GRIDS+GUIDES/INTERVIEW

GHOST IN THE MACHINE
Meet Yuri Arcurs, the god of modern stock photography.
by Zachary Petit

It all seems too good to be true, like something you’d read in a modern Horatio Alger novel: In 2005, a Danish college student named Yuri Arcurs begins selling his photos online to stock agencies. He clears about $100,000 his first year. ("It was a small year, but a good start for a small business.") The next year, he says, he made about four times that—which continued to be the trend for the following three years.

Now, 10 years in, he identifies as the world’s top-selling stock photographer. He’s sponsored by luxury camera manufacturer Hasselblad. The spread of his photos and their impact on visual culture is vast and deep, and regardless of whether or not you’ve heard of him—or realized it—you’ve undoubtedly seen his images somewhere in the physical or digital world.

So. How the heck did all of that come to pass?

Back when you started, did you have trouble breaking into the industry? No, I was fortunate enough to have a couple of super hit-sellers within the first 500 images I produced, which took me from student photographer to a professional photographer’s salary within three months, in terms of royalties. It was relatively easy to get into the business at that time. I did, however, get rejected at the doorstep of Corbis Images when I approached them. They turned me down with the comment, “We don’t do walk-ins.”

How did you grow so fast, and so vast? Most people who reach financial success in their company spend a lot of money on themselves; they will start having fun with that and drive big cars, etc. I didn’t do that. For the first five years of my business, I put every cent back into the business. … Secondly, to grow a really big business you need to work really hard. In the beginning I worked an average of 70 hours per week for the first five years.

How many hours a day do you work now? Not a lot now; I’m probably down to about 10 hours a day, and three to four hours each day on the weekend. It’s dropped from the entrepreneur average down to normal high-level executive average. Thank God!

When did you start hiring team members to support you? Quite quickly, within the first six months. I spent my own salary on staff. Total headcount averages at about 100 people over three different companies in three different countries. Our team consists of producers, stylists, art directors, editors, RAW processing department, keywording department, uploading department, advanced retouching, basic retouching, training teams, sales teams, HR, core management, the board and various structures that need to be in place for a company that size. … We have a total of 20 photographers now who have been trained by myself.

How many images do you estimate you’ve shot and published on stock sites? Personally, I’ve shot a total of more than 85,000, coming from over 1 million RAW files.

What’s it like to be the anonymous face behind so many photos? Funny, on a normal day a normal person in any big city in the world will see between two and 30 of our images. I see the same amount and I am often surprised at how they use the images. It can be quite amusing.

How close of a beat do you keep on culture? We keep a very close eye; we need to be at least a year to a year and a half ahead of the current trend. We sometimes discover that we were wrong or slightly off. We then work on modifying our prediction as soon as possible. We stopped shooting and producing the hipster vibe a year and a half ago, as we believed it would end quite soon, which has turned out to be the case. Today’s hipster is more hippy. The current trend now is going towards a more “mad man” style.

How much of a reflection of culture is there in stock photography right now? I wish there was more of a reflection than there is today. The types of photos we shoot are extremely dependent on culture, but the general stock industry is not very good at this at all. We are currently focusing on shooting very cultural-specific shoots at the moment, from traditional Muslim, traditional Jewish, [to] diving into subcultures like the lesbian communities and very un-mainstream but culturally heavy subjects. There is a continuous high demand for this; such images are not going to be super hits, but they will have a long shelf life.

Do you craft images to appeal to specific markets? Absolutely, very much so. We target very specific pharmaceutical-type industries, insurance images, etc. Sometimes when we shoot a kids shoot we will include concepts that could be used in business too. We cross-reference the subject matter we shoot in interesting ways. … For example, [for] a business concept, we don’t necessarily shoot it as a business shot of people in suits; we use metaphors instead and rely on symbolism, and sometimes that works much better.
Some of Yuri Arcurs’ favorite images from his collection. He shoots with a Nikon D810e and a Hasselblad—the latter of which “is super slow, super clumsy, on a FireWire 800, but it shoots absolutely, ridiculously amazing images and the skin tones are incomparable. It is almost eight years old but it is still the best.”

Do you consciously try to make your images look stock? My most successful images, and images that often sell well and therefore come to be the public representation of my work, are not synonymous to what I like shooting, but what sells. There is a difference between knowing when you shoot a stock image that will be genuinely liked, not necessarily liked by yourself, but shooting it because it works, and then shooting and striving for the professionalism that you want to put into the images yourself. The biggest misunderstanding I would say from the general public’s perspective about my style is that I am synonymous with the look and feel of high-selling stock images. I don’t necessarily like those images myself, but they sell well to a broader audience that doesn’t have a too-refined pallet.

What makes a photo “stock”-like? How do you balance something to be generic enough to be stock yet still stand out for designers choosing images? That’s a good question. That is a very difficult line to walk. The methods that we use to balance out generic elements towards what people will not find too generic are done by inserting elements of real emotions, authenticity, even real people and not models, real families, not a model family put together. We use natural scenes, we use natural scenarios. If we have a family shoot where the kids are opening presents, we actually give them a present and see their reactions and take those shots. Our trick is to work more from a movie script than from a shoot list.

How do you respond to photographers who criticize stock artists by saying they devalue photography? I think the criticism you are referring to is one we heard so much four to five years ago when microstock was introduced into the industry and obviously came with very low prices, as opposed to the traditional stock industry that sold images for $100 and more. At that time, the newly introduced competition was a real threat to a lot of established photographers that were used to selling images at ultra-high prices, and it completely disrupted this industry, sometimes causing infuriating anger towards the “new guys.” The thing is that these kinds of industry disruptors will always occur, and criticizing them is placing yourself on the slowest end of the “reaction of change” continuum. The fastest reaction of change you can have is understanding when a disruption is about to happen before it happens, then betting on it and ultimately winning on it.

Do you shoot your own personal photography outside of stock? I don’t distinguish it like that. It’s all mixed together. I don’t really know when I shoot privately versus commercially anymore since they are often mixed together. Some commercial shoots are so fun I would do them privately, and some private shoots end up becoming work. I have a permanent spot in my forehead that won’t go away from looking through a viewfinder as much as I have done.