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*Dossier Marketing : nouvelles tendances stratégiques*

# Brand identity in the digital age : complexity and contradiction

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## Introduction

Amongst the recent trends having affected the marketing industry, it is undeniable that digitalisation has had the greatest impact on how business is being run by brands. E commerce, for instance, was nonexistent twenty or so years ago and is now one of the most flourishing ways of communicating messages and distributing goods to the general public. The multi-channel<sup>1</sup> and omnichannel<sup>2</sup> strategies are widespread nowadays and multiply the number of consumer touchpoints, both physical and digital, sometimes combined in what is now broadly known as “phygital”.

As a consequence, brand communications are by far much more diversified than in the past. At the end of the last century, when we personally started our career, advertising campaigns were most of the time limited to a one long annual TV commercial, often cut down into a variety of shorter versions in order to optimise the media spendings and increase the quantity and frequency of

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<sup>1</sup> Multi-channel refers to the use of several media channels for spreading marketing messages. This can include email, social media, print, mobile, display ads, television, and more. Leveraging multiple channels allows brands to interact with their customers across multiple touchpoints for a more comprehensive campaign.

<sup>2</sup> An omnichannel strategy is a marketing method designed to deliver a seamless and consistent customer experience across all touchpoints. That might include brick-and-mortar shops, websites, email, social and mobile – anywhere a brand is present.

contacts. The same principle applied to print adverts, outdoor or press, with generally one or two key visuals and texts (headline and baseline, plus body copy for magazines), adapted to the various sizes of the press titles or of the networks of billboards.

In brief, life for semioticians was relatively easy as the sizes of the corpora that they were asked to scrutinise and peruse were, say, “manageable”, even if a few pack designs were also added to complement the source material. One of the many tasks that they were and still are commissioned to undertake is what in the market research world is currently referred to as “brand audits”. In layman terms, this type of project consists in nailing down the fundamentals of the brand identity, through the analysis of the brand communications, be they in advertising, packaging or any other forms. However today, this task is a somewhat different from what it used to be. The question at stake is “how really different?”.

## 1. Brand identity from a marketer’s point of view

In a broadbrush way, brand management is by and large based on the long established theory of “positioning”, a central notion in marketing, invented at the end of the sixties<sup>3</sup>. Positioning consists of a brand occupying one area of the consumer’s mental space left available by competition. It therefore is a differentiating mechanism by which a brand attributes itself a portion of content, a concept or value, distinct from those already preempted by its competitors, and appropriates it to make it its “territory” (it is possible to assimilate the positioning of a brand to the “mental territory” that it occupies or seeks to occupy)<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the main objective assigned to the brand is then to leave a mark on people’s minds rather than to mark its products.

It turns out that the word “brand” etymologically has a lot to do with the medieval French term “*brandon*” which initially referred to a torch and then by extension to the fire-heated monogrammed pokerlike iron rod used to tattoo livestock to indicate ownership (the “branding iron”). The concept of branding goods or services is therefore strongly associated to the notion of a long lasting and even irreversible trace or print. As a result, many marketing theorists developed the metaphor of DNA<sup>5</sup>. This analogous borrowing from biology stems from the notion that just like sequences of genetic code determine whether a person ineluctably has green eyes or curly hair for life, how a brand is viewed and expressed is also determined by a rigid DNA programme.

From a semiotic standpoint, both images, the “branding iron” and the “brand DNA”, entail the establishment of what L. Hjelmslev called a “symbolic system”

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<sup>3</sup> The term “positioning” was coined by two American marketers, Al Ries and Jack Trout, and first used in their seminal article “Positioning is a game people play in today’s me-too marketplace”, *Industrial Marketing*, 54, 6, 1969 ; further developed in their book *Positioning : The Battle for your Mind*, New York, Warner Books, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.-P. Petitimberty, “Territoire(s) de marques”, *Actes Sémiotiques*, 117, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Notably L. B. Upshaw, J.-N. Kapferer, P. Marsden and T. Gad. See references.

(as opposed to “semiotic systems”) in which the two planes of any language, the plane of expression and the plane of content, are in a relationship of total conformity. In other words, these are languages in which to one signifier corresponds one and only one signified. Thus reduced to the level of a mere symbol, a brand’s sole function is to allow it to be identified. As a consequence, most marketers and brand managers will focus on such indicators as the impact, memorisation, attribution, etc. of their communication campaigns, and will pay much attention to maximising repetition with a view to ensuring that those indicators flash green on their dashboards. In short, the pivotal dimension of their strategic choices is the identification of their brands.

Now, it goes without saying that the notion of identification is far from encompassing that of identity, quite the opposite. In fact, the concept of identity goes far beyond the mere idea of identification. Confusing one with the other leads to a major oversight and, in the worst cases, to serious mistakes.

Amongst others, the most serious one probably is the hypertrophy of what the marketing lingo calls “brand codes”, “brand signals” or “brand ownables”. And indeed, this hypercodification, i.e. the systematic and frequent repetition of the same signs, tends to make them lose their power of meaning (cf. the socio-semiotic regime of programming) and, more importantly, make the brand run the risk of enclosure in a self-referential discourse by which it ends up stifled or “fossilised” beneath thick layers of “limescale sediments”<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Brand identity from a semiotician’s point of view

Jean-Marie Floch is the first semiotician who laid the foundations of a more relevant and rigorous definition of what a “brand identity” really is<sup>7</sup>. Adopting here the theoretical position inaugurated by this pioneer, we deliberately discard the approaches to brand identity proposed by the Anglo-Saxon strand of semiotics, whose work on “pop culture”, “brandsapes” and the so called “cultural codes” — dominant, residual, or emergent — is semiotic in name only. These approaches are far too heavily influenced, not to say led astray, by the work of communication scholars, e.g. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, along with marketing scholars, e.g. David Aaker, Douglas Holt, or Jean-Noël Kapferer, but also by the woolly “cultural studies” or the no less nebulous “consumer culture theories”. This strand still considers that the task of “decoding” signs (as if these were “encoded” and cryptic) is what semiotics is quintessentially about<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> We borrow these two expressions from Jean-Marie Floch, *Marketing, sémiotique et communication*, “Une étoile est née”, Paris, P.U.F., 1990, p. 75 (our translations).

<sup>7</sup> J.-M. Floch, “Waterman and its doubles”, *Visual identities*, London, Continuum, 2000, pp. 26–32; also see “Logique de persuasion du consommateur et logique de fidélisation du client”, in *Comment parler au consommateur aujourd’hui et demain ?*, Cahiers de l’IREP, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Among the most famous and publicised representatives are Virginia Valentine in the UK, and Laura Ruth Oswald in the USA (see references). For a more detailed explanation of these Anglo-Saxon features, cf. A. Basunti, “Semiotics and marketing in the United Kingdom. An explorative study”, *E/C - Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana Studi Semiotici*, 2005.

Based on the reflections of Paul Ricoeur<sup>9</sup>, Floch developed a semiotic description of brands as “small engine(s) for creating meaning and value”<sup>10</sup>. In other words, instead of reducing the brand to a set of frozen symbols condemned to be tirelessly repeated, he advocated the theory according to which brands are dynamic and generative instances, prone to many changes whilst having the capacity to remain consistently the same over time.

By summoning the hjelmslevian model of the various planes and levels of language and adapting it to brands, Floch underlined the variable nature of the substances of expression and content (that can thus accommodate the brand’s developments and changes) whilst the forms of each plane, made of invariant relations between their respective units, ensure the consistency of the brand. The whole, because it introduces a fundamental distinction between the variable and the invariable components of meaning, allows to report a brand’s identity, conceived as the ability to change, and evolve or develop while remaining oneself.

More specifically, Floch defined the substance of content of a brand as consisting of the variable conceptual universes in which it operates. These, as a result of diversifications, extensions, innovations, acquisitions and even mergers, etc., may obviously change over time. As for the substance of expression of a brand, it comprehends the varied and variable media used by the brand to express itself or the materials processed to manufacture its manifestations.

The form of content of a brand, coined “brand ethics”, accommodates its invariant *Weltanschauung*, i.e. the way in which it structures its environment, along with the relationship it establishes to others, competitors, and consumers alike. As for the form of expression, coined “brand aesthetics”, it comprehends the invariant relations established between the brand’s signifiers that make it recognisable, aesthetics being conceived as “an approach to the world of the sensible, i.e. of the senses, involving a ‘worldview’ and a certain relation of oneself and to the world [i.e. the above defined form of content], *capable of communicating an emotion*”<sup>11</sup>.

In short, for Floch, the identity of a brand, irrespective of the domains that it covers and of the media that it harnesses, can be defined as the articulation of an “ethics” with an “aesthetics”, both strata being, by definition, united.

In many of his analyses, mostly conducted in the field of visual semiotics that was his main *cheval de bataille*, Floch showed that, conversely to the understanding of brand identity accepted by the marketing doxa, i.e. seen as the result of a frozen hypercodification of a symbolic type, brands often harness semi-symbolic systems, allowing them, on the one hand, to create an effect of motivated signs, i.e. some permeability of the two planes of language, normal-

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9 P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

10 J.-M. Floch, “Logique de persuasion du consommateur et logique de fidélisation du client”, *art. cit.*, p. 13.

11 *Id.* and E. Roux, “Gérer l’ingérable : la contradiction interne de toute maison de luxe”, *Décisions Marketing*, 9, 1995, p. 21 (our stress, our brackets).

ly and theoretically conjoined in all arbitrariness. And on the other hand, to benefit from complete leeway to renew themselves, to surprise consumers who, whilst being surprised will nevertheless recognise the values or the worldview that they share with such or such brand and which have made them loyal to it.

The most famous published example certainly is the Chanel brand about which Floch showed the conformity between the aesthetic category /classical vision/ vs /baroque vision/ (which is already a semi-symbolic system in itself<sup>12</sup>) and the ethical category /control/ vs /freedom/. But other examples abound: Apple and Habitat<sup>13</sup>, but also, according to secondary sources, Ferragamo, Loewe, and Yves Saint Laurent<sup>14</sup>.

In each of these cases respectively, Floch has uncovered the brand logic at work in the form of categories, i.e. pairs of opposing terms in a relationship of reciprocal presupposition, or in other words in a relationship of contrariety. Along this line, based on Claude Lévi-Strauss's reflections about myths, which on many occasions he summarised as having the function to conciliate pairs of contrary terms and make them coexist under one roof (visually represented by an overhanging brace), Floch came to the conclusion that, most of the time, brands operate as mythical mediators and that their identities, understood as "small semiotic engines", can be distilled down to such systems of parallel and symmetrical opposition on both planes.

### 3. Brand identity today : from contrariety to contradiction

The accelerated pace of digitalisation, combined with the compounding effect of globalisation, is forcing brands to reinvent themselves. As we have seen, while brands have long been seen as rigid imprints governed by a logic of consistency, identification, and repetition, it now seems increasingly challenging for them to hold firm and stay the course. As a former chairman of the AACCC<sup>15</sup> put it a few years ago,

summoned to express themselves through multiple and heterogeneous communication channels, in a daily and virtually uninterrupted relationship with their audiences, brands have come to overexpose themselves, sometimes *to the detriment of meaning*, effectiveness and relationship. These excesses have led to indifference to, and even rejection of, advertising. Worse still, they contribute to a general insensitivity to brands.<sup>16</sup>

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12 Composed of the overall category /continuity/ vs /discontinuity/, at work on both the plastic and narrative levels in a chiasmus structure ; cf. *Les formes de l'empreinte*, Périgueux, Fanlac, 1986, pp. 107-110, and *Visual identities*, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

13 J.-M. Floch, *Visual identities*, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-78, 107-180.

14 G. Mazzalovo, "Exemples d'applications de la sémiotique de Jean-Marie Floch à la gestion des marques", *E/C*, 2008 ; "Yves Saint Laurent : question de style", *E/C*, 2011.

15 Association des Agences Conseil en Communication (society of communication consulting agencies).

16 L. Habib, *La communication transformative*, Paris, P.U.F., 2010 (our translation, our stress).

In this age of blissful glorification of digital activation, many brands seem to have forgotten that “all that glitters is not gold”<sup>17</sup> and that being content with being fashionable and trendy often leads to a fate of a dead leaf.

Among many other aggravating factors, the “storytelling” communication technique, supposedly the most effective, is probably the most harmful, especially in social medias where it is to be found copiously. This “concept” (if it is such a thing), imported from the United States a few years ago, is still very much in vogue in the arenas of brand management, marketing and advertising. But what exactly is storytelling ? It is the “art” of making up stories out of nothing or very little : it consists of blowing up the anecdotal out of proportions, adding suspense where there is only a dull succession of trivial events, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats by raising expectations of twists and turns (which, by the way, never come), presenting the banal as a discovery, stating the obvious in a spectacular way, and so on. But all these hyperbolic devices that make up the storytelling toolkit are the antithesis of real narrativity. The storyteller is content to render the surface of things, focusing on their appearance and then trying to stage it, to blow it up to capture the audience’s attention, entertain them and, ideally, impress them. Basically, storytelling can be summed up as the implementation of communications whose device focuses exclusively on the enunciation and the search for its impact and emotional effects rather than on the substance of the utterance itself, the “text”, relegated to the subordinate rank of “pretext”. This is why, despite its name, storytelling has little to do with narrativity, but is at best reportage, and at worst “small town news”.

With so little attention paid to their content and so much paid to their effects in terms of impact or buzz (measured in numbers of clicks, repostings and comments, whatever their natures), this proliferation of messages as well as their exponential frequency make it difficult to manage their strict coherence, and more so in a global context where the channels and sources of transmission are varied (including within the same corporate organisation), along with their respective cultures and languages. The ideal of hyper-consistency sought by marketers has become virtually impracticable, and the profusion of utterances issued by a single brand — to say nothing of those of its competitors — makes it increasingly hard for the semiotician to draw forth “the invariant beneath the variation”<sup>18</sup>.

Having said that and in light of our own experience, having personally had to deal with such voluminous corpora, one thing seems certain : many brands are now facing a major problem, that of *contradiction*. From a semiotic point of view, this leads to question the purity of the semi-symbolic identity model developed by Floch.

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17 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Scene 7.

18 R. Jakobson’s famous formula, *Une vie dans le langage*, Paris, Minuit, 1984, p. 155 (our translation).

#### 4. Asymmetry and “included middle”

In the world of cosmetics, for example, it is not uncommon nowadays to come across parent brands or umbrella brands (i.e. brands accommodating a large portfolio of sub brands), some of whose sub brands will highlight the natural value of their product range in their communications, while others will conversely emphasise the synthetic (non-natural) molecules or components, e.g. liposomes or micelles, invented and manufactured in their laboratories to make their formulations more effective, and a third subset will claim to offer “the best of both worlds”. So, what are we to make of that type of parent brand if its role is to endorse and therefore reconcile its “natural”, “non-natural” and “natural and non-natural” sub brands? What does it stand for? What identity does it have with such a contradictory content? Both logical principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle (*tertium non datur*) which theoretically subtend the elementary structure of meaning conflict with such a configuration. Can I be *both A and  $\bar{A}$*  ?

On the semiotic square, only the contrary terms of the primary axis (S1–S2) and the subcontrary terms of the secondary axis ( $\bar{S1}$ – $\bar{S2}$ ) can theoretically coexist and be combined in the syntactic form of two new terms, respectively complex and neutral<sup>19</sup>. The question therefore is : can both terms of a schema, either positive or negative, or even both the complex and neutral terms, which are, by definition, in a relationship of contradiction, coexist and be combined in the same way ? And if so, can this be found on both planes, expression and content, and therefore form semi-symbolic systems ? And what if the relationships are not the same on each plane ?

Unless mistaken, the only published works by Floch that approximate our issue are the analyses of an entire advertised sector (and not a one brand communication), namely that of the psychotropic drugs<sup>20</sup>, an entire work, that of Roland Barthes’s writings and drawings<sup>21</sup>, and lastly that of the spatial organisation of a hypermarket<sup>22</sup>. In all three cases, the entire constitutional model appears on the plane of content, which entails that both positive and negative schemas belong to the systems, and, as a logical consequence, so do their contradictory terms<sup>23</sup>. One could always object that the coupling applies to the deixes of the semiotic square, rather than to their respective components, but the fact remains that the contradictory terms are part and parcel of the “small semiotic engine” that makes it possible to recognise whether such or such given manifested occur-

19 Labelled as “third generation categorial terms”, cf. A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and language. An analytical dictionary*, “Square (Semiotic —)” entry, §5, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982.

20 J.-M. Floch, “Un type remarquable de sémosis : les systèmes semi-symboliques”, *Semiotic theory and practice*, Proceedings of the third international congress of the IASS, Palermo, 1984, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1988.

21 *Id.*, “L’écriture et le dessin de Roland Barthes”, *Petites mythologies de l’œil et de l’esprit. Pour une sémiotique plastique*, Paris Amsterdam, Hadès Benjamins, 1985.

22 *Id.*, “La contribution d’une sémiotique structurale à la conception d’un hypermarché”, *Recherches et applications en Marketing*, IV, 2, 1989.

23 See appendices.

rence belongs to the psychotropic drug sector or to the work of Roland Barthes (all the more so in that latter case as the four terms of the axiology are coupled with respective sets of signifiers).

All this may seem a bit far-fetched and nowhere near our initial question about brand identity. We don't think so and concur with Floch for whom "there is no brand without speaking out, and it is speaking out that *creates the brand's identity*. (...). Like speech, a brand *can be recognised* by a certain way of articulating and a certain way of thinking ; in other words, it possesses *constants of expression and constants of content that ensure its identity*"<sup>24</sup>. In all cases, be it a sector, an entire work or a brand, identity has to do with their being recognised, and that recognition is the outcome of the coupling of invariant relationships between terms belonging to each of both planes of language. We can see no good reason why these relationships should be symmetrical on both planes (e.g. only contrariety) as long as they remain invariant in time and space, whatever the signs used by the given brand.

On many occasions, our analyses found out that brands can be identified by the coupling of a "standard" category on one plane and a contradiction on the other (so far, we have not found any instance of complementarity, but purport that it is not unlikely). For instance, in a recent project in the perfumery sector, we discovered that the semi-symbolic system harnessed by one of the brands at stake, in its pack as well as adverts, coupled the "classic" figurative gender and scent categories of content /feminine + floral/ vs /masculine + woody/ with the visual opposition between a complex and a neutral term, namely /chromatic/ (i.e. monochromatic or polychromatic) and its contradictory term /non-chromatic/ (i.e. achromatic, that is black, white and grey). This is how this can be visualised :

Expression		/chromatic/ (mono or polychromatic)	vs	/non-chromatic/ (achromatic : black, white, grey)
Content	<i>Gender</i>	/feminine/	vs	/masculine/
	<i>Scent</i>	/floral notes/	vs	/woody notes/

When their design agency was asked to create the layout of the outer package for the bottle of a new unisex fragrance (feminine and masculine) whose formulation was yet to be determined, they came up with an interesting proposal consisting of a plastic box covered by a colour gradient, progressively running from full opacity (chromatic) to complete transparency (achromatic). Although it was difficult to lexicalise it in one word, it was nonetheless the visual translation of the syntactic merger of the notions of chromatism and achromatism into a single signifier.

<sup>24</sup> J.-M. Floch, *Marketing, sémiotique et communication. Sous les signes les stratégies*, Paris, P.U.F., 1990, p. 75 (our translation, our stress).



At this point, what remains to be debated is whether a contradiction can generate a third generation term. Should semioticians follow the logicians and adhere strictly to the "excluded middle" principle, or can they deviate from it? In this case, we tend to concur with Sémir Badir who wrote that

contradiction has gradually come to be seen as a passageway, an intermediary between contrary terms, the use of which is not as necessary as it might at first appear. In this way, *semiotic theory distances itself entirely from logic*, not because it reinvents contradiction and contrariety, but because *it assigns to the system that governs them functions and applications that are quite different from those intended by logicians*.<sup>25</sup>

Along that distancing line from mainstream logic, Stéphane Lupasco, a French philosopher logician of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, developed an alternative theory inspired by physics in general, but more particularly by the paradoxical and disconcerting complexity at work in quantum mechanics (e.g. the wave-particle duality affecting such quantum entities as electrons, photons, bosons, etc.). This theory is known as that of the "included middle". For him and a few quantum physicists, A and  $\bar{A}$  not only contradict one another but also coexist at once in the form of an additional third party, labelled "T state" ('T' for "*tiers inclus*", the French equivalent of "included middle")<sup>26</sup>. Obviously, within the limits of this article, we cannot present Lupasco's work and its implications in physics in any detail<sup>27</sup>. Suffice to say, at the risk of trespassing orthodoxy and going against the grain of mainstream beliefs, that we consider it inspiring and able to also have implications in semiotics<sup>28</sup>.

## 5. Complexity and complication

In a recent article published in this journal, Guido Ferraro advocated the need to make our semiotic models more complex, starting with the generative trajectory of meaning<sup>29</sup>. The above having to do with the fundamental syntax, we believe that it is a first attempt at setting that project in motion insofar as what subtends it stems from the complexity of the new laws of physics and their formal translation into a logical system, better suited to reflecting them than the current one.

Accepting (provisionally) and following this hypothesis leads to an attempt to formalise it in semiotic terms. This is a complicated task, given the standard representation of the constitutional model as a 'square', whose diagonals make

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25 S. Badir, "Contrariété et contradiction", *Actes Sémiotiques*, 117, 2014 (our translation, our stress).

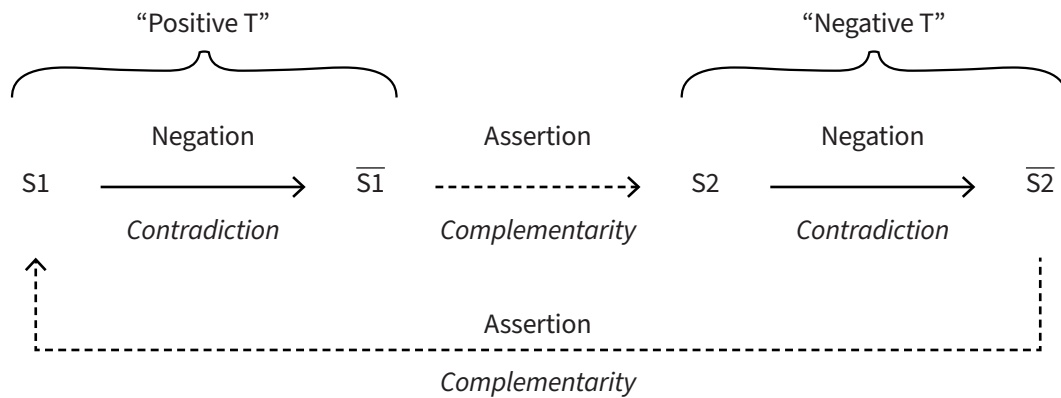
26 In particular see S. Lupasco, *Le principe d'antagonisme et la logique de l'énergie. Prolégomènes à une science de la contradiction*, Monaco, Le Rocher, 1987.

27 For a short introduction to his theories, see Joseph E. Brenner, "The philosophical logic of Stéphane Lupasco", in *Logic and logical philosophy*, 19, 1 2, Torun, The Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, 2010, pp. 243 285, as well as Basarab Nicolescu, *Qu'est ce que la réalité ? Réflexions autour de l'œuvre de Stéphane Lupasco*, Montréal, Liber, 2009.

28 In very much the same way as Rudolf Carnap (Vienna circle) or Alfred Tarski (Lwów-Warsaw school), but from an entirely distinct perspective, to say the least.

29 G. Ferraro, "Modèles classiques et complexité sémiotique", *Acta Semiotica*, I, 2, 2021.

it impossible to visually subsume their respective ends. The only manageable way to visualise T (positive and negative) is to ‘flatten’ the square and linearise it, following the sequence of the two operations that give rise to it, with its corresponding relationships :



Unfortunately, such a graph excludes the visualisation of the relation of contrariety and the corresponding complex and neutral third generation terms. Likewise, including both deixes would probably clutter it substantially and make the whole thing more confusing than enlightening. That said, increasing the complexity of a system never comes without its share of complications, among which its visual schematisation is probably neither the most insurmountable, nor the most essential.

More complicated and important are the remaining questions that this proposal arouses : one may wonder what type of relationship these two included middles have. Can it be one of the three already established by the standard syntax, or does it introduce a new one ? Likewise, one may also wonder whether there exists an operation allowing to generate that relationship, and again whether this operation is a duplication of one of those that are already established or happens to be a third one.

Our journey into this conundrum has not gone any further than that, and our experience so far has not given us the chance to come across any concrete brand case that would allow to hypothesise answers. But, beyond the sole world of brands and their identities which was our starting point, other domains may prove helpful in this exploration. We cannot help thinking of those complexities already unearthed by socio-semioticians in the field of interactional regimes<sup>30</sup>. Despite the fact that none of them has dealt with such contradictory configurations, it is not forbidden to imagine that there can exist accidental manipulations (or manipulated accidents), as well as programmed adjustments<sup>31</sup> (or adjusted programmings).

30 See E. Landowski, “Complexifications interactionnelles”, *Acta semiotica*, I, 2, 2021.

31 Although this specific combination was debated a few years ago : see M. B. Moein, “De l’hésychasme au ‘samâ’”, and J.-P. Petitimberty, “Dialogue avec Mortesa B. Moein”, in “Sémiotique des pratiques mystiques”, *Actes Sémiotiques*, 118, 2015.

## Conclusion

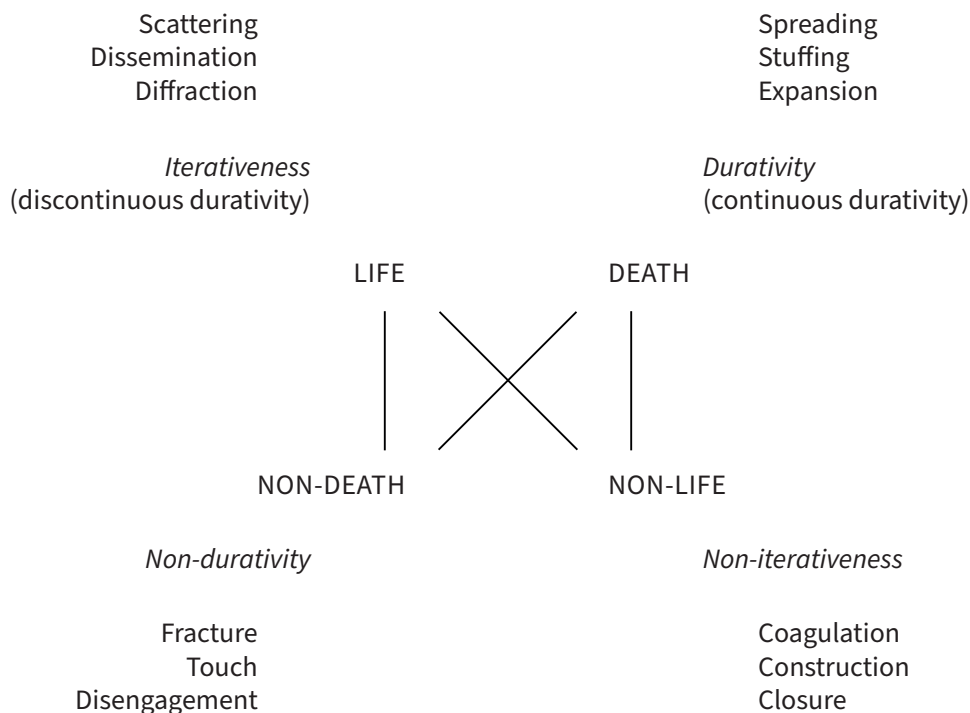
Having started this somewhat audacious and provocative reflection from the field of marketing and branding management, and having expanded its scope beyond this restricted and minor sector, we have tried to follow the path initiated some forty years ago by Jean-Marie Floch who wrote in his very first book :

Semiotics firmly defines itself as a scientific endeavour : it aims to construct a general theory of meaning and language. But it can also be defined, and experienced, as *a certain turn of mind, made up of curiosity about everything that has, or can have, meaning.*<sup>32</sup>

And we thus hope that our own curiosity has triggered our reader's and raised their interest in this type of reality grounded speculation that gives semioticians both food for thought and grist to their mill.

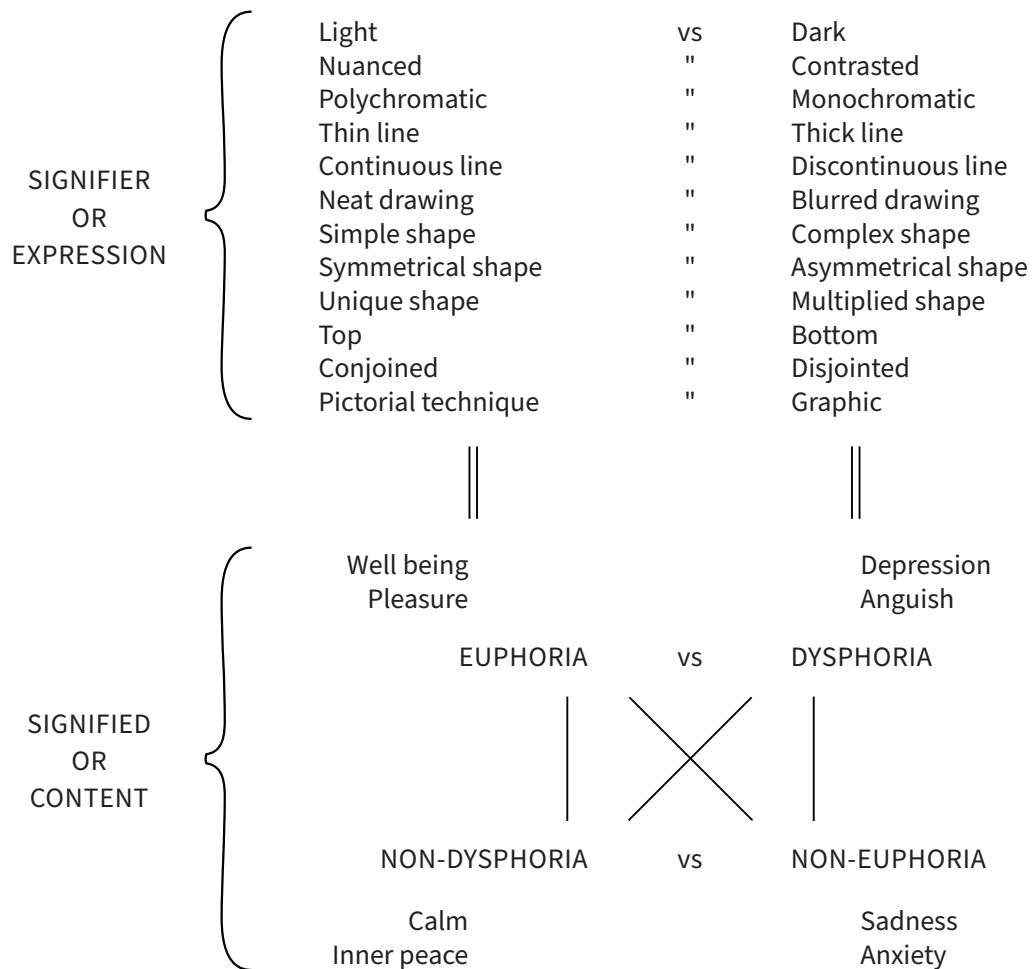
## Appendices

1. The semi-symbolic system of R. Barthes's writings and paintings (our translation, adapted from J.-M. Floch, 1985) :

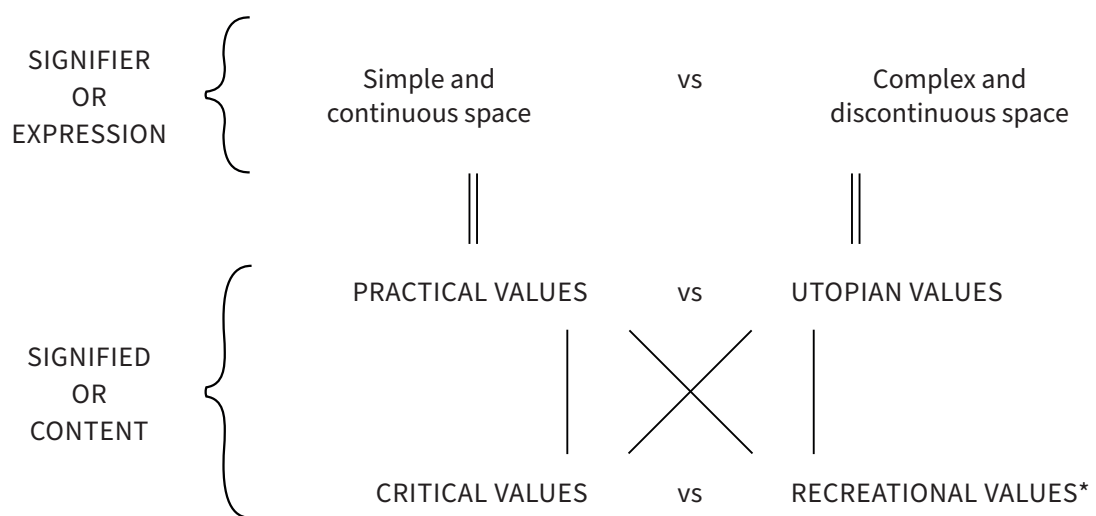


<sup>32</sup>J.-M. Floch, *Petites mythologies de l'œil et de l'esprit*, op. cit., p. 139 (our translation, our stress).

2. The semi-symbolic system of the psychotropic drugs advertising sector (our translation, adapted from J.-M. Floch, 1988) :



3. The semi-symbolic system of the spatial organisation of a hypermarket (our translation, adapted from J.-M. Floch, 1989) :



\* : among many other translations of *valeurs ludiques* : playful, pleasure-seeking, gratuitous, diversionary, aesthetic, etc.

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**Résumé :** La vitesse exponentielle à laquelle les marchés sont envahis par la digitalisation (invasion qui culmine avec l'avènement des médias sociaux), en conjonction avec d'autres facteurs tels que la mondialisation, les diversifications tous azimuts ou la course à l'innovation, fait de la gestion des marques un exercice aujourd'hui périlleux. Enjointes de communiquer à très haute fréquence avec leurs nombreux publics, les marques tendent à privilégier l'impact sur le contenu de leurs messages. Sous l'effet d'une telle pression, elles sont souvent amenées à se contredire de manière flagrante. Aussi, le modèle semi-symbolique de l'identité de marque, tel qu'il a été adopté par les sémioticiens à la suite de J.-M. Floch, ne fonctionne-t-il plus dans sa symétrique pureté. Cet article discute donc de son adaptation possible aux évolutions actuelles et, sur cette base, propose d'envisager l'introduction du concept de "tiers inclus" dans l'organon de la syntaxe fondamentale du parcours génératif de la signification.

**Mots clefs :** catégorie, complexité, contradiction, identité, logique, semi-symbolique, tiers exclu, tiers inclus.

**Resumo :** Identidade de marca na era digital. — A velocidade exponencial com a qual a digitalização invade os mercados (invasão que culmina com as redes sociais), assim que outros fatores (a globalização, a diversificação e a corrida para a inovação) acabaram fazendo hoje da gestão das marcas um exercício perigoso. Devendo comunicar incessantemente com seus numerosos públicos, as marcas tendem a privilegiar o impacto antes do conteúdo de suas mensagens. Sob o efeito de tamanha pressão, elas frequentemente se contradizem de modo óbvio. Nestas condições, o modelo semissimbólico da identidade de marca elaborado por J.-M. Floch, tal como foi adotado pelos semioticistas com a sua simétrica pureza não mais funciona. O presente artigo trata, portanto, de sua possível adaptação às evoluções atuais e, nesta base, propõe a introdução do conceito de « terceiro incluído » no organon da sintaxe fundamental do percurso generativo da significação.

**Abstract :** The exponential speed at which markets are invaded by the trend towards digitalisation (with the advent of social media in particular), together with other influences such as globalisation, all-out diversification, and the race to innovate, have made brand management a perilous exercise. The need for brands to communicate constantly with their multiple audiences has led them to prioritise impact over content. In doing so, they often blatantly contradict themselves. The semi-symbolic model of brand identity, as adopted by semioticians following J.-M. Floch, no longer functions in its symmetrical purity. This article therefore discusses its possible adaptation to current developments and, on this basis, proposes to consider the introduction of the notion of "included middle" into the corpus of the fundamental syntax of the generative trajectory of meaning.

**Auteurs cités** :Sémir Badir, Jean-Marie Floch, Algirdas J. Greimas, Eric Landowski, Stéphane Lupasco.

**Plan :**

Introduction

1. Brand identity from a marketer's point of view
2. Brand identity from a semiotician's point of view
3. Brand identity today: from contrariety to contradiction
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5. Complexity and complication

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Appendices

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