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The small producer: from political commitment to a marketing figure. Analysis of use of the portrait for social communication on products

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Photographs of producers are increasingly being used in communication strategies for products, especially food products. These portraits seek to materialise the relational dimension between producers and consumers. While fair trade actors were the first to enable consumers to “put a face” to their purchases, this communication strategy is neither systematic nor specific to fair trade. In both fair trade and conventional trade, the portrait is used to humanise the relationship with the product. Packagings convey a presentation of an alter-ego who is not a generic figure, but is intended to be the identifier of a specific contact (the small farmer from the other side of the world, or in your local area). This strategy has been adopted, and indeed taken further, by conventional trade, in order to benefit from interrelational aspects. Against this background, this article aims to critically examine the marketing uses of photographs of producers, through three cases: North-South fair trade, North-North fair trade, and the “marketing of authenticity”. In the light of analysis of social uses of the portraits, its study of the various visuals shows that the portraits used ultimately contribute more to an illusion of personalisation than to true information about the product’s traceability.

1. Uses of the portrait in the media: the illusion of its value as testimony

Using a portrait for communication purposes is a practice that is as old as advertising itself. Highlighting a figure or face personalises the message, creates the illusion of special dialogue, a close relationship, and therefore captures the receiver’s attention. With the development of techniques for copying and diffusing images, the number of portraits has greatly increased, and so have the uses of portraits in the media. Portraits are used as much to sell¹ as to provide a recommendation or raise awareness in a reader, who is gradually turned into a spectator, as the portrait has also been used for political mobilisation since the late 19th century. Among other sources, this social documentary tradition began with the work of the American Lewis Hine (1874-1940), particularly his pictures for the National Child Labor Committee in the 1910s. The captions to the pictures state the name, age and history of each photographed individual. The photographs used in the 1930s by the US government to show the ravages of the economic crisis under the Farm Security Administration (1935-1942) had a similar motivation, but adopted different strategies. Dorothea Lange, for example, gives more generic captions to her pictures, and as a result the figure becomes a symbol rather than a first-hand account of a specific situation. Fair trade’s visual strategy is inherited from this iconography.

Use of the portrait in the media generally contributes to the subject being eclipsed by the genre or category, whatever the medium or channel of diffusion. Yet this observation goes against the ideology underlying the development of social and press photography: in both cases, the aim is to build on the testimony value assigned to photographic records. A portrait should not simply “humanise” the story, but act as proof of its truth. It is important to note that this belief in a form of truth value of images is in fact a cultural construct. Engravings were credited with the same quality before it was attributed to photographic images (Gervais

¹ As shown by the Félix Potin album designed to hold a collection of 510 photographs of personalities of the time, collected one by one when items were purchased in a Félix Potin store (chain of small grocery stores).

2007). But both types of picture, engravings and photographs, are primarily the work of their creators, who make compromises with reality. A photographic shot is a fragment of space and time, whose conditions of existence depend on a number of material, economic, ethical and political contingencies, and can therefore only be a singular reflection of a reality that is always multiple (Michaud 2002). The image, received as a proof, is first and foremost a reflection of the discourse conveyed by the authors of communication media.

What about the images, and more specifically portraits, used in marketing strategies referring to the figure of the “small producer”, namely in North-South fair trade, North-North fair trade and the new short food supply chains. For North-South fair trade, the use of inserts containing a brief description of the producers and their families is indeed a conscious strategy to “market” products (Wright 2004). These strategies are largely based on narratives about the producers (Goodman 2004) and contextualisation of the products: they include the name of a cooperative, a place and/or a picture of the producers. The communication conveyed by this marketing is supposed to fill in for the interpersonal relations of traditional networks, by reducing the distance between the producers and consumers. Several studies have shown that in fair trade, representations of producers are built on a shared repertory of symbols (Wright 2004; Adams and Raisborough 2011). These visuals construct a generic figure, that of the idealised small farmer or producer as the upholder of traditional values, and this figure masks the singularity of situations. The populations presented on the packaging relate to the “myth of the small producer”. Far from being documentary in nature, this figure of the “small producer” is entirely constructed, for the purpose of conveying a specific message. This construction certainly helps to humanise the representation of the production channel, but paradoxically it works against the desire for transparency, instead promoting a myth.

2. The portrait of the small producer in North/South fair trade

The “myth of the small producer” carried by North/South fair trade has its foundations in a postcolonial heritage that contributes both to naturalisation of their inferiority and emphasis of their authenticity (Blanchet 2010). This dual trend associates positive values (authenticity) with negative values (weakness and being “left out” of society). The weakness and sidelined situation of the “small producer” is underlined in the discourse, eliciting compassion and appealing to the ethical values of mutual support and solidarity. The consumer comes to associate his purchase with a political act and the idea of going against the established order. The non-verbal communication, on the other hand, is much less conservative. To enhance the authenticity aspect, the figure of the small producer reuses stereotypes based on the portraits of “natives” distributed since the 19th century (Maresca 2011). Very early on, even in the 1840s², photographic mimesis was used in anthropological expeditions with the aim of building up scientific records of ethnic traits. But with no standardisation tool, these portraits remained portraits of specific individuals, and could not be used to establish any real typology. Ethnographic studies thus developed classification methods that ultimately came to resemble the judiciary method, particularly visible in the frontal/profile photographic system (Phéline 1985). The main explanation for this complicity between the anthropometric portrait

² The spread of the photographic process from 1839 sparked a major upheaval in the portrait’s reign in the West. It had previously been the preserve of a political, economic and intellectual elite, but then spread to new social classes and new uses. This period forged the social uses and a shared visual culture of the photographic portrait. Photography was used for social purposes just as much as scientific and police purposes.

and anthropologists' racial albums, according to Sylvain Maresca (2011), is their common denial of the portrait as a singular representation, whether in form or title. Individuals are considered merely as specimens, physiological ideal-types of the group to which they belong. The staging of the picture helps to solve the contradiction inherent to using the portrait of a particular flesh-and-blood individual as the representative of a general, hypothetical and abstract type. The individual becomes the representative of the group, and vanishes behind the type.

The photographs used by most fair trade brands establish a fantasised vision of the Other, whose singularity is lost in his otherness. An exotic figure mainly recognisable by the adoption of traditional attributes (clothing, canvas bag, animal). This reprise of colonial stereotypes is not specific to fair trade. The figure of the small producer is found in many marketing strategies promoting products from the South. The coffee brand Juan Valdez, for example, constructs its image based on the figure of a producer wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a traditional scarf, who is always accompanied by his mule. This iconography is ultimately similar to the stylised figure used by Max Havelaar until it recently standardised and stylised its logo. Marketing strategies in North/South fair trade, when they spotlight the figure of the "small producer", thus tend to reproduce the visual strategies of conventional trade in a representation that relates to the hierarchies inherited from colonial times. The image contrasts with the text, in an obvious contradiction of the discourse.

3. The dual nature of the small local producer figure

When fair trade is seeking greater attention for individuals, this relates visually to the type or specimen, or even a "concept-portrait" or "specimen-portrait". With the recent development of North-North fair trade and the marketing of authenticity, the figure of the small producer is being repositioned. As a result, the abstraction is based on different presumptions in the North and South. While the visuals selected for commercial channels in the South tend to naturalise difference and weakness, appealing to a sense of compassion, the visuals used in the North relate to the myth of the self-employed producer working alone, a kind of artist of the modern day (this is the case of the Alter Eco "North-North" fair trade range).

The specificity of fair trade, which wants to raise the profile of production channels, is now encountering the ideology of transparency which "means that everything can be shown and made public, to be submitted to examination by others, and also be the object of monitoring and control procedures" (Zarka, 2006, authors' own translation). This false revealing, this apparent discovery of the processes at work and the actors working in the shadows is found in all sectors of communication (industrial, political, etc). It is materialised in packaging by the photograph exposure, on the products, of actors in the production or distribution chain. Their portraits appear on the packaging itself, in the stores and in the advertising. For promotion of local products that claim implicitly or explicitly to be fair trade products, the producer is given a key place in this emphasis on authenticity. When shown and identified on the packaging, he is a guarantee of the product's origins. He provides situational authentication of the product (Merle and Piotrowski, 2012) and its traceability, either real or symbolic. Development of these marketing strategies thus contributes to a shift, or a split into a dual nature, for the "small producer" figure. This figure is emerging in new brands such as "Le Petit Producteur" or short supply chains such as supermarket chain E. Leclerc's "Local alliances". In both cases, the producer has not only a face, but also a full name, a specific history, sometimes even a body and a voice. The situation is ultimately paradoxical: while

fair trade channels are depersonalising producers in favour of stereotypical profiles, the actors of conventional trade are succeeding in giving the small producer a more realistic presence. These strategies are a way of adding relational value to products sold in supermarkets. They create confusion with fair trade products by adopting a similar marketing strategy.

In the end, portrait use occupies an ambiguous position, since the aim is to respond to a desire for documented traceability, a social and political concern to make the invisible people in a commercial channel visible, and a marketing strategy to promote the relational by humanising the connection with the product. It appears that so far, the marketing dimension based on promotion of stereotypes has been dominant in fair trade channels, while paradoxically, channels that are further removed from the ethical principles of fair trade have succeeded in emphasising the documentary value of this visual choice.

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