

2022

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Ann Curran

Technological University Dublin, [ann.curran@tudublin.ie](mailto:ann.curran@tudublin.ie)

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### Recommended Citation

Curran, Ann, "Ordinary and Extraordinary Images: Making Visible the Operations of Stock Photography in Posters Against the Repeal of the 8th Amendment" (2022). *Articles*. 106.

<https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschmedart/106>

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## Ordinary and Extraordinary Images: Making Visible the Operations of Stock Photography in Posters Against the Repeal of the 8th Amendment

Ann Curran <sup>1\*</sup>

Published: March 1, 2022

### ABSTRACT

The operations of stock photographs, as utilised by the Irish anti-abortion lobby, have not been examined before. Many of the 'Vote No' posters in the 2018 Irish referendum campaign on the 8th amendment maintained a visual and textual focus on foetal personhood: asking the Irish electorate to 'love both,' while deploying a range of stock photographs. In this article, I trace specific stock images used on anti-abortion posters against Repeal back to their online image bank sources. I make visible the role of generic or stereotypical photographs in anti-abortion messaging, in the knowledge that stock photographs often function best when masking their ideologies as 'natural' systems of belief. As global anti-abortion campaigns increasingly co-opt the arguments and look of 'progressive' campaigns, using ordinary rather than extraordinary photographs, global image banks seek new markets by producing feminist and gender rights-oriented stock photographs. Meanwhile, versions of the 'classical' images in the visual repertoire long-favoured by anti-abortion campaigns continue to be remediated. Image banks also function as *de facto* online archives of editorial photographs of both pro-choice and pro-life activism - yet another facet of the role of stock photography in the visual economy of abortion.

**Keywords:** stock photography, Ireland, anti-abortion messaging, posters, image banks

### INTRODUCTION

*Yet although these images are ubiquitous, they are also so unexceptional that our encounters with them have no duration, and are not marked off as noteworthy events or experiences* (Frosh, 2003: 1).

The role of stock photography<sup>1</sup> in anti-abortion messaging by the 'Vote No' side during the 2018 Irish referendum campaign on the 8th amendment *is*, I would argue, noteworthy. Stock photographs are consistently overlooked, underestimated, and not attended to, but their cultural and infrastructural reach is immense. Aiello (2016: n. p.), writing in *Ethnography Matters Blog*, describes them as 'the visual backbone of advertising, branding, publishing and journalism'; they are essential to understanding how people engage with media content 'across genres, platforms and borders'. From their 'formulaic repetitiveness and monumental redundancy' to their 'yearning for authenticity,' stock photographs appear innocent in how they construct social and political stereotypes, but they also function to reinforce 'such apparent uniformity' (Frosh, 2003: 215). Paul Frosh asks if it is possible to move beyond the standard critique of stock photography as a 'malign cultural power,' to pay closer attention to the images themselves, our habituation to them and how they signify in terms of publicness, visibility and engagement (Frosh, 2020: 7). Because if we continue to overlook stock photographs and their operations, how can we understand the ways in which the generic photograph or 'genericity' is strategically deployed in both visual and political culture?

On 25 May, 2018, the Irish electorate voted to repeal or overturn the 8th amendment to the Irish constitution in order to legislate for legal abortion. Introduced in 1983, the 8th amendment or *Article 40.3.3*<sup>2</sup>, made abortion

<sup>1</sup> Frosh (2003: 3) defines stock photography as: 'a global industry which manufactures, promotes and distributes photographic images for use in marketing, advertising, sundry editorial purposes...'

<sup>2</sup> *Article 40.3.3* of the Irish Constitution or the 8th amendment states: 'The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn, and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as is practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.'

illegal in Ireland except where there was a ‘real and substantial risk of loss of the mother’s life’. This effectively prioritised foetal rights over the basic rights of women and girls. A very brief introduction to Irish abortion politics leading up to the 2018 referendum campaign will be provided later in this article.

The role of stock photographs, as utilised by the Irish pro-life movement, has not been examined before. The use of images and visual artefacts has, of course, always significantly impacted political campaigns about abortion and the fight for reproductive rights globally. As Sandlos (2000: 80) states:

It would be difficult to locate a political struggle in which images have played a more central role than they have in debates over reproductive choice.

An updated and more expansive approach to using stock photography by anti-abortion organisations in Ireland was notable in the 2012 to 2013 multi-sited poster and billboard campaign mounted by pro-life organisation Youth Defence. Many of their on-street presentations were drawn from ‘globalised’ and widely disseminated anti-abortion stock images for English-speaking audiences, although local nuances and specificities were taken into account. Five years later, a close analysis of ‘Vote No’ posters deployed during the 2018 referendum campaign offers an opportunity to produce new knowledge about how stock images are being used by Irish anti-abortion organisations.

What can be seen as the rise of the more generic photograph in global campaigns against abortion has taken place at the same time as the role of ‘official’ photographs for both pro-life and pro-choice positions is arguably less important. This can be attributed to the impact of social media, the adoption of more mixed-media messaging and the incorporation of user or campaigner/activist-generated content. After decades-long campaigns of misinformation using predominantly ‘extraordinary,’ graphic photographs of foetuses or ‘foetal remains,’ pro-life organisations and activists increasingly incorporate the ordinary, unremarkable photograph in their repertoire, paired with a more positive, ‘moderate’ toned text which mimics the look of socially progressive campaigns. Saurette and Gordon (2013: 180) write of such developments in anti-abortion discourses in Canada and the US (2013 and 2016) where anti-abortion messages are presented as modern, equalist and, in fact, pro-woman. However, Browne and Nash, discussing the heteroactivist tropes operationalised by the No side during the Irish referendum campaign, caution against exaggerating the influence of North American anti-abortion tactics on the Irish context; this may result in a failure to ‘recognize the geographical (and cultural) specificities of how resistances are created and manifest’ (Browne and Nash, 2020: 53).

‘Old media’, such as political posters, remain influential and relevant forms of communication in Irish electoral campaigns. Lorna O’Hara argues that one can interpret the Irish struggle for reproductive rights as ‘a battle over access to public space,’ given that until recently ‘pro-life groups completely dominated public spaces with their posters and advertisements, attempting to control public discourse about abortion’ (O’Hara, 2020: 166). Posters had both symbolic and cultural value for Yes and No sides in the 2018 campaign. Certain No posters immediately galvanised public condemnation, while perceptions about the timing, installation and placement of posters more broadly figured as harbingers of success or defeat in the referendum outcome. The sheer mass of posters on streets across Ireland during the campaign meant that the streets functioned as proto visual battlegrounds, and funding drives to print more posters quickly over-ran their targets<sup>3</sup>. Posters were interrogated, intervened with, hacked and pulled down. They were an ‘always on’ form of ambient, visual messaging. Images of streets thronged with Yes and No posters were used by the international media as visual shorthand to represent the abortion debate in Ireland. The extent of the impact of posters was acknowledged on the day of the vote: in an exit poll by Behaviours and Attitudes for RTÉ<sup>4</sup> it was revealed that the Irish electorate believed that posters had had a 10% influence on their voting decisions.

The focus of this article is photography, specifically a visual and textual analysis of posters using stock photographs by organisations campaigning for a No vote during the 2018 Irish referendum campaign. Paying attention to and speculating about the role of stock photographs in anti-abortion visual discourses, as well the corporatised nature of stock photography itself, is the second objective. For a fee or for free, online image banks provide every kind of photographic image used by the pro-life movement, although given the polysemy of photographs, these images are not always constructed with this purpose in mind. Classical or stereotypical images, such as Madonna and child shots, used in anti-abortion messaging may end up being perpetually remediated, remaining in circulation on posters and ephemera for years – this is a measure of the stock image’s success. Free or monetised images of foetuses are equally available on image bank websites. Increasingly, they are packaged as

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/together-for-yes-crowdfunding-3957637-Apr2018/> (Accessed 27 June 2021).

<sup>4</sup> See ‘When Will the Posters Come Down?': <https://www.rte.ie/news/newslens/2018/0528/966672-election-posters/> (Accessed 14 July 2021).



**Figure 1.** ‘Low Poly Fetus Inside the Womb.’ Source: Ekaterina Glazkova/Adobe Stock. Used with permission.

decorative, cute and sentimental, such as **Figure 1** from the Adobe Stock website. This image was used extensively by anti-abortion protesters in Warsaw during the 2021 ‘Women’s Day Without Compromises’<sup>5</sup>.

Global image banks have an additional stake in providing access to other visual representations to do with abortion: namely selling documentary or editorial images of pro-life and pro-choice activism online, functioning essentially as *de facto* online archives. Because of an in-built imprecision around terms, keywords and image categorisation in order to maximise profit, searching on image banks for either pro-life *or* pro-choice activist images often yields a mixture of the two, creating a blurring of two radically different political positions. What can we learn about the role of photography in anti-abortion discourses by tracing the stock photographs on ‘Vote No’ posters during the Irish referendum back to their ‘origins’ on image banks? And can we speculate about the impact of such often undervalued generic images more broadly in relation to the issue of abortion, while image banks and stock photography corporations simultaneously co-opt feminist discourses on gender and women’s rights for greater financial gain?

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO IRISH ABORTION POLITICS

*After almost thirty-five years of activism, agitation, hardship and litigation, the 8th Amendment was finally removed from the text of the Irish Constitution following a referendum on 25 May 2018 (de Londras et al., 2020: 2).*

Abortion laws ‘reflect broader social and political debates about gender, sex, and community’ which, in relation to the foundation of the Irish state, were exemplified in the bans on divorce, married women working in the public sector, contraception and abortion (Smyth, 2005: 7). A conservative sexual and gender order was imposed in Ireland as an outcome of the political and social power wielded over and within the state by the Irish Catholic Church. In equating the term ‘mother’ with ‘woman,’ the 8th amendment perpetuated Irish women’s social status as mothers first and foremost, drawing on the nationalist image of a productive maternity originally enshrined in *Article 41.2*<sup>6</sup> of the 1937 constitution. Such an order existed alongside the promotion of a nationalist myth premised on the cultural and religious exceptionalism of the Irish (Browne and Calkin, 2020: 9). Thus, long-standing efforts to prevent the legalisation of abortion in Ireland also functioned to support an idealised, ethnic view of Irishness (Fletcher, 1995).

Linda Connolly reminds of us of how the long-fought and ultimately successful campaign to repeal the 8th is ‘interconnected with a longer and broader history of feminist activism’ (Connolly, 2020: 36). Irish women campaigned on issues of bodily autonomy from the late 1960s onwards, mobilising firstly around the legalisation of contraception and then abortion (Connolly, 2020: 36). The Women’s Right to Choose group was formed in

<sup>5</sup> Women’s Rights activists in Poland marked International Women’s Day, 8 March 2021, by protesting the near total ban on abortion which came into effect in January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *Article 41.2* of the Irish Constitution states: ‘The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.’

1978. Following the introduction of contraception in Ireland, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) was formed in 1981 as an umbrella of 14 groups leading the campaign for a constitutional amendment ‘designed ‘to guard against the future legalisation of abortion’ (Connolly, 2020: 55). Barry (1988), in her account of the 1983 referendum campaign examines the emergence of powerful, Catholic anti-abortion organisations such as Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) and Family Solidarity. SPUC, in particular, became notorious for their visual tactics and the use of graphic images of foetuses on posters and ephemera. Following the ‘X’ case in 1992, which established a right to abortion in the case of a risk to the life of the mother, the anti-abortion organisation, Youth Defence, was formed. Youth Defence currently describes itself as ‘Ireland’s largest and most active pro-life organization, led by young people who believe that life is worth protecting.’ Its relationship to photographic images and stock photography came into relief in 2013, when it was investigated to determine whether or not it had breached the licensing agreement for using an image of a young, white woman in the ‘Abortion Tears Her Life Apart’ poster and billboard purchased from iStockPhoto<sup>7</sup>.

The death of Indian dentist, Savita Halappanavar, as a result of an incomplete miscarriage in 2012, was a hugely significant event in the history of Irish abortion politics: a moment of mobilisation for the pro-choice movement in Ireland and ‘desire for change quickly galvanised around a simple demand: REPEAL’ (de Londras et al., 2020: 2). Rather than amend the existing 8th amendment, pro-choice activists and organisations coalesced around the call for its complete removal from the constitution, as well as an end to treating abortion as an exceptional practice separate from social and legal regulation. de Londras et al. (2020: 6) note that ‘between 1983 and 2018, the relationship between religion, politics, and society in Ireland was transformed’. ‘Together for Yes’<sup>8</sup>, the Irish national civil campaign organisation was formed to campaign for a Yes vote, or the repeal of the 8th amendment, once the referendum was announced. On the No side, there was a notable secularisation of anti-abortion messaging and the absence of overt Catholic Church involvement. Nonetheless, ‘repeat players,’ or legacy organisations connected to the church across the years, continued to challenge any moves towards progressive gender, sexual and reproductive rights (de Londras et al., 2020: 5). ‘Love Both’ (founded in 2016), and ‘Save the 8th’ (founded in 2018), were the key players or coalitions of organisations fighting to retain the 8th amendment and oppose the introduction of legal abortion in Ireland.

## NOT CEDING THE VISUAL TERRAIN TO THE NO SIDE: FOR AND AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHS

Photography is a signifying system at work in the world, but critically analysing and interpreting photographs is still regarded as a specialist skill. Stock photography remains largely invisible in its operations to the viewing public, and while tools such as semiotic analysis and visual literacy training encourage us to ‘read’ photographs as complex texts, the consistent dismissal of stock photographs due to their ubiquity makes their critical interrogation unlikely. Semiotics provides one method by which to interpret the connotations produced by a photograph, whereby the codes in the image are dependent on, but crucially not limited by, what is literally in the frame - the photograph’s content or denotation. But the content of a photograph, regardless of its indexical quotient, always only serves up fragments of reality. Petchesky, in her discussion of the co-option of the foetal photograph by the pro-life movement, acknowledges the limitations of photographs as she argues that ‘Fetal [sic] imagery epitomizes the distortion inherent in all photographic images: their tendency to slice up reality into tiny bits wrenched out of real time and space’ (Petchesky, 1987: 268).

The photograph may equally be viewed as ambivalent: what Barthes (1977a: 17) describes as ‘a message without a code,’ a version of reality but one which can conceal its construction and ability to carry ideologies due to the photograph’s unshakeable association with objectivity and truth. This characteristic is more pronounced in stock photographs, which are set up and cast with models yet often appear neutral, naturalistic or snapshot-like, manifesting social, cultural and political meanings despite themselves. Is it possible for any one single photograph to communicate a fixed meaning or message to a mass audience? Posing this question in relation to the pro-choice movement, Sandlos (2000: 88) asks: ‘Can one image reflect the discursive struggle to define and redefine a movement’s objectives and the conditions of political subjectivity over time?’

‘Together for Yes’ eschewed the use of photographs on their posters in favour of a text and graphics design strategy. In an interview conducted by Photography/Archives/Ireland with Sinéad Kennedy, member of the executive committee of ‘Together for Yes’, she discussed the decision against using photographs as being not just

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/youth-defence-abortion-image-investigation-533369-Jul2012/> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Together for Yes’ was launched on 22 March 2018. It was co-led by the National Women’s Council, the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment and the Abortion Rights Campaign. It was joined in the Executive Committee by the Irish Family Planning Association. See: <https://www.togetherforyes.ie/about-us/who-we-are/>.



**Figure 2.** ICBR protestors outside the Four Courts, Dublin, June 2018. Photograph by Ann Curran.

about devising a counter-strategy to the photographs used by organisations on the No side, it was not about ‘ceding the visual terrain,’ as famously discussed by Petchesky (1987: 264):

On some No posters, you saw photographs of women with six month old babies or two or three month old babies presented as though they were newborns or in utero. This sort of image was not what we were trying to reflect or counter. What we felt was the central concern of people was that this is not an easy decision, it’s a complex decision. And I mean, how do you reduce that kind of complexity to a photograph? I don’t think you can.

Concerns about the photograph’s inability to adequately represent the complexity of decisions in relation to abortion were uppermost for ‘Together for Yes’, as they sought to reach the undecided voter. Their most widely-disseminated poster featured the slogan ‘Sometimes a Private Matter Needs Public Support’, evincing an ethics of care and respect around the issue of abortion rights. A text and graphics formula without photographs had also been used for the posters advocating a yes vote in the 2015 ‘Marriage Equality’<sup>9</sup> referendum campaign to grant equal rights to the civil institution of marriage for same-sex couples. There was, therefore, a logic in maintaining that design strategy and visually connecting these two issues as related social reforms and rights-based issues. Additionally, both ‘Marriage Equality’ and ‘Together for Yes’ posters were designed by the same Dublin-based graphic design company *Language*.

On the other hand, photographs were extensively used by the ‘Vote No’ or anti-abortion organisations on their campaign posters and ephemera. There was an updating of familiar tropes in stock images in the pro-life image repertoire, with better quality and higher-resolution photographs deployed alongside a more contemporary design approach to image and text. There was evidence too, of a smoother genericity and relatability in how photography and design were used to soften the anti-abortion message. There was thus a strategic performing of the ‘ordinary’ alongside the more ‘extraordinary’ images and messages from ‘Save the 8th’ and ‘Love Both,’ which, as Browne and Nash (2020: 55) remind us, were not homogenous entities. Both organisations presented a different approach to using photographs and different visual arguments on their posters. The ‘Love Both’ organisation opted for a generally more relatable tone and appeal, in contrast to previous Irish anti-abortion campaigns, and in step with the transnational ‘updating’ of contemporary anti-abortion discourses. Saurette and Gordon (2013: 158) note that such tactics are ‘increasingly colonising and employing explicit arguments, principles and narratives that have traditionally been associated with progressive feminist, pro-women and pro-choice movements’. ‘Save the 8th’, however, in its poster presentations remained largely foetocentric and ‘traditional’ in how it absented images of women, framing abortion as equivalent to killing babies. Their posters combined stock images with triggering forms of textual address, echoing earlier Irish pro-life campaigns aimed at shaming women and equating abortion with murder. The most graphic photographs deployed in the campaign against Repeal were those of dismembered foetal remains on the large banners used by the Irish Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (styled as ICBR). The banners are seen in **Figure 2**, as ICBR activists assembled to protest the referendum result outside the Four Courts in

<sup>9</sup> ‘Yes Equality: The Campaign for Civil Marriage Equality, a new independent nationwide civil society group was launched yesterday 9 March 2015 at the Rotunda Pillar Room. The group was formed to coordinate and lead the campaign to win the Marriage Equality Referendum on May 22nd.’ See: <https://www.iccl.ie/archive/yes-equality-the-campaign-for-civil-marriage-equality-formally-launches/> (Accessed 28 July 2020).



**Figure 3.** ‘Pro-Life Protestor in Dublin City Ireland.’ Source: Mark Henderson/Alamy Stock Photo. Used with permission.

Dublin in June, 2018. Arguably, having such images in circulation during the referendum campaign functioned to position some of the more objectionable No posters using stock photographs as moderate by comparison.

### BACK TO THE BANK: ‘EDITORIAL’ VERSUS ‘CREATIVE’ STOCK PHOTOGRAPHS

In order to both provide context as to how stock photographs function and demonstrate my methodology in tracing photographs on ‘Vote No’ posters back to their image bank sources, I will begin with a sample image which combines the two main genres in stock photography available from image banks: editorial photographs and what Getty Images describes as ‘creative’ photographs. **Figure 3**, ‘Pro-Life Protestor in Dublin City Ireland,’ is for sale on the Alamy website. This image is dated 19 January 2013 and corresponds with the extensive poster and billboard campaign mounted by Youth Defense during 2012 and 2013<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 3** features an elderly woman in a rain poncho holding a poster outside Merrion Square Park. Dubliners will know that Merrion Square is situated across from Holles Street Maternity Hospital, an ongoing site for anti-abortion protests. To purchase this image on Alamy, there is a suite of options corresponding to ‘rights-managed licenses’ for downloading and using the photograph: these range from ‘personal use’ at \$19.99 (a ‘non-commercial, one-time, personal use’) to a ‘marketing package’ for \$199.99, which allows the image to be used in a marketing campaign by a ‘large business of more than 10 employees.’ In between, there are prices for rights-managed licenses to reproduce the photograph in magazines or on websites and, based on each option, the file may be downloaded at different resolutions. Beyond these functional parameters, which are germane to all stock photography websites, there are important details about ‘releases’ and ‘model releases’ which restrict usage. Captioning for an editorial image may provide detail about the event pictured, but in the case of this photograph an extensive text in the ‘more information’ field begins:

The Pro Life Campaign is a non-denominational human rights organisation, drawing its support from a cross-section of Irish society. The Campaign promotes pro-life education and defends human life at all stages, from conception to natural death. It also campaigns for resources to support and assist pregnant women and those in need of healing after abortion.

Moving to the photograph on the poster that the pro-life protestor is holding, it features a close-up image of a young, blonde-haired, white woman, nominally a mother, who is smiling while she nuzzles her blue-eyed baby. This posed and constructed ‘creative’ stock photograph appears ‘naturalistic’ or generic, signifying motherhood, but the woman in the image is most likely a model. The text ‘Love Them Both’ and two graphics of hearts are placed to the left-hand side of the image with the strapline ‘Abortion Kills One, Hurts Another’ running underneath. Notably, the harsh tone of the strapline is at odds with compassionate message of the larger text ‘Love Them Both’, as the poster dates from 2013 when the ‘abortion hurts women’ argument was prominent in the US and Canada (Saurette and Gordon, 2013: 171). The global pro-life movement in English-speaking countries continues to use this same poster today, albeit with modified straplines.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/abortion-billboards-youth-defence-pro-choice/> (Accessed 26 May 2021).



**Figure 4.** ‘If Killing an Unborn Baby at Six Months Bothers You, Then Vote No’ poster by ‘Save the 8<sup>th</sup>’ Photograph by Ann Curran.

To trace the photograph on the poster back to its image bank, I made a selection or screen grab of the image of the mother and baby and uploaded it to Tin-Eye Reverse Image Search (<https://tineye.com/>). This yielded a number of ‘hits,’ all based on image recognition algorithms, including exact copies of the image as well as similar images. A reverse image search is a content-based image retrieval (CBIR) technique, whereby you provide the CBIR system with a sample image upon which it bases a search query without the need for keywords or search terms. This brought me to the Adobe Stock website, where a full-resolution version of the photograph, titled ‘Baby and His Mother,’ is for sale. It is in the ‘parenting’ category, retrievable using adjectives such as ‘angelic’ and ‘adorable,’ but also generic keywords like ‘baby’ or ‘boy.’ It displays as one of a series of mother and baby shots by two Dutch commercial photographers at 2XSamara.com, and continues to be sold today, nine years after its appearance on this poster. I followed this same method of selecting the photograph on the ‘Vote No’ poster and uploading it to Tin-Eye Reverse Image Search for all stock photographs in the following analysis.

## PERFORMING THE ORDINARY: STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY IN POSTERS AGAINST REPEAL

A political poster and its meanings are ‘negotiated within specific geographical, historical and ideological positions’, and the poster may figure as ‘a fluctuating discursive structure’ made of images, text and graphic elements (Aulich and Sylvestrová, 1999: 12). Every time a photograph appears on a poster, it is usually joined with language ‘as caption, headline, surrounding text, intertitle, or spoken voiceover or dialogue’ (Kotz, 2006: 513). Without text, the photograph may convey a deep ambivalence, and posters in a political campaign are not usually designed to signify ambivalently. In Barthes’ (1977b: 37-41) extended argument about ‘the rhetoric of the image’, he elaborates on the relationship between text and the photograph, saying that text may function as ‘anchorage’ or alternatively as ‘relay’. In the case of ‘anchorage,’ the text appears to be equivalent to what is in the image—it anchors the meaning of the photograph, reinforcing to the viewer what it is they see. With ‘relay,’ the text and image relationship is more complicated and potentially even antagonistic, whereby the combination of image and text creates a meaning that could not have been achieved by each element separately.

**Figure 4** was one of the most controversial posters produced by the No side in the 2018 referendum campaign, the poster which generated the most complaints to Dublin City Council (Ní Aodha, 2018). It features a stock photograph of a pregnant woman’s elaborately painted belly, with a painted-on image of a happy, full-term baby curled up in the womb. The drawing is pastel-hued on a stark, white background thus separating the image from the woman’s skin colour (white) and producing a crude *trompe l’oeil* effect. Drawn in naïf style, the baby is positioned upside down as though in utero, with the umbilical cord shaped into a bright pink heart and framed by decorative birds of varying colours. Cropped to display the stomach alone, it emphasises the woman’s body as vessel or incubator, denying her identification with her own pregnancy and promoting the autonomy of the foetus-baby



inside. This image can be categorised in the genre of maternity photography, with the ‘baby-bump’ shot generally marketed as a celebratory image of pregnancy. In ‘baby-bump’ photographs made by professional photographers, it is not unusual for a headless, pregnant body to be presented. Other tropes in this genre include the holding of a printed sonogram image of the foetus over the pregnant belly.

The stock photograph used in **Figure 4** is titled ‘Maternity’ and was made by Mario Trainotti, an amateur photographer and Catholic academic based in Brazil. It is available to download for free on the Pixabay image bank website. On Pixabay however, the skin colour of the arms on either side of the pregnant belly is darker than the version presented on the poster, suggesting the skin tone in the image was lightened for the Irish audience. The overall use of colour in the image and complimentary pink in the outlining of the text, makes the poster appear bright and appealing, especially perhaps to children. The colour palette is in sharp contrast with the shrill tone of the textual address above the photograph which reads: ‘If Killing an Unborn Baby at Six Months Bothers You Then Vote No.’ The text, when read with the photograph of the painted belly, functions as relay rather than anchorage – it produces an entirely different reading of the image which could not be deduced from encountering the image alone. Erected by ‘Save the 8th’<sup>11</sup>, this poster once again asserts the primacy of the individual rights of the foetus and equates abortion with murder, while simultaneously seeking to mislead the public about the introduction of late-term abortions, or abortion without term limits, as the probable outcome of a Yes vote. On *Save8.ie*, the poster was displayed with a link claiming that the Irish government was deceiving the electorate about restricting abortion term limits, that abortions up to six months would be optional under the legislation, which was false. Complaints made to Dublin City Council about this poster were explicit<sup>12</sup>.

The use of such a photograph demonstrates how trends in photography naturally feed into the production of stock photographs and how attentive the pro-life lobby is to popular visual culture. The genre of the pregnancy shoot is long-established, but its more recent variation is the painted, pregnant belly photograph. Images with nature-based motifs, full landscape scenes, representations of fairy tales, or even scenes from Disney films, are either hand-drawn or painted on the belly using stencils. This elaborate, fantasy image of the foetus-as-baby emerges in stock photography and popular culture as a generic, relatable image which can, in turn, be remediated as an anti-abortion image.

The defining of Irish womanhood in terms of the maternal function has been interrogated by Smyth (2005). In **Figure 5**, a stock photograph of mother and baby in quasi-religious pose, an image of blonde-haired woman with her sleeping infant was used on a poster by the political party Renua<sup>13</sup>. As with most social archetypes in stock, the same standards of tidy, good-looking but not too beautiful white people or babies is evident. The mother’s eyes are modestly cast down rather than making eye contact with the viewer, while she holds her clean, white, baby conveying her submissive role in this idealised depiction of maternity and functional femininity. The photograph is titled ‘Newborn Baby in a Tender Embrace of Mother at Window’ and is available on eight different stock websites, including Adobe Stock and microstock sites such as Shutterstock and Canstock. The image is, as many stock photographs are, ‘referentially ambivalent’ in that it depicts a ‘realistic’ scene in time and space but is staged by models. It is also ‘interpretively ambivalent’ because it has a number of potential connotations in relation to a celebration of maternity and family. While the intimacy of the pose suggests a general, idealised view of motherhood, it registers as locally specific to Ireland being reminiscent of Irish Catholic iconographic representations of women as mothers, such the image of mother and child on the cover of the 1951 ‘Mother and Child Scheme’<sup>14</sup> booklet and the Marian stamp from 1954<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.save8.ie/> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>12</sup> One complainant wrote: ‘I work in the hospital and I feel that these “Vote No” posters are very insensitive and could be very upsetting to some of our patients. I think the location of these posters, which display an image of a naked woman with a baby painted on her stomach, are very inappropriate outside of a maternity hospital which specialises in the care of very sick women and babies.’ See Ní Aodha (2018), More than 150 complaints about ‘graphic’ and ‘false’ referendum posters sent to Dublin City Council, *TheJournal.ie*. 2 June.

<sup>13</sup> *Renua* is a registered political party in Ireland which describes itself as: ‘Ireland’s patriotic and socially conservative party that stands for the protection and promotion of the things that are essential to our individual and collective quality of life: strong families, safe communities and an independent country that is prosperous and run fairly for the benefit of all’. See: <https://www.renuaireland.com/> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>14</sup> The Mother and Child Scheme was a proposed healthcare programme in Ireland which evolved into a major political crisis involving the Irish government and the Catholic Church in the early 1950s. A brochure, ‘What the new service means to every family’, was prepared but was not issued to the public. See: <https://www.theirishstory.com/2013/06/19/the-controversy-of-womens-health-the-mother-and-child-scheme-the-role-of-church-and-state/#.YG1uMelKjYI> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

<sup>15</sup> A stamp featuring the Madonna and child by Luca Della Robbia was issued in Ireland in 1954 in celebration of the ‘Marian Year’. A stock image of the stamp is available for purchase on shutterstock.com. See: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/ireland-circa-1954-stamp-printed-marian-117482191> (Accessed 20 May 2021).



**Figure 5.** 'Be My Voice, Vote No' poster by Renua. Photograph by Ann Curran.



**Figure 6.** 'Vote No' poster by 'Love Both.' Photograph by Ann Curran.

The text 'Be My Voice' is positioned at the top of the poster on a blue background above the photograph. This entreaty to 'be my voice' is part of the extended strategy of ventriloquism in anti-abortion messaging, aimed at presenting the voice of the foetus or baby as an individual with rights, as discussed by Berlant (1997). The speaking subject of the poster is not the adult woman or mother, but the baby who asks to be represented in the debate. Again, the operations of what Barthes (1977a, 1977b) calls 'relay' are at work in this image-text combination: nothing in the actual image itself suggests the primacy of one subject over the other, mother or baby, as the image alone might simply be read as an archetype of harmonious motherhood. But the text, in combination with the stock image and context, produces a new message that could not be understood if they were separate.

An alternative example of a white mother and child image is seen in [Figure 6](#). In this instance, a woman wearing white is holding a small boy on the street, smiling and looking directly at the camera. By virtue of pose and physical proximity, they are presumed to be mother and son. The photograph could equally be a snapshot on someone's phone or in any family album. The social stereotype in stock functions best not when the representation is remarkable but when it is ordinary, yet ordinariness in stock photography still requires conspicuous staging. There



**Figure 7.** ‘No Abortion on Demand’ poster by ‘Love Both.’ Photograph by Ann Curran.

is no text, strapline or slogan per se, except for the name of the organisation ‘Love Both’<sup>16</sup> printed in cerise pink. The text or logo in this instance functions as anchorage rather than relay: it confirms that we see two individuals in this image and asks that we, the public, love both of them equally. But, in the context of the referendum campaign, this presentation of genericity implies a vote to retain the 8th amendment and prevent legal abortion in Ireland will allow this image of productive motherhood and heteronormative order to prevail.

A final poster by ‘Love Both’, **Figure 7**, features a white, newborn baby asleep and wrapped tightly in a white blanket on a white backdrop above bright pink text stating ‘No Abortion on Demand’. The ‘No’ is enlarged for emphasis to almost the same size as the baby. The photograph, called ‘Newborn Baby Boy Wrapped in Blanket’ by Catherine Ledner, is available on the Getty Images image bank. Alternative tags for this image include: ‘new life photos,’ ‘white photos’ and ‘innocence photos’. Stock images of white babies’ bodies may circulate via greeting cards or inspirational mood boards but outside of these sites they have the potential to be co-opted as weapons. The image of such a white baby on a clinical, all-white backdrop is explicit in its proposition of a universal whiteness. People, babies or children in the stock photographs used by the No side were uniformly white, indicative both of the dominance of whiteness in stock photography, despite recent attempts by image banks to represent greater diversity, and the desire to present Irishness as white. Rivetti (2019: 181) argues that the referendum campaign was, in fact, a ‘missed opportunity to reconfigure Irish identity—which continues to rest on being white, Catholic and settled’. The text on this poster, ‘No Abortion on Demand’, functions antagonistically as ‘relay’ once again, whereby the combination of image and text creates a meaning that could not have been achieved by each element separately.

## NO LONGER EXTRAORDINARY: FOETAL IMAGES ON IMAGE BANKS WEBSITES

*The fetuses on the posters have no mothers. They are advanced for their age. They have grown-up thoughts. They choose their words carefully. They know how to get your attention (Fitzpatrick, 2018).*

Here, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Chris Fitzpatrick describes the effect of the posters on the street, specifically the ‘Vote No’ posters featuring foetuses. Despite the softer appeal of ‘Love Both’ posters, which mimicked the look of progressive political campaigns using more generic images and relatable modes of address, the number of posters and ephemera featuring foetal images on the No side remained plentiful. Posters such as ‘Save the 8th’s ‘License to Kill?’ poster featured a close-up of the foetus, emphasising its humanity and how abortion ‘relates directly to killing babies’ (Browne and Nash, 2020: 60).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Love Both’ is described on its website as ‘a nationwide movement working to protect the right to life of all unborn babies and campaigning for support for women with unplanned pregnancies.’ See: <https://loveboth.ie/> (Accessed 31 July 2021).



**Figure 8.** ‘Vote No: My Heart Started Beating at 22 Days’ poster by ‘Love Both.’ Photograph by Ann Curran.

The role of visualising technologies in framing the abortion debate and contributing to the concept of foetal personhood is long-established (Haraway, 1997: 222). Duden (1993:14) discusses the close-up of the foetus by photographer Lennart Nilsson on the cover of 1980 edition of *A Child is Born*: ‘A bluish, pink figure with protruding veins sucking its thumb, the vaguely human face with closed eyes covered with a tissue veil’. The iconic image is, as we now know, an image of a dead foetus not a live foetus and since the 1970s ‘Nilsson’s photos of embryos and fetuses can be found everywhere in our mediatised culture’ (Jülich, 2015: 639). A similar, if not the very same image of a foetus was deployed on two fliers and one poster distributed by ‘Love Both’ during the referendum. On one flier it was used as an illustration to support the claim that ‘A Baby’s Heart is Beating by Just 22 Days’; on a different flier it was used to illustrate stages of growth for a foetus from 13 to 23 weeks. The same image, seen here in **Figure 8**, was then scaled up to street poster size and the text was changed to read ‘My Heart Started Beating at 22 days’, once more making the foetus speak.

This combination of image and text figures as a ‘classic’ representation in anti-abortion discourses, both of how ‘fetal images are central to the ideological construction of the fetus as a child with ontological and biological existence, which is independent of the bodies of women’ (Sandlos, 2000: 81) but also, given the context of a referendum, how ‘fetal citizenship contradicts the citizenship of women’ (Franklin, 1991: 201). As Berlant (1997: 98) writes: ‘The success of the concept of fetal personhood depends on establishing a mode of “representation” that merges the word’s political and aesthetic senses, inputting a voice, a consciousness and a self-identity to the fetus that can neither speak its name nor vote’. Efforts to revive arguments about when life begins, render women absent, court controversy and generally mislead the public were a constant in the 2018 No posters featuring foetal images.

Stock images of foetuses are readily available on most image bank websites. At the time of writing, there are 5792 ‘Fetus Premium High Res Photos’ for purchase on Getty Images using the AI-assisted search term ‘fetus’ and the filter ‘creative.’ This search generates a first page replete with multiple versions of foetal images including: sonograms; foetus dolls made of different materials, foetus dolls held in hands; pictograms and graphic renditions of foetuses; foetus silhouettes; maternity icons; and shots of pregnant women having ultrasound scans. Additional search terms are suggested on the page, using a double-term strategy such as ‘baby fetus’ or ‘fetus womb,’ introducing another problematic elision between significantly different entities. Other proffered categories by the search engine include ‘unborn fetus,’ appearing to endorse the anti-abortion movement’s longstanding tactic to claim an *in utero* foetus of any gestation as a viable baby. The range of visual images produced by the search for ‘fetus’ demonstrates an expanded interpretation of the search term, along with a muddling of image types. This tallies with Georgina Firth’s discussion of how the appropriation of foetal images by anti-choice groups has led to collapsing the specificity of a medical image with that of a photograph, in order to produce an image which is ‘invested with the powerful aura of a portrait’ (Firth, 2009: 59).

Maintaining the key search term as ‘fetus/foetus’ but switching the filter to ‘editorial’ on Getty Images brings up 3,440 images. Along with some of the exact same foetal images returned in the ‘creative’ search, this time there is extensive documentation of pro-life *and* pro-choice activism, featuring images of women protesting together in public space but on entirely different sides of the issue. Foetus dolls are cradled in the hands of protestors at anti-abortion rallies such as the ‘Love Both’ ‘Stand Up for Life Rally’ in Dublin on 12 May 2018, shortly before the referendum; a plastic foetus doll is held at a protest outside the Marie Stopes Clinic in Belfast in April 2016; or a rubber foetus doll is paraded at the ‘March for Family’ in Verona, Italy in March, 2019. However, on the same page of results are images of Polish women activists holding the banner ‘You will never walk alone’ in Lwowek Slaski, hometown of Marta Lempart, the leader of the Polish Women’s Strike in December 2020. There are absolutely no representations of foetuses in either of these images. Thus, images of political protest by directly opposing sides of the debate can present together in a search for ‘fetus’ on an image bank site, and signify broadly as *similar* images of protest around the issue of abortion, despite their diametrical opposition.

The famous Lennart Nilsson image on the ‘Love Both’ poster and fliers that began this discussion of foetal images on image bank websites, has become a stock image of a foetus by default due to its unauthorised circulation and use (Jülich, 2015: 639). Jülich (2015: 639) notes:

On internet forums, blogs and other websites, individuals and organisations use his fetal imagery to mobilise support for arguments about reproductive rights, sex education *and* abortion.

In order to fulfil its potential in the market, the coherence of the stock image has to be balanced with how the image can open itself up to recontextualisation along the production chain. Therefore, as Frosh argues, there is a persistent ‘dialectic of instability and stability’ which pervades stock photography. The stereotypical or generic image in stock photography repeats itself ‘pathologically’, over and over again in order to produce a relay between knowledge and identification that allows for it to function in a crowded visual field (Frosh, 2003: 107). The Nilsson image, in circulation since 1965, has become the stereotypical image of a foetus and what Duden (1993: 14) calls ‘part of the mental universe of our time’.

## COLONISING DIFFERENCE: STYLING STOCK PHOTOGRAPHS AS FEMINIST AND PRO-WOMAN

*In recent years, we have seen a deliberate attempt, on the part of Getty, to represent the company in politically conscious terms, and to address those points upon which the industry and the genre have received critique—particularly, the frequent resort to stereotypes* (Aiello and Woodhouse, 2016: 353).

Across the last ten years, and in line with neoliberal reforms bolstering monopoly capital power, the stock photography industry has become ever more concentrated in the hands of a small number of key corporations. Since 2016, Getty Images has been recognised as the dominant global force in stock photography, offering access to over 400 million royalty-free or rights-managed images at the time of writing. Aiello (2016: n. p.) describes how ‘we quite literally swim in an ocean of images that were made for and are distributed by very few big corporations. This has had significant ramifications for photography itself, as clients opt to purchase photographs from image banks over the hiring of a photographer, and distinctions between stock photographs and many other genres in photography have become increasingly blurred.

In ‘When Corporations Come to Define the Visual Politics of Gender,’ feminist scholars Aiello and Woodhouse (2016: 352) investigate how major corporations such as Getty Images respond to new trends in visual culture, purporting to challenge stereotypes in stock photography in order to make more ‘politicised images’. In 2014, Getty Images partnered with Sheryl Sandberg’s ‘Lean In Foundation’ to curate a selection of feminist stock photographs. These photographs are described as being ‘devoted to the powerful depiction of women, girls and the people who support them,’ and present images of ‘female leadership in contemporary work and life.’<sup>17</sup> Images of women in business or research roles, mostly smiling, feature alongside shots of women protesting for equal rights and shots of women with ‘we should all be feminists’ printed on their t-shirts. Examining how photographs from the ‘Lean In’ collection circulate, Aiello notes that they are often used in lifestyle articles which discuss how challenging it is for women to juggle work and motherhood (Aiello in Cain, 2017), thus reinforcing traditional ideas about the woman’s ‘place’ being in the home. How such images are deployed reveals once again how stock photographs may be co-opted to reproduce the very ideological trope they appear to be challenging.

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<sup>17</sup> See: <https://leanin.org/getty> (Accessed 27 July 2021).



**Figure 9.** ‘Stop Policing My Body’ poster by ROSA. Photograph by Ann Curran.

Getty Images’ ‘Genderblend’<sup>18</sup> category and keyword were launched in 2015. With Genderblend, Getty Images aims to represent gender as a ‘nuanced spectrum,’ portraying ‘gender identities and relations in ways that are both more inclusive and diverse.’ It also makes claims to be ‘harnessing feminist theory’ with its use of terms like ‘empowerment’ and ‘strong women.’ A sub-category is the Genderblend Transgender collection featuring 37,473 images. Only here does a less clumsy attempt at the representation of gender identity appear to be evident: not all subjects are smiling, they are photographed with partners and families, they take part in marches for transgender rights. Do such stock images have the potential for socially progressive effects as they become ‘mainstream’? Can we approach them with trust instead of suspicion, returning to Frosh’s (2020: 9) argument about whether stock photographs may be viewed as other than ‘malign,’ or as good ‘bad’ objects?

Getty Images’ intentions signal a drive to further dominate visual culture by corporate stock photography, to influence and monetise issues to do with gender, equality and race among others. In creating such resources, Aiello and Woodhouse argue that Getty Images is, in fact, simplifying and depoliticising issues to do with gender and identity, as part of an ‘active attempt to make the commercial photography both look and feel complex, concrete and political’ (Aiello and Woodhouse, 2016: 355). Infamous stock images like ‘Women laughing with salad’ still sell but now co-exist in the same visual ecosystem with the very concepts which challenge them. In harnessing feminist discourses to legitimise new representations of gender and identity in stock photography, Getty Images conceals and neutralises strategies for commercial gain as it moves into the realm of social critique, ‘and in doing so, also begins to colonise difference’ according to Aiello and Woodhouse (2016: 355). As Frosh (2003: 58) reminds us, image banks don’t merely respond to patterns of consumption, but themselves drive changes in cultural taste and trends.

In the 2018 referendum campaign, a distinctive Repeal poster by ROSA (Figure 9), the Irish Socialist Feminist organisation, featured a black and white photograph of a woman’s lower torso with the words ‘stop policing my body,’ handwritten across the belly. ROSA created this image specifically for the referendum campaign. A stock photograph of ROSA’s poster taken by Artur Widak/NurPhoto is available for purchase on Getty Images as an editorial image. It is notable how many similar ‘creative’ photographs with constructed versions of a DIY or agit-prop protest aesthetic in relation to women’s rights are currently for sale on a range of image banks. What registers as a distinctive, commissioned non-stock photograph can be copied, appropriated and reproduced. A new ‘creative’ stock photograph may thus be made based on an ‘editorial’ one in the visual economy<sup>19</sup> of the very same image bank.

<sup>18</sup> Getty Images Visual Trends Director, Pam Grossman, discusses Genderblend as a visual trend for visual branding and campaigns which can benefit from a blurring of the gender lines. See: <https://www.gettyimages.ie/photos/genderblend?phrase=genderblend&sort=best> (Accessed 27 July 2021).

<sup>19</sup> ‘Visual economy’ is a term to describe the systems which animate the production, circulation, exchange and consumption of photographs used by Deborah Poole in her 1997 book *Vision Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

## CONCLUSION

How the Irish anti-abortion movement uses stock photography has not been examined before. The generic photographs from global image banks which the 'Vote No' campaign used with enhanced design and production values, can be understood as a representational shift, relative to previous anti-abortion campaigns in Ireland. This is part of a strategy to construct more 'reasonable' visual arguments by some anti-abortion organisations, such as 'Love Both', while others such as 'Save the 8th' continue to make posters where foetal iconography and foetal personhood dominate. Stock photographs with compassionate sentiments for women who have abortions and are in need of 'healing,' as presented on posters during the 2012-2013 campaign by Youth Defence, were no longer in evidence by 2018. Women who were visible on posters were pictured mostly as mothers in thrall to the baby beside or inside them, but equally were presented as a danger to the life of that baby.

Van House and Churchill (2008: 296) suggest that 'what is remembered individually and collectively depends in part on technologies of memory and the associated socio-technical practices which are changing radically'. A contemporary stock photograph such as 'Maternity' on the 'If Killing an Unborn Baby at Six Months Bothers You Then Vote No' poster was potentially more memorable than a poster without a photograph by *Together For Yes*. But the notoriety of a poster like this worked against the anti-abortion lobby. In complaints submitted by the general public to Dublin City Council about 'Vote No' posters, they were repeatedly described as 'graphic', 'offensive', 'harmful' and 'inaccurate'<sup>20</sup>. As one citizen complaining to Dublin City Council wrote:

Please note that I have no issue with the No Campaign. It's just the very visual nature of these images is too much, and is reminiscent of the imagery that was used in the 1980s for the same aim. If you are of a certain vintage, you might recall how scary that was?

The stereotype in stock functions best not when it is remarkable but when it is ordinary. Yet ordinariness in stock photography requires conspicuous staging, theatricality, and construction. I have discussed the use of stock photography in representing certain key concepts, stereotypes, tropes and messages in anti-abortion discourses as well as campaign posters against Repeal. Organisations such as 'Love Both' sought to harness the visual genericity of images available on global online image banks, along with contemporary poster design, to reassure and counter negative perceptions of pro-life visual messaging, but also to potentially displace the archival visual memory of earlier Irish anti-abortion campaigns. This strategy failed. Irish anti-abortion organisations used a range of stock photographs to undermine women's rights and reproductive choices, concepts supposedly to the core of what corporations such as Getty Images now present as their feminist credentials. It would be a mistake, however, to regard the visual repertoire of anti-abortion discourses as static: it has demonstrated that it is equally capable of adopting new strategies, responding to new image trends and weaponising the generic to resonate in different and specific cultural contexts.

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<sup>20</sup> See Ní Aodha (2018). More than 150 complaints about 'graphic' and 'false' referendum posters sent to Dublin City Council, *TheJournal.ie*. 2 June.

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**Citation:** Curran, A. (2022). Ordinary and Extraordinary Images: Making Visible the Operations of Stock Photography in Posters Against the Repeal of the 8th Amendment. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 6(1), 07. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/11751>

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