

Text: J. Abbott Miller

Pictures for rent

Stock photography receives little attention and wins even fewer awards, but it makes up a kind of corporate vernacular that informs almost all levels of graphic design

1. This idealised "milk and cookies" scene has lived several stock photo lives, from its usage as a contemporary shot (c. late 1950s) to its present historical status as a nostalgic image. In between, it probably languished in obscurity. There seems to be an

unwritten rule in the stock photo agencies that images need to be about 20 years old before they can be re-circulated as "nostalgia". Camp 1950s images are a mainstay of many of the agencies which supply clients in advertising and publishing.





Photography, like typography, is technically, historically and aesthetically wedded to graphic design. Yet unlike type, photography is rarely accorded attention as one of graphic design's primary resources. Histories of photography usually focus on inventions, genres and influential photographers – ignoring the relationship of the medium to graphic design and the ubiquitous but less fashionable area of “stock photography”, a sub-genre defined by agencies and researchers as “pictures for rent”.

Stock photography offers a way of studying images as a form of currency that funds advertising, text books, real-estate pamphlets, greeting cards, in-flight magazines, book covers, posters and annual reports. It cuts through the genres – and what I would call the class distinctions – of graphic design. This kind of photography is not the award-winning sort commissioned by top art directors, nor is it a heartfelt grass-roots expression; it is instead a kind of corporate vernacular that informs a vast amount of graphic design practised in both amateur and professional settings.

The two major sources for stock photos are outtakes from commissioned shoots (often of a documentary nature) and photographs shot specifically as “stock”. It is difficult to trace the history of the phenomenon because it is both a border activity – an unrespected sub-genre of more respected forms – and a transient, commercially driven undertaking. Nor is stock photography a stable, continuous or discrete entity. Some of the major strands that have contributed to its development include the early stereoscope businesses, the formation of picture agencies that accompanied the expansion of magazine publishing and advertising in the 1920s and the formalisation of what I will call the “stock market” in images in the 1970s. It is inappropriate to look for a single point of origin for stock photography, since the industry has grown out of the diverse areas of photographic production and consumption.

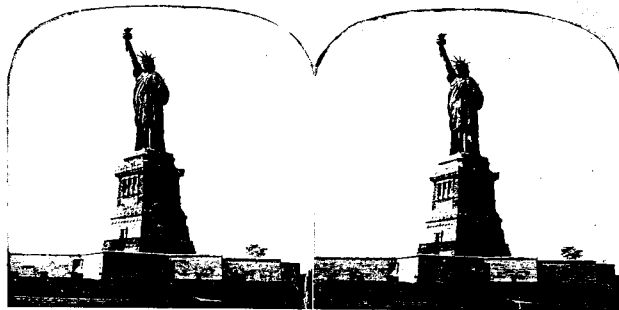
RISE OF THE STEREOSCOPE

The early market for images in the US was dominated by manufacturers of stereoscopic picture cards. Stereoscopes are viewing devices that create a three-dimensional effect when the eye blends together two photographs of the same scene taken at slightly different angles. The stereoscope soon became a widespread pastime, and as early as 1859 Oliver Wendell Holmes recognised that the consequence of the new obsession “will soon be such an enormous collection of forms that they will have

to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now.”

One of the most successful stereoscope companies was Underwood and Underwood, set up in 1880 by Bert and Elmer Underwood of Ottawa, Kansas. The Underwoods began as modest distributors of photo cards produced by other companies, but within four years had what appeared to be a monopoly on the US market. The Underwoods opened branch offices across the country, in Canada and in Britain. In 1891 the company made its headquarters in New York and began to publish its own stereoscopic photos; by 1896 it was supplying photographs to newspapers and magazines, marking its first foray into a “pictures for rent” type of agency, a development that coincided with the rise of half-tone reproductions in American newspapers.

Six years after the Underwood brothers retired in 1925, the firm was reorganised as Underwood and



Underwood News Photos, a supplier of historical and contemporary news subjects. This trajectory – from a stereoscope factory producing travel and entertainment images to a news photo specialist – was typical of early picture agencies. Three other firms which followed this route were the Brown Brothers, B. W. Kilbourn, and H. Armstrong Roberts. Roberts was the first agency to publish a catalogue of its holdings, which was circulated to potential customers in 1920 (previously agencies had simply conducted image research in response to general requests). The catalogue, which did not reproduce every photograph in the collection but included broad types of imagery, introduced a new paradigm to the business, putting the pictures on display like goods in a department store in contrast to the more hermetic model of the archive.

The Roberts agency has survived the mergers of the internationalised photo agencies and is still in

business today, with branches in several US cities. In a recent interview, Bob Roberts said that in producing a catalogue, his grandfather invented the notion of “stock photography” – that is, of a speculative market for photographs.

SERVING THE MASS MEDIA

The rapidly expanding magazine and advertising industries in America and Europe in the 1920s widened the scope and formalised the practices of photo agencies. In Weimar-era Germany, as described by Maud Lavin in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, publishers of photo weeklies such as Ullstein Verlag had in-house photographers but also commissioned freelancers through agencies such as Dephot (Deutsche Photodienst) and Wide World. Photographs were often shot without the assurance of a commission, discouraging political imagery since generic pictures could be sold to either liberal or conservative publications. Dephot was among the first and most prominent of the photo agencies and developed largely as an intermediary between the photographers and the mass-media publications they served.

Just as many of America’s most influential art directors were European émigrés, so too were some of the most important figures in photojournalism. Kurt Szafranski, formerly at Ullstein, emigrated to the US and founded Black Star, one of the first such agencies in the country. Kurt Korff, also formerly at Ullstein, wrote an outline proposal for an illustrated magazine which was followed closely by publisher Henry Luce in the formation of *Life*, America’s main photojournalistic outlet, launched in 1936. Otto Bettmann, an antiquarian with a life-long obsession with picture- and book-collecting, fled Nazi Germany for New York in 1935 with suitcases full of pictures from which he built the Bettmann Archive. Bettmann organised his picture library in a self-consciously academic fashion and considered his classification system to be the key to his success. He had close ties with New York’s graphic design community, receiving early encouragement from Dr Robert Leslie, whose typesetting firm The Composing Room provided a successful example of a supplier of services to the publishing and design industries. Bettmann’s story is characteristic of other immigrants who set up agencies in US cities, including Globe Photo, Three Lion, Camera Press and Shostall. Kurt Hutton and Felix H. Man are credited with bringing photojournalism to Britain in the form of *Picture Post* and *Weekly Illustrated*.

both founded by Stephen Lorant, formerly editor of the *Münchener Illustrierte Presse*.

A parallel development was the US government's Farm Security Administration photography project, which employed a group of photographers to document American life. Initiated in 1935, the scheme ran for eight years, during which time Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Esther Bubley and others compiled a photographic record of the country which served as a public relations tool for New Deal programmes. The FSA dossier was used in government publications and the agency also made its holdings available to newspapers and

1936 PHOTO REPRODUCTION



2. Stereoscopic viewing cards present the same image at slightly different angles to create the illusion of depth through a viewfinder. The Statue of Liberty is typical of these often tourist-oriented images of cities and sights from around the world.
3. For contemporary viewers it is hard to imagine that this was ever seen as a non-ironic or deliberately surrealistic image. The glazed expressions and social-realist upwards tilt of the head create a disturbing amalgam that as a genre might be called ad-prop.

4. This is only one of several stock photos that steal directly from Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving dinner painting, with Mantegna-Body-of-Christ foreshortening on the table. Norman Rockwell is a stock photo favourite.

magazines, from mass-market publications such as *Look* to small-scale journals. Thus the government founded its own picture agency, which still functions as a historical archive today.

THE STOCK MARKET

In the mid-1970s stock photography began to separate into two fields – photo agencies oriented towards advertising and news agencies furnishing documentary images – formalising a distinction that was already present in most organisations. The shift occurred as companies began to cater solely to the advertising market. Photographer Tom Grill and businessman Henry Scanlon, whose agency Comstock is currently among the largest in the field, are said to have “invented” the contemporary form of stock photography, whereby a photographer shoots prior to any assignment. Scanlon and others have dated this “invention” to about 1974-75, but the same claim was made by H. Armstrong Roberts



50 years earlier. Indeed, it is clear from looking at photographs from agencies active in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s that many were generated or marketed as multi-purpose and generic in the same way as Comstock describes its own stock pictures of the 1970s.

The Comstock holdings are distinguished by their more pointedly “conceptual”, “abstract” or “metaphorical” approach to subject matter. Scanlon makes much of the fact that he and Grill assigned photographers to shoot for “concept” rather than “content”, to think in terms of “word pictures”, visual condensations of verbal concepts. Stock catalogues will often group such photographs under categories such as “analogies”, “business metaphors”, “symbols” or “conceptual”.

Stock agencies were not, and still are not, respectable in the way that assignment shooting is, and are typically seen as a way of making money

from photographic leftovers. But as the photography business became more competitive, stock-market shooting became a significant part of it. The rapid expansion of the stock market over the last 20 years is the result of a number of factors. Magazines, which traditionally employed staff photographers whose work was the property of the publisher, gradually eliminated these positions in favour of freelance photographers who could sell their outtakes. This potential was reinforced by the 1978 Copyright Law, which states that a photograph is the property of the person who shot it: a client who hires a freelance photographer is paying only for



the "use" of that photographer's property. Another major change was technological. By the early 1980s nearly all agency photographs were colour transparencies, which meant that an original would have to be sent out rather than a print generated from a black and white negative. Most transparencies would be damaged after only five trips to a printer or colour house, limiting the lifetime, circulation potential and profitability of a single image. In 1985 Kodak introduced high-quality duping film (Kodak 50/71) that allowed photographers to make limitless dupes of successful pictures. A typical international agency will

now make an average of 125 copies of a single photograph for circulation to sibling agencies in over 15 different countries. Photographer Lester Lefkowitz has sold one photograph over 250 times; his 1989 image of two meshing gears has appeared on posters, on the covers of a journal of accounting and a law journal and on examples of graphic design all over the world.

Encyclopaedic and lavishly produced catalogues are a phenomenon of the last ten to 15 years. Unlike earlier catalogues, which merely indicated the type and variety of images available, these now provide a record of the entire archive, so clients rarely make research requests but instead ask for the exact picture they require. Many photographers demand that each of their pictures accepted for distribution

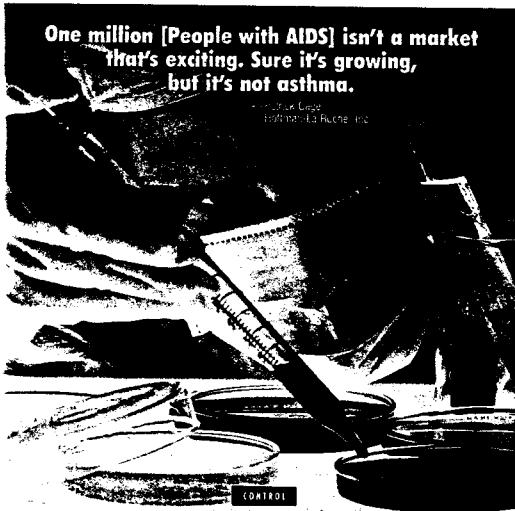
COMSTOCK INC.



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5. Male and female versions of the same scene are now typical in business and domestic contexts. In this "working family" scenario, the male executive dashes off to his meetings while the woman carries junior to pre-school. 6. In the catalogues researched for this article there were no categories designated as "gay and lesbian", although there were frequently same-sex couples in intimate poses. Advertising has recently discovered the gay consumer as a market. 7. Many catalogues offered categories of individuals identified as "executives", but there were no corresponding categories designated as "blue collar". Instead, these images occur under headings such as "the diversified workforce" that mix executives

with mechanics and so on. 8 and 9. AIDS was indexed in only one source, Tony Stone (8). The image, however, is very indirect. A 1989 project (9) by Gran Fury for *Artforum* used stock imagery as a way of creating a message which played on pharmaceutical trade advertising. 10. This image of an art director/designer helps the readership of this magazine to understand to what extent he or she conforms or deviates from "stock-photo reality". If you are male, white and unstoppably creative, you are getting close to becoming an illustration. 11. Images such as this geisha woman buying American softdrinks from a vending machine wield cultural stereotypes of mind-numbing banality.



appears in the catalogue. The incredible volume and obsolescence of such catalogues is changing as they are replaced by photo-CD and on-line services. But while these technologies are appealing from an ecological standpoint, they pose a new range of problems for photographers, who will find it difficult to protect their work as it becomes subject to digital manipulation and disguise.

NON-SPECIFIC STEREOTYPES

As a business, stock photography is based on the notion that a single photograph has a potential for multiple applications. In modern stock photography, the informational richness and depth of the photographic image clashes with the imperative for the generic, the non-specific, the symbolic, the superficial and stereotypical. This striving for clarity and legibility (in both formal and conceptual terms) unites the disparate styles and subjects offered up by stock photo agencies.



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The catalogues and archives of the stock industry provide an index of how images communicate in the context of mass media. In the process of building and marketing their collections, stock agencies are establishing a visual dictionary of mass media – a visualisation of emotions and situations such as patriotism, parenthood, leisure, friendship, work, power, confusion, information, love and aggression.

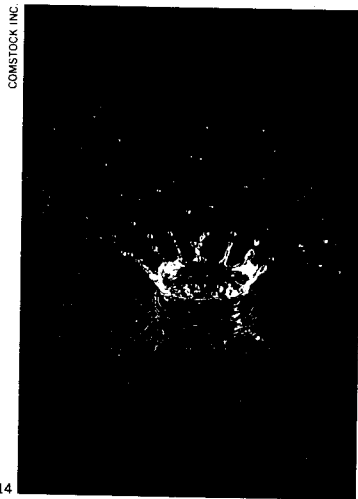
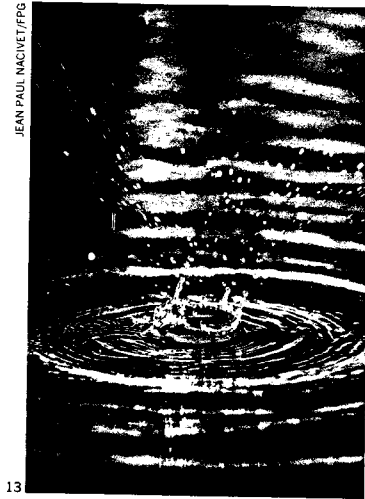
PICTURE LITERACY

Historians of printing have shown that the formalisation of writing through the medium of typography – its gradual elimination of the vagaries and inconsistencies of handwriting – affected the development of both grammar and punctuation. And with this formalisation came a proliferation of vocabulary: in other words, a higher degree of structure yields an expansion of vocabulary.

The notion that modern culture is characterised by a shift from print-based literacy to picture-based

literacy has been discussed since the advent of photography; the field of cultural studies has situated itself at this intersection of words and pictures. The saturation of imagery, and the growth of apparatuses with which to disseminate and analyse it, begs the question of whether a similar formalisation is occurring in the realm of images? Stock photography is an exaggerated forum in which to consider this question, but for that same reason is useful as an index of a publicly directed form of speech.

Iconographically, stock photography converts dialects of Modernism into the everyday language of commerce, as in the relentless recycling of Edward Weston-style nature studies or the endless drip of Dr Harold Edgerton's famous stroboscopic study



JEAN PAUL NACIVET / FPG

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COMSTOCK INC.

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12-14. MIT professor Harold Edgerton invented the stroboscope and pioneered the field of ultra-high-speed photography. His famous series of pictures of a milk droplet splashing into the shape of a crown has become a classic icon in photographic history. These droplet images come from three different photo agencies, and there are typically several in each agency's catalogue. 15. The Japanese company Photonica has emerged as a leading producer of stock photography which actively discourages the clichés of many stock images. The Photonica catalogues arrange work by

photographer, presenting the images in the manner of an art catalogue. 16 and 17. American designer Bethany Johns uses stock photography as a wry and inexpensive way of reinforcing serious messages. A WAC (Women's Action Coalition) announcement avoids what might seem a humourless warning by using a 1940s image of a woman in novelty glasses. A "terms and conditions" sheet from Johns' own stationery quotes that most ubiquitous of stock-photo gestures, the handshake, then quotes it next to the signature line to underscore the point that the agreement is binding.

a water droplet. Stock photography also updates
 makes contemporary images from Michelangelo
 Norman Rockwell, using conventions as legible as
 no-smoking sign. Stock photography suggests that
 industrialised cultures “visual literacy”, or better
 “picture literacy”, means that there are more and
 ore pictures, but that they get more and more alike.
 Because of its emphasis on clarity, stock-photo
 tech is an exaggerated form of representation –
 eature that becomes apparent when the subject
 cultural difference. To sum up the landscape of
 ntemporary Japan, photographers resort to the
 ost easily read juxtaposition of clichés: a geisha
 man buying a Coca-Cola at a vending machine.
 espite the tendency towards internationalisation in
 ock photographs, there are still important cultural
 fferences: while us markets demand multi-cultural
 agery, European and Asian markets largely reject
 egrated scenes.

The repetition of compositions, poses and settings
 akes contemporary stock photography appear as
 monolithic category of generic imagery. Yet like
 aphic design, it is practised on a number of levels
 at are in varying degrees commercial, stylistically
 nbitious or tailored to the needs of a specific
 ientle. Within the stock industry there is
 commercial mainstream – Comstock, FPG,
 ony Stone – and an avant-garde wing, represented
 y Photonica, established in Tokyo in 1987 and in
 ew York in 1990. The sophisticated colour and
 ostracted forms of Photonica represent a reaction
 ainst the “stock photo” look; the imagery is
 ighly specific rather than generic, and the style
 oregrounds the vision of individual photographers.

Photonica’s success has led other agencies to mimic
 s approach: FPG has just introduced an imitative
 Photo Haiku” catalogue and Photonica-like
 equests appear on the “Want Lists” issued by the
 gencies. Receiving my “Photo Haiku” catalogue,
 was reminded of a statement made by Lefkowitz:
 Photo agencies... react purely to whatever sells.”

WORKING IN THE ARCHIVES

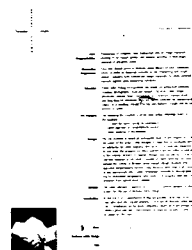
While much of this photographic production is
 ntended as a practical tool for designers, some have
 mployed stock in a less straightforward manner.
 An early example is Moholy-Nagy’s book *Painting,
 hotography, Films*, which weaves highlights
 rom mostly German mass-media publications
 nd photo agencies into a manifesto about the way
 odern photography extends vision. Two recent
 xamples are more directly “about” the language
 of stock photography. The catalogues *Cultural*

Geometry, Artificial Nature and Post-Human
 (see “Reputations”, pages 14-16) by the design and
 editorial team of Dan Friedman and Jeffrey Deitch
 offer an amused, sometimes critical response to the
 image banks of mass media. In the case of *Cultural
 Geometry*, stock imagery associated with tourism
 is juxtaposed with artwork rooted in geometry.
 Through words and pictures, the book deconstructs
 the notion of “pure” geometry, foregrounding the
 way this carries cultural associations. In all three
 books, stock photography, celebrity press shots and
 mass-market magazines provide the lens through
 which to survey the media-saturated culture in which
 the artwork was produced.

Designer Bethany Johns uses stock photography
 from the 1940s and 1950s for both editorial and
 budgetary reasons. In pro-active work for the
 Women’s Action Coalition, stock sources provide
 inexpensive, powerful, sometimes humorous
 reinforcement for serious messages. Johns’ studio



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stationery features stock photographs that relate to
 the various functions of business correspondence:
 a solid handshake graces the letter of introduction,
 a transmittal sheet features a golfball about to be set
 in motion by the swing of a club, invoices show
 a woman screaming in terror. Johns’ use of stock
 sometimes exploits the camp, nostalgic quality
 of 1940s and 1950s imagery, sometimes stock
 photography’s visual drama, as in an anti-
 discrimination statement for Atlantic Records that
 has a mysterious, blindfolded man with the words
 “we should know better” superimposed over the
 rants of a racist monologue.

British designer Mark Farrow has incorporated
 stock imagery in a less editorially specific manner:
 “The way we use pictures is almost gratuitous.
 It comes from the logic that record sleeves have
 pictures, so we provide a picture. Often this has
 nothing to do with the band, it’s just a great image.
 It’s almost a form of generic packaging for records.

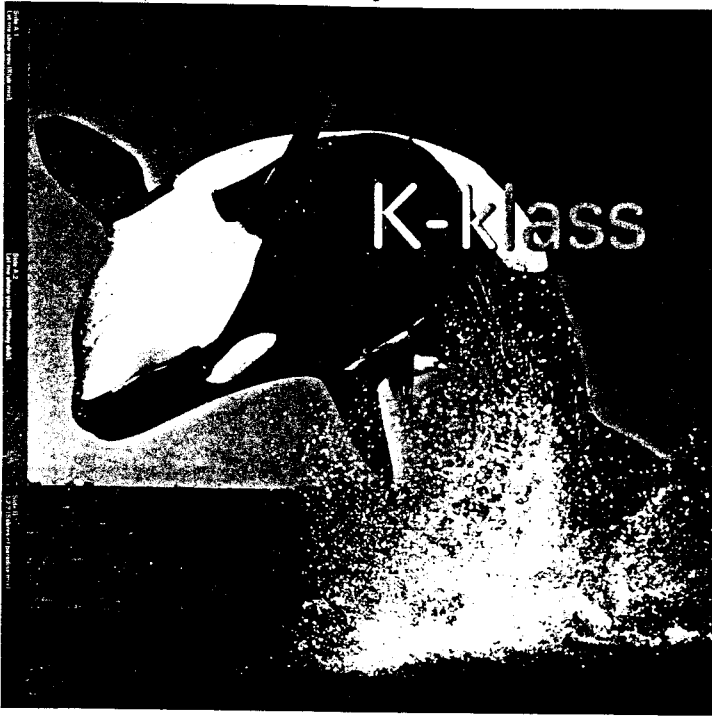


The bands I'm doing much of this work for don't have a public image and they don't have much of a budget, so it works for economic reasons as well. If anything started our use of picture libraries, it was financial constraints."

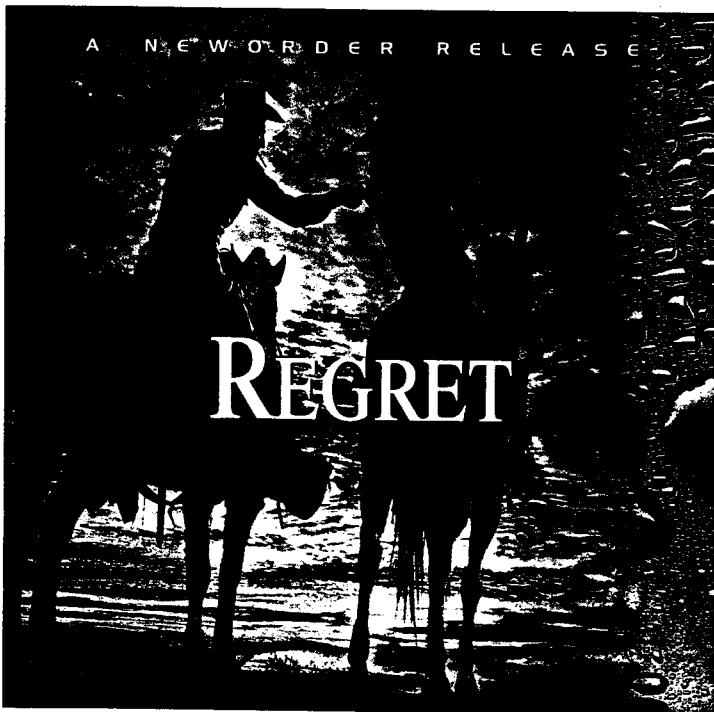
Farrow began using picture-library images in 1990-91 for Deconstruction Records, a major British dance label. In his work for a band called *K-klass*, he has developed imagery with nautical references because the name refers to a type of submarine. The cover for *Let Me Show You* uses an image of a huge killer whale breaching, obtained from a picture library that specialises in animals. The whale may be thought of as a kind of submarine, but otherwise has no thematic relationship to the band or the music. For another band called *The Grid*, Farrow used a Japanese phone card, which typically feature arbitrary images, as a point of departure for a sleeve that juxtaposes a lone cowboy and a satellite photograph. Again, it holds a loose rather than illustrative connection to the music. Asked about the relationship between his *Texas Cowboys* cover for *The Grid* and British designer Peter Saville's 1993 *Regret* cover for *New Order*, Farrow acknowledged the similarity but felt that Saville's use of such imagery took place in a story-telling mode, whereas his own is more ambiguous and non-narrative.

Saville's *Regret* cover underscores its narrative aspects with a typographic treatment that echoes the advertising/display titling of big-budget movie posters. The cover skilfully fuses the languages of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, movies and cigarettes, territory where the melodrama inherent in the title comes into full narrative flower. In Saville's work for both *New Order* and clothing designer Yohji Yamamoto, there is a metaphorical use of imagery that parallels standard uses of stock sources rather than the oblique relationships favoured by Farrow. "I don't think of this imagery as kitsch," says Farrow. "Many of these are beautiful, strong photos, and they are not there for their story or for a laugh."

The New York studio Bureau designed a 1991 Elektra Records advertising campaign which uses brilliantly hued and hyper-realistic stock photographs of a vacuum cleaner, a glistening Thanksgiving turkey and a big, fleshy baby. Each advertisement in the series promotes a different band, but as in Farrow's work, there is no specific link between the artists and the imagery. What unites the series is the motif of a jagged cartouche that surrounds copy typeset in a large, industrial sans serif. In an industry characterised by clever copy



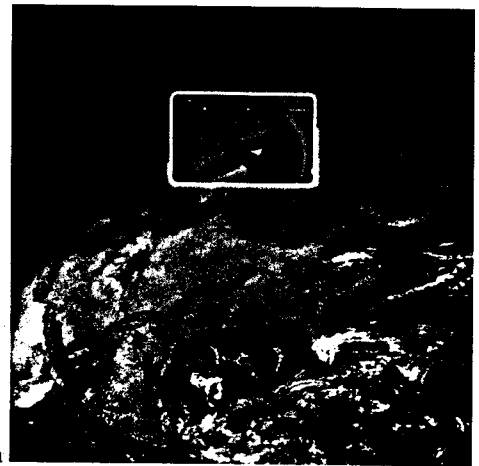
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lines and mediocre band photographs, these advertisements display a pleasing flippancy towards the conventional goals of advertising.

Designers engage stock imagery in ways which could be described variously as sincere, naive, pragmatic, ironic, humorous, political or appropriationist. In some designers' work, these images become discursive, reflective of their own status as a form of "popular reality". In his book *The Politics of Pictures*, media theorist John Hartley uses "popular reality" to refer to the forum of imagery that creates our concepts of the public. Historical and comparative study of stock photography could yield insights into the often hypothesised domination of the image over the word, and the transformation of our roles from "citizens" into "consumers". ○
Thanks to Comstock, Tony Stone and FPG



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18. The photo agencies may once have seemed like the last place the music business would look for fashionable advertising imagery, but in the "ironic" 1990s stock photos have proved a knowing choice in a sector of the market that has sampled, and become immune to, almost every other kind of visual thrill. Stock photos are used by designers such as New York team Bureau in a press campaign for Elektra Records in the full knowledge that the audience will identify them as library images being used counter to their original bland and corporate intentions.

19. London music graphics designer Mark Farrow has shown a purposeful commitment to the use of picture library images in his sleeves for Deconstruction Records. As with Bureau's press

advertisements, it is the lack of apparent connection between chosen imagery and music that piques interest: there is no way of guessing from the image alone what genre (rock, rap, New Age whale music?) this belongs to. Only the type suggests "pop".

20 and 21. The stock universe is one of endless requotation, so it is appropriate that even within the small, still-emerging sub-genre of fashionable stock, similar tropes should recur. A Peter Saville 12-inch sleeve for New Order and a Mark Farrow 12-inch sleeve for The Grid both centre on silhouettes of contemplative cowboys already deeply embedded in the collective consciousness by several decades of Hollywood Westerns and Marlboro Man billboard advertisements.