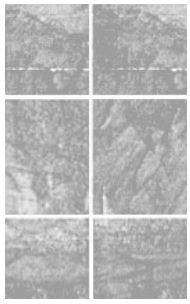
visual communication

ARTICLE



Building the world's visual language: the increasing global importance of image banks in corporate media

DAVID MACHIN
Cardiff University

ABSTRACT

Many of the images we now find in magazines, news, promotional material and advertisements are bought cheaply from image banks like Getty Images, which can be accessed by people all around the world. These images are technically of high quality. They have bright lighting and flat colours; attractive models are highly posed and are set in non-descript locations to make them usable across the world. They do not represent actual places or events and they do not document or bear witness, but they symbolically represent marketable concepts and moods such as 'contentment' and 'freedom'. The world in magazines and other similar media therefore comes to resemble the limited world of the image bank categories, which are based on marketing categories. This is therefore an ideologically pre-structured world which is in harmony with consumerism.

KEY WORDS

discourse analysis • electronic images • image banks • multi-media • multi-modality • photography • semiotics

INTRODUCTION

You are reading through the pages of a Sunday newspaper supplement. There is an article on the effect of moving home on children. On the page is a photo of a child with a cuddly toy, looking rather thoughtful, its gaze slightly off frame. The child sits on what looks like steps in front of a blank background, and is positioned to the side of the frame, to enhance the sense of space and loneliness. The image is technically superb, highly posed and highly designed, with careful co-ordination between the rich, primary colours of the clothes, the toy and the background.

The next article in the supplement looks at inner city violence in the

Copyright © 2004 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: www.sagepublications.com) /10.1177/1470357204045785
Vol 3(3): 316–336 [1470-3572(200410)3:3; 316–336]

1950s. It is illustrated by a black and white photograph of Teddy Boys in confrontational mode. They stand in a row facing the right of the frame, as if confronting an unseen rival, but in an orderly way, so all can be seen by the camera. A second glance reveals that the shot is likely to be a still from a movie.

Neither of these images has been commissioned for these specific articles. They have been taken cheaply and conveniently from an image bank. Image banks like Getty Images and its main rival, Bill Gates's Corbis, stock many millions of images, which can raise revenue of up to $100,000 each a year as they are licensed to designers around the planet. Many of them are archival images of key historical moments. But the biggest earners are stock images like that of the child sitting alone on the steps – images that do not record anything but evoke an idea or a feeling and can be used to add interest to a page. This is a $2 billion a year industry, and one which has entirely transformed the world of media images. Previously, image collections formed a small fragmented, national, specialist industry. Then Getty came along, buying up smaller collections and digitalizing everything, thus creating a global, cheap and fast access system. This article argues that this is bringing about fundamental changes in the way photographic images are used. What matters now is no longer only what photographs represent, when and where they were taken, and why. What matters now as much, or more, is how many different contexts they can be inserted into, both in terms of what they represent and in terms of their form, as they must be able to fit into a range of overall layout designs, for instance through colour coordination. The more they are multi-purpose, generic and decorative, the better they will sell. There has been a shift, it is suggested, from emphasis on photography as witness to photography as a symbolic system. This is partly due, I argue, to the culture of branding, where products are represented by images of, say, friendship, romance, or adventure – in other words through the meanings and the values of the products rather than through the products themselves, or their functions and uses. I do not wish to suggest that the use of symbolic images is fundamentally wrong, only that it should not become so dominant as to squash other roles which photography can and should also play.

The main purpose in this article is to describe the Getty image bank as a symbolic system. It is important to stress, however, that symbolic systems of this kind do not simply evolve. They are actively and intentionally created by powerful global corporations, and the way in which they are created is driven by the needs and interests of these corporations. For this reason, I begin by sketching the political and economic context in which this 'visual language' developed. This article formed part of a wider project on the representations of women in global media, such as Hearst's *Cosmopolitan* with 44 versions around the world. So this article investigates representations of women in the image bank. This does not provide a complete analysis of the Getty image bank but it serves as a representative example of the way that particular kinds of actors, actions, settings, moods, etc. tend to be seen around the world due to the image bank. These images, I argue, in reflecting consumer

categories, show a stylized, harmonized corporate world of work, commodified leisure and individualism, which is abstracted from politics and society.

The image industry and Getty images[1]

In March 1995, Getty Communications, set up by investment bankers Mark Getty and Jonathan Klein, saw potential in a fragmented world image market. It made its first acquisition by buying the London-based Tony Stone Images. At the time this was one of the world's leading image agencies. Getty has since gone on to take over 20 more companies, spending about $1 billion on the way. The company went public on the Nasdaq in 1996.

In 1998, Getty moved into digital imaging with the purchase of PhotoDisc. This revolutionized the use of image banks. When Getty first acquired Stone, image banking meant filing cabinets full of negatives. In the old style catalogue system of image access, designers would have to search through catalogues to find the right image and then wait for the order to arrive. Or they could contact the image bank to describe what it was they wanted. A photo researcher would then do a search to find something that fitted the request. If successful, some samples would be sent by courier, or by mail. If the designer did not like the images, the whole process would have to be repeated. With the Getty digital online service, the same thing could be done quickly and cheaply. The industry's main costs – storage and distribution – were eliminated.

In 1999, Getty bought out Eastman Kodak's image bank stock for $183 million. In 2000, it spent $220 million on buying the Visual Communications Group, with its $90 million a year in revenue and its hold on European markets. This included what until then, with a collection of 10 million images, was the biggest commercial library of images and film clips in the world (Reuters). In addition, Getty licenses the National Geographic image collection, which contains over 10 million images. It now has about a quarter of the world's $2 billion a year industry – an industry which used to consist of hundreds of small-scale regional and specialist companies. With their superior technological and financial clout, and of course economy of scale, Getty boasts, there is no reason why they should not be able to move further into the territory of the remaining smaller operators. In some countries, their current 25 percent market share would be considered illegal. But the company is based in the US where Microsoft have already paved the way, and at the global level there is no regulation for companies monopolizing the world market in this way.

The key to Getty's success is a system that allows designers to simply type in search terms such as 'woman' and 'work' or, as Getty describes them, 'conceptual terms' like 'freedom' or 'independence'. The search will then take in some 350,000 images. They are mainly contemporary images but will also include some archival images. This will throw up pages of thumbnails of images associated with the search terms. Designers can then download the

images to find one that fits in with their design, and pay online for the rights to use it. The whole process can be completed in a few minutes.

While Getty is a North American company based in Seattle, over 40 percent of its revenue comes from outside North America, where it draws customers from more than 50 countries. The company has websites in 10 languages and wholly owned offices and agents in more than 50 countries, including Singapore, the Philippines, Korea, China, Lebanon, New Zealand, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Europe and Latin America. Their images can increasingly be found all around the planet in advertisements, magazines, promotional material, food packaging, newspapers, etc.

The other massive image bank is Bill Gates's Corbis which has about two million images online. However, Corbis deals mainly in news and archival images, while Getty focuses on licensing stock photography to designers and advertisers. Jonathan Klein, one of the founding directors, has said that old pictures do not bring in the same kind of money as stock photography, e.g. images of business meetings, skylines, or romantic couples. Initially, Getty did not produce images but used the agencies that had increasingly emerged to take advantage of the many images photographers do not use. More recently, however, Getty has started to actively search out images, informing photographers of the kinds of images they look for. Getty images, according to Morrish (2001), must be 'striking, technically superb, yet meaningless', so that they will 'never conflict with the client's message'. As I argue later, I do not in fact agree that this is the best way to describe the typical Getty image.

Getty's promotional material reveals that the company 'is a leading force in building the world's visual language, through its innovative creation, sourcing and distribution of imagery, fonts and related services to the communications industry worldwide'. The company claims to produce and distribute images that touch people every day all over the world. If it does indeed have this kind of global reach, and this kind of influence on the images photographers now produce – and there is every indication that it does – we should take their claim seriously: Getty *is* a leading force in building the world's visual language from one which emphasized the photograph as witness, as record of reality, to one which emphasizes photography as a symbolic system and the photograph as an element of layout design, rather than as an image which can stand on its own. These changes in visual language are driven by the needs of global corporations, more specifically by the requirements of the concept of 'branding', as I show later in more detail.

I now turn to an analysis of the Getty images of women by focusing on three aspects: (i) their genericity, (ii) their 'timelessness', and (iii) their low modality. This is followed by a discussion of the system of search words used in the Getty image bank. As I draw on a range of analytical concepts and methodological tools, it is more convenient to discuss these in the relevant sections, rather than in a separate methodology section. I would like to stress that this study is a first exploration. The sheer size of the Getty image bank

makes it complex to grasp the hidden system in all its detail, and computer corpus techniques are currently being developed that will help us to obtain a more comprehensive picture. However, I do feel that, in this article, I have been able to put out a few useful markers on the terrain.

THE GENERIC IMAGE

Photographers I interviewed told me that images produced for Getty need to be general rather than specific. The image of the child with the cuddly toy is an example. It can be used to illustrate childhood worries and traumas of many kinds and in many contexts. In this section, I explore just what it is that can make photographic images generic. And it should perhaps be remembered that until recently many key theorists of film and photography have argued that photographic images can never be generic. Contrasting photographic images with words, Metz (1971) listed five key differences. One of them was that images can never be generic, while words are always generic and can only become specific in a given context: 'The image of a house can never mean "house" but only ever "Here is a house"' (p. 118).

Decontextualization

A key characteristic of the vast majority of Getty images is that the background is either out of focus, or eliminated altogether – many of the images are made in the studio, against a flat background. By means of such decontextualization a photograph is more easily inserted into different contexts, and acquires a 'conceptual' feel. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), 'by being decontextualised, shown in a void, represented participants become generic, a "typical example", rather than particular, and connected with a particular location and a specific moment in time' (p. 165). As a result, they say, decontextualization is one of the hallmarks of the 'abstract coding orientation', an approach to image production in which the validity of images lies not in their resemblance to visible reality, but in their adequacy with respect to the essential or general nature of the things depicted, and this means 'reducing the individual to the general, and the concrete to its essential qualities' (p. 170). I return to this later under the heading of 'modality'.

Generic settings

If a setting *is* shown, it tends to be either a window, or a generic setting. Windows are favourites, especially when the view behind the window is light and out of focus, because they suffuse the image with a feeling of brightness and airiness. I interviewed over 30 photographers who had syndicated their work for this project who universally said that this provided 'optimism', 'delicacy' and 'beauty'. Clearly, the world of the image bank image is the bright and happy world of 'positive thinking' favoured by contemporary corporate ideology.

If other settings are shown, they tend to be generic. Generic interiors avoid clutter. Their style is the style of the showroom or the interior in the home decoration magazine, which must allow as many people as possible to imagine the space as their own. Often there is a sense of opulence, as in the airport lounge, or the modern designer shoe shop, or restaurant or media office in New York or London: expansive wooden floors, bright modern lighting, minimalist furniture highlighting perhaps one single, exciting colour. Exteriors also tend to be generic: mountains, the ocean, a non-descript city street that might be anywhere in the world.

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 illustrate these features. All of them show ambiguous spaces. Two of them have the typical high lighting key. Figure 1 is coded by Getty as being an 'office space', yet it might also be a large studio space. Figure 2 is categorized as 'construction' but, apart from the hard hat, not much construction is visible. Figure 3 is categorized as 'research', although it could be an office space, apart from the fact that the model is wearing a lab coat. Figure 4 is coded as being an 'architect' yet the space itself resembles a museum space, an artist's studio or some other kind of corporate space. It is only the presence of a standing drawing board that indicates architecture.

Figure 1 'Office space'. © Getty Images: Businesswoman using a laptop with her colleague on a mobile phone, dv 689054 (RF), Digital Vision collection.

Attributes

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 also illustrate the importance of props for the generic image. Props are used to connote not only the setting but also the identities of the actors and the nature of activities, but in terms of 'types' rather than individual identities. An image might be categorized as 'research, science and technology' such as in Figure 3, showing a woman in a white coat, wearing glasses, working at a computer. Take away the white coat, and the woman might as well be a businesswoman. In Figure 1, it is the computer and telephone that signify 'office'. Since these two attributes are so unspecific, a wide range of work settings can be signified by this image, allowing it to be used in a range of articles. Again, Figure 2 is categorized as 'construction', but the only visual indicator of this is the hard hat.

Figure 2 'Construction'. © Getty Images: Architect with hard hat and blueprints in hand. dv272101 (RF), Digital Vision collection.

Barthes (1977) has said that the objects in photographs form a 'code of connotation':

> They constitute excellent elements of signification: on the one hand they are discontinuous and complete in themselves, a physical qualification for a sign, while on the other they refer to clear, familiar signifieds. They are thus the elements of a veritable lexicon, stable to a degree which allows them to be readily constituted into syntax. (pp. 22–3)

To my knowledge, the implicit challenge to try and construct such a lexicon has not been taken up in the academic study of photography. But, as I show later, it has been taken up by Getty, whose code book provides precisely such a lexicon and syntax.

Models as generic people

In fashion, the faces of the models are often striking. In stock images of women, on the other hand, the models are clearly attractive but not remarkable because a striking face, an easily recognizable face, would be less easy to re-use. Not only casting, but also hair style, make-up and dress must help create genericity or 'categorization', as it is called in Van Leeuwen (2000: 95), who argues that visual categorization is not an either/or matter, but depends on the degree to which cultural attributes and physiognomic stereotypes overwhelm or suppress people's unique, individual features. In Figures 1, 2 and 3, the models have become interchangeable. Their

Figure 3
'Research'.
© Getty Images: Woman in lab coat using computer, E003338 (RF), Photodisc Blue collection.

individuality has been fully 'appropriated', as Barthes (1973: 118) would say, by the type they are to represent. It is as if we are back in the era of medieval art, where saints and mythological or biblical characters were recognized not on the basis of their physiognomy but on the basis of their attributes (Jupiter carrying the thunderbolt, St Catherine carrying the wheel) or on the basis of their dress or hair style (e.g. St Peter was an old man with hair and beard cut short and wearing a blue tunic and yellow cloak). In Figure 2, the model becomes a construction worker because of an attribute. Take off the hard hat and, with the addition of a drawing board, she could become an architect. Give her a laptop and she is a businesswoman.

This use of a limited number of props leads to a highly clichéd vocabulary. In the article from which I have already quoted, Metz (1971) also said that, while there is a limited stock of words in a given language, photographic images are infinite in number (p. 118). But when we look at how the Getty image system represents a given category, for instance 'people' or 'settings', we find that it has a quite limited visual vocabulary. Science is indexed by a white coat, construction by a hard hat, office work by a computer and a telephone, and so on. This is particularly important in relation to the representation of women – which happens to be the issue that led to my interest in image banks. In the early 1970s, women began to be represented in the mass media as part of the corporate world. This corporate world, particularly during the 1980s, was mythologized as a world of innovation, ideas, groundbreaking cut-and-thrust business moves. Advertising and women's magazines often used images of women in formal suits (usually with short skirts) with either a mobile phone or a laptop to index positions of power in business and the corporate cityscape. While the actual power of the woman and the reality of the world in which she operated was never formulated, the props did their work. In the Spanish television version of *Cosmopolitan*, there is a programme called *Sextot* where presenters talk frankly about sex, as in the magazine itself, which uses sexual transgression as one indication of women's agency (Caldas-Coulthard, 1996). In the

Figure 4
'Architect'.
© Getty Images: Architect and drafting table, dv267016e (RF), Digital Vision collection.

opening sequence, the camera moves along a digitally generated street towards the studio set. The street is urban, city high-rise. The camera lingers on the people carrying out their lives silhouetted in the windows. Many of them are women sitting at computers. In other words, the *Cosmo* viewer is constructed as an empowered woman through the attributes of open sexuality (which has its own history) and corporate technology. Earlier I cited the words of one of Getty's founders who said that his company would have a defining role in the world's visual language. We are beginning to get a glimpse of the nature of this language.

To summarize this section: I have discussed three key aspects of photographic genericity – decontextualization, the role of attributes, and the use of generic models and settings – in an attempt to show that the photographic image is not necessarily restricted to capturing specific and unrepeatable moments. It can also be generic, denoting general classes or types of people, places and things, rather than specific people, places and things. Until recently, this kind of photography was restricted to fields like advertising – and to some degree 'art' photography. Today it moves out of these fields into territory that used to belong to photojournalism and documentary photography – while paradoxically some advertising images go the other way (e.g. Benetton).

Timelessness

Closely related is the fact that image bank images tend to lose their origin in time and space. The past is reduced to a simple iconography, while the present becomes a symbolic world with a fairly stable global vocabulary.

The Observer of 9 June 2002 carried a Getty image of a woman wearing a headscarf and holding a child. The image was used to illustrate the conflict in Kashmir which was highly newsworthy at the time – and it came from the National Geographic collection which is incorporated in the Getty image bank. As is typical of *National Geographic* images, it is highly stylized, with rich, deep colours and an out of focus background. Here it is used to give the reader a sense of the effect of the conflict on ordinary people. It has been argued convincingly (Lutz and Collins, 1993) that *National Geographic* offers a very Western view of the world, always emphasizing enduring human conditions like motherhood and childhood, and using colourful clothes and exotic settings to emphasize the diversity of humanity – at the expense of truly revealing difference and political realities. *National Geographic* openly discusses some of the techniques it uses to manipulate images, for example, through the use of colour (Abramson, 1987; Bryan, 2001), yet here all this is concealed, as the image is transformed from being a witness, a record of moments in the world, to a symbolic representation of the vulnerability of the mother and child in conflict. Again, there is in principle nothing wrong with symbolic representations of this kind. We need both the abstract truth of the symbolic representation and the empirical truth of the record. What is

problematic is the confusion between the two that characterizes the current period of transition from the hegemony of the one to the hegemony of the other.

Jameson (1991) once described the effect that movies had on the distorted and mythical representation of America in the 1950s, with its small town diner, prom night, wearing of sneakers, people classified as nerds, etc. A limited number of icons came to represent the whole of a particular time, place and way of life. According to photographer Michael Wray (personal communication), we will gradually come to accept stock images in this way, as images that show us how the world really is. Professional photographers will have no choice but to produce these kinds of images and no others. They will receive a list of search categories from the image bank which they will use as a guide. The images they produce may or may not have something of their own signature. But a less distinguishable image which contains the required generic features will have more chance of re-use than an image which draws attention to itself. Wray suggested that even the 'edgy' looking image has become a generic category. For a while, perhaps, denotation and connotation held each other in balance. Now, it seems, we are moving to a photography in which there is only connotation.

Modality

A further characteristic of image bank images is their modality. Image bank images lack 'denotative excess'. According to Barthes (1977), it is (but now, perhaps, we need to say, 'was') typical of photographs that connotation can never exhaust them, 'there always remaining in the discourse a certain denotation without which, precisely, the discourse would not be possible' (p. 50). In other words, because photographs reproduce reality, they have an 'ineffable richness' of detail, an 'analogical plenitude' (p. 33) which guarantees that the photograph, however much it is a message with a connoted cultural meaning, also always contains a surplus of things that 'are just there', without contributing anything to the cultural meaning, other than that they 'naturalize' it by being there. Exactly the same phenomenon takes place in fiction, where certain realistic details, 'indices', as Barthes (1977: 93) calls them, add nothing to the storyline or its interpretation but serve only to heighten realism. In image bank images, such realistic detail, such denotative excess, is eliminated. Apparently, it is not needed any more. Apparently, signification can, today, be more overt, and is no longer in need of naturalization. Indeed, indexes of artifice, of *un-reality*, may be added, such as the emphasis on colour coordination, which gives away that the images are designed rather than 'captured'. In advertising images, such unreality was common already. The difference is that, today, the corporate image and its ideology also pervade the territory formerly held by the documentary photograph.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 161ff) have pointed out that verisimilitude has never been the only criterion for the truth of images. In

scientific images and abstract art, images must be truthful, not in the sense that they look like what they represent, but in the sense that they correspond to the underlying nature, or 'essence', of what they represent. This is why in scientific illustrations a simplified diagram might be more accurate than a highly detailed photograph. In such a context, a photograph may be seen as showing only the surface, while diagrams can get underneath that surface by representing the structures common to a range of superficially different phenomena. Similarly, a sculpture of a woman by Miro represents not a specific woman, but 'woman' in general (as Miro saw her). In such images, a reduction in the use of the means of visual representation signifies higher modality – a line drawing rather than a photograph, a blank background rather than a specific landscape, black and white rather than colour, plain colour rather than modulated colour, and so on. Another possible validity criterion for images is their emotive resonance. Here what matters is neither the truth of verisimilitude, nor the abstract, 'essential' truth, but emotive, 'sensory' truth. From the point of view of photographic realism, such 'sensory' images will be less realistic, but this time not because of a reduction, but because of an increase in the use of the means of visual representation: uncannily fine detail, richer colour, a deeper perspective. Think of Dali – or of food advertisements. And artists may of course combine the abstract and the sensory truth, for instance by using simplified forms but intensified colours, as did Miro. The same appears to be happening now with image bank images. They are, it seems, increasingly moving towards the abstract truth and, at the same time, the sensory, emotive truth. In doing so, they are also increasingly moving *away* from the naturalistic, empirical truth.

MEANING POTENTIAL

Barthes (1977) said that, in the early 1960s, images were polysemous: 'they imply, underlying their signifiers, a "floating chain" of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others' (p. 39). Words, he said, are needed to 'fix the floating chain of signifieds' and 'hold the connoted meanings from proliferating'; in other words, to control the meaning of images by selecting for them a single specific meaning. More recent theories have emphasized how readers, rather than captions, anchor the meaning of images and, indeed, verbal texts as well. The texts themselves embody a *meaning potential* (Halliday, 1978), a *set* of possible meanings, and which of these meanings will be actualized depends on the context – on who 'reads', where, when, and for what reason. This is also the kind of reading image banks cater for. Image bank images are not 'anchored' by a specific caption, but are categorized in terms of a *range* of possible meanings, which are labelled by search words, words being more easily managed in a computer than images. These search words specify the kind of people, places and things shown in the image, and sometimes also the period and the type of photograph. In addition, they provide a connotative meaning potential, categorizing the images in conceptual terms, as expressing 'freedom', 'romance', and so on.

The search terms play a key role in the visual language of Getty – and they can also provide a framework for an investigation of it. They allow us to ask not 'What *does* this image mean?', but 'What, according to Getty, *can* (and what cannot) be said with this image, and with the Getty visual language as a whole?' What *will* be said is then a different question that is currently being investigated in relation to the representation of women and their sexual and work activities in the 44 versions of the global women's magazine *Cosmopolitan*. In this article, however, I explore the structure of a visual *language*, not the structure of its contextually specific uses (advertisements, magazine features, corporate websites, etc.). Here, for example, is the meaning potential of Figure 1:

> Open plan, bending, computer equipment, one woman only, businesswoman, office equipment, telephone, full length, profile, office, Caucasian, one person, working, desk, one young woman only, casual, 25–30 years, using computer, laptop, business person, side view, indoors, day, business, agility, office equipment, flexibility, horizontal, photography, balance, uniqueness, colour, individuality.

What I want to explore here is not these descriptions themselves, but the structure that underlies them, the structure of the Getty semantic field (cf., eg., Lehrer, 1974). I use lexical structure analysis to investigate whether the Getty language is indeed a systematic organization of a semantic field and, if so, what that field is, and how Getty organizes it. Given the size of the image bank, this is a very large task. Here I explore just two issues, which hopefully will demonstrate the usefulness of this approach. First, I look at the field of *settings*. Globalization is often referred to as 'deterritorialization'. Looking at the kinds of settings included in the image bank's descriptions might help us understand how deterritorialization is actually realized in visual communication. Second, I look at the 'conceptual themes' field.

Settings: geographic search terms

There were a total of 90 'setting' descriptors in the Getty image bank, which could be initially categorized in terms of three broad categories: geography, interiors and exteriors. Here are some observations.

Given the emphasis on generic images, it is perhaps not surprising that *specific* places are not only relatively under-represented, but also form a highly unsystematic and incomplete list. Most important, I found that while most major world cities form search categories on the image bank, the images that the terms throw up are mainly generic in that they could be anywhere, or they are iconic, such as Mediterranean beaches, Latin American indigenous people with highly coloured clothing, or Paris as indexed by the Eiffel Tower, London as indexed by Big Ben, etc.

The following descriptions were given for parts of the world or groups of countries: Europe, Mediterranean countries, Asia, Middle East,

North America, Latin America, Caribbean, Oceania and the following list of countries: Senegal, Cameroon, Bali, Indonesia, Denmark, Norway, Canada, China, India, Jordan, Italy, Argentina, Guatemala, Spain, Greece and Russia. It is clear that whoever designed the codebook did not assume that Getty's clients would be interested in looking for specific locations, and had no particular interest in creating a systematic database in this regard. Precise geographic location is haphazard, a leftover perhaps from the earlier days in which place and data were the key authenticating data of any documentary or news photograph. By and large, setting has become irrelevant, it seems – with one exception, tourism. Not only are many of the places listed mainly of interest from the point of view of tourism, but further investigation shows that typing in such a place name will bring up places of touristic interest; for instance, a search for 'London' will bring up Tower Bridge, Buckingham Palace, and so on, as well as archive images of couples kissing and having fun in London's parks and streets, images which in all other respects have all the hallmarks of the generic image.

It should also be noted that many of the images categorized in terms of a particular location only carry generic indicators of that location. Mediterranean countries, for instance, are represented by slightly out of focus beach scenes, with a model posing. This applies to a range of geographical locations. For example, an image might be categorized as hailing from western Guatemala showing a mother carrying a baby, the baby leaning back comically, the mother only indicated by ethnic colour and a ponytail, and the background an empty sky. Clearly this image is not intended to document anything about western Guatemala. It is included because of the way it can connote Western notions of childhood. Other specific geographic search terms yield equally generic images.

Generic settings

More common than geographic search terms are generic terms for interior and exterior spaces. For example, rooms: *gym, living room, conference room, bedroom, office, school*; types of buildings: *swimming pool, temple, church, railway station, subway, delicatessen, market, noodle bar, café, igloo;* means of transport: *recreational boat, nautical vessel, passenger train, car*; city exteriors*: urban scene, city location, street, alley, square, sidewalk, subway platform, harbour, outdoor market, traffic jam*; and country exteriors*: rural scenes, beach, sea, river, water's edge, jetty, underwater, mountain range, field, ploughed field, village, road.* Some locations can be either in the city or the country*: backyard, fishing industry* and *running tracks.*

The interior spaces included here are all represented in generic form, as abstract spaces with a few props. Buildings, too, are unremarkable and unmemorable, with little in the design denoting their function, except when they are tourist attractions, as in the case of the igloo, when they feature in a period image, as is the case particularly with railway stations, and in the case

of markets, where produce is represented in detail and with high modality, like the products in advertisements (cf. Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 164). In the exteriors, we note the emphasis on water, which is used a great deal to index freedom, relaxation and relationships. Water has a massive number of images in the image bank, often using the diffused high key lighting that characterizes the Getty image. Just as the mobile phone and the laptop index work and business, so water indexes freedom, escapism and romance, as well as freshness and health. We get a sense here of the way corporate visual language incorporates 'new age' ideas. Connotations of serenity, escape and freedom bring a sense of 'philosophy' or even morality into the corporate world of branding and consumerism.

Finally, while the geographic terms form a haphazard collection, here the beginning of systematicity can be felt. Some of the search terms clearly have a hyponymic relation to others. There is, for instance, the distinction between '*indoors*' and '*outdoors*', with the latter again divided into '*urban scenes*' and '*rural scenes*', and with each allowing further subdivisions. This has the makings of a systematic taxonomy, entirely along generic and global lines, and entirely abstracting away from the specifics of specific places, except in the case of tourism.

Conceptual themes

We found a total of 81 'conceptual' search terms, and were able to categorize them into two main categories: (a) mental states, and (b) themes expressing core values associated with the people, places and activities shown. As I have already suggested, it is these categories which are the true raison d'être of stock images. As image bank contributor photographer Romilly Lockyer told me, the most important thing about image bank images is that they evoke moods and concepts. For this reason, it does not matter much that the image of the Guatemalan child tells us little if anything at all about western Guatemala. What matters is that it says something about childhood innocence or cheekiness. The fact that it is also categorized as 'western Guatemala' might help to tell the designer that the image is likely to have some ethnic content (itself usually indexed in the image by patterned, colourful clothing), which can be a useful corporate/consumer tool for bringing a kind of morality to products.

We analysed category (b) conceptual search terms into five groups: goals and motives; positive characteristics of people, places, things and/or activities; negative characteristics of people, places, things and/or activities; positive mental states; and negative mental states.

Goals and motives all express positive moral values. These include social goals: *togetherness, friendship, love, protection*; a desire for knowledge and progress: *exploration, curiosity, innovation, growth, on the move*; states of mental and physical well-being: *spirituality, balance, relaxation, satisfaction* and *well-being*; and some other less easily classifiable terms: *freedom, fun, world culture, patriotism* and *tradition.*

It is immediately obvious that we have here a well-organized and systematic catalogue of the moral values of the new capitalism, values which play a key role in the age of branding where product ranges are associated with precisely these kind of values, so that companies no longer sell whisky but friendship, no longer shampoo but hope, and so on.

A Getty image of a woman walking along the sea shore in a short dress is categorized under 'spirituality' as well as under 'calm people'. This is once again realized through the presence of water and soft, high key lighting. The model appears to be lost in the moment, but there is nevertheless a horizon, a distant goal, in the shot.

Positive characteristics of people, places, things and activities are often task-oriented: *endurance, strength, agility, determination, concentration*, but they may also be aesthetic/moral, e.g. *simplicity, purity, elegance, harmony, grace*, or focused on mental resources: *creativity, learning, expertise*, which does not mean that *vitality* and *sensuality* are forgotten. Again we see values here that fit in well with the new global corporate ideology, while the negative characteristics included point at the possible risks of this ideology: *greed, vanity, pride, indulgence, escapism* and *aggression.* Note how many more positive terms there are: positive thinking is itself a crucial moral value in the corporate/consumerist world.

Positive mental states for women include both affective states such as *pensive, shy, affectionate, cheerful, content, exhilarated* and *ecstatic*, and cognitive ones such as *anticipation, memories, nostalgia* and *conflict*, while negative ones include *disappointment, fear, loathing, fury, suspicion, hysteria, rejection.*

The pictures that realize these categories focus on behaviours, which are themselves quite systematically categorized. We see women in a range of postures including *sitting, standing, leaning* and *lying down*, with a range of facial expressions, such as *looking at camera, staring, frowning, sulking, watching* and *thinking*, and involved in activities such as *kicking* and *jumping*.

We end this section with a look at some of the images that realize the conceptual theme of '*freedom*'. Freedom has been, and still is, a key concept in the history of Western thought, the basis of human rights, including the right of freedom of expression. In the Getty visual language, it has a consistent iconography. Figures 5 and 6 are representative of many hundreds of images catalogued as expressing 'freedom'.

The image in Figure 5 is clearly a stock image with all the hallmarks of the generic image. There is no background apart from the blue sky – in freedom images, blue skies are a must. The model is generic. With a pair of glasses and a laptop she could be a businesswoman. The focus is not so much on her as on the fact of her suspension mid-frame. Jumping, or the raising of limbs generally (arms raised to heaven, legs raised on a bicycle), equals freedom, which therefore is interpreted as a subjective experience, a *sense* of freedom: the image is also categorized as expressing *vitality* and *exhilaration*, both of which have many of the same indexes in the image bank.

In Figure 6, freedom is again expressed through bodily movement, as

freedom to *move* – in none of the images is there any sense that freedom might be about political belief or ideology. A woman is walking through meadows, jumping, spinning, waving her arms. Again there are the blue skies, and an open space – often an index of *freedom*, *serenity, relaxation* and *spirituality*. Freedom is generally associated with the freedom to move, which is indicated by many images showing people driving along a highway in classic US sports cars, drawing on the road movie romance of get up and go.

In the Getty visual language, concepts like 'freedom' and 'exhilaration' are realized through activities which are in harmony with the corporate world. Freedom is not ideological, not something that needs to be protected or fought for. It is a *mood*, a passing feeling, expressed by jumping or other physical activities, and a concept drawing on 'new age' ideas of serenity and simplicity. An important part of the way branding works is by associating a product or company with morally loaded values. As a result of this, there is a market for the visual expression of such concepts, whereas there is less of a market now for visuals that provide concrete and specific descriptions, the visual of an earlier era of photography and of a time in which products were sold on the basis of their use value.

Figure 5 'Freedom'. © Getty Images: Woman jumping, AA013794 (RF), Photodisc Green collection.

The semantics of the Getty visual language is a world of morality as 'mood', where freedom equals jumping and independence is a fashion statement. The only other kinds of images categorized as expressing 'freedom' are an image of a US jet fighter and an image of the Statue of Liberty, seen from below with war planes overhead. Needless to say, 'capitalism' is not a search term, and 'globalization' throws up romantic images of global business. There is no category 'welfare state', and 'poverty' is only reflected in black and white archive images, so that an article on poverty has little choice but to use 1950s images in their layout, which effectively helps create a cushion against the reality of poverty. Spanish *Cosmopolitan* editor Sarah Glattstein Franco told me that image bank symbolic images, as she called them, can 'lift even the most depressing article'. By way of example, she showed me an article on what happens in Spain when you need an

Figure 6 'Freedom'. © Getty Images: Woman twirling in field, arms raised level with shoulders, YLI_097 (RF), Photodisc Blue collection.

abortion. Accompanying the text were two images, both generic image bank images. They showed young models in underwear, against blank backgrounds with high key lighting, looking thoughtful.

Conclusion

Images of the kind discussed in this article are globally distributed and used. As a result, visual language becomes demonstrably more homogenized, generic and limited in its iconography. Will we still be able to recognize 'work' without the laptop, 'freedom' without someone jumping, 'ethnicity' without bright and multi-coloured clothing? Image banks like Eye-Wire, incorporated into Getty, offer designer categories like '*world family*' where beautiful young, healthy people smile and leap about in multi-ethnic colourful groups; '*women on top*' where women in white-light diffused abstracted rooms speak on telephones or laugh with other women while pointing at computer screens; '*young at heart*', where 60+'s cycle along beaches or spray each other with garden hoses; '*attitude*', where young 'happening people' in grunge fashion skateboard with shades in front of fluorescent psychedelic backgrounds – in short, a world organized into consumer categories and easy clichés.

Photographers and art directors told me that the role of the image has changed. Photographs used to be much more descriptive. They would show the viewer details of places, people and activities. Further information would be given in the accompanying text. In contemporary publishing, there is a tendency for the photograph to be used as part of the page layout alongside fonts, colours and borders. Headings on texts may use the same colour as the clothing or lips in the photograph. This will be true for ads, features and fashion alike. The image will be used to symbolically represent the essential message of the article, but this does not necessarily mean that the photographic message is the same as that of the verbal text. A newly launched Vietnamese women's magazine contained an article on checking for mouth cancer. It was illustrated with an image of the face of a young woman lightly touching her lips, smiling excitedly, against a background suffused with white light. For such an article, one might have expected a more serious image. But this was a page for health promotions which contained several such abstract image bank images. It had to symbolize health, beauty and the exhilaration of life. And the images had to be colour coordinated with the rest of the layout. As a result, the page looked very attractive. The world of consumer health products is a very pleasant one. Even mouth cancer, showing the magazine's serious role, is lifted into controllability in this world. Glamour, health, fun, energy, control and consumerism all become features of the same landscape.

At first glance, the image bank seems to offer an unlimited vocabulary with its several hundred thousand online images. Further exploration quickly led me to realize its limitations. The image bank is an ideologically

pre-structured world. The categories that are available are restricted in terms of all the clichés and marketing categories I have begun to discuss in this article. Phenomena which lie outside of this are not included. All this calls to mind the processes which so concerned Adorno (1941, 1991) regarding the culture industry. He was terrified by the way the culture industry, due to the logic of economics and economies of scale, fostered homogenization, and reproduced easily recognizable and easily digestible patterns. And he realized the importance of predictability. He realized that the culture industry needs predictability as it needs to predict the market, and that it can increase predictability by presenting the audience with a preset conceptual space that will allow them to recognize the product. All this in turn would remove the possibility for creativity and innovation.

In our case, we have seen how image banks transform visual language along the logic of economies of scale, and how the images that sell best accord with existing consumer categories ('world family', 'women on top', etc.), remove reality from the image to create a harmonized world, and emphasize 'moods' rather than actions. Photographers, in order to survive, will have to produce images that fit in with these categories. Even the 'edgy', 'quirky' image will have its own category. Such images may still be produced, but if they are too memorable, they will not be multi-purpose enough and lose out. We should be concerned about the effect of this increasingly stylized and predictable world on audience expectations of what the visual representation of the world should look like. We should be concerned about the fact that we no longer flinch when we see a posed, processed, stylized, colour-enhanced, *National Geographic* image of a woman and child taken from Getty and placed on a page in *The Guardian* for a documentary feature on the Kashmir conflict.

In *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies* (Machin, 2002), I argued that we can think of society as a kind of conversation about the world and about life. There have been many ways of doing this – a vast range of conversations. The anthropological archive could be seen as a celebration of this. Today's mass media – and with it the Getty images – form a key part of this conversation. It is clearly in the interest of the global corporations that there should be one conversation only, with one shared language. Should we commend Getty for uniting humanity in this way?

NOTES

1. The information in this section comes from Getty publicity, The Getty Website, interviews with photographer Allen Tannenbaum, and Dorfman (2002).

REFERENCES

Abramson, H.S. (1987) *National Geographic: Behind America's Lens on the World*. New York: Crown.

Adorno, T.W. (1941) 'On Popular Music', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* IX(I).
Adorno, T.W. (1991) *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.* London: Routledge.
Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*. London: Fontana.
Barthes, R. (1977) *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana.
Bryan, C.D.B. (2001) *The National Geographic Society: 100 Years of Adventure and Discovery*. New York: Abradale Press.
Caldas-Coulthard, C.R. (1996) '"Women Who Pay for Sex. And Enjoy It": Transgression versus Morality in Women's Magazines', in C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, pp. 250–70. London: Routledge.
Dorfman, J. (2002) 'Digital Dangers: The New Forces that Threaten Photojournalism', *Columbia Journalism Review* July/Aug.
Halliday, M.A.K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotics*. London: Edward Arnold.
Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Kress, G. and Van Leeuwen, T. (1996) *Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
Lehrer, A. (1974) *Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
Lutz, A. and Collins, J.L. (1993) *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Machin, D. (2002) *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies*. London: Arnold.
Metz, C. (1971) *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, Vol. I. Paris: Klincksieck.
Morrish, J. (2001) *Business 2.0*, April edn, Bizjournals, Seattle.
Van Leeuwen, T. (2000) 'Semiotics and Iconography', in T. van Leeuwen and C. Jewitt (eds) *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, pp. 92–118. London: Sage.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DAVID MACHIN works in the Centre for Language and Communication at Cardiff University.

Address: School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, POB 94, Cardiff CF10 3XB, Wales. [email: machind@cf.af.uk]