ABSTRACT


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Seventy percent of the commercial images which we see everyday are estimated to be produced within the stock photography industry (Frosh, 2003, p.2). Academic discourse confronting this industry has, to date, hypothesised the domination of a carefully contrived style of stock photography over society. These glossy, formulaic and idealistic images are speculated to project consumerist ideologies and stereotyped constructions onto their viewers (Miller, 1996; Frosh, 2003; Machin, 2004). However, the established power of the stock photography industry has been disrupted with the explosion of online image-sharing communities such as Flickr and by new microstock models. Furthermore, the digital environment has changed society's ways of creating, finding - and even seeing - photographic images. Has some capitalist regime, enforced by stock photography, been upended by the digital revolution as the images of the masses flood the Internet?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of technology in the transformation of stock photography practices. Subsequently, it examines the potential meanings for society which arise from this change. Through a combination of structured analysis and expressive discussion the insights of photography theory are applied within a grounded context, citing Berger, Barthes and Sontag as key influences.

In light of this analysis, I assert that stock photography is being redefined as part of a digital environment. By mobilising all the creative potential and freedom of online image communities it gains the opportunity to be revitalised and thrive. Through the interchange of gazes, stock photography in return holds the power to reverberate these changes within society. It can offer fresh meaning and a renewed equilibrium for society, which is now more in harmony with the community than the corporation.