

Stock Imagery as Contemporary Iconography of Race, Class and Identity

CHEMI MONTES-ARMENTEROS Chemi Montes-Armenteros is currently the graphic design program director at American University in Washington DC. He obtained his MFA in graphic design at the Pennsylvania State University, and his BA in graphic design and audiovisual media at the University of Salamanca in Spain, his country of birth. Chemi taught design at Penn State prior to a brief period in the industry.

His professional experience encompasses print, video and film graphics and web design. A combination of agency and freelance practice has allowed Chemi to work with a diversity of clients ranging from small businesses and non profits to Fortune 500 companies. His work has received awards in design competitions and juried annuals, and also appeared in several design books and design periodicals, including *Graphic Logo*, *Applied Arts*, *How, Step and Print*. He also has published writings on design and semiotics, one of his areas of research.

VISUAL MESSAGES ARE NOT ALWAYS THE PRODUCT OF ORIGINAL IMAGERY CREATED FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. In communication design, the use of stock photography and stock imagery often becomes necessary for budgetary reasons or time constraints.

There are two major markets for stock photography. Editorial users of stock photography are book publishers (textbooks included), encyclopedias, magazines and, more recently, multimedia producers. Images aimed at this editorial use are often concerned with illustrating a subject matter or representing a specific object. The commercial market includes firms and agencies involved in design, advertising, marketing and public relations, along with other corollary entities. These multiple venues clearly extend the use of stock photography to many visual environments, which underlines the connection between designers — present in great numbers in both the editorial and commercial markets — and decisions regarding the use and selection of stock imagery.

The use of images acting as tokens of a larger group is common practice in communications design. This metonymic connection attempts to invest an image, which in the case of photography has an almost tautological relation with its referent, with sign attributes. When dealing with images of people, such an attempt to refer to the many by presenting the one fails to acknowledge both individuality and diversity. This failure is manifest in two ways: first, by depriving the one person of his or her own identity by virtue of its use as representation, and, second, through the reduction of plurality to one person. One can identify this practice as an example of “canonic generality,” which also functions as an inclusion-exclusion device for the audience, depending on whether the viewer believes him — or herself to be represented by the image.

The images in these collections can be understood as signs — visual signs — that make a visual thesaurus of current socioeconomic and cultural practices. They constitute a thesaurus, first in the sense that they are collections of images representing categorized activities and topics, which, as our analysis will show later, are economically and culturally biased reflections of the ideological environment. Not all human activities are represented, not all cultures are present, and not all social and ethnic groups are given equal relevance. Second, stock photography is a visual thesaurus in that it provides a number of possible options from which to choose a visual sign for visualization of an idea. But, as opposed to the familiar reference texts, the signs in this case are not compiled in groups of synonyms and antonyms. Rather, for the purpose of expedient searches, they are assigned keywords, which often cross from the descriptive to the evocative, from denotation to connotation, from representation to idealization. They are grouped within categories in which their polysemy is the least restricted. Each of the images then becomes the epitome of the free-floating signifier, a signifier without

a direct or unique connection to a referent. In fact, one could venture to say that it is this very attribute that makes some images more commercially successful than others. This last quality, however, is equally affected by ideological biases both at the stage of assigning meaning and at the stage of compiling the collections as visual resources. Stock imagery can be considered, then, as much a simplistic reflection of society's inner workings, power relations, values and class structure as a tool for their perpetuation. In sum, stock photography is the iconography of our ideology. In a designed visual message, both visual and verbal components operate at a complex level in which discourses become signs themselves rather than just combinations of signs. Constructed ideas, part of the cultural ideologies that frame our perception of reality, are used as if they had a natural referent; thoughts, values, perceptions — all of which are culturally bound — are used as if they were directly anchored on real objects for their meaning. The cultural and ideological construct becomes a naturalized context of reference, and in its naturalization presents itself as hardly questionable and inevitable. The meaning(s) of a visual sign, such as a stock photograph, is therefore often based on the role of that sign in another code, generating a multilayered complexity of visual and verbal metasigns.

Ideological constructions are complex codes, and they emanate from, as much as they recreate and perpetuate, social practices. Roland Barthes referred to these parallel or exterior codes as mythologies. This is not to say that social practices determine the nature of messages, nor is it to say that they are fixed. Ideological and cultural practices and, consequently, the code constructs to which they are tied, are constantly exposed to oppositional and negotiated messages by individuals and group participants, who also extract reactive oppositional and negotiated readings from the messages to which they are exposed. Stock photography constitutes a perfect example of the message-constructing devices that partake in the mechanic described up to this point. The very nature of stock photography requires that the selection of an image be made from pre-existing archives. The large number of images available through one single agency makes it necessary to catalog these vast collections and classify them, tagging each of them with a number of keywords. That way, a designer or art director faced with the need for images can narrow the possibilities by exploring only images marked by a specific word or by associated words.

These search methods obviously take place within the boundaries provided by the agency's pre-existing collections. The collections of images made available in any particular stock are not the result of a random process. To the contrary, archives are themselves the result of selections carried out by the agency among images provided by their regular photographers or by those who wish their work marketed by the agency. The criteria involved in this decision-making can be



illustrated by the guidelines provided by one of the these agencies, Indexstock, to prospective photographers: “We do need images that show a concept that can be used in a business publication like a brochure or an annual report. Hard-to-get shots of rare animals, cut[e] pictures of dogs, kids, people shopping or enjoying a sport... think of the things you would want to use to sell a product, illustrate a book, or awaken emotions in a potential customer.” It is in an agency’s best financial interest to cover as wide a range of requests as possible, taking a systematic approach to the classification of realities. However, these “requests” are anticipated by identifying tendencies that come from market interests, particularly in the case of advertising. The result is a plethora of imagery to be used in communication materials that does not just respond to but also predetermines possible demand. Being immersed in ideologically condoned commercial practices, stock agencies — like most (re)producers of culture — are determined “not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves.” In light of these observations, it seems clear that available images often display people and situations that are conducive to consumption or commercial exchange, which is the desirable lifestyle in a market-based society. If we recall the earlier mentioned directives offered by one of these agencies, images must show concepts “that can be used in a business publication.”

Let us consider an analogy to illustrate this point.

Imagine that the art director or designer considering the use of stock photography is instead a person about to travel to a foreign country. Without having the luxury to dedicate the proper amount of time to learn the foreign language, he or she is forced to rely on one of the commonly used books that contain premade, complete sentences rendered in a phonetic transcription. These sentences make it possible to establish communications once the individual has arrived in the country of destination, but, at the same time, they predetermine not only the kind of situations and social interactions in which the tourist can safely get involved, but also the manner and tone in which these situations develop and how he or she is perceived by the local population. Moreover if the book itself had been produced with the help of the Chamber of Commerce of the place of destination, chances are the sentences would replicate patterns of behavior and consumption beneficial to the local economy. The language reference book has thus become a tool to predetermine the range of perceptions and activities of our traveler.

Although market forces are a decisive agent in determining the imagery available through stock photography, this image-selection bias is not the only factor to consider. Messages produced using stock photography inherit ideological and value assumptions that go beyond commercial considerations. One of the characteristics of stock photography as a practice that is often considered an advantage is that many of the pictures are shot under ideal, controlled conditions. In this manner, setting, lighting, weather, and quite often props and models can be carefully picked and instructed. Although not all stock imagery is produced in this manner, this is a usual method, more apparent in some categories than in others, but still rather obvious when reviewing any stock collection. Models are often easily identifiable despite the change in costume and makeup from one image to another, and the surroundings are frequently common to several images, even if the depicted situation varies. In these cases of set-up shots, a constructed image takes on the appearance of objective, natural, mechanical representation, attributes due not only to the illusory neutrality of photography as a medium, but also to the mimicry of stopped action, of captured moment, of snapshot. The results are images that, from a semiotic point of view, are, as explained earlier, free-floating signifiers, stills of a nonexistent narrative, or, perhaps, of any narrative. Earlier, we discussed the advantage of a stock image telling many stories rather than one. This representational fallacy of photographs that are set up to look “natural” shares the intent to make the world outside the screen a continuation of the world displayed in it with fictional narratives, such as movies and television; the difference is that this identity between the real and the constructed worlds is presented as de facto in the case of stock photography. In that case, stock imagery is more than a tool for the commercial promotion of products and services. As earlier quoted, the image may aim to “awaken emotions.” The images themselves become currency in a trade in which the wealth being transferred is ideology.

Stock collections have become searchable databases

Business	+ people (12,273 hits)	100%
	+ men (males)	74%
	+ one man only (only men)	41%
	+ women (females)	46%
	+ one woman only (only women)	21%
	+ Caucasian	59%
	+ African-American	13%
	+ Asian-American	4%
	* + Latin American and Hispanic Ethnicity (Ethnic)	6%

that rely on keywords for the return of suitable matches. Stock photographs tell many stories and hence have many different readings. It follows that the decision to attach a specific keyword to a photograph relies on common readings of the image as a denotative and connotative sign. Since this classification is intended to facilitate the search to possible clients, it must also be made with the assumption that the criteria for assortment are extensive to users — that is, shared and, as such, naturalized. This indeed constitutes a naturalization of the constructed essence of the values and considerations that support any classification or epistemological paradigm. What a culture knows is certainly neither permanent nor natural. This is why the examination of these keywords, and moreover, the images returned in a search conducted using certain keywords, reveals ideology at work.

We will use a popular stock collection, Photodisc, to test some of our analysis by conducting searches that describe some gender and race markers as an example. The results are outlined in the table above.

These numbers can serve as an illustration of gender and race presence in a work environment. One might argue that they are simply a reflection of a reality of the workforce, which, in itself, would be revealing information on role allocation in our society in the context of demographic realities, and, thus, a revelation of ideology. Some gender-based, racial and cultural segments of the population are severely underrepresented; they are excluded from a message's content and, presumably, from its audience, thus removed from a communicational exchange that seeks to engage and promote economic activity. Since social identity seems to be tightly tied to capabilities for economic involvement, both as generators or as consumers, absence of representation — whether as reflection or as bias — economically disenfranchises some groups more than others.

Patriarchal and racial segmentation of society, as shown in the table above, is not a revelation. However, its clear quantitative reflection in stock imagery does serve as evidence of the extent to which a seemingly neutral and versatile communication resource is not devoid of ideological reinforcement. I invite the reader to replicate similar searches in this and other stock collections. The results will reveal a portrait of reality that is equally tinted by gender, race and economic

assumptions. Furthermore, subsequent qualitative analysis through the tools of visual semiotics will shed light on not just whether a group is represented, but in what role and capacity.

I do not intend to present the case that stock photography is morally ill-willed, but rather that it is a revealing quasi-anthropological catalog of the social practices and values that we define as ideology.

Photodisc.com, the most popular stock photography website, has been used to test the results of the search for "business" images. The results are outlined in the table above. The results are as follows:

1. The most common keyword used to narrow the search is "people" (12,273 hits).

2. The most common keyword used to narrow the search is "men" (74% of the total).

3. The most common keyword used to narrow the search is "one man only" (41% of the total).