Weber [1903–1917] 1949, 90). Therefore, although ideal types of authority can be analytically distinguished and heuristically useful, living authority very often appears in a variety of combinations. A president, for instance, is clearly a form of rational-legal authority. Yet, any particular president can also have a certain amount of personal charisma, a type of ‘pure’ charisma that may have been evident prior to the height of their power. A traditional religious leader, such as a priest or monk, can also be a charismatic as well, very often challenging the very tradition to which they belong.

Although most scholarship on charisma begins with Weber, sociological studies of charisma have been inconsistent. As Miyahara argues, ‘one can find such diverse definitions of charisma as the capacity to bring salvation, simple normative influence, extraordinary emotional significance, imputed moral superiority and the capacity to arouse awe and reverence’ (Miyahara 1983, 373). These different definitions have been employed to study a range of phenomena – from organisational consensus and decision-making (Zablocki 1980) to social change and revolution (Berger 1963; Swatos 1981). Scholarship from outside of the field of sociology illustrates a similar diversity in definition and

utilisation of the concept. For example, in fields such as political science (Schweitzer 1984; Willner 1984), psychology (Oaks 1997) and leadership studies (Conger and Kanungo 1998), Weber's definition is the basis for conceptualisations and theoretical trajectories that approach charisma in myriad social settings.

Notwithstanding, sociologists generally agree that charisma is rooted in authority and therefore implies a specific type of relationship. Charisma is a social construct, something created and maintained by people in specific situations. Yet, rather than focus on inner dynamics of the relationship, scholars have given greater attention to external variables in the constitution of charisma. For example, charisma is seen as the result of historical upheaval or rapid social change (Barnes 1978; Jones and Anservitz 1975), some type of crisis or psycho-social deprivation (Corsino 1982; Galanter 1982; Halverson, Murphy, and Riggio 2004), the desire for belonging (Zablocki 1980) or the manipulations and ideological machinations of the leader (Lindholm 1990; Willner 1984). As DuPertuis points out, these approaches tend towards determinism and paint a picture of social actors as passive and very often irrational. As she writes, 'desperate times, desperate needs, and desperate characters compel them to impute charisma' (DuPertuis 1986, 112).

Many studies, therefore, presuppose a constructionist perspective, but few actually focus on the specific group dynamics taking place for charisma to take hold, for power to be built up, for followers to heed the call. This is not to discount the critical importance of historical or structural pressures in the constitution of charisma. But what remains under-theorised is the fascinating dimensions of micro-group dynamics. By shifting attention to the primary site of group dynamics, the question becomes, what social interactions facilitate the shift from a flesh and blood mortal into an exceptional, if not god-like being (Wallis 1982, 26)? Wallis is one of the earliest proponents of this interactionist perspective (Wallis 1982). Using the case study of David Berg, founder of the Children of God, he explores the specific history of interactions that turned a fairly average individual into a charismatic leader. Eileen Barker (1993) also focuses on the internal culture and structure of the group rather than just on external forces in her research on the Unification Church. She proposes a theory of 'charismatisation' whereby attribution of charisma is not an immediate or automatic response, but only through interaction with others does the new recruit 'learn' to see the leader as charismatic (184). Others have utilised a similar approach (Couch 1989; Finlay 2002; Joosse 2006; McGuire 1983), and Collins'

theoretical work provides some real possibility for close analyses of the creation of charisma (Collins 2004, 2010). Nevertheless, 24 years after Wallis' initial suggestion, Dawson asserts that in order to further the study of charisma, we must look more closely at specific interactions – 'we need enlightened microanalyses of the patterns of social interaction through which charismatic authority is constructed' (Dawson 2006, 22). We heed this call and refocus attention back to the specificity of interaction through analysing photographs that illuminate this process. They provide a lens to explore the interpersonal communication and embodied performance of charisma. Within these micro-acts, the somatic/affective aspect of charisma is articulated.

SAMPLING RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CHARISMATICS

As mentioned in the 'Introduction' section, our selection and comparison of various political and religious leaders raises a number of questions that should be addressed. First, to politics. Our comparative political sample consists of photographs of Adolf Hitler, Ronald Reagan and Barak Obama. We recognise that this selection might cause some to bristle because it may imply an equivalency; but charisma, as Weber pointed out, is a value-neutral term (1958a). That is, regardless of the content of the message or the consequences – good or evil – it is the vision and demands by leaders and attribution of greatness by followers that contribute to someone being deemed charismatic. As Willner asserts, 'charismatic leadership is a relationship, an interactional process, inherently neither moral nor immoral, neither virtuous nor wicked' (Willner 1984, 12). Her now classic book on political charisma includes a very diverse swath of examples including Hitler, Gandhi, Roosevelt and Mussolini (Willner 1984).

As we also discussed above, ideal types are mental constructs used to examine actual situations or cases of a particular phenomenon. Although we are treating our political sample as charismatic authorities, it is clear that they blur the neat lines of Weber's authority typology. The political leaders we have selected clearly have legitimacy based on their position within a legal-rational structure. But we assiduously chose these three political leaders because all of them are or were considered charismatic persons in the popular imagination and, importantly, they are defined and framed as charismatic leaders in the scholarly literature (Bligh and Kohles 2009; Gbadamosi 2009; Lepsius 2006; Seyranian and Bligh 2008; Willner 1984). This blurring also occurs within the religious realm, and clearly with Michael Roach as well. As a Tibetan Buddhist monk, Roach obviously has

traditional authority. Yet, as will be detailed below, he has behaved in ways that have directly challenged the Tibetan hierarchy – a classic charismatic move. In addition, the adoration and reverence by his students, the beliefs in their leader’s spiritual exceptionalism, clearly places both Roach and McNally within a charismatic type. The point is that when studying actual, lived authority, this kind of blurring is the norm.

Another issue to consider is that we are comparing religious and political forms of charisma that are difficult to compare. The argument being that the charismatic dynamics occurring at Diamond Mountain, or any small religious community, compared to the political examples such as Reagan or Hitler, are just too different to put side by side. Our definition of charisma, however, hinges on a leader providing a comprehensive ideological vision, attributions of greatness and willingness to follow – all of which can be found in our sample. Each of these points could be debated no doubt, with examples and counter-examples to refute or bolster the claim of a particular leader’s charisma. A vigorous debate could ensue about the comprehensiveness of any leader’s vision and the varying degrees to which followers embrace a particular ideology, obey demands or idolise their leader. A review of the literature on charisma reveals exactly this type of discussion – what are the defining features of charisma, does one particular religious or political leader deserve the label of charismatic or not and so on. This is important work, and we certainly acknowledge different forms and degrees of charisma, political and religious. Nevertheless, our interest is in the embodied and affective features that cut across different forms of charisma. We assert that charisma manifests through physical interaction and that the charismatic touch is a meaningful and deliberate performative act. Our aim in this article is to re-invigorate an interest in the micro-interactional dynamics of charisma through visual methods – not to engage in nuanced discussions of who is and is not charismatic or what specific criteria ‘really’ make some individual charismatic. In a sense, we are staying true to Weber’s ideal types, using common features of charisma not to find perfect matches or to argue for specific features as more charismatic than others, but as heuristic device to see interesting patterns in seemingly disparate cases. By re-opening an examination of charisma visually and inductively, we may, at some point, even be able to come to new and clearer definitions and criteria of charismatic authority. We are not comparing apples and oranges, so to speak. Rather, the investigation of charismatic leadership at Diamond Mountain leads us to examine and theorise the importance of semi-formal



FIGURE 1. Geshe Michael Roach and Lama Christie McNally. Reproduced courtesy of the photographer, Lyn Sims.

and public touching between various forms of charismatic authority in a variety of contexts.

IMAGES OF THE TOUCH: VISUAL METHODS

Becker (1974) was one of the first sociologists to champion the idea that photographic and other images had a significant place within sociological research. His seminal work ‘Photography and Sociology’, first published in 1974, examined the history and uses of photographs in conjunction with sociological studies of images, and the production of images in fieldwork and analysis, charting the field of visual sociology in its nascent stages.¹ Five years later, Goffman published *Gender Advertisements* (1979), one of the most comprehensive semiotic analysis of how gender is displayed in advertisements. Goffman concentrated on pre-existing images (analysing hands, knees, eyes, positioning, size) rather than text, making linkages between the representations of gender roles and the performance and institutionalisation of gender inequality in everyday life. Over 30 years later and within the past two decades especially, there has been increased attention towards the visual aspects of culture within the fields of sociology and cultural studies (Emmison and Smith 2000; Grady 1996; Harper 1993, 2012; Prosser 1998; Wagner 2002). While some works of visual sociology rely on photographs produced during fieldwork, others offer semiotic and qualitative media analysis to critically investigate the multiple meanings of images and the social and cultural contexts in which they emerge (Dunier and Carter 1999; Harper and Faccioli 2000; Pauwels 2008).

This visual sociological study uses two types of images to illustrate the charismatic touch – those created during the process of conducting ethnographic work on Diamond Mountain and circulating images of famous



FIGURE 2. McNally and student holding hands and talking as others look on and wait their turn. Reproduced courtesy of Tad Fettig Images.



FIGURE 3. Roach touching and being touched by student. Reproduced courtesy of Tad Fettig Images.

and infamous politicians known for their charisma. By reflexively using photographs taken in the field, and those selected from Internet searches, we show how charisma is represented through the visual language communicated in the charismatic touch. Photographic representations of the charismatic touch reveal a visual syntax as well as an affective relationship between leader and follower. They capture the charismatic touch, demonstrating the precise moment of exchange while adding to the visual historical archive. These images frame the performance of charisma to show the overlapping of bodies engaged in ritualistic moments that trigger heightened emotional states.

By carefully deconstructing these photographs – taken in the field and taken from mass media – we highlight the proximal interplay between bodies of leaders and followers while acknowledging the subjective nature of embodied experiences. This visual data enables us to reconsider charismatic authority as an interactional process performed between actors, rather than the result of macro-structural forces, political crises, social disorder or the psychology of particular vulnerable individuals.

BACKGROUND: FIELDWORK ON DIAMOND MOUNTAIN

What if you were asked to give up everything – loved ones, money, home – and go off into the desert to live in solitude and silence – having no contact with anyone – for three years, three months and three days? What if the promise was enlightenment, an implicit guarantee given to you by two leaders you saw as the embodiment of spiritual perfection? It was this promise, spoken by leaders and heard by followers, that sparked the ethnographic research on Diamond Mountain in 2008. Located in rural Southeastern Arizona, Diamond Mountain is a very remote and rustic Buddhist retreat and educational centre nestled in the foothills of the Chiricahua mountains.

The larger Diamond Mountain spiritual community was started by Michael Roach, an American-born Tibetan Buddhist Monk in the Gelugpa lineage. He was one of the first Americans to receive a Geshe degree, which is similar to a Doctorate of Divinity. Traditional in some ways, Roach has always been a controversial figure due to his professional and personal life. One of the biggest controversies came around 12 years ago, when, as a monk with celibacy vows, Roach took his primary student, Christie McNally, as his ‘spiritual partner’. He also made her a ‘lama’, causing uproar all the way to the current Dalai Lama.² Nevertheless, over the years, they



FIGURE 4. Followers bend towards McNally as she enters to give a public teaching. The touch is any type of exchange that occurs in a semi-formal interaction. In this case, McNally first grasps the hands of her follower and then takes the flowers from his hands which are in prayer position. When her hands get full, she gives flowers to her primary attendant, the man directly behind with long hair. Photograph by Matthew Immergut.

have garnered thousands of students globally and a core group of about 150 people. The demographic make-up of these students reflects the ‘White Buddhist’ population in the United States more generally – Euro-American, racially homogenous, middle class and well educated (Coleman 2001; Fields 1992; Prebish and Baumann 2002; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Seager 1999) (Figure 1).

Prior to being elevated to a position of leadership by Roach, McNally was a student, but a completely devoted student and a part of what Weber called the ‘charismatic aristocracy’ that so often surrounds a charismatic leader (Weber 1978). Once selected to lead by his side, Roach’s charisma, in a sense, ‘rubbed off’ on McNally. Within a few years, however, McNally was considered not only as an exceptional leader and perfect teacher, but also seen as a divine being.³

Over the past five years, Immergut has followed 40 devotees of Roach and McNally as they closed down their lives, moved to Arizona and entered their first three-year silent retreat at Diamond Mountain on December 2010. This visual ethnography will continue until they re-emerge and reintegrate into society on April 2014. As part of the fieldwork process, 40 in-depth interviews with members, as well as a series of follow up interviews, were conducted. In addition, to date, approximately 90 hours of video footage has been recorded capturing the overall life of the Diamond Mountain community, including group activities, rituals, teachings, the building of retreat cabins and the subjective experiences of the participants. As Roach, McNally and their followers have been very active online, producing images, websites and other publicly

available information, this research project also includes qualitative media analysis. This material, along with stories published in the popular press about the leaders and the group, was catalogued and analysed. We draw from this extensive data, in particular stills from video footage, to document the charismatic touch, its performance and significance in the creation and maintenance of charismatic authority.

OBSERVING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE CHARISMATIC TOUCH

In the process of conducting fieldwork, one regular interaction that captured the attention was the arrival of Roach and McNally for public teachings. He observed the followers line up, side by side, eagerly awaiting to give them flowers, speak a few words, prostrate at their feet, hug or touch and be touched by them in some way. The emotion and reverence were visually and viscerally palpable during these exchanges (Figures 2 and 3).

In Collins' interactionist terms, these images reveal specific social 'ingredients' such as physical proximity and mutual focus of attention on the leaders (2004). During this semi-formal ritual entrance, bodies were drawn closer together and the participants' postures and faces oriented towards Roach and McNally. Their bodies resembled plant leaves leaning towards sunlight to soak in a necessary and life-affirming force. These photographs also provide evidence of a 'shared mood' that fuelled the ritualised spectacle (Collins 2004, 48) (Figure 4).

The wide eyes and the smiles all seem to bespeak of a certain collective feeling of joy or happiness. What is also notable in these photographs is how proximity to Roach and McNally seems to dictate the amount of energy. Like a vortex of attention, Roach and McNally pull those closest to them with the greatest emotional intensity. For instance, those directly touching or being touched by Roach or McNally very often have the largest smiles, and as you move back the smiles decrease and gazes appear more scattered. However, images of facial expressions do not necessarily reveal commonly shared mood or shared subjective feelings. There is a long history in psychology of examining the relationship between facial expressions and emotions as well as more specific studies that directly assess the link between smiles and happiness (Ekman 2006). In terms of the latter, empirical evidence does not confirm that smiles indicate happiness (Ruiz-Belda et al. 2003). If anything, a smile simply conveys 'cooperative intent' regardless of any specific emotions (Ruiz-Belda et al. 2003, 324). Sociological research similarly confirms that people may

participate in a group ritual, but individually do not necessarily interpret or share the same emotional state (Heider and Warner 2010). Interviews with members of Diamond Mountain reveal that a degree of emotional variability exists when interacting with the Lama's during these moments of contact. Members report feeling joy, exuberance, love and a number of other positive emotions. At times, they also feel dread, humility and awe and may tremble and weep in the presence of their leaders and others in attendance. Thus, we cannot tell what is happening inwardly for the individual by simply reading their facial expressions.

Yet, even amidst the range of subjective experiences, the collective display itself holds the power. As Rappaport writes, 'It is the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, and not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment, which is socially and morally binding' (Rappaport 1999, 122). The externalisation of supposed inner states that are visibly communicated through bodies, faces and touching indicates the specialness of the person that sits at the centre of collective attention. But this is not a one-way street of attribution from followers to leaders. Instead, one can observe in these charismatic touch images an exchange of gazes, a mutual recognition and expressions of emotion – a smile that produces a smile, a touch that generates a touch. This reciprocal giving and receiving recurred at every public teaching – very often for 20 minutes or more, for what was usually a short walk from entrance to a main stage. As such, these various moments of touching and contact were important moments of interaction in the physical and symbolic constitution of the charismatic bond.

The charismatic touch not only contributes to an overall 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1915), but provides a necessary moment of physical intimacy to mediate the gap between leaders and their growing number of followers. When Roach and McNally started teaching together in 2003, they had regular close contact with their small band of disciples. Within a few years, their numbers grew significantly. As a result, except for a closed inner circle, or what Weber called the 'charismatic aristocracy', the original ease of access was lost. Johnson calls this the development of 'two worlds':

An unavoidable by-product of the fact that growth restricts ordinary members access to the founder is the division of the movements into two worlds, namely the world of followers and the world of the founder and the founder's most intimate circle. The former become increasingly isolated from the day-to-day concerns of the founder and the innermost cadre. With this division into different worlds,



FIGURE 5. Adolf Hitler surrounded by cheering crowd, c.1930s, Hulton-Deutsch Collection. Reproduced courtesy of Corbis.

the possibility arises that the typical information, perceptions, and preoccupations of the occupants of these two worlds will diverge. (Johnson 1992, s5)

To mediate the increasing distance, and control this gap, Johnson argues for the examination of the symbolic proliferation of images of the leader around the flock of congregates. Such images of Roach and McNally were very evident throughout the Diamond Mountain community. There were a variety of images such as headshots or the two of them with devotees on personal altars, in dining areas, on refrigerators and dashboards of cars, as well as digital images of them on computer screens. But another, more powerful way to manage this gap and decrease distance is through the act of the charismatic touch. Physically touching, in other terms, creates an emotional intimacy that builds a bridge between the first world of isolation and exclusion of the leader and the second world of the followers. The performance of the touch has affective resonance.

The images of Roach and McNally reveal this type of bridge building intimacy – a necessity to ensure ongoing charismatic authority – but the images also reveal distance. As the pictures display, Roach and McNally are the focus of everyone’s attention, they are distinct, powerful centres or even sacred symbols which group life revolves around. Their authority is reinforced because they are ‘not like us’. By touching or being touched by them, followers have contact with an ideal that is both within their physical grasp but somewhat out of reach or other-worldly. The charismatic touch embodies both intimacy and distance simultaneously – a balance of utmost importance for the sustainability of charismatic power. This tacit micro-interaction shows how charisma hinges on an affective exchange between actors. Even though it is clearly unequal, leaders and



FIGURE 6. Ronald Reagan working the crowd. Reproduced courtesy of Adam Watson, State Archives of Florida.

followers are energised and charged, and the status distinctions between them are reinforced.

FROM RELIGION TO POLITICS: THE CHARISMATIC TOUCH AS VISCERAL AND VISUAL

Although outsiders may view this type of emotional devotion with suspicion in new charismatically led religious groups, reverential exchange in public settings happens frequently within the larger secular society. The performance of charisma can be applied within other social settings (Gardner and Avolio 1998), particularly in individuals who use popular media as a vehicle to propel their power. In this final section, we assert that the charismatic touch is a way to *viscerally* and *visually* cement power and authority in the political sphere. The visceral aspect stems from the examination of the site of the actual image, the touching that happens between leaders and followers *in situ*. Just as with the images from Diamond Mountain, these pictures demonstrate a high degree of affective bonding and a touch that mediates a critical balance between intimacy and distance between leaders and followers. The visual communication of charisma refers to the narratives that such images portray, shifting our analysis from the site of the touch to the circulation of such images within the mediascape. These images (re)produce the touch symbolically and may communicate its significance

beyond the original context, thereby solidifying a leader's charismatic appeal.

Many renowned political leaders have been recognised for their distinctive charisma and, arguably, Adolf Hitler's power was fed in part by his authoritative and convincing persona. Hitler was highly aware of his public image, and he effectively used symbols, uniforms and political spectacles to strengthen it. In [Figure 5](#), Hitler performs the charismatic touch, in an unusually intimate way. Like the images from Diamond Mountain, leader and followers appear to be energised and euphoric through participation in this interaction. It is rare to see a photograph of Hitler smiling. His SS clad escort is also grinning. It is an intimate moment, where leader and followers physically touch, share mutual recognition and worthiness. What is also evident is Hitler's apartness or distance from others. He is the locus of attention and interaction. In this image, he reaches down from his moving car, physically removed, whereas others reach up, watch, salute and attend. Hitler and the left armband swastika merge into a type of living symbol. By reaching out and touching him, they touch an ideal, something to ascribe to. The message communicated is that power is within the grasp of the follower, but can never be fully transferred or possessed. As Roberts and Yamane write 'The charismatic person offers the only source of truth or salvation... Hence, the leader has a considerable amount of personal space – that is, he or she may be approached but not too closely' (Roberts and Yamane 2011, 152). The 'Rise to Power' is one of balancing this distance with intimacy – being close, accessible, intimate but in ways that reaffirm distance and exceptionalism. The charismatic touch can facilitate such work.

A more recent example of the performative and interactional dynamics of charisma is duplicated in a photograph of Ronald Reagan from the 1980s ([Figure 6](#)). Like the image of Hitler, the charismatic touch is being mobilised to enliven followers, to share a moment of mutual recognition and, more crucially, to balance intimacy and distance. In the world of mass media, the intimacy-distance dynamic becomes a pressing matter of presentation of self. Contemporary politicians, like Reagan, must navigate the performance of a credible authentic self, one that is personable and relatable but strong and special – a leader that is simultaneously 'of the people' and a leader 'for the people'.

In this image, Reagan displays a symbolic openness and accessibility through his smile and body language, which is rather exuberant in comparison to the image of Hitler. This may reflect both his personality and an astute awareness of the power of the construction of a likeable

personality within the mass media. As a former actor, Reagan was known for his affable nature and ability to communicate in a way that was read by many as 'no nonsense' or devoid of complex political rhetoric. His presentation of self was often more informal and convivial. Without this kind of likeability being portrayed in person and in the media, leaders get charged with being too stiff, lacking ease – castigated as aloof or distant. Of course, too much emotion, lack of bodily control, too big a smile or vigorous a handshake may demonstrate an inability to detect appropriate social cues thereby weakening authority and must be guarded against.⁴ But the charismatic touch provides a semi-formal, ritual context in which interactions are brief enough to secure intimacy, without risking accusations of over acting, being insincere or any other loss of control over impressions.

In considering male politicians, we speculate that the charismatic touch also allows a space for manipulation of gender codes. As many have shown (Hall 1987; Henley 1995; Hall, Carter, and Horgan 2000; Weitz 1976), there is a direct correlation between gender roles, embodiment and affect. Men's postures, expressions and gestures can be linked to male dominance and power in political, economic and cultural spheres. For example, in the performance of traditional masculinity, male bodies tend to take up more physical space than female bodies, regardless of the relative size of either, reinforcing hegemonic gendered spatial dominance. Self-identified heterosexual men who fail to present their bodies in masculine ways, risk being labelled as weak, ineffective or sexually deviant. However, the charismatic touch allows a moment for male charismatic leaders, specifically in the political sphere, to safely be expressive and receptive. This may cultivate a temporary intimacy with a leader who is usually distant, powerful and untouchable. The charismatic touch is nurturing, 'feminine' and a necessary expression of soft power to ensure charisma. The charismatic touch facilitates an instance in which masculine power is not eroded by gestures of the feminine. In fact, the performance taps the feminine to solidify empathy and intimacy, potentially shoring charismatic authority for male politicians and fuelling affective relationships.

The media offers an opportunity to strategically disseminate such images into the popular cultural imagination. Photographs of the charismatic touch can be used as a form of visual capital in calculated political publicity efforts. At the site of circulation, the images can also provide a sense of intimacy and relatability to the non-present viewer and at the same time demarcate the leader as exceptional, someone standing above but

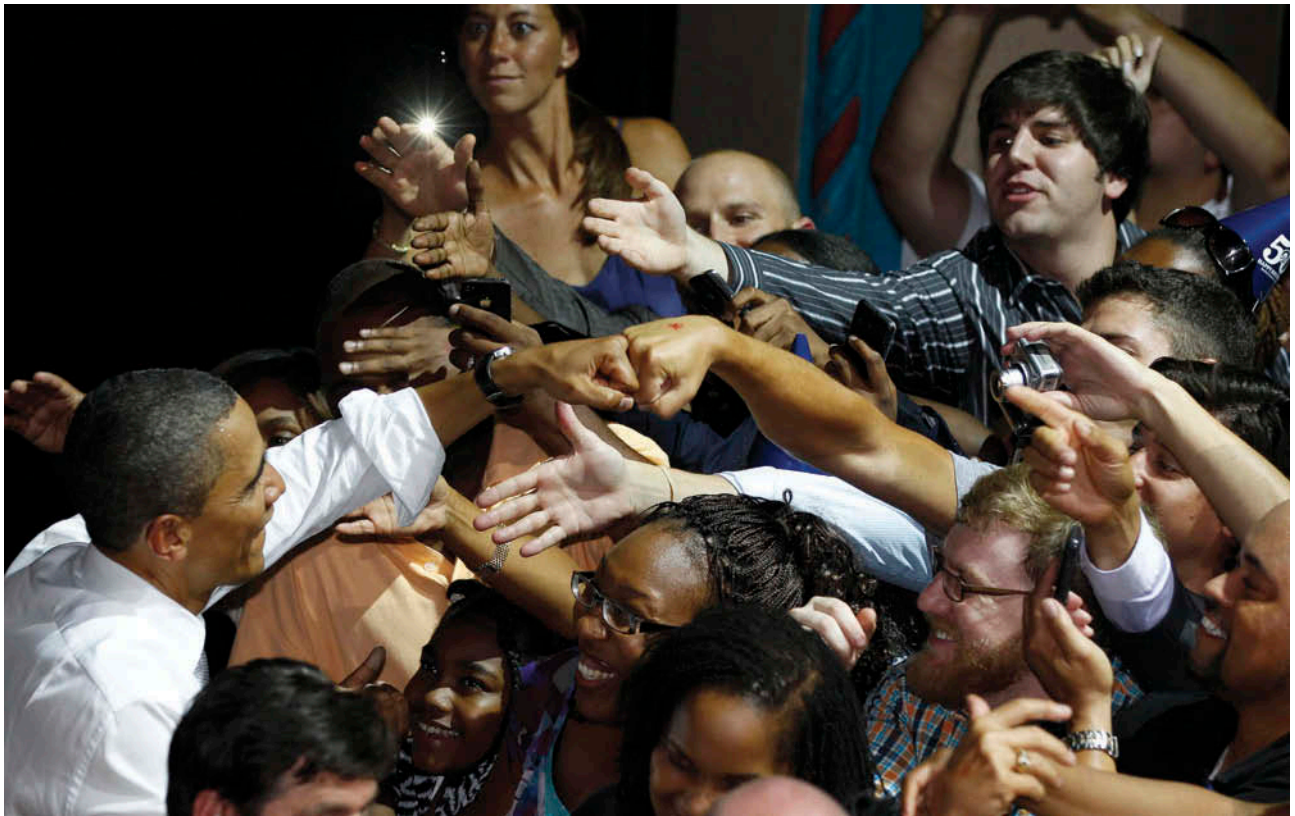


FIGURE 7. United States President Barack Obama fist bumps a supporter after he delivers remarks at a Democratic National Committee fundraiser at the Aragon Entertainment Center in Chicago, 3 August 2011. REUTERS/Larry Downing. Reproduced courtesy of Corbis.

powerfully persuasive over the crowd. Barack Obama, a twenty-first century president who is very technologically savvy, accomplishes this balancing act well in his media appearances.

Obama used social networking sites, virtual worlds and video games during his campaigns to assiduously connect to a larger population of people, particularly those born after the advent of the Internet. The Obama White House has its own Flickr account in which it uploads carefully edited photographs of the president. Many of these images are of Obama touching and being touched by the crowd and depict a similar balancing act between his presentation of self as authentic, intimate and one of the people, while also demarcating him as a leader for the people. Although the White House Flickr account does not grant permission for the open usage of these photographs, people do view them and comment on the images.⁵ In a May 2011 photo-set documenting Obama's visit to Ireland, a photograph of screaming college girls excitedly reaching out to touch him has almost 50 000 views. The image is similar in emotional intensity to another image (Figure 7) where audience members stretch and bend their bodies for a chance to touch his.

When considering the circulation of these images to reach out and touch those not present and thereby to

reconnect and recharge the charismatic bond between leader and followers, we can see a direct precedent in the religious realm. Carefully crafted and aesthetically rendered religious icons, rhetoric and performance-based spectacle have been used by televangelists and savvy spiritual leaders to create symbolic communities and shared understandings for disparate and geographically disconnected devotees. As Morgan (2007) has shown, images of Jesus as hero, friend, stoic servant and the ideal masculine or macho physique have been strategically deployed to sell Christianity from the late nineteenth to twentieth century. While we do not focus on the function of the charismatic touch as a promotional strategy per se, it is clear that the touch has been reproduced widely in mass media. These mediated versions may give some viewers a feeling of being there and being connected through symbolic touching. The touch does indeed have embodied precedents in radio and television:

In the days of radio broadcast, evangelist Oral Roberts asked his listeners to place their hands on their radio sets as they listened from afar in their parlors to pray with him and receive a special blessing which he would send by touching the microphone through which he broadcast his sermon. His son, Oral Roberts,

Jr., applied the same practice in his televised services, asking viewers to place their hands on their television sets to touch his own palm raised before the camera. (Morgan 2007, 223)

This version of the touch mediated through radio and television works in a similar way to bring the leaders and followers symbolically closer together. It is in a sense, a virtual charismatic touch. It emanates as a form of embodied 'electricity' that requires a 'circuit' of transmission which can be effectively channelled through mass media, whether televisual or virtual (Morgan 2007, 223). Within the frame of mass media, when actual contact with a leader is unlikely, the proliferation of images can bridge this distance. Images of the charismatic touch, in particular, may provide that same type of virtual electricity, reaffirming closeness and exceptionalism simultaneously, and thereby visually constructing and cementing charismatic power and authority in the political sphere. The touch clearly works at the site in which it is enacted and physically experienced, but photographs allow it to perpetually circulate as a reference. Documentation of the touch affords an opportunity for the larger public to observe, to symbolically participate and to gauge for themselves whether the charismatic leader is authentic.

CONCLUSION

Images of charismatic touching are ubiquitous in mass media and popular culture. However, as the Diamond Mountain research demonstrates, the moment of charismatic touching is a crucial aspect within the context of a charismatically led religious community. This *in situ* interaction shores the hierarchical relationship between leader and follower, while offering an emotional and embodied experience. It may be transitory, but it is a deeply felt intimacy, particularly for the devotees. By focusing on this somatic and affective micro-interaction, one can begin to better understand the complexity of charismatic authority. Images of the touch help sociologists and ethnographers to capture and analyse this short-lived event and place it within a larger theatre of sociality, where relationships are generated and power is solidified.

Within the expanding realm of contemporary visual culture, in part fuelled by mobile media and apps such as Instagram, photographs of the charismatic touch allow the ritual to reach millions of people – Flickr alone contains 8 billion photographs and 1.5 million active groups – some of whom may already be fans, supporters and followers. Others who may be unfamiliar or uninterested in the charismatic leader are exposed to the

visual communication of charisma – choosing to click it into focus or to delete. Either way, the symbolic syntax of the touch has been distributed and entered circulation within the mediated 'image world' (Sontag 1977). It becomes part of our visual language.

The power of the charismatic touch may resonate beyond those directly involved in the initial physical exchange – as evidence such as the White House Flickr photostream and images produced and disseminated by religious communities like Diamond Mountain. They suggest that astute spiritual and political leaders understand its potential to convey a message of intimacy and authority. Ultimately, charisma becomes associated with the act of touching, a gesture represented in numerous historical and contemporary photographs. The photographs signify the leaders' charisma, making the touch a powerful communicative interaction. Semiotically, the touch is the sign, ultimately signifying the leader's 'electricity' or 'humanness' or 'powerfulness'. As various iterations of the touch circulate across media platforms, they may be appropriated, revised and relocated in divergent contexts – blogs, Tumblers, websites – producing new meanings that may strengthen or diminish the charismatic authority of the leader. Charismatic leaders may lose their influence and their constituency, but the performance of the touch itself will likely endure due to its functional, affective and generative power.

NOTES

- [1] For an overview of the early history of visual sociology, see Stacz (1979).
- [2] The office of H. H. Dalai Lama issued a letter to Roach stating: 'We have received inquiries and letters of concern about your status and conduct from many people. We have seen a photograph of you wearing long hair, with a female companion at your side, apparently giving ordination... This unconventional behavior does not accord with His Holiness's teachings and practice'. Letters are available online at <http://info-buddhism.com/Dalai-Lama-Letters.pdf> (accessed 25 September 2013).
- [3] For a more complete understanding of their relationship, see Kaufman (2008). For a more comprehensive treatment of their relationship, their break-up and the ensuing years of scandal, see Immergut (2013).
- [4] Howard Dean and what is now known as the 'Dean Scream' is a good example of how emotional exuberance can ruin a political career (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Dean#Disappointing_Iowa_results_and_the_22_Dean_Scream.22_media_gaffe).
- [5] As stated on the White House Flickr account under each photograph available for public viewing: 'This official White House photograph is being made available only for publication by news organisations and/or for personal use

printing by the subject(s) of the photograph. The photograph may not be manipulated in any way and may not be used in commercial or political materials, advertisements, emails, products, promotions that in any way suggests approval or endorsement of the President, the First Family, or the White House’.

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