

10. Perfect Strangers in the City: Stock Photography as Ambient Imagery

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Abstract

In this chapter, I focus on stock photography as an unremarkable and mundane visual genre that permeates everyday life in cities, and which therefore also contributes to shaping experiences in and of urban public space. The chapter conceptualizes stock photography as an ambient medium. It shows how stock photography is used to promote businesses and services through smiling individuals and other familiar and flexible subjects that often enliven otherwise vacant or drab storefronts and ultimately also confer warmth to otherwise bland if not alienating urban “landscapes of capital”. The chapter concludes by reflecting on some of the problems and potentials of this often overlooked type of ambient imagery in the creation and regulation of urban mood.

Keywords: stock photography, atmospheres, urban mood, the everyday

Introduction

Stock visuals are everywhere, though we rarely notice them – not unlike the air we breathe. They include infographics, illustrations, video footage and, perhaps more predictably, also creative and editorial photographs that can be licensed from global visual content providers like Getty Images, Shutterstock and many others. These pre-produced visuals, and especially stock photography, are the visual bread and butter for much of contemporary communication. With the rise of social networking and online news, stock photos have become central to digital media culture. Far from being only encountered in the digital realm, however, stock photography is also the raw material of much visual communication in urban space. This is not only because outdoor advertising

is increasingly made of layouts that integrate stock imagery into narratives promoting branded commodities, but also and more importantly because stock photography is now regularly displayed in public space independently of traditional advertising as such. This is a topic that remains under-researched, but which could in fact shed some light on how the proliferation of digitally produced and distributed imagery shapes our everyday urban surroundings.

In this chapter, then, I focus specifically on stock photography's presence in the urban built environment, with an emphasis on some of the ways in which generic images contribute to the promotion of particular experiences in and of public space. In doing so, I take on Paul Frosh's recent invitation to move beyond the "standard critique" of stock photography as being clichéd and stereotypical, and therefore also problematic from a representational standpoint, to gain insight into its characteristics "as an ambient or 'absent-minded' medium" (2020, 189), which is just as banal as it is abundant. In other words, here I am interested in the role played by stock photography as ambient imagery, that is, as a mundane visual genre that permeates our everyday lives in cities, and which therefore also contributes to shaping its "moods" and "atmospheres" (Roquet 2016; Rose, Degen, and Melhuish 2014). Building on my previous work on the visual communication of specific identities in generic images (Aiello 2013; Aiello and Woodhouse 2016; Thurlow, Aiello, and Portmann, 2020), I also aim to critically examine the relationship between the aesthetic qualities of stock photography and their experiential import as ambient imagery.

Overall, the aims of this chapter are more properly conceptual rather than empirical, while also being rooted in observations collected over several years. The chapter is thus centred on a discussion of stock photography as ambient imagery informed by key academic literature on ambient media and communication and underpinned by an exploratory analysis of some key ways in which stock photography is used in outdoor public spaces, mostly in the city where I reside (Leeds) but also in other European cities where I have happened to spend some time. Before I delve into this discussion, however, in the next section I offer a focused overview of stock photography's "visual economy", that is, some of the "social relations, practices and institutions" (Rose 2010, 62) that shape its production, distribution, and circulation.

A snapshot on the visual economy of stock photography

Paul Frosh has defined the stock photography business as the "Leviathan of the image" (2013, 131), both due to its increasing importance as "an

industrialized system of image-production” (Frosh 2003, 3) and its inexorable consolidation into the hands of fewer and fewer corporate giants, with Getty Images as the global market leader. Since the early 2000s, with the advent of Internet-native “microstock” agencies and the extensive digitalization of both production and distribution processes, stock photography has become ubiquitous in all arenas of media culture – from overtly corporate or commercial spheres to the more ambiguous realms of lifestyle, political, and interpersonal communication. As of 2012, the global market for stock images amounted to US\$2.88 billion and was spread across 2500 commercial image suppliers mostly located in Europe, the United States and Asia (Glückler and Panitz 2013). By 2020, this market had grown to over US\$4 billion and was estimated to grow by another US\$1.82 billion during the period 2020-2024 (Technavio 2019). Perhaps not surprisingly, at the time of writing it has also been forecast that the “communication services” sector would see an upsurge due to the COVID-19 pandemic and register a higher growth rate compared to the global GDP growth.

The growing need for visuals as part of bite-sized and short-form digital media content developed for a variety of institutions and businesses, together with “crunching deadlines, reducing budgets, and increasing inefficiencies” (Arizton Advisory and Intelligence 2019), makes for a particularly favourable setting for the stock images market to thrive in the face of recession. Stock images are highly popular on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat – something that makes their global growth prospects particularly favourable in post-pandemic times (Technavio 2019). In addition, the social power of stock photography has grown with the increasing blurring of boundaries between “pre-produced” or “ready-to-use” imagery and both editorial and commissioned photography. Stock imagery has become a staple of media, such as newspapers and advertising, that traditionally relied on “original” photography, or imagery made for the purposes of portraying a given event or promoting a specific product or service. With the growing availability of free creative images (Laurent 2014) and the gradual disappearance of exclusive licensing models to boot (Burgett 2019), the already pervasive presence of stock photographs is only likely to expand further – particularly in the realm of public space and the urban built environment.

In recent years, I and others have begun to examine the significance of generic visuals such as stock photos in news-making, specifically in relation to issues like the standardization and commodification of photojournalistic practices and styles (Aiello 2012; Runge 2020), the repurposing of a limited variety of images and visual discourses across a wide range of news stories

(Machin and Polzer 2015; Thurlow, Aiello, and Portmann 2020), the circulation of stock images across digital media platforms (Aiello 2016), and the forms of engagement that generic images may promote in relation to issues reported in the news media (Generic Visuals in the News). For the most part, however, existing scholarship on stock photography has pre-eminently focused on its role in advertising and lifestyle marketing, particularly with regards to the ways in which stock images are used to promote stereotypes (Machin 2004), authenticity (Frosh 2003; 2013), and more recently also diversity (Aiello and Woodhouse 2016).

Still visibly missing from this growing constellation of scholarship on stock imagery is an appraisal of what, in his monograph on public screens, Krajina defines as the “environmental character” of stock photographs, which also ought to be examined “as objects that form part of everyday spaces” (2014, 26-27). Not unlike television and other screen media that have become part and parcel of our everyday landscapes, stock photography’s “ability to dissolve into a place’s structures” (McCarthy 2001, 14) makes an investigation of its relationship with urban space particularly urgent. Most certainly, just like outdoor advertising, stock photography in cities “is a truly mass medium in an age of media fragmentation” insofar as “its occupation of urban space means that it potentially speaks to an audience that is broad in terms of demographic characteristics” (Cronin 2010, 172). At the same time, the stock photographs that we now often see on various urban surfaces are typically there to “mark” a business or at times even an otherwise vacant space. They have quite literally taken on the role of placeholders for otherwise unused or undefined spaces. In doing so, and as we will see later in this chapter, one of the main aims of this imagery may be to regulate the mood or enhance the atmosphere of its urban surroundings rather than advertise a particular product or service.

Stock photography as ambient imagery

According to Frosh, stock photography is an ambient medium because of its “absent-minded” nature, together with the fact that it’s an “image-ecology” in its own right – that is, a web of relations across multiple images. In other words, from a social standpoint, stock photos exist first and foremost as an aggregate of images that we traverse “in a complex force-field of attention and distraction” (2020, 189). For this reason, Frosh argues, it becomes all the more important to examine stock photography “as a fluctuating visual environment” rather than “in relation to the power of individual images

which demand (and amply repay) intense, focused viewing” (2020, 201). This is a recognition that, in turn, requires the critic to move away from “standard” discussions of the content and ideological import of particular images to focus instead on their ability to foster experiences of “aggregated, absent-minded sociality” (Frosh 2020, 189–190). Ultimately, Frosh concludes that by giving away with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” and the focus on engaged publics foregrounded by most visual culture scholars, we can start to consider “the visual promotion and proliferation of genericity as a positive social, political or ethical force” (2020, 201) and, as a consequence, stock photography as a public good rather than a “bad object”.

Frosh’s argument is intentionally provocative, but it also convincingly foregrounds the importance of looking at images – particularly ubiquitous imagery like stock photography – in ways that account for their *experiential* qualities as part of a broader set of social relations rather than as individualized tokens of power-laden ways of seeing. However, here I argue that this is something that can and ought to be achieved also by considering some of the key *aesthetic* qualities that set apart stock imagery. While both the *absent-mindedness* and *multiplicity* that Frosh highlights are key to the definition of stock photography as ambient imagery, I would also like to advance the idea that stock photography’s *familiarity* and *flexibility* are what makes it distinctively able to “blend” into urban space and therefore also operate as part of a place’s general “atmosphere”. Both familiarity and flexibility are qualities that relate to stock photography’s representational and design resources – that is, both what is typically included in these kinds of images and how these images are arranged to achieve a certain “effect” or “feel” (Aiello 2012). I will return to a discussion of both familiarity and flexibility in the next section.

While an emphasis on representational and design resources may be associated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that Frosh encourages us to leave behind, I maintain that a close attention to visual aesthetics contributes to a better understanding of stock photography as ambient imagery, in conjunction with considerations regarding its absent-mindedness and multiplicity. Not unlike outdoor advertising, and in fact often as part of branded advertisements, stock photography can be considered as what Cronin defines as “an urban, visual vernacular” (2010, 190) based on Sharon Zukin’s definition of cities as “a visual repertoire of culture in the sense of a public language” (Zukin 1995, 264). As Cronin explains, the status of advertising as a vernacular originates from “the familiarity of its presence and form” (2010, 190) in conjunction with the fact that it populates the urban environment and our everyday lives in it. She then adds that advertising’s

status as a vernacular is also linked to its central role in relation to popular and pleasurable yet also fraught consumption practices (e.g. shopping) and commodities.

Thanks to the growing availability of inexpensive royalty-free digital images through online image banks, stock imagery is now a major if underestimated urban visual vernacular. Not only have we become accustomed to its ubiquitous presence independent of traditional advertising, but many of us are also increasingly familiar with the “typical” aesthetic of stock photography as a widespread visual genre via digital culture – many jobs nowadays require some degree of engagement with image banks for the purposes of in-house design or advertising, and social media are notoriously fertile ground for the proliferation of stock photo-based parodies and memes (Shifman 2013). As we will see in a moment, stock photographs are now regularly used to dress urban surfaces that would otherwise remain “empty” while also being amply used by businesses and institutions of all kinds to promote their services, most often in close proximity of their physical premises.

It is precisely thanks to the multiplicity of its manifestations in the world that Frosh sees stock photography as an exemplary part of a “pre-public framework” (2020, 190). However, in keeping with Zukin (1995), I would instead argue that precisely thanks to its abundance, stock photography is also and foremost a “public language”, or even better a “public art” (Hariman and Lucaites 2016), albeit one that is rooted in absent-mindedness and genericity rather than focused viewing and iconicity. In other words, not unlike more arresting documentary or news imagery, stock photography may very well also provide “a way of being in the world; that is, a primary way of seeing and being seen in association with others” (Hariman and Lucaites 2020, 2). This is a view that becomes especially important in light of stock imagery’s abundance in our everyday lives in cities.

Stock photography’s familiar and flexible strangers in the city

Stock photography’s genericity is a commercial imperative that is premised upon visual choices aimed at making the people and situations it portrays immediately recognizable as similar to those we “know” in real life while also keeping their portrayal open to a range of interpretations. In other words, both familiarity and flexibility are key to the success (or at least the usability) of stock photographs. In doing so, the “stock aesthetic” also typically relies on design resources like decontextualization (Machin 2004) and stylization

(Aiello 2013b) in order to achieve a timeless quality for images that may be used to portray “types” rather than specific objects or individuals (Aiello 2012) in broad settings such as “the home” or “the office”. However, since the early 2000s, the range of design resources that set apart stock photography as a visual genre has expanded to include stylistic features that are traditionally associated with editorial, documentary or social media photography (Aiello and Woodhouse 2016). Regardless of their overarching “look”, the subject matter of stock photographs is nevertheless still predominantly related to aspirational ideals of productivity and consumption. As far as representational resources are concerned, stock images tend to privilege the portrayal of individuals, couples, or small groups of people (particularly nuclear families) engaged in business, leisure, or “lifestyle” activities (Aiello and Parry 2020).

In urban public space stock photography is often used to promote businesses and services through smiling “strangers” whose identities remain undefined while also fitting in recognizable “types”, to enliven otherwise vacant or drab storefronts, and ultimately also to confer warmth or texture to otherwise bland if not alienating “landscapes of capital” such as those occupied and outlined by banking services and shopping malls. I now turn to a discussion of three vignettes illustrating these uses of stock photography in urban public space.

Populating the city with perfect strangers

For over three months during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, my partner, young baby, and I could only take walks around our neighbourhood in Leeds, England. On our daily outings, we often took a route that had us walk by a dental practice located in one of the typical red-brick terraced houses that line many of the city’s streets. Photographs of smiling people against blank backgrounds were carefully laid out on the windows so as to cover a range of human types and relationships: two heterosexual couples (one younger and one “senior”, respectively), a traditional family of four, and an attractive young woman (Figure 10.1, left). Perhaps because our lockdown-driven daily life was in stark contrast with our previous lifestyle as international academics, and more recently also as a transnational family, I found myself anticipating the comforting sight of those smiling faces, which I would have otherwise simply overlooked as a mundane part of my surroundings. Mask-less and seemingly carefree, these strangers looking out from the dental practice’s windows had become noticeable in their slightly tone-deaf familiarity.

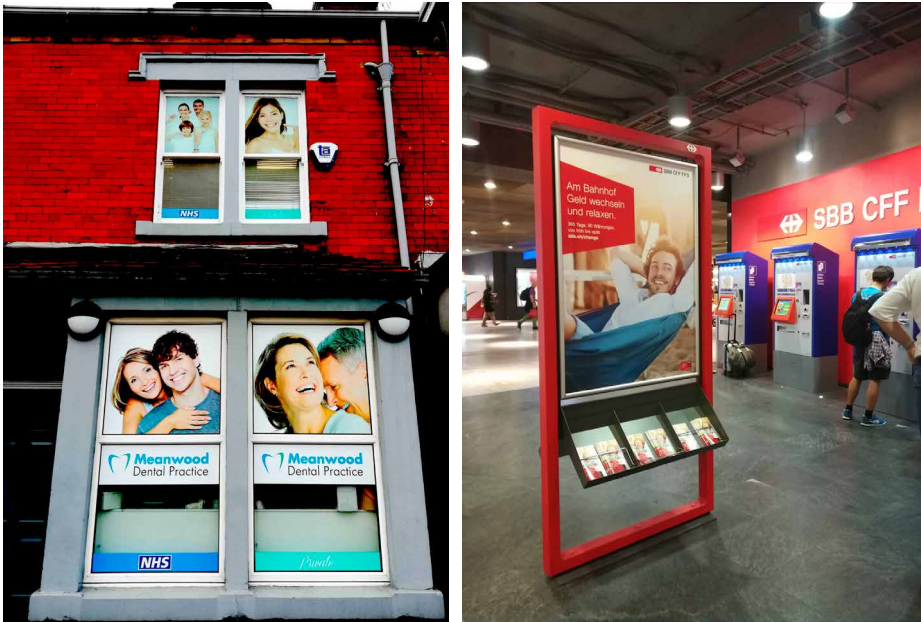


Figure 10.1. Populating the city with strangers in Leeds, UK (left) and Bern, Switzerland (right). Photos by author.

And while the exceptional circumstances underpinning our frequent walks by the dental practice made these stock images stand out in an unusual manner, many cities are populated with these “perfect strangers” that dot a variety of urban surfaces and façades. Prior to the pandemic, on my regular work trips to other European cities I often walked by stock photos of smiling individuals promoting otherwise faceless services – like, for example, the availability of a currency exchange counter at the main train station in Bern, Switzerland (Figure 10.1, right).

As Frosh explains, these generic individuals look like “approximations” of people that we have encountered before, and by virtue of their ubiquity in everyday life we have become “habituated” to “the perpetual ambient presence of strangers in both public and intimate spaces” (2020, 201). The fact that they are usually set against blank or blurred backgrounds – as in the traditional stock photo aesthetic – makes them flexible insofar as they can be used to communicate a variety of concepts and identities, and in fact we often see some of the very same subjects being used to promote different products, businesses or services. Hence their flexibility also contributes further to their increased familiarity. This said, these subjects are overwhelmingly white in appearance, though at times also ethnically



Figure 10.2. Stock photography's familiar and flexible stranger in Leeds, UK. Photo by author.

ambiguous like the young woman pictured on her own on one of the dental practice's windows. This particular model, whose name is Rebecca Givens, is also especially familiar, as for over a decade she was one of the most widely used subjects in royalty-free imagery (Figure 10.2). Overall, these images are also fairly homogenous from an emotional standpoint, and it is precisely this "upbeatness" of portrayed subjects that sets apart stock photography as a visual vernacular. Ultimately, the "perfect strangers" that we encounter in urban space through these stock images may also contribute to an overarching affect centred in the creation and regulation of a "mood" that privileges individualized approaches to identifying and engaging with the urban environment (Roquet 2016). I will return to this point in the conclusion.

Animating precarious urban façades

By virtue of the familiarity and flexibility of their subjects, stock photos are also frequently used to "animate" urban façades which would otherwise remain vacant or blank. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of austerity had turned many a storefront in British cities into perpetually

empty windows looking into dark interiors. It is now common to see these windows covered in imagery pointing to a host of potential commercial endeavours, which are unfailingly presented as being embodied in the lifestyle-oriented activities of smiling individuals — we thus routinely encounter the perfect strangers of stock photography as they are having coffee with friends, doing yoga, carrying shopping bags, or receiving beauty treatments (Figure 10.3, top). Along the same lines, stock photos can be found covering the side or unused windows of a variety of establishments, often featuring uplifting visual content that has little or nothing to do with the products or services that are sold inside (Figure 10.3, bottom). As a whole, these images conjure up a sense of imagination for these otherwise precarious spaces and surfaces.

For this reason, here it may be helpful to consider Cronin's argument that the significance of outdoor advertising may be best understood through Bergson's concept of "fabulation", which emphasizes the productive nature of advertisements as part of our immediate environment and therefore also as contributing to our embodied understanding "of the social and natural world" (2010, 126). According to this view, advertising ought to be examined as a set of stimuli that contribute to the creation of "helpful fictions that enable us to engage with the world and facilitate our actions" rather than "illusions or fictions that distort or mask true human needs" (Cronin 2010, 187). In other words, advertisements may offer practical orientations towards urban space which in turn are productive of lifelike fictions that help us make sense of the city in an embodied manner. Unlike outdoor advertising, however, the stock photos that cover unused windows and shuttered storefronts are overwhelmingly unbranded, often unanchored to text, and ostensibly open-ended insofar as they "sell" not so much a particular product or service, but rather a vision or an experience which may or may not be directly applicable to the space they occupy. These visions and experiences are abstract by virtue of these images' visual flexibility (i.e. these could be any groups of friends having coffee or any meadow with a blue sky) but are also concrete thanks to the familiarity of their visual contents (i.e. these could be my friends or a meadow and a blue sky I saw on a particular occasion). Overall, then, these are fictions that animate the surfaces that they cover by concealing their precarity and visualizing a sense that the city is rife with potential for meaningful forms of individual engagement with the surrounding environment.



Figure 10.3. Animating precarious façades in Leeds, UK (top) and Bologna, Italy (bottom). Photos by author.

Texturizing landscapes of capital

In concert with its reliance on familiar and flexible subjects and its ability to animate urban surfaces, stock photography as ambient imagery is also often set apart by a “texturized” look and feel, which is mobilized in more overtly capitalist and consumption-driven urban settings like, for example, banks and street shopping malls (Figure 10.4). In my previous work on branding and stock photography, I have defined texturization as a host of design resources, or visual cues, that are aimed at invoking the material, embodied and sensorial qualities of imagery (Aiello and Pauwels 2014). In visual communication, texture is a visual rendition of haptic or tactile features, and whether or not one can truly “touch” it, texture also summons us to identify with experiential rather than purely symbolic meaning potentials (Djonov and Van Leeuwen 2011). For example, the recent proliferation of irregular or distressed graphics that are clearly produced with computers is to be linked with the increasing importance of experiential meaning potentials like “authentic”, “individual” and “personal”, which have acquired particular value in an age where digital reproduction and templates are dominant (Mosbæk Johannessen and van Leeuwen 2018).

Conferring texture to stock images requires an effort to achieve greater contextualization than the typical “stock photo aesthetic” of blank or blurred backgrounds and neutral or bland colour palettes, for example through the careful staging of cluttered, layered or grainy settings and surfaces. At the same time, these images can be texturized through lighting and photographic effects (Aiello and Woodhouse 2016). In Figure 10.4, top, we see what looks like a blown-up stock rendition of a social media image in the window of a bank located on the corner of two busy commercial streets in the city centre of Leeds. An uplifting scene of heterosexual ordinary romance set in a park is enhanced by the “warmth” of its filter and sun flare, a carefully chosen photographic “glitch”. The anchoring text reveals the bank’s aim to “humanize” its customers and, in this way, make us engage with its services as individuals. Along the same lines, in Figure 10.4, bottom, the large side windows of a supermarket in a street shopping mall of a Danish city are covered in texturized images of spring onions and the hands and forearm of a man kneading dough on a table top covered in flour. The chiaroscuro lighting brings out the grain of both the spring onions and the arms and hands working on the dough. Not unlike images found in the business class menus examined by Crispin Thurlow in his critique of privilege in airline travel, here “a rich sense of photographic texture is produced through the surfaces depicted, as well as with the organic materiality of the vegetables”

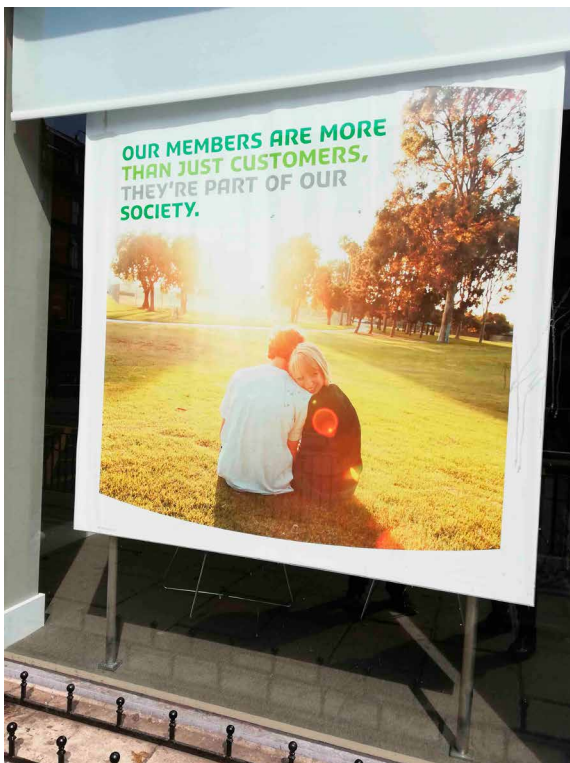


Figure 10.4. Texturizing landscapes of capital in Leeds, UK (top) and Nyborg, Denmark (bottom). Photos by author.

(2020, 11), something that in turn produces a sense of distinction for those who get to choose their meals from these exclusive menus.

As a whole, staged images that make texture “visible” bring us closer, in an experiential and embodied manner, to both the visual text at hand and the urban site in which this is placed. Drawing from Sedgwick (2003), Thurlow states that “touch is unavoidably also that other kind of feeling: that feel-good feeling and that “feeling good about myself feeling” (2020, 15). In texturizing these urban landscapes of capital through the familiar and flexible textures of stock images like the ones I have just described, the impersonal and often ruthless structures of finance and commerce may make us feel close to them and may also make us feel good on an individual, personal level.

Conclusion: ambient imagery and the “mood” of the city

Just like the air we breathe, ambient imagery is both pervasive and unremarkable, and as mundane as it is part and parcel of our everyday lives. In particular, sourced from millions of possibilities in online image banks, stock photography’s banality and its abundance in urban space make it both strikingly insignificant and integral to our ways of being and moving in and through the city. Here, I have outlined some of the key ways in which stock photography is mobilized in urban space, particularly with regards to the relationship between some of its experiential and aesthetic dimensions. In linking stock photography’s visual familiarity and flexibility with how we may encounter and experience it in the city, I have attempted to start thinking through some of the ways in which, as Thurlow (2020) points out, the “sensory qualities of texts” may also contribute to “their sensuous, affective resonances” (2020, 14-15). I would therefore now like to conclude this chapter with a brief reflection on how the interaction of stock photography’s key aesthetic qualities – i.e. familiarity and flexibility – with the urban built environment contributes to creating the “mood” of everyday life in cities.

In his book on ambient media in Japan, Paul Roquet traces the relationship between the emergence of “mood-regulating” media and a neoliberal culture of therapy and healing that relies on “atmospheric determinations of self” (2016, 15). As he states: “The demand for self-care has shifted not just media use but media *aesthetics*” (Roquet 2016, 16), where “the imperative for calming affect” and for “providing a sense of restfulness and relaxation” (Roquet 2016, 18) has become central to music, film, video art, and even literature. Ambient media provide what he considers as provisional comfort in the face of the threats and uncertainties of life under capitalism,

while also functioning as a form of social control. This said, according to Roquet, ambient media also offer affordances for publics to reflect on urban coexistence and participate in collective practices of attunement. Along the same lines, stock photography's ambient qualities are centred on aesthetic choices that may make urban sites and surfaces that are often unremarkable and utilitarian if not downright precarious and alienating more engaging and even comforting. This is a mood that feeds on encounters with familiar and flexible subjects which may make us feel close to these sites and surfaces, and also good about ourselves as we traverse the city. In doing so, however, these encounters also promote individualized – or dare we say, neoliberal – approaches to living with others in cities. At the same time, this ambient imagery personally invites us into the spaces it occupies in ways that may enable us to start imagining what life in the city could be like in a more sensuous, embodied manner.

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Giorgia Aiello is Professor of Culture and Communication at the University of Leeds (UK) and Associate Professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the University of Bologna (Italy). She has written extensively about the problems and potentials of visual communication in digital media, cities, and everyday life. She is a co-author of *Visual Communication: Understanding Images in Media Culture* (with Katy Parry; SAGE 2020) and a

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