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Centre for Cognitive Semiotics
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Barthes and beyond: From structuralism to semiotics

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Roland Barthes, 1915 - 1980



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Le Degré zéro de l'écriture suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1953
Michelet par lui-même, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1954
Mythologies, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1957 - rééd. augmentée, 2010
Sur Racine, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1963
Essais critiques, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1964
La Tour Eiffel, Centre national de la photographie/Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1964
Éléments de sémiologie, Denoël/Gonthier, Paris, 1965
Critique et Vérité, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1966
Système de la mode, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1967
S/Z essai sur Sarrasine d'Honoré de Balzac, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1970
L'Empire des signes, Skira, Paris, 1970
Sade, Fourier, Loyola, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1971
Nouveaux essais critiques, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1972

Le Plaisir du texte, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1973
Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1975
Alors la Chine ?, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1975
Fragments d'un discours amoureux, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1977
Leçon, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1978
Sollers écrivain, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1979
La Chambre claire : Note sur la photographie, Gallimard/Seuil/Cahiers du cinéma, Paris, 1980
Le Grain de la Voix : Entretiens, 1962-1980, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1981
L'Obvie et l'Obtus : Essais critiques III, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1982
Le Bruissement de la langue : Essais critiques IV, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1984
L'Aventure sémiologique, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1985
Œuvres Complètes, 5 tomes, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2002

Works on semiotics

[Mythologies, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1957 - basically the postface](#)

[La Tour Eiffel, Centre national de la photographie/Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1964](#)

Éléments de sémiologie, Denoël/Gonthier, Paris, 1965

Système de la mode, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1967

[S/Z essai sur Sarrasine d'Honoré de Balzac, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1970](#)

L'Empire des signes, Skira, Paris, 1970

L'Aventure sémiologique, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1985

And a number of articles:

Le message photographique in [Communications n° 1, 1961](#)

Le message publicitaire, rêve et poésie, in [Les Cahiers de la publicité n° 1, 1963](#)

Rhétorique de l'image in *Communication*, n°4, 1964

L'ancienne rhétorique. Aide-mémoire. In [Communications, n° 1, 1970](#)

+ several articles on narratology



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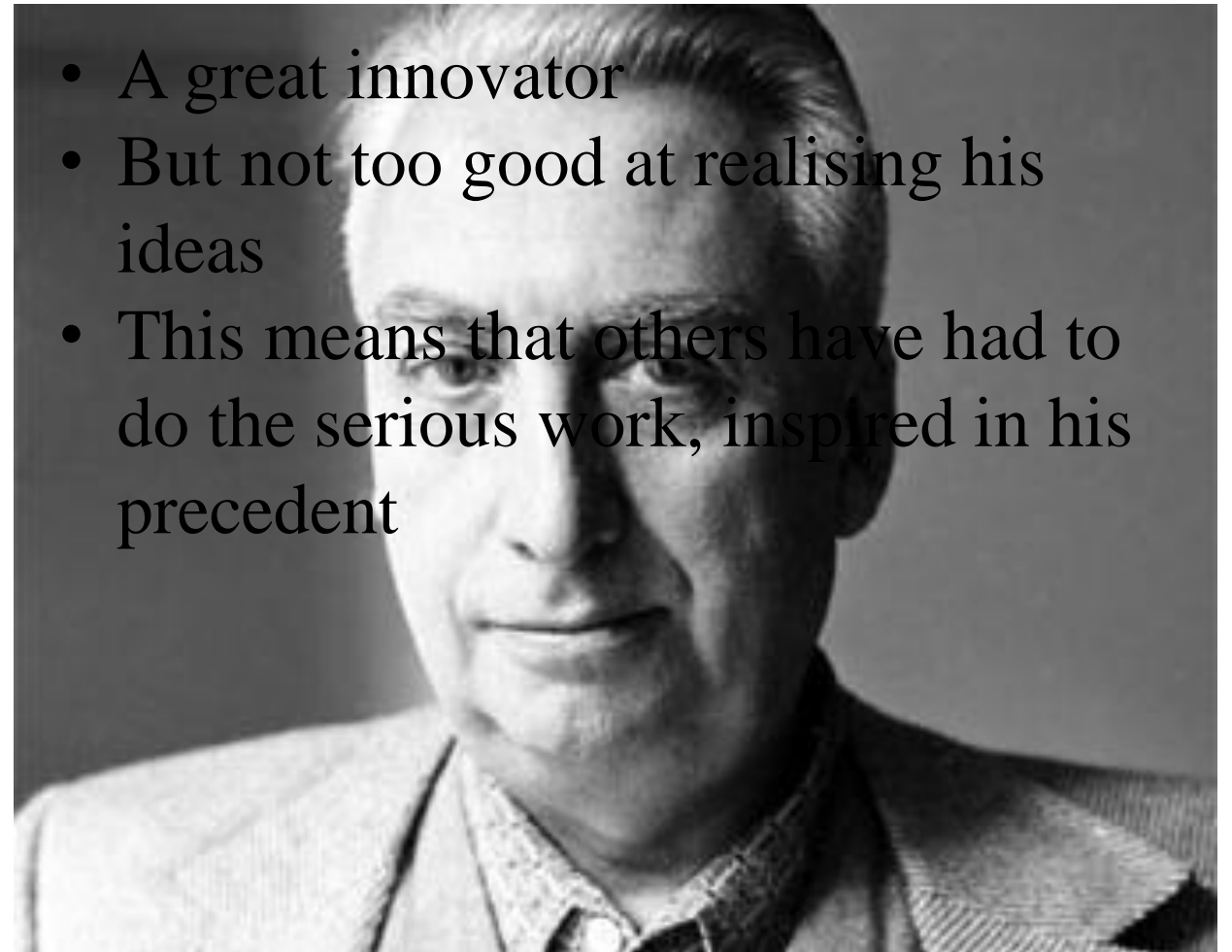
Le message photographique in [Communications n° 1, 1961](#)

Le message publicitaire, rêve et poésie, in [Les Cahiers de la publicité n° 1, 1963](#)

Rhétorique de l'image in *Communication*, n°4, 1964

L'ancienne rhétorique. Aide-mémoire. In [Communications, n° 1, 1970](#)

+ several articles on narratology



- A great innovator
- But not too good at realising his ideas
- This means that others have had to do the serious work, inspired in his precedent

Remembrances of
Panzani spaghetti:

Barthes: “The rhetoric
of the picture” (1964)



Barthes as initiator of Pictorial semiotics

- Because, unlike art history, he used a *model* to analyze a picture
- And he based the model on semiotic (meaning-bearing) categories

But in fact pictorial semiotics was born out of the *critique* of Barthes' attempt

- Critique stemming from the Greimas school, notably Jean-Marie Floch
- Critique by Groupe μ (Liège school)
- Critique by Fernande Saint-Martin (Quebec school)
- My own critique

A model

- *A simplified, but still more or less iconic, representation of the object studied*
- which can be more easily manipulated than the real thing,
- and which (ideally) has the advantage of representing *classes of objects of a particular category*, rather than a single object,
- so that, *when methodological operations are applied to it, it yields information about the category of objects concerned*

A model

- *A simplified, but still more or less iconic, representation of the object studied*
 - In Barthes' case Hjelmslev's connotation-model (only that Barthes has not understood it)
- which can be more easily manipulated than the real thing
 - But you cannot manipulate a model you have not understood
- and which (ideally) has the advantage of representing *classes of objects of a particular category*, rather than a single object,
 - We can only know whether this is true, if the model is applied to more than one object (in this case, more than one picture)
- so that, *when methodological operations are applied to it, it yields information about the category of objects concerned*
 - Since the model is both unclear and has not been generalized, it cannot work

Connotation:

A secondary meaning
resulting from *the choice*
you make among several
alternatives for conveying
a primary meaning

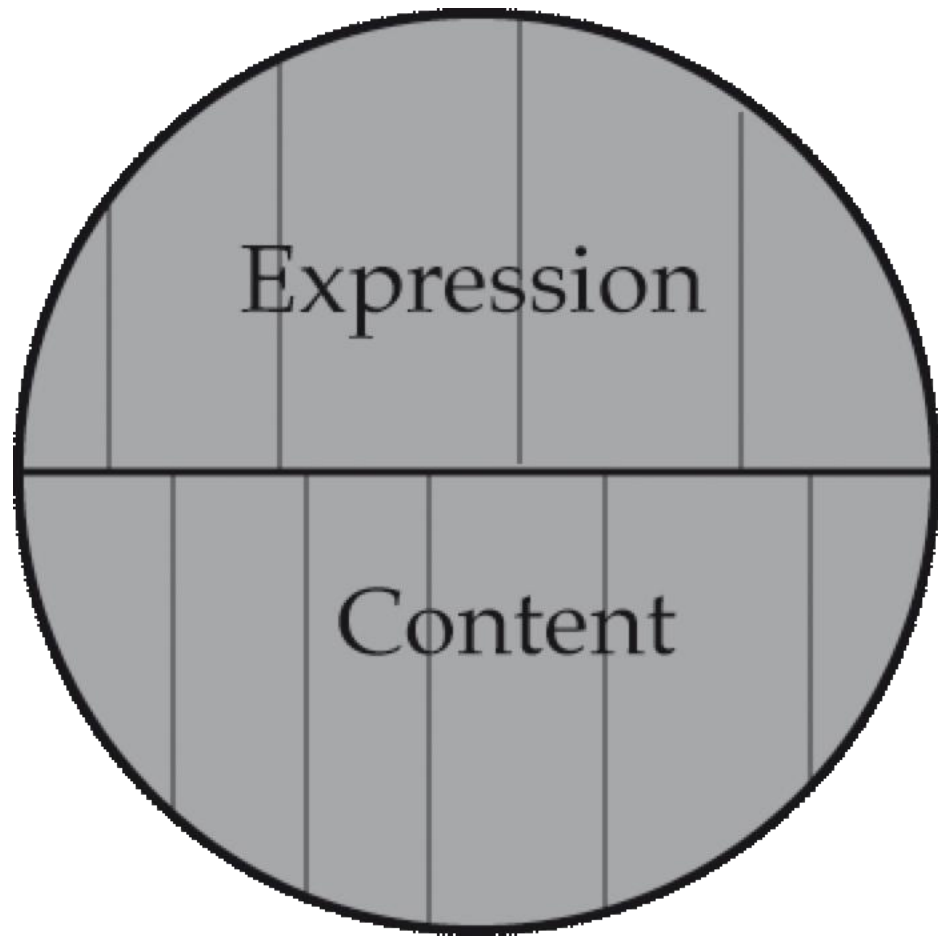


Connotation:

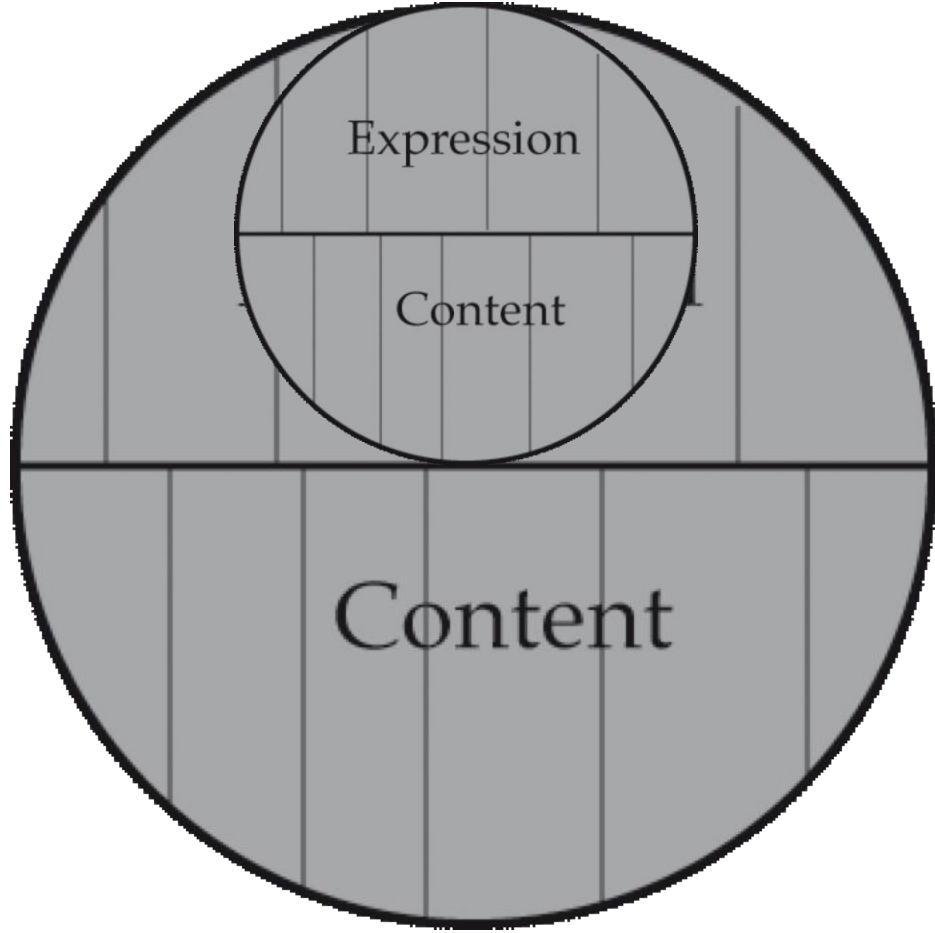
A secondary meaning resulting from *the choice you make among several alternatives* for conveying a primary meaning:

Louis Hjelmslev: "All the time I am speaking I am connoting 'Danish'"

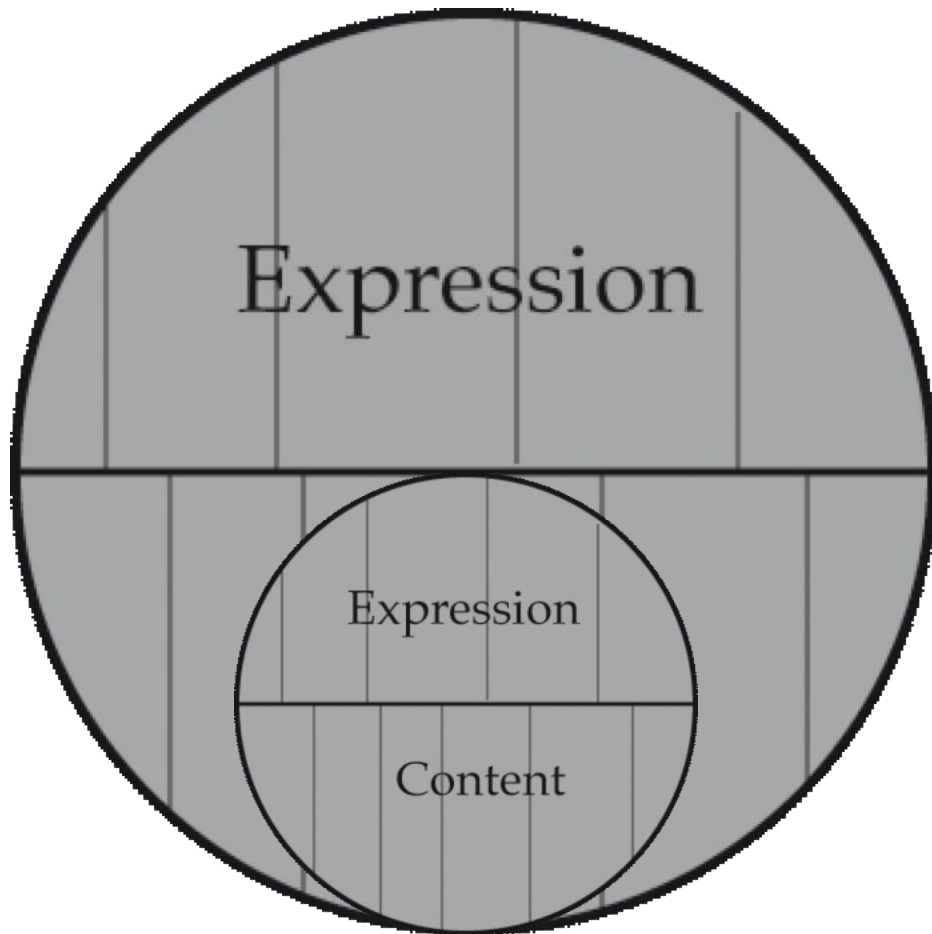
Denotation



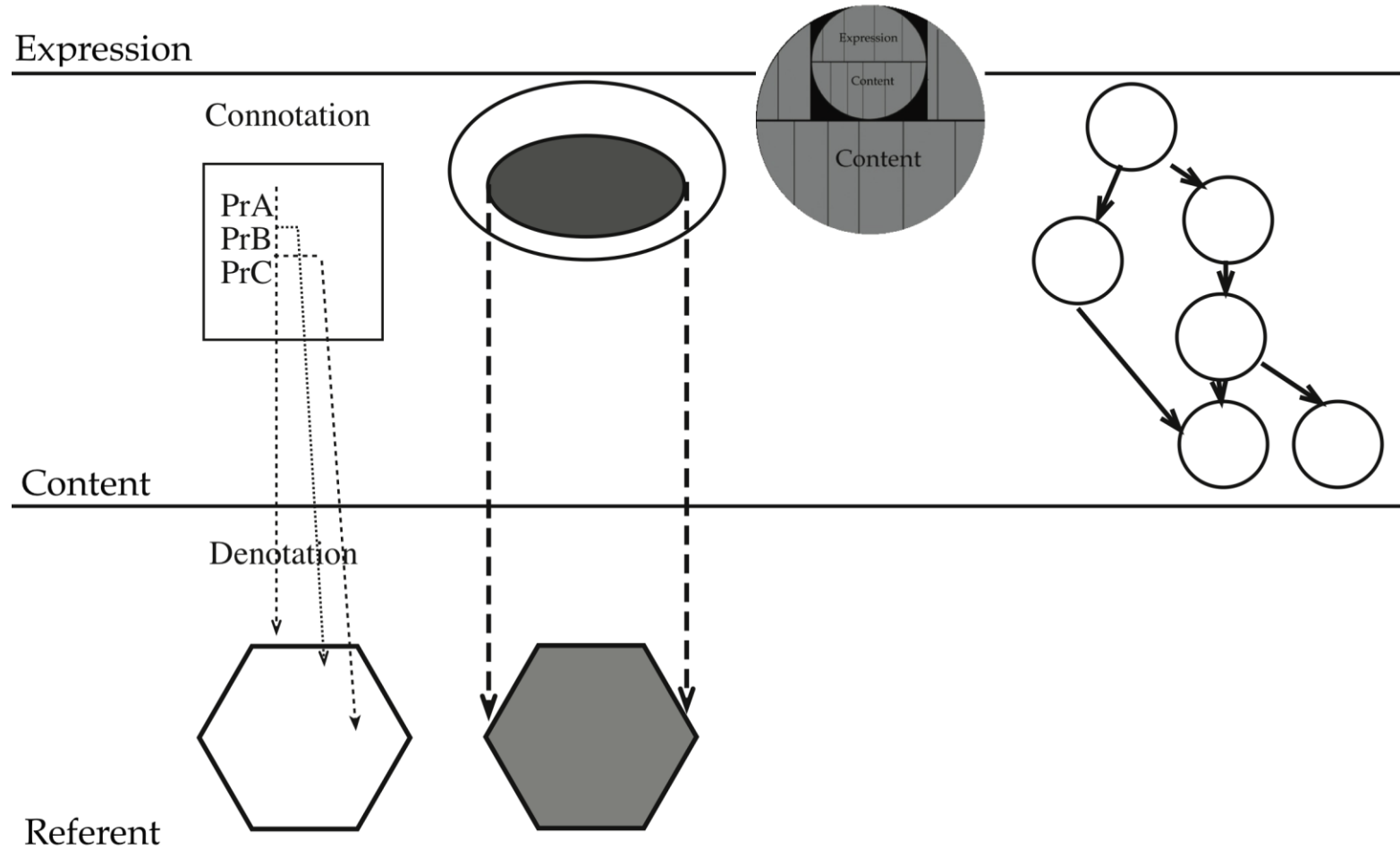
Connotation



Metalinguage



- 1) Logical 2) Stylistic 3) Hjelmlev's 4) Eco's distinction =



Real connotations in Panzani (Choice of expression alternative with constant meaning)

- The word "Panzani"
- "advertisement"
- "stilleben"



The rest is rather *topoi* (in the rhetorical sense) – things taken for granted in our socio-cultural Lifeworld

- “abundance”:
“complete meal”,
“product = raw material”



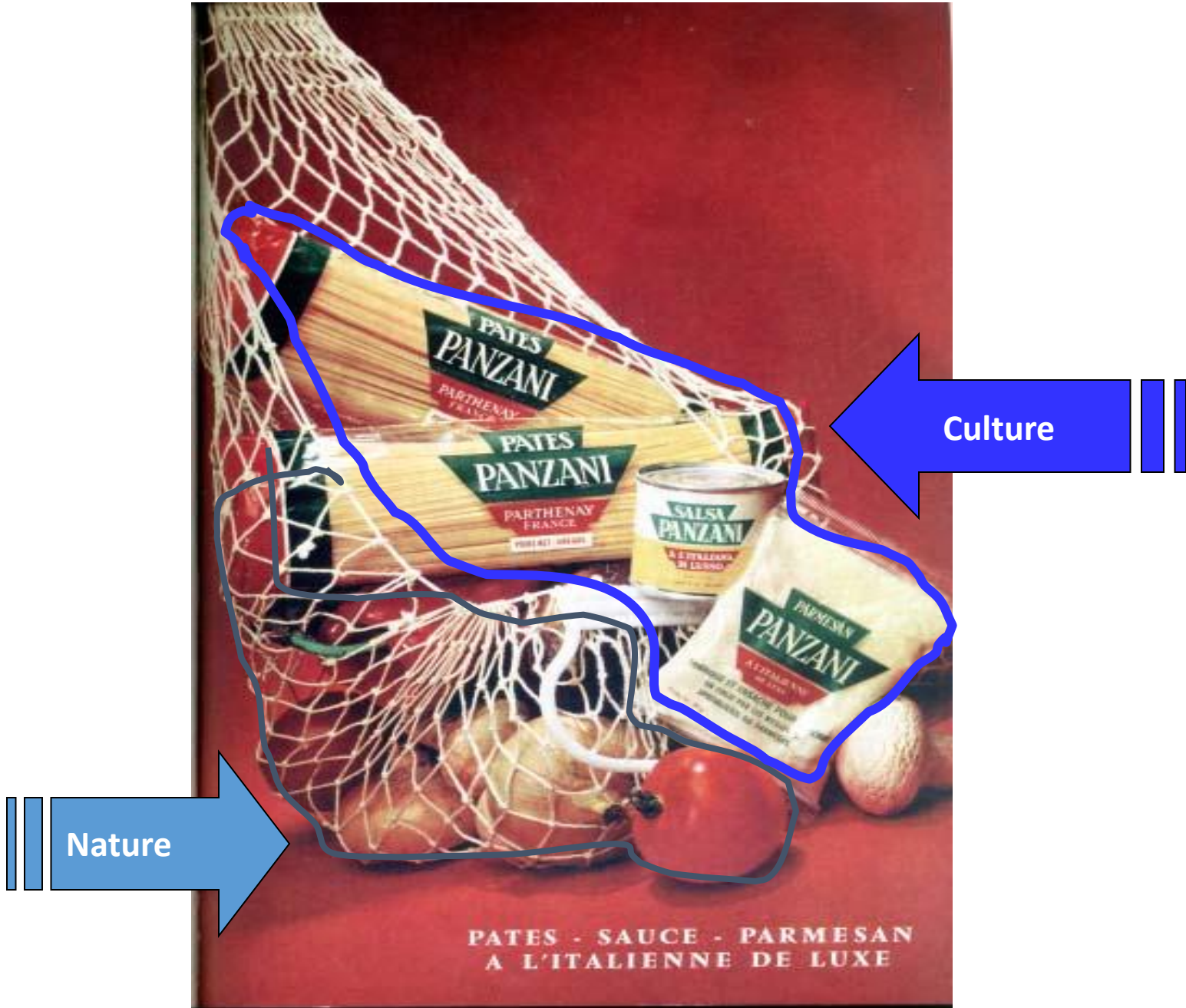
The rest is rather *topoi* (in the rhetorical sense) – things taken for granted in our socio-cultural Lifeworld

- “market trade”:
“newly
harvested”, “for
home made
food”



Present-day *topoi* – things taken for granted in our socio-cultural Lifeworld

- “processed product ≠ raw material”
- To begin with a **contiguity**
- (relatively) **unexpected presence**



Four (or five) parts of classical rhetoric

Inventio

Compile information

Dispositio

Organize information

Elocutio

Express information

Memoria

Memorize the discourse

Actio

Pronounce the discourse

Topoi:

basic categories of relationships among ideas, each of which can serve as a template or heuristic for discovering things to say about a subject. "Topics of invention" literally means "places to find things."



Tomato as
“synecdoche
” (rhetorical
figure) for
Italy?

Pictures (photographs) are “tautological” (Barthes)

- For Barthes the picture (the photograph) is “transparent”: you see through it to the referent directly
- This is obviously untrue, in two ways:
 - The picture embodies a perspective: we necessarily see the referent *from a particular point of view*, with emphasis on *certain properties* and, possibly, *parts*
 - The picture is a flat *surface* on which *colour spots* have been disposed, and there is no way we can avoid seeing this



Pictures (photographs) are “tautological” (Barthes)

- This is obviously untrue, in two ways:
 - The picture embodies a perspective: we necessarily see the referent *from a particular point of view*, with emphasis on *certain properties* and, possibly, *parts*
 - In this case the way the string bag is presented in an angle to the camera – suggesting the topoi “back form the market sphere”
 - The picture is a flat *surface* on which *colour spots* have been disposed, and there is no way we can avoid seeing this
 - The way in which different colour spots are disposed withing the rectable making up the picture



Barthes does not see the picture *as* a picture

- Not as *a particular way of presenting that which is perceived* (in a particular perspective, etc.) – which leads to the **theory of iconicity, that is, how the picture is related to the outside world**
- Not as colour spots disposed on a flat surface (the *plastic* layer) – which leads to the **idea of non-figurativity – in other words, the plastic layer of the picture**



Method is the manipulation of the models (expression and/or content)

1. The model applied to several pictures
2. More adequate segmentation

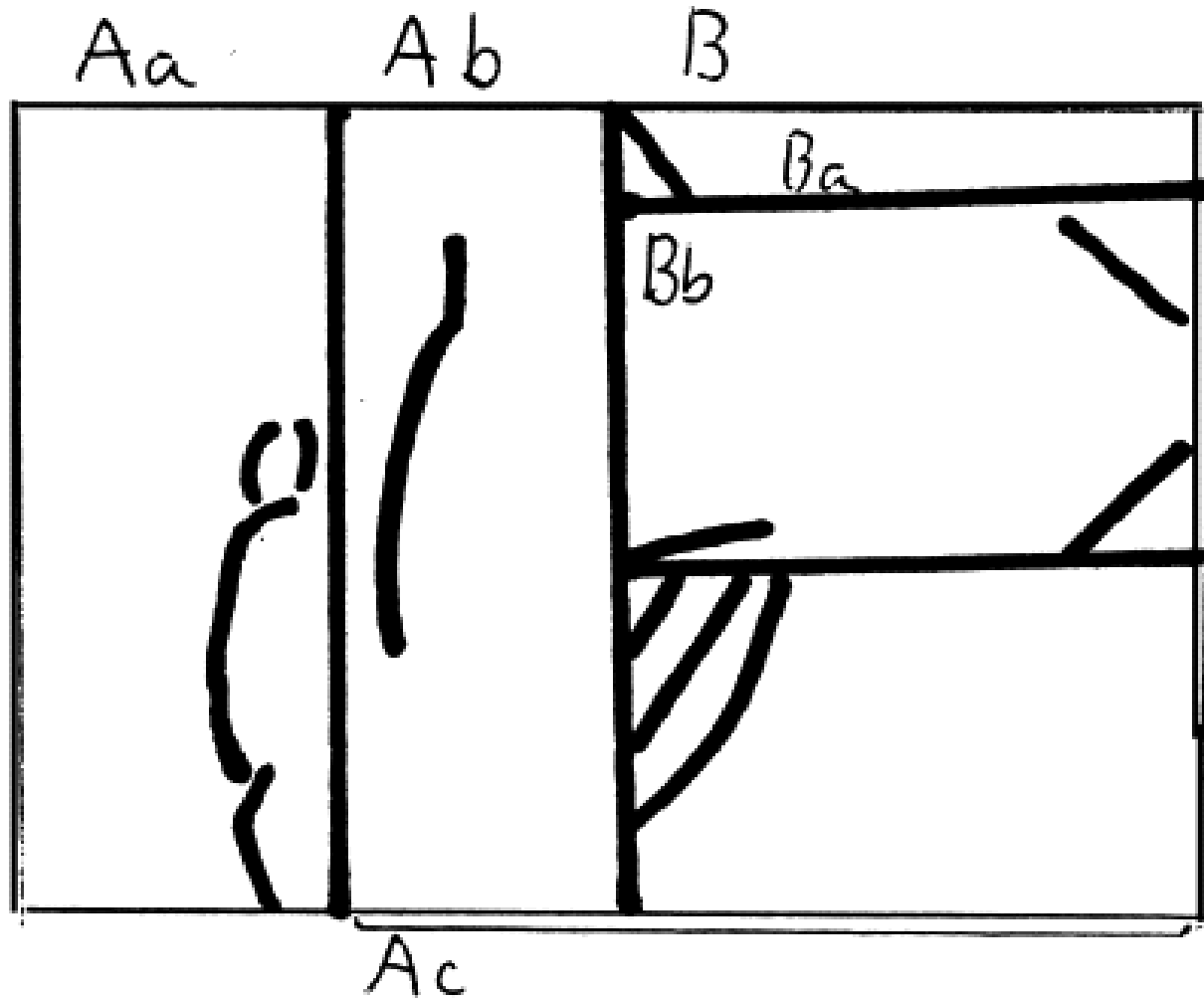
Floch's receipt:

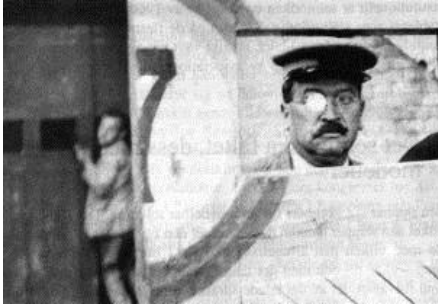
- 1) Divide the picture in two parts (not necessarily in the middle)
- 2) If possible, divide each part into two parts (and so on)
- 3) Find a series of binary oppositions of properties which justify these divisions



Floch's receipt:

- 1) Divide the picture in two parts (not necessarily in the middle)
- 2) If possible, divide each parts into two parts (and so on)
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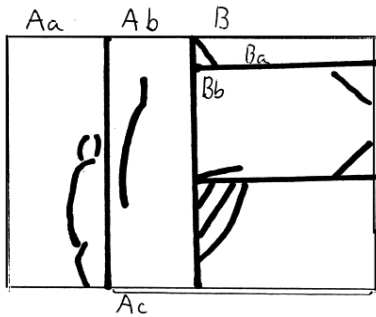
a) Floch's version (Aa vs Ac)

In the following, we intend first to restate Floch's analysis in a more explicit and formal mode, and then pass on to a few comments.

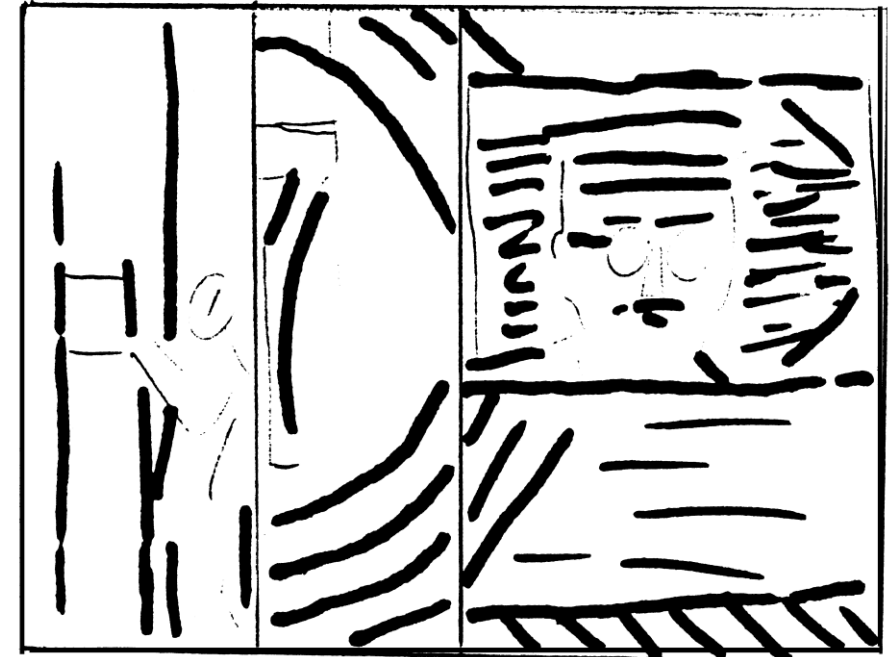
smaller part (Aa)	vs	bigger part (Ac)
dark shapes	vs	light shapes
blurred shapes	vs	distinct shapes

horizontal repetition of black squares
 big half-circles
 descending obliques

that is, a general angularity (isotopy) interrupted (deviation), by, respectively
 digit/person vs half-circles/glasses



There really is very little basis for this segmentation, in fact only the difference between dark and blurred shapes, on the one hand, and light and distinct shapes, on the other, and this is in any case a very relative distinction (that which is seen through the watchman's loop-hole is rather hazy, too, and there are many smaller, dark areas).



smaller part (Aa) vs bigger part (Ac)

dark shapes vs light shapes

blurred shapes vs distinct shapes

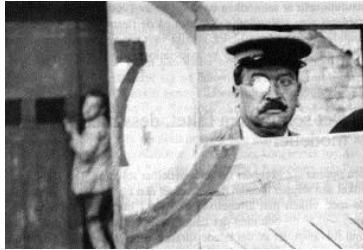
horizontal repetition of black squares

big half-circles

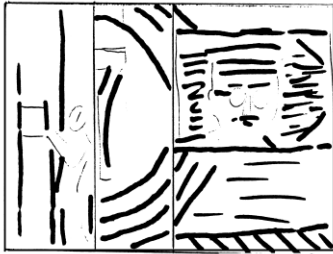
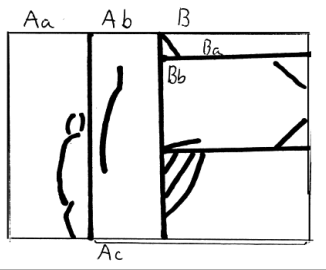
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that is, a general angularity (isotopy) interrupted (deviation), by, respectively

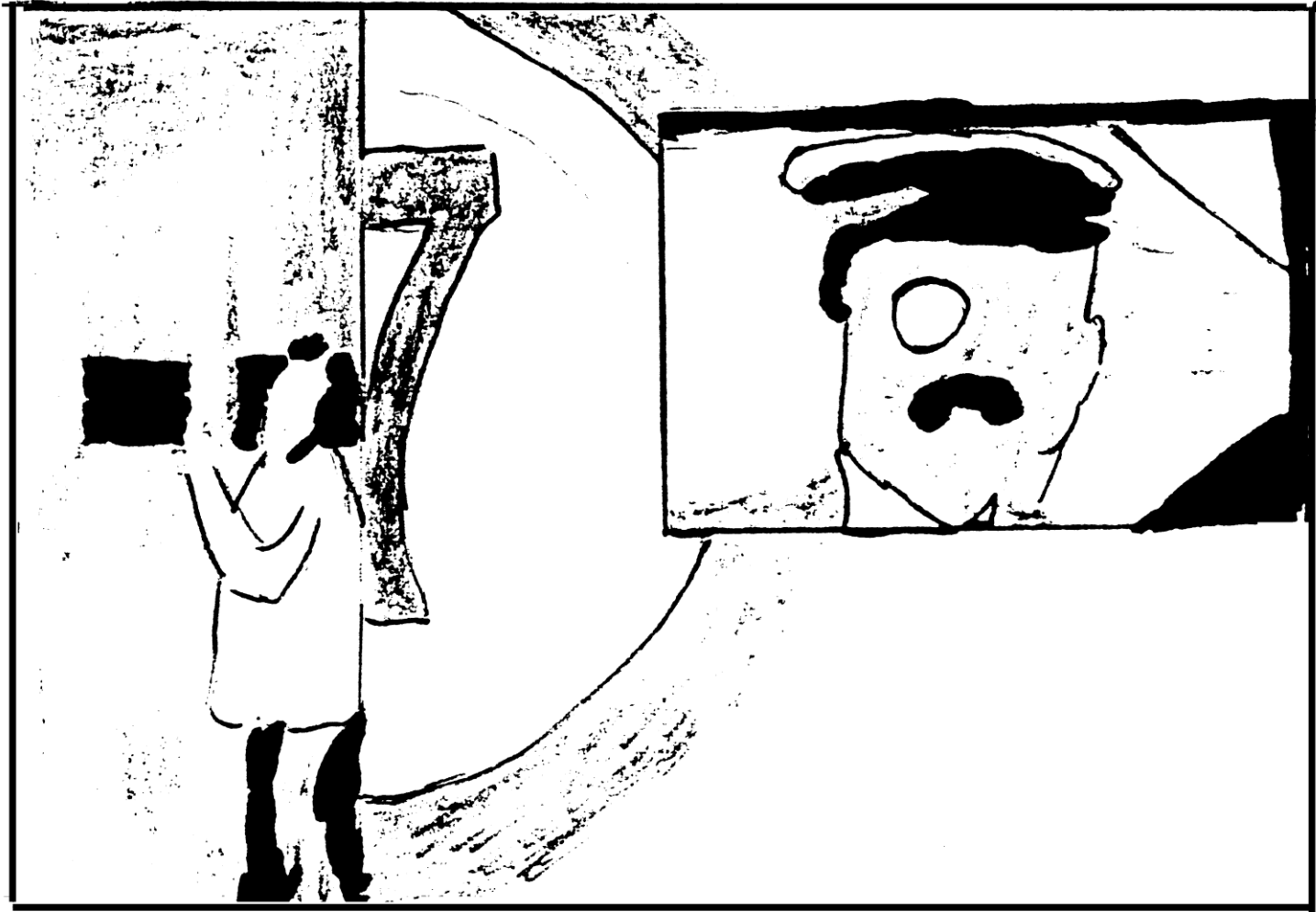
digit/person vs half-circles/glasses



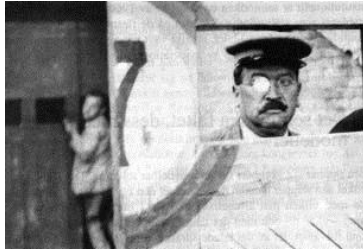
A vs B:



verticals	vs	horizontal
vertical field division	vs	horizontal field division
extreme tone contrasts	vs	grey tone scale
sub-fields on the same level	vs	included sub-field
straight lines and curved shapes	vs	obliques
parallelism of curved shapes Aa/Ab	vs	parallelism Ba/Bb in obliques
figure down to the right	vs	figure up to the middle
field part of a circle	vs	rectangle part of the field



Text analysis

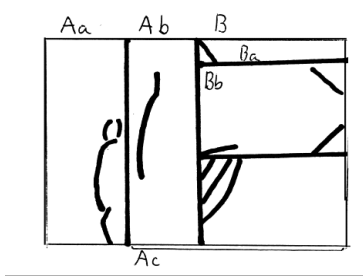


Aa vs Ab vs Ba vs Bb

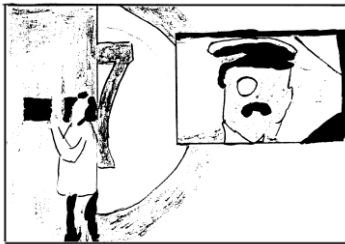
verticals vs curves vs obliques (& horizontals) vs horizontals (& obliques)

homogeneous field (with deviation) vs inhomogeneous (of homogeneous sub-fields) vs homogeneous field (with deviation) vs inhomogeneous field (of details)

dark vs light vs grey tones vs dark/light/grey



The latter may be developed in the following way:



Light vs dark represented by (extreme cases)

Dominance

Aa	medium light	vs	very dark	medium dark
Ab	very light	vs	medium dark	very light
Ba	medium light	vs	medium dark	medium light
Bb	very light	vs	very dark	medium light

signe particulier

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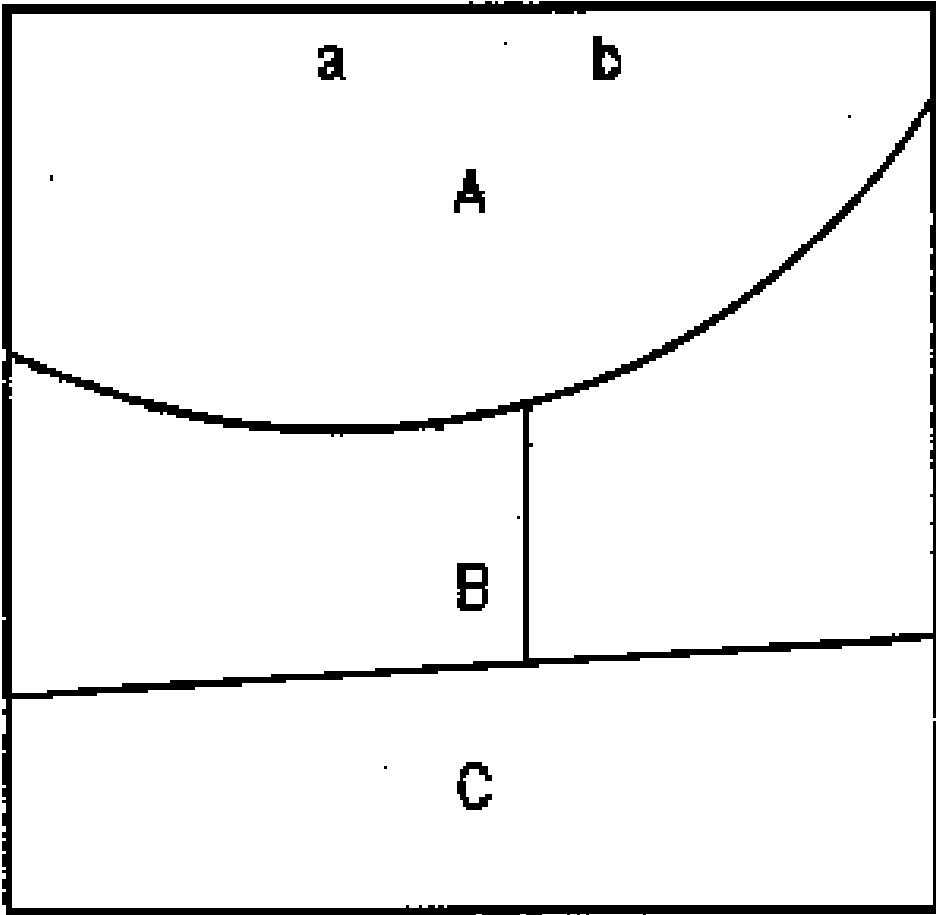
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Starting from the other end:

- 1) Making all plausible divisions of the picture
- 2) Listing all binary oppositions between the different division blocks
- 3) Using this information to decide which division (if any) is predominant



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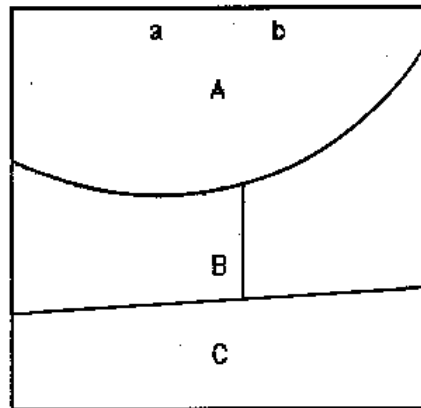
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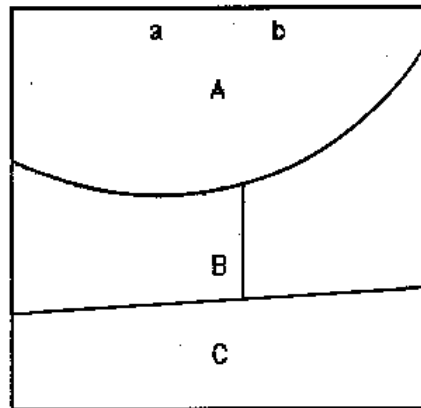
a) colour correlation (A vs B+C):

A	vs	B + C
beige	vs	yellowish brown (+black)
a few, almost parallel lines	vs	lines forming angles
quasi-horizontality	vs	several directions
no verticality	vs	<i>vertical in Ba continued in Cb (neck/watch)</i>
divergent detail to the left (in Aa)	vs	divergent detail to the right (Bb,Cb)

b) shape correlation (A+B vs C):



A + B	vs	C
roundish shapes	vs	angular shapes
continuous upward movement	vs	genuine horizontality
direction upwards from displaced middle axis	vs	slight movement upward from the left to the right
<i>rough mirror symmetry of the respective lower curves (particularly in Ba)</i>	vs	no symmetry to other fields
<i>connectivity of the configurations in the two fields (head+hat)</i>	vs	<i>rupture of configurations (head/arm)</i>
<i>common projectivity downwards</i>	vs	no projectivity



c) correlation of homogeneity (A+C vs B):

A + C	vs	B
figure reaching the border	vs	figure in the middle against a background
homogeneous field	vs	heterogeneous field
shallow depth(close to surface)	vs	relative depth (further back)
predominant horizontality	vs	predominant verticality
predominant parallelism (including concentric circles)	vs	relative symmetry around the vertical axis; and around the horizontal axis with a change in size (shoulders/face)
apparent rough texture	vs	apparent smooth texture
details placed on a divergent axis from that of the field (watch and bow are obliquely vertical)	vs	detail (mouth) has a horizontal axis and reproduces in smaller size and different interrelations shapes present in the larger field (shoulder+chin curves)
details in colours close to that of the larger field	vs	detail (mouth) in extremely divergent colour

*Semiotics of
photography*

Theories of photography (according to Dubois)

- As an **icon**: the naïve, common-sense conception, represented within semiotics by Barthes: the photograph is, more than any other iconic sign, similar to what it represents
- As a **symbol**: just as any other picture, the photograph is a conventional sign which can only be interpreted by those who know the code (Eco, Lindeken, etc.)
- As an **index**: the photograph is an imprint on the photographic emulsion of that which it represents (the "indexicalists" of the 1980-ies: Vanlier, Dubois and Schaeffer)

Index and icon as function

- For *Peirce*, photographs are *icons* as well as *indices*: in some respects they are quite similar to what they depict; and they are physically obliged to correspond point by point to the referent
- According to *Barthes*, the photograph, differently from the hand-made picture, does not depend on historically variable rules of transformation : it is a message *without a code*
- In other passages, however, Barthes claims that the photograph means "*this has taken place*", "*this was here before*", which, in Dubois's view, makes him into a pioneer of indexicalism

The triumph of conventionalism(Lindekens)

- The photograph has features and signs, exactly as verbal language, i.e. double articulation, according to Lindekens
- Lindekens and Espe both show that the meaning of photographs may change, independently of the motive, by modifying the contrast, etc.
- Nothing can be both as contrasted and as shaded as the real object, at the same time. According to Lindekens, this is similar to the features of language.
- Lindekens is of course wrong: in language, something is *either* voiced or unvoiced (what is between does not count), but all pictures are *more or less* contrasted and shaded

Barthes about chirographs as opposed to photographs

- chirographs requires there to be a set of **rules for mapping** perceptual experience onto marks made with a pen on paper;
- these rules imply **a particular segmentation** of the world as it is given to perception, picking up some (kinds of?) features for reproduction, while rejecting others, and perhaps emphasising some properties at the same time as others are underplayed;
- and all this takes place **under given historical circumstances**, which are responsible for varying the emphases and the exclusions


But photographs are not so dissimilar

- Also photographs (and other technographs) contain **rules for mapping** perceptual experience onto marks on a surface - but they are partly built into the device;
- Photography is able to pick up particular **proper parts** ('son sujet', 'son cadre') and **perceptual angles** of vision ('son angle') of the whole motive, but cannot chose to render just a few of its **attributes**;
- Without recurring to later modification of the exposed material, *photography is merely able to pick up features, or restrict its selection of features, at the global level*, whereas in drawing, local decisions can be made for each single feature

The transformation rules of photography (Gubern, Ramirez)

- Lindeken's example still shows that there must be some kind of rules of transformation if the real, three-dimensional world is to be transferred to the photographic plate
- They do not have to be known to the photographer; even if they have been historically created, they now are to a large extent built into the camera

exclusion of the third dimension
exclusion of movement
exclusion of non-visual stimuli
demarcation of the scene within a frame
distortion of colours and tone values
size transformations



Apply to
some
extent to all
pictures

The transformation rules of photography (Gubern, Ramirez)

cyclopean vision
static vision
perspectival distortion



Apply to
most kinds
of pictures

granularity of the expression
(normally invisible) in the whole
picture
perspectival projection of whole
picture
demarcation of space



Are unique to
photography

In other words: the transformations are
global, not local

The transformations are *global*, not *local*

In other terms, the transformations apply to much bigger chunks of reality than in the case of hand-made pictures (Chirographs)

This does not mean that the photograph is conventional

The photograph is an imprint, i.e. it is an index the *referent of which has on some earlier moment been in direct contact* ("contact of light") *with that which later will become the expression of the sign and which has then detached itself from it, leaving a visual mark on the surface.*

This is an index similar to the traces left by a foot or the fingerprint



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