

CONFLICTING MESSAGES: THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF SLOW FOOD

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ABSTRACT:

This research provides a rhetorical analysis of the visual communication of the Slow Food International website to consider how Slow Food communicates messages to its audience via photographs on its website. Using a visual communication perspective combined with Perelman's notion of "rhetorical presence" as a theoretical framework, I argue that Slow Food's visual communication (photographs and website content) conflict with their creed stating that good food should be available to people of all incomes and backgrounds. I explore how the visual messages of two representative photographs evoke compelling imagery of travel, gourmet food, cooking, and fine dining. However, I contend that these images fail to overcome rhetorical barriers of time, money, and skill that would be needed to get more lower- and middle-class people and home cooks to implement Slow Food objectives. Thus, the Slow Food photographs alienate those with less income, leisure time, or cooking skill and reinforce the view of Slow Food as an elitist social movement.

KEY WORDS:

Slow Food, visual rhetoric, communication, marketing



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1 Introduction

Slow Food International (Slow Food) was founded by Carlo Petrini and 62 others in Bra, Italy 1989 as an effort to combat the fast food culture that had penetrated Italy during the 1980s and had spread to other parts of the world.¹ As a social movement, Slow Food claims to have millions of participants across 150 different countries.² However, according to some reports, the organisation is relatively small, with about 80,000 official members.³ The founding members put forth several objectives, including to: reverse the trends of fast food culture, re-instill a love for quality food products, foster agricultural methods that are ecologically friendly and sustainable, support fair food (food produced by fairly paid labourers), and preserve local traditions associated with regional food culture. On the Slow Food website, the motto is clear: "*Slow Food is a non-profit,*

1 *Slow Food International*. [online]. [2014-09-01]. Available at: <<http://www.slowfood.com/>>.

2 Compare: *Slow Food International*. [online]. [2014-09-01]. Available at: <<http://www.slowfood.com/>>; PETRINI, C.: *Slow Food: The case for taste*. Columbia University Press, 2003.

3 SCHNEIDER, S.: *Good, Clean, Fair: The rhetoric of the Slow Food movement*. In *College English*, 2008, Vol. 70, No. 4, p. 384-402.

eco-gastronomic member-supported organization that was founded in 1989 to counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world. To do that, Slow Food brings together pleasure and responsibility, and makes them inseparable."⁴

In addition to maintaining the original tenets, Slow Food has extended its focus to helping developing countries reach these ideals. Slow Food has many audience members worldwide, but the scope of my analysis focuses on rhetorical strategies on the Slow Food website that would appeal to average home cooks within the lower and middle classes, particularly within the American context. Carlo Petrini argues that quality food should be available for all classes of people, not just the wealthy.⁵ From this point of view, Slow Food seems to desire all people to be able to afford good and fair food.

However, others have noted that Slow Food appears to foster elitism and that the movement's goals are only viable for those with wealth and leisure time for activities such as cooking, gardening, and wine tastings, and this explains why a majority of Slow Food supporters are predominantly middle and upper class.⁶ For example, Slow Food membership fees and events can be expensive. Some have argued that for Americans to implement Slow Food, the organisation needs to more effectively disassociate from its elitist reputation.⁷ Many Slow Food advocates would agree that barriers still exist. Petrini says he is giving strong attention to the United States: "When I visited ... everybody told me that Slow Food can't work in the US, that everything must be fast."⁸ Despite these obstacles, Petrini goes on to argue that the United States is helping lead the way with new ideas and policies. While Petrini references the food trends in the United States, it is important to explain how these trends form rhetorical barriers for Slow Food and limit adoption among American audiences.

In the past three or four decades, eating out in the United States (U.S.) has become more the norm than sitting around a table and eating a family dinner. With many households in the U.S. requiring both parents to work full time, family meal times have become increasingly difficult to sustain. Additionally, the blurring of work and home life via mobile technologies makes concentrating on slow family life around mealtimes challenging. Free time that does exist is often taken up by socialising with friends and family, engaging in child-rearing activities, and spending time on other leisure activities. Long commute times for workers may also reduce the amount of time for food leisure. As a result, cheap and fast meals and prepared foods have become an unfortunate necessity in the U.S. Cooking, gardening, and extended family meals have taken a backseat to the fast-paced, take-out American lifestyle.⁹

However, some notable food writers such as Michael Pollan are attempting to resist trends toward the fast-paced lifestyle that produces unhealthy food.¹⁰ Pollan critiques the ways the American food system encourages genetically modified food, monoculture, and pesticide use on large farms. Genetically modified and pesticide laden fruits and vegetables often look prettier, have fewer flaws, and are larger than organic produce. Increasingly, American food products are imported from countries far away and must be picked before they are ripe in order for the food to survive the journey to our supermarkets. For these logistical reasons, food may not be as fresh as if it were purchased from a more local food source.

As a related trend, farmers' markets offering local produce have been increasing in number, as evidenced by growth from only a few hundred in the U.S. in the 1970s to more than 8,000 registered farm-

ers' markets today.¹¹ Many Americans are aware of the negative impacts of pesticides and buy organic food at farmers' markets or local grocery co-ops and health food stores to support environmentally conscious production.¹² Healthy organic food is not only less cosmetically perfect, but it is often more expensive than non-organic food, which becomes a barrier for low-income populations.¹³ For Slow Food, the American culture represents a formidable adversary. The task of reversing several cultural trends is not impossible, but Slow Food requires powerful rhetoric if it wants to capture the minds, hearts, and loyalty of a mainstream American populace. Slow Food must show ordinary American cooks that the organisation has something to offer that is feasible for their busy lives and modest cooking skill level.

2 Communication, Rhetoric, and Visual Arguments

This analysis focuses on the visual communication of Slow Food and how the photographs on the Slow Food website function as a form of argument. Communication scholars have argued that visual imagery and mass media communicate symbolically and can be analysed from a rhetorical point of view.¹⁴ For example, some early examples of scholars studying visual communication analysed the rhetorical messages of war propaganda in the mid-20th century.¹⁵ This essay uses the rhetorical approach, a traditional communication perspective, to analyse images, signs, and other visual symbolic artefacts¹⁶ of Slow Food's website. Indeed, other rhetorical scholars have advocated the analysis of artefacts besides speech acts, notably Kenneth Burke¹⁷ and Susanne Langer.¹⁸ For instance, Langer argued that scholars studying symbols can and should analyse nondiscursive symbols, something she called presentational forms.¹⁹ Therefore, I frame my analysis from a communication and visual rhetoric perspective.

Photographic images communicate and persuade by emphasising rhetorical presence. Rhetorical theorist Chaim Perelman argues "Choosing to single out certain things for presentation in a speech draws the attention of the audience to them and thereby gives them a presence that prevents them from being neglected."²⁰ Perelman argued that rhetorical presence could be useful when a rhetor wanted to evoke an object's existence and qualities through language even though that object is not physically present. In order to create presence, a rhetor can insert, repeat, or emphasise a particular detail. For the Slow Food website, that means photographs. Scholars have argued that photographs can represent a type of visual rhetoric that creates presence

4 Compare: *Slow Food International*. [online]. [2014-09-01]. Available at: <http://www.slowfood.com/>.

5 HICKMAN, L.: *Slow food: Have we lost our appetite?* [online]. [2015-05-25]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/feb/04/slow-food-carlo-petrini>.

6 Compare: DONATI, K.: *The Pleasure of Diversity in Slow Food's Ethics of Taste*. In *Food, Culture & Society*, 2005, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 227-242; BITTMAN, M.: *Slow food quickens the pace*. [online]. [2015-05-25]. Available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/26/slow-food-quickens-the-pace/?_r=0>.

7 HIRSCH, J.: *Slow Food must shed elitist label*. In *Associated Press*, 2008.

8 *Revolutionaries by the Bay*. In *Economist*, 2008, Vol. 388, 8597, p. 38.

9 SCHLOSSER, E.: *Fast food nation: The dark side of the all-American meal*. New York: Harper, 2005.

10 Compare: POLLAN, M.: *The omnivore's dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Press, 2007; POLLAN, M.: *In defense of food: An eater's manifesto*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008.

11 Compare: BROWN, A.: *Farmers' market research 1940-2000: An inventory and review*. In *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*, 2002, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 167-176; USDA. *Farmers marketing: Direct sales through markets, roadside stands, and other means up 8 percent since 2007*. [2015-05-29]. Available at: <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Online_Resources/Highlights/Farmers_Marketing/Highlights_Farmers_Marketing.pdf>.

12 Compare: ALKON, A.: *From Value to Values: Sustainable Consumption at Farmers Markets*. In *Agriculture and Human Values*, 2008, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 487-498; GARNER, B. R.: *Vote with your fork: The performance of environmental voice at the farmers' market*. In DEPOE, S., PEEPLES, J. (eds.): *Voice and environmental communication*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. 148-169.

13 COLASANTI, K., CONNER, D., SMALLEY, S.: *Understanding barriers to farmers' market patronage in Michigan: Perspectives from marginalized populations*. In *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 2010, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 316-338.

14 Compare: FOSS, S.: *Theory of visual rhetoric*. In SMITH, K. L., MORIARTY, S., KENNEY, K., BARBATSIS, G. (eds.): *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*. MAHWAH, N. J.: Routledge, 2004, p. 141-152; HILL, C. A., HELMERS, M.: *Defining visual rhetorics*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004; LANGER, S. K.: *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.

15 LITTLEJOHN, S., FOSS, K.: *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005.

16 FOSS, S.: *Theory of visual rhetoric*. In SMITH, K. L., MORIARTY, S., KENNEY, K., BARBATSIS, G. (eds.): *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*. Mahwah, N.J.: Routledge, 2004, p. 141-152.

17 Compare: BURKE, K.: *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969; BURKE, K.: *A grammar of motives*. World Publishing Company, 1945; LITTLEJOHN, S., FOSS, K.: *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005.

18 Compare: LANGER, S. K.: *Feeling and form: A theory of art*. New York: Scribner, 1953; LANGER, S. K.: *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.

19 Compare: LANGER, S. K.: *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957; LITTLEJOHN, S., FOSS, K.: *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005.

20 PERELMAN, C.: *The realm of rhetoric: Philosophy*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, p. 35.

and which references other works, places, scenes, or feelings.²¹ An image may allude to or suggest other ideas.²² Additionally, where Perelman argues that rhetorical presence is created with language, I use the same principles to analyse the rhetorical presence created with photographs by analysing elements such as composition, lighting, focus, depth of field, colour, and content.

In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate how Slow Food successfully use photographs to appeal to the imagination for gourmet food and environmentalism but fail to overcome the barriers of time, money, and skill. I also refer to these barriers collectively as feasibility.

3 Slow Food Imagery

The visual rhetoric of the Slow Food website symbolises luxury, exoticism, leisure, and professional approaches to cooking. There are rotating photographs of Italian architecture, exotic looking gourmet food, artfully crafted and colourful graphic designs, prominent words like “Fish”, “Biodiversity”, and “Earth”, references to other countries, and links to the movement’s ideology. Two specific photographs, both taken from the Slow Food website in September 2010,²³ will serve as representative anecdotes²⁴ for my argument that the Slow Food visual rhetoric appeals to the imagination but fails to overcome the practical barriers of time, money, and skill.

The first photograph, located at the top of the website home page, is an artisanal cheese that appears to be either fresh mozzarella or a goat’s milk cheese. It shows a hand holding a brick of cheese as if examining it to assess whether or not it meets some quality criteria. The cheese clearly creates the rhetorical presence of artisanal quality because it is not packaged but left with the rind exposed – typical of artisanal cheese. If the artisanal calibre of the cheese were still in question, the label would dispel that notion. The small label behind the cheese looks to be hand laminated and has a three-line description fitted in a metal label holder. Mass-produced, supermarket cheddar cheese does not require a three line description and a handmade note. The photograph is a black and white image with a sepia tone effect that suggests nostalgia for a simpler golden age of existence. A close examination will show that the photograph has what photographers call hard lighting. Hard lighting indicates high contrast and occurs naturally on sunny days. From the angle of the light source, this photograph evokes the ambience of either early morning or early evening. The photograph may be meant to induce ideas of early morning food shopping, such as at a farmers’ market or in an idyllic Italian village. In addition, this photograph appeals to the basic visceral senses of taste and sight. This photograph invokes the rhetorical presence of farmers’ markets, specialty cheeses, and gourmet food products. This assertion corroborates others’ observations that Slow Food participants are often wealthy consumers who can afford to shop at farmers’ markets and purchase items like artisanal cheese.²⁵ Coupled with imagery of Italian architecture and Italian words, the image further appeals to the American imagination because it invokes images of Italy and the desire for the myth of the idyllic Italian lifestyle.

Yet while the photograph appeals to the imagination and senses, it unwittingly creates more barriers by evoking a visual presence of gourmet foods that are typically difficult to find, expensive, time-consuming to make, and unfamiliar. To expound, while many are willing to take the time to go to a specialty store or farmers’ market, most still shop at large supermarkets that may or may not stock artisanal food. This is slowly changing in U.S. supermarkets, and access to these products is increasing. A larger barrier is money. While many people appreciate artisanal cheese, a good artisanal cheese can cost anywhere from \$7-15 per half pound compared to \$4 for a non-artisanal, plain brick of Cheddar or Colby cheese. The artisanal cheese image on the website represents the expensive variety.

21 HILL, C. A., HELMERS, M.: *Defining visual rhetorics*. Mahwah : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

22 FOSS, S.: Theory of visual rhetoric. In SMITH, K. L., MORIARTY, S., KENNEY, K., BARBATSIS, G. (eds.): *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*. Mahwah, N.J. : Routledge, 2004, p. 141-152.

23 *Slow Food International*. [online]. [2014-09-01]. Available at: <<http://www.slowfood.com/>>.

24 BURKE, K.: *A Grammar of Motives*. World Publishing Company, 1945.

25 DONATI, K.: *The Pleasure of Diversity in Slow Food’s Ethics of Taste*. In *Food, Culture & Society*, 2005, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 227-242.

Lastly, the question of feasibility arises. Because artisanal cheeses represent expensive and imported products, typical cooks in American lower- and middle-class homes may not possess the knowledge or skill needed to purchase and use these cheeses effectively. If typical home cooks look at a recipe with an exotic cheese, many may not even attempt the recipe because they either will not know where to find the cheese or may not know how to cook with it. The adventurous cooks who do buy an imported, artisanal cheese are still faced with the question, “What should I do with this?” They may not know how to incorporate Pecorino Toscano into an American casserole. Again, the image reflects the exotic. Overall, the visual rhetoric summons the presence of barriers and fails to show ways these barriers could be overcome by normal, everyday cooks.

A second photograph is a picture of a chef clothed in cooking garb and holding a knife preparing to chop and cook food. The chef has a Slow Food logo on his chef jacket, and he is wearing a leather watch. He exudes professionalism. The low aperture of the camera lens and subsequent shallow depth of field blur the background and force the viewer focus on the chef’s hands and arms, which are front and centre. In fact, the head and legs are not a part of the image, indicating that Slow Food’s marketing intent is for audiences to focus on the hands, knife, cooking, and expertise. Further, the chef is not merely holding the knife but seems to be sharpening or testing it against his hand. The image is slightly blurred to indicate motion and action. To a mainstream American audience, the picture of the chef taps into the recent and widespread popularity of cooking shows featuring celebrity chefs and cooking competitions. The chef on Slow Food’s website invokes the presence of good food, cooking, and expertise. Slow Food may even be trying to connect with the idea that cooking shows espouse – that you can do it at home. However, while the rhetorical summoning of the artistic and expert chef appeals to the imagination and senses, it fails to make it accessible to the everyday home cook. As in the cheese photograph, the rhetorical message of this photograph indirectly invokes barriers of time, money, and skill. In the following paragraphs, I discuss in more detail these three barriers.

First, time is an issue. Television chefs cook quickly, but for most home cooks, a gourmet meal takes a prohibitive amount of time. The chef image will not convince audiences finishing a full day’s work that they have time for such a venture when they arrive home. Gourmet cooking requires time for leisure – a luxury many do not have. These images also fail to communicate how families with children will have the time to cook homemade meals in addition to daily child-rearing activities.

Second, a gourmet chef cooks fine food with fine ingredients, which can be expensive and difficult to source. For instance, by the time a home cook discovers a spice market where galangal and twelve other unusual but required ingredients could be purchased to actually cook a traditional Thai recipe, the result is often a costly meal. The Slow Food imagery does little to assure audiences that this style of cooking is affordable.

Lastly, the chef image implies a high skill level, which poses a rhetorical barrier for many. Not only is it time-consuming and expensive to cook high quality food, but home cooks may also have a difficult time believing they can cook the way a celebrity chef cooks on television. Celebrity chefs are, after all, professionals. The photo of the chef in his fancy cooking outfit conveys professionalism. We rarely see professionals make mistakes, but home cooks ruin recipes often.

The Slow Food visual rhetoric and imagery capture the imagination and resonate with the recent popularity of cooking television and foodie culture. However, neither of the images adequately counters the barriers evoked by its subject matter or artistic presentation.

Conclusion

In sum, the Slow Food website employs artistically beautiful images that succeed in appealing to the imagination by rhetorically invoking the presence of gourmet food culture, exotic travel, and cooking shows. However, Slow Food also unwittingly evokes the rhetorical presence of time, money, and skill constraints while failing to show a lower- or even middle-class audience with average cooking ability how to partake in Slow Food ideology and overcome these challenges. This conclusion is not entirely surprising. Rather, this

analysis reinforces other writers' arguments that for Slow Food to succeed, it needs to transcend its elitist reputation.²⁶

In order to reach the average American audience, Slow Food must use images that convince people that they have the required time, do not need a lot of money, and already possess the abilities necessary to participate in the social movement in a meaningful way. This could be reinforced by programmes, website changes, and photograph changes that send these messages. Some alternative images could show inner-city kids and adults planting a garden in an empty lot to show that people do not need a lot of money or land to grow food. Alternately, Slow Food could show a photo of a business executive preparing food with children in the kitchen to show that you can have a career and family and still find time to cook. Slow Food could also show a young couple saving money by growing a garden or a family around the dinner table eating and smiling. Images like these could get more people involved in believing in Slow Food and in participating in its ideals. Slow Food faces many challenges in terms of being adopted²⁷ by a larger demographic of Americans. Currently, the imagery displayed on the website reinforces the elitist consumerism that ostracizes many who could participate in more modest ways.

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²⁶ Compare: HIRSCH, J.: *Slow Food must shed elitist label*. In Associated Press, 2008; DONATI, K.: *The Pleasure of Diversity in Slow Food's Ethics of Taste*. In *Food, Culture & Society*, 2005, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 227-242; SCHNEIDER, S.: *Good, Clean, Fair: The rhetoric of the Slow Food movement*. In *College English*, 2008, Vol. 70, No. 4, p. 384-402.

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