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An Explication of Visual Enactment in *Advanced Style*: Fashioning a Challenge to the Ideology of Old Age

Karen A. Foss & Sonja K. Foss

In this essay, we use the outfits of *Advanced Style* and their challenge to the ideology of old age to theorize the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment. We propose that visual enactment involves four key elements—visibility, individuality, syncreticity, and futurity. Visibility makes an issue salient, individuality breaks apart an established category, syncreticity integrates disparate elements to create a new ideology, and futurity involves the anticipation of a new kind of future. Application of this theory to other discursive and nondiscursive artifacts will reveal the extent to which these features characterize enactment generally.

Keywords: *Advanced Style*; Clothing; Enactment; Ideology; Old Age; Visual Rhetoric

Enactment, a rhetorical strategy in which “the subject of one’s discourse is rendered in the very form of that discourse” (Mendelson, 1998, p. 38), has been identified as a means to endow new propositions with presence to make transformation possible (DeLuca, 1999). In enactment, “the text instantiates the concept” so that an argument is embodied and displayed in a “concrete, situated linguistic performance” (Leff, 1989, pp. 124, 118),

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provoking “stimulating curious, transformative modes of experience and thinking” (Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009, p. 183). Its force lies in part in its

audacious, “in-your-face” strategy because it ... is usually presented as a *fait accompli*, often announcing a conclusion, a status shift, or a significant gain already having taken place, or else the rhetor would not be able to prove the truth of her or his own claims. (Daughton, 1995, p. 24)

Two primary types of enactment have been identified in the communication literature. The most common form occurs when a rhetor “incarnates the argument, is the proof of the truth of what is said” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 9). The rhetor’s own actions embody the idea being expressed so that the rhetor “is an *exemplar* of the argument” (Campbell, 1988, p. 260), literally performing the argument being made. Frances Wright, the first woman to speak in public in the United States, is an example of this kind of enactment: “By her own *action* of appearing repeatedly on the lecture platform, Wright demonstrated her conviction that women deserved equal rights with men, for the lecture platform was a male domain” (Kendall & Fisher, 1974, p. 60). The members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in their sit-ins at lunch counters in the South in the early 1960s, provide another example of enactment. These students “attempted to live ‘as if segregation did not exist’” (Hogan, 2007, p. 3) by claiming “the respect and dignity that segregation systematically denied them” (Hogan, 2007, p. 23). Similarly, when members of the environmental group Earth First! lived for years on a platform 100 feet up in a redwood tree or buried themselves neck deep in a logging road, they were literally performing and enacting “humanity’s connection to nature” (DeLuca, 1999, p. 13).

Although use of the body to argue is the primary way enactment occurs, it also can be depicted when a rhetor shows others engaged in the process of enactment. An example is Cicero’s *De Oratore*, in which the characters of Crassus and Antonius enact the type of argumentation Cicero advocates “by the exchange of statement and counter-statement, by refutation and clarification, by rebuttal and restatement” (Mendelson, 1998, p. 30; see also Leff, 1989). In a film, enactment of an argument may occur through rhetorical “choices regarding plot structure, characterization, iconography, sound, and editing” (Campbell, 1988, p. 266). *The Year of Living Dangerously*, for example, enacts the condition of dialectical balance by presenting a series of opposing values or choices, each of which is “equally appealing and unappealing” (Campbell, 1988, p. 262).

Scholars identify a number of dimensions of enactment. Materiality is a key component because it is inherent in the display or demonstration that enactment involves—material elements serve as the proof for the argument being made. Those who engage the replica of Noah’s ark at Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky, for example, walk on uneven floors covered in scratch marks to suggest animals had clawed at the deck, hear thunder cracking, and feel the rumble of waves beneath their feet (Bloomfield, 2017). Zagacki and Gallagher’s (2009) analysis of the Museum Park at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, North Carolina, points to the experience that visitors have of “existing both inside and outside [nature] at the same time” (p. 175). They explain: “It is the materiality ... of the Museum Park that evokes

this sense, so that visitors can actually experience (in the heart of an urban area) themselves and nature co-existing” (Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009, p. 176).

Closely connected to the material dimension of enactment is its performative nature. Daughton (1995) suggests that enactment is a unique rhetorical form because it rests on “performative features” (p. 23), a notion echoed by van Doorn (2011), who suggests that enactment is marked by “performative incorporations of situated embodied experience” (p. 542). Similarly, as Mendelson (1998) notes about *De Oratore*, Cicero “chooses to *perform* the subject, and in so doing to give substance or body to theory and pedagogy” (p. 29). Kauffman’s (1979) analysis of the *Gorgias* focuses on the performative nature of enactment, suggesting that “the dramatic action of the dialogue can modify the interpretation of the discursive argument” (p. 127). Blair and Michel (2000) suggest that the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, can be read “as a set of rhetorical performances that reproduce the tactical dimensions of Civil Rights Movement protests of the 1950s and 1960s” (p. 31). Likewise, Carr’s (2010) study of expertise sees it as a performance in which individuals enact the part; “expertise is something people do rather than something people have or hold” (p. 18).

Another quality of enactment is its greater reliance on emotional rather than rational appeals. DeLuca (1999), for example, suggests that enactment is “a mode of argument that is less focused on an abstract, universalized reason and more attune[d] to the feelings that accompany lived experiences” (pp. 15–16). Merriam (1975) suggests that Gandhi’s hunger strikes enacted a new vision for India, creating “an emotional impact difficult to achieve through ordinary speech and negotiation” (p. 293). Bloomfield (2017) notes the affective weight of Ark Encounter, which constitutes an argument based not on “logic, evidence, or science but on appeals to ... fear and threats of damnation” (p. 274). In Anderson and Warren’s (2011) analysis of how Ryanair CEO Michael O’Leary enacts an entrepreneurial role, they argue that “his jesting, his clowning, his undeferential acting out of the rough-tongued protagonist” are designed to “capture emotional attraction” (p. 604).

The material, performative, and emotional dimensions of enactment constitute a useful starting point for understanding the rhetorical strategy. But these features, even in combination, are not specific or exclusive to enactment—they can describe many rhetorical forms. In this essay, we argue that four dimensions—visibility, individuality, syncreticity, and futurity—elaborate on and refine the material, performative, and emotional characteristics identified in the earlier literature on enactment and are particularly applicable to visual enactment. We use as a case study the visual images of *Advanced Style*, a project in which Ari Seth Cohen photographs unconventional, eccentric, and stunning outfits worn by old¹ women and men on the streets of major cities around the world. We argue that *Advanced Style* makes use of the presentation, projection, and performance of the clothed body to intervene into and challenge stereotypical beliefs about the old. By offering a story of old people as vibrant, alive, whole, and capable human beings, the outfits of *Advanced Style* not only illustrate resistance to ageist constructions but create an alternative image of what being old looks like. In the development and presentation of our theory of visual

enactment, we respond implicitly to a question posed by Olson, Finnegan, and Hope (2008): “How do we understand and theorize the rhetoric of dissent and resistance when it is collectively enacted *by* and *on* individual bodies” (p. 201)?

Advanced Style

“If you’re looking for a punk rock anarchy, look at *Advanced Style*” (Cohen & Plioplyte, 2014). With this observation, Ari Seth Cohen captures the unusual outfits worn by those he photographs for *Advanced Style*. Cohen’s interest in the fashions of old women and men began when, as a child in San Diego, he was inspired by his grandmothers’ sense of style and fascinated by the elegance of the vintage clothing in their closets. Cohen (2012) filled sketchbooks with drawings of “well-dressed grande dames”—drawings that came to life for him when he moved to New York City in 2008: “I found ladies and gentlemen who still wear hats and gloves and who express a sense of style all their own” (p. 5). He began to photograph stylish women and men past the age of 60 (many in their 80s and 90s) on the streets of New York City and created a blog, *Advanced Style*, to display his photographs. Cohen has three goals for his project: to photograph an often-overlooked segment of society; to show that individuals “can be stylish, creative and vital at any age” (Cohen, n.d.); and to “pay homage” to his grandmothers’ “style and spirit” (Cohen, 2012, p. 5). “By refusing to accept the notion that growing older is something to be feared,” Cohen (2016) asserts, “we can begin to fully embrace our elderhood with as much joy, creative growth, and imagination as our childhood” (p. 7).

Cohen followed the creation of his blog with two books—*Advanced Style* in 2012 and *Advanced Style: Older and Wiser* in 2016. In 2013, he published a coloring book that featured *Advanced Style* women and men (Cohen & Schraer, 2013), and a year later, he produced a documentary film, *Advanced Style* (Cohen & Plioplyte, 2014). Joined by Debra,² whom he frequently photographs as part of *Advanced Style*, he presented a TED talk in 2014 (Cohen & Rapoport, 2014) and created a YouTube video, *Advanced Style: Men*, in 2015 (Cohen & Plioplyte, 2015). Some of the individuals photographed for the *Advanced Style* project have become models in advertising campaigns, including the “Forever” campaign for Karen Walker eyewear (Cohen, 2013a, February 6); the “Magic Hands” campaign for Karen Walker Jewellery (Nurick, 2016); and a digital campaign for Coach bags (Cohen, 2013b, March 25). Cohen also has collaborated with Audicus to design removable adhesives for hearing aids in bright patterns, including pink sparkles, leopard prints, and polka dots (Reed, 2015). Cohen is often called an *ambassador* for old people because of his ongoing efforts to raise awareness about the detrimental stereotypes of old age (Reed, 2015; see also Friedman, 2015).

The *Advanced Style* project has received limited scholarly attention (Foss, Foss, & Zhang, 2015; Gullette, 2017; Jermyn, 2016; Jermyn & Holmes, 2015; Mackinney-Valentin, 2013; Twigg, 2013). Jermyn (2016) is one of the few scholars who is critical of *Advanced Style*, calling it a “makeover” because the women Cohen photographs

are mostly white, able bodied, and slim and do not look like many old women (p. 575). Furthermore, she argues, the only substantive diversity evident in the project is the contrast between the colorful and distinctive attire of *Advanced Style* and the age-appropriate, darker, looser, and self-effacing dress associated with old women, who “are expected to relinquish interest and pleasure in the sartorial world and recede from visibility” (Jermyn, 2016, p. 576; see also Clarke, Griffin, & Maliha, 2009; Goldsberry, Shim, & Reich, 1996). The project also encourages female rivalry, Jermyn (2016) asserts, in that only some of the individuals Cohen photographs are chosen to be featured in modeling campaigns, on television shows, and in TED talks.

Mackinney-Valentin’s (2013) assessment is both more positive and more representative of the scholarship about *Advanced Style*. She argues that the women and men of *Advanced Style* are “fashion forward in their own right” and not only challenge stereotypes about old age but inspire younger women to view old age more positively (p. 139). We acknowledge the limitations of *Advanced Style*, but we also appreciate the opportunity to explore how the outfits function rhetorically to intervene in, resist, and challenge the ideology of old age.

Clothing as Resistance

That clothing makes a statement is a cliché (Davis, 1992). Mediating between the body and the social world, clothes communicate identity categories such as gender, social roles, economic status, political affiliation, and religious beliefs. As indicators of personal expression, adornment also can suggest mood, function as sexual symbol, construct narratives of social history, and advocate for causes (Griffin, 2002; Penney, 2012; Roach & Eicher, 1979; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). “Getting dressed” is the complex outcome of the individual wearer in negotiation with the social forces of culture pressing upon the body (Entwistle, 2000, p. 11). Consequently, “there can be no natural form of dress, any more than there can be a natural body” (Twigg, 2018, p. 335).

Because the practice of dressing functions as a “visual rhetorical text” (Penney, 2012, p. 2319), the rhetorical code or syntax of dress—“fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion” (Davis, 1992, p. 5)—can “reveal and/or produce appropriate arguments” capable of generating new interpretations and meanings and thus effect social change (White-Farnham, 2013, p. 477; see also Entwistle, 2000; Foucault, 1978; Trethewey, 2001). In this essay, we take seriously the ways in which clothes function as “‘carriers’ of a wide range of ideological meanings or ‘social agendas’” (Crane, 2000, p. 24) and thus can challenge conventional ideologies and propose alternatives to them.

Clothing may function as resistance in three primary ways—to recruit and lend legitimacy to a cause through the wearing of marked items of clothing, to obscure radical objectives and acts through conventional dress, and to disrupt perceptions by deliberately violating conventions of dress. In the first category of studies, researchers explore the ways dress functions rhetorically to recruit new members to and

provide visibility and legitimacy for a cause. When the suffragists wore purple, green, and white clothing, for example, their visible affiliation with the movement not only inspired other women to join the cause, but the sheer number of participants they saw wearing the colors gave them the courage to do so (Parkins, 2002). Contemporary examples of using clothing to recruit and legitimize include wearing red baseball caps reading *Make America Great Again* to signal support for Donald Trump or wearing certain colors to show gang affiliation. When surrounded by others whose clothing references alignment with a group or cause, individuals are more easily able to express those beliefs (Penney, 2012). Dress, then, can function to foster inclusion—a sense of belonging to a group or cause—and facilitate the act of joining by the uncommitted.

A second way in which clothing functions to resist is when the dressed body accommodates to social norms in order to pursue radical objectives (Parkins, 2002; Torrens, 1997). Early women speakers sometimes adopted the simple garb of Quakers—dress associated with moral, virtuous women—to be able to pursue the radical act of speaking in public. Dressing in a way that emphasized simplicity and modesty helped “undercut the sense of violation engendered by a woman’s public speaking” (Mattingly, 2002, p. 27). Likewise, well-dressed suffragists could throw stones and break windows and then slip back unnoticed into the crowd because they adhered to traditional expectations for respectable dress (Parkins, 2002). Johnson’s (2001) analysis of women’s corsets shows their accommodation potential; a woman wearing a corset signaled her compliance with the social ideal of womanhood. Absent a corset, a woman was considered “loose”; with it, she preserved her social standing and could more easily “do battle with the world” (Johnson, 2001, p. 218). In a similar fashion, members of the Red Hat Society create and wear red hats—a conventional feminine accessory—to afford them the chance to make “something different of their life experiences after age fifty than they expected.” They literally “change the conditions of the social milieu they believe would have otherwise left them, as aging women, behind” (White-Farnham, 2013, p. 485). Yet another way in which fashion functions to covertly accomplish radical goals is suggested by Foss (1996), who articulates how the act of sewing a garment—a traditionally feminine act—can transform a space into a feminist one in which the sewist is unencumbered by patriarchal demands.

A third type of study of clothing as resistance deals with dress that is deliberately used to violate and disrupt conventional expectations or to advocate for a new worldview. Women reformers who adopted the bloomer costume and engaged in activities that could not be done in dresses, for example, challenged the notion that women were incapable of both physical and political engagement (Barnard, 2002). Women who dressed as men in the 19th century did so to call attention to themselves and their causes. Surgeon Mary Walker, for example, wore only men’s clothing after receiving her medical degree. During the Civil War, she wore a blue uniform adorned with a surgeon’s green sash when she cared for wounded troops, an outfit that called attention to the fact that she was violating femininity both through her dress and her assumption of the role of surgeon rather than nurse (Mattingly,

2002). By suggesting that the outfits of *Advanced Style* constitute a set of meaning-making practices that challenge and enact an alternative to the ideology of old age, we are situating our study within this tradition of clothing employed as a disruptive rhetorical strategy.

The Ideology of Old Age

Becoming old is both a biological process and a social construction (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Featherstone & Hepworth, 2009; Wykle, Whitehouse, & Morris, 2005). As a social construction, the ideology of old age is one of “the most acceptable and unnoticed” of prejudices (Gullette, 2017, p. xiii) because it persists despite the fact that individuals are living longer and with more vitality than ever before. This prejudice, termed *ageism*, is the “process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (Angus & Reeve, 2006, p. 139). Such stereotypes consist of generalizations that stigmatize and dismiss the old by defining them via narratives of illness, disability, disengagement, decline, and dependency; as a result, the old are often grouped with children and those with disabilities (and talked to similarly) (Dampier, 2018; Hockey & James, 1995). Although the negative narratives told about the old are largely “inaccurate, simplistic, rigid, and erroneous” (Angus & Reeve, 2006, p. 139; see also Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, 2006; Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Hatch, 2005; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Trethewey, 2001), they are embedded in social structures, policies, organizations, and practices that perpetuate rather than dismantle ageist ideologies (Angus & Reeve, 2006; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Moody, 2001; Pike, 2011). Because of the stereotypes that exist about old age, to age is to cease to be a person and is “something to be avoided” at all costs (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, p. 16; see also Pike, 2011). In this essay, we are interested in the ways in which the fashions of *Advanced Style* are layered onto old bodies to challenge constructions of old age through the strategy of visual enactment.

***Advanced Style* as Visual Enactment**

The outfits photographed for *Advanced Style* enact a challenge to the conventional and largely negative ideology of old age by asserting that their wearers do not conform to that ideology. This challenge and the alternative ideology offered are manifest rhetorically in four key elements—visibility, individuality, syncreticity, and futurity—that constitute, in constellation, the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment. To explicate the features of visual enactment, we rely primarily on the material features of *Advanced Style* outfits as they intervene between the bodies of the wearers and the ideology of old age, but we also use text from Cohen’s books, blog, and films to supplement and confirm these elements.

For the purpose of our analysis, we dissect the outfits—describing their individual dimensions—to support our claims about the features of visual enactment while acknowledging that, in fact, the outfits present their constituents simultaneously. In other words, we recognize that the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in a single act of vision, so the overall impact of the outfits is what challenges the ideology of old age (Langer, 1979). We break the outfits into their component parts simply to facilitate analysis. We turn now to our theorizing of the elements of visual enactment, beginning with the feature of visibility.

Visibility

Visibility is the state of being seen, of “bringing before the eyes” (Hawhee, 2004, p. 183). Visibility animates, infuses, and endows a person or an object with presence; it says, “here I am; look at me.” Something that is visible is obvious, prominent, and attracts attention, and the fashions of *Advanced Style* provide a visual display that carries with it the “potential for public attention” (Blair, 1999, p. 36). Visibility politics assumes that the act of being seen and heard is intrinsically liberating, beneficial, and even necessary for individuals and groups “to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources” (Brouwer, 2008, p. 208). Visibility thus is a crucial starting point for visual enactment because unless an ideology is recognized as a problem or made salient, it cannot be challenged, reconsidered, or changed. Visibility is manifest in the outfits photographed for *Advanced Style* in three ways—the outfits are designed for display in public settings, they are characterized by bold exuberance, and they are augmented by nonverbal displays that show wearers in command of their worlds.

That the outfits photographed for *Advanced Style* are located in and photographed in public, in the streets, is a major dimension of their visibility. The wearers of the outfits assert their stigmatized identities—identities clearly marked as *old*—into public venues, making themselves available for public scrutiny (Phelan, 1993). Lynn uses a theatrical metaphor to describe the public aspect of *Advanced Style*: “We must dress every day for the theatre of our lives” (Cohen, 2012, p. 157). Tziporah provides an example of public display in that she rides her bicycle around New York City simply to show off her fashions. She deliberately does not wear a helmet because all of her outfits include a hat, and a helmet would destroy the overall effect (Cohen & Plioplyte, 2014). One of the outfits she displays on her bike consists of ankle-length black pants with fabric folds that drape over each leg. An orange velvet jacket covers a blue top that hangs a few inches below the jacket’s hem; her beanie matches the blue of her top (Cohen, 2012, p. 184, [Image 1](#)). The presentation of outfits for public inspection inserts those outfits and their wearers into the communicative space of spectators, where they cannot help but be noticed, thought about, and talked about. Spectators pay attention first to the clothing, then to the identity and presence of the wearers, and ultimately to taken-for-granted assumptions about old people.



Image 1 Tziporah.

Visibility is further achieved in *Advanced Style* outfits through their lively exuberance. The outfits created and worn by those whom Cohen photographs attract attention because they are dramatic, striking, colorful, and bold; consequently, neither the outfits nor the individuals wearing them can be ignored. Bright colors are one way in which *Advanced Style* outfits stand out. Carol, for example, is shown in one photograph wearing a long dress in a bright pink, blue, and yellow floral print. A blue jacket is layered over the dress, accessorized with aqua gloves, a bright pink hat, and necklaces made from pink and yellow beads (Cohen, 2012, p. 24). Exuberance is achieved in other outfits through the use of bold patterns. In a photograph from Cohen's (2012) first volume, a woman wears a floor-length coat in a print of large pink, black, white, and gold squares (p. 202). Outsized elements that enact conspicuous visibility also suggest exuberance. One woman is shown wearing a yellow Carmen Miranda hat piled several feet high with artificial fruit (Cohen, 2016, p. 198). In another photograph, she sports an enormous hat, twice the size of her head, in the shape of a purple rose (Cohen, 2016, p. 199). The exuberance of Ilona's outfits also results from an oversized feature—very long bright red false eyelashes made from her own hennaed hair (Cohen, 2012, p. 70). The outfits photographed for *Advanced Style* afford a startling vision with their eye-

catching and bold styles, claiming for the wearers a central rather than a peripheral role in society. The wearers of these outfits refuse to fade into the background, one of the expectations that is central to the ideology of old age (Jermyn, 2016; White-Farnham, 2013).

The women and men of *Advanced Style* also engage in nonverbal displays that enhance the visibility of their outfits. A confident and even theatrical attitude is evident in how they pose in Cohen's photographs. They often are photographed with arms akimbo or arms flung open wide—nonverbal displays that take up space and make the individuals and their fashions difficult to miss and dismiss. Judith, for example, in a black-and-white-striped jacket of many layers and folds of fabric, is photographed with one hand on her hip and the other touching the tip of her Napoleonic *bicorné* hat; she stares directly and confidently into the distance (Cohen, 2016, p. 110, [Image 2](#)). Staring off camera is, in fact, a common gaze for those photographed for *Advanced Style* and also is a frequent pose for women in contemporary advertising (Jhally, 2009). In contrast to such advertising, however, in which the woman featured appears to be oblivious to the world around her, those photographed for *Advanced Style* communicate a commanding presence, a sense of being in control of the space beneath their gaze. Their use of the stare is reminiscent of hooks's (1992) description of this kind of looking as a powerful, defiant, and transformative act: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' ... the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). Those involved in *Advanced Style* assert their right to look, to stare, to take up space, and to belong in the world.



Image 2 Judith.

We acknowledge that the power of *Advanced Style* outfits to attract and hold the gaze of the viewer may not always be beneficial. Their blatant visibility may reduce them and their wearers to spectacle so that they are seen only in the stereotyped ways they wish to eschew (Bourdieu, 1991; Brouwer, 2008; Debord, 1995). They might be seen, for example, as old people who dress in eccentric and wacky outfits because they have lost their faculties and their good judgment. Alternatively, their mismatched fabrics and bright colors could be interpreted as similar to the outfits toddlers dream up when allowed to dress themselves, an infantilizing image that feeds into the notion of old age as “a second childhood” (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995, p. 7; see also Hockey & James, 1995). The notion of the jester—and thus a comic interpretation—might also come to mind when viewing the outfits of *Advanced Style* because of their exuberant colors and patterns, outlandish hats, and array of baubles and other accessories associated with the jester’s costume (Foss et al., 2015). Although viewers may perceive the outfits in these negative ways, we suggest that a reductive, stereotyped, and/or comic reading is not likely to be the typical response to the outfits because each of the negative readings carries a concomitant positive dimension: Wacky outfits may be evidence of individuals choosing to have fun, the dress of toddlers suggests initial steps toward independence, and an important function for the jester was to advise and to speak the truth in nonthreatening and palatable ways (Otto, 2001). Viewers still may make negative or unflattering readings of the outfits, but many contextual factors are likely to tip those readings at least partially into positive territory. In addition, the other features of visual enactment—individuality, syncreticity, and futurity—provide additional support for a positive response.

We suggest, then, that the dominant impression offered by those photographed for *Advanced Style* is that they are not afraid of being seen; indeed, they are determined to be seen. Consequently, the outfits themselves and the ways in which their wearers perform them afford a spirited assault on the invisibility expected of those of advanced age. Their blatant visibility undermines “the dominant culture’s simultaneous devaluing of the aging women’s body while rendering it invisible” (Holstein, 2006, p. 330). Doonan (2016) captures the visibility of the outfits in his forward to Cohen’s second book: “When an *Advanced Style* visionary walks into your field of vision you will always feel as if you just spotted a rare butterfly or found a 20-dollar bill in the street” (p. 5). The fashions create spaces of attention—a first step in challenging the ideology of old age—by depicting old people as prominent, central, and relevant.

Individuality

Individuality is the quality of uniqueness that distinguishes one person or object in a category from another; it is a persistent and peculiar set of features or characteristics that imbue distinctiveness. Individuality is the aspect of visual enactment that says, “I am not what you thought I was; look again.” That *Advanced Style* outfits are

nondiscursive highlights their uniqueness because they cannot be put into a general class, as Langer (1979) explains:

In the non-discursive mode that speaks directly to sense ... there is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct *presentation* of an individual object ... In itself it represents just one object—real or imaginary, but still a unique object. (p. 96)

Individuality is a requisite dimension of visual enactment because it removes items and individuals from categories in which they typically are placed by a conventional ideology. Putting together a distinctive look is not only “an opportunity to express one’s individuality” (Twigg, 2010, p. 484) but is also a creative act that deliberately removes the outfits and their wearers from classification. In the case of *Advanced Style*, those photographed remove themselves from two categories—fashion and old people.

The *Advanced Style* outfits communicate uniqueness in their explicit dismissal of the dictates of fashion. Their wearers reject the fashion industry as a category of aspiration and evaluation not because they do not wish to keep up with fashion trends—a common stereotype of old women and one reinforced by the fashion industry (Twigg, 2018)—but because they do not want to look like everyone else. A woman photographed for Cohen’s (2012) first book confirms this sentiment: “My philosophy is fashion says ‘me too,’ while style says ‘only me’” (p. 154). Joyce’s advice to “*find a distinctive style and make it your own*” (Cohen, 2016, p. 67) echoes this insistence on individuality. Joyce’s style—long black dresses, pearls, and her hair wrapped in a braid around her head—is elegant and classic but always individualized. In one photograph, Joyce layers a bright yellow print jacket trimmed with jumbo rickrack on top of her signature black dress and accessorizes her look with long black and gold earrings (Cohen, 2012, p. 97). Debra summarizes the individuality desired and demonstrated by *Advanced Style*: “As the saying goes, ‘Be yourself; everyone else is taken’” (Cohen, 2016, p. 89).

Advanced Style outfits not only remove their wearers from the category of fashion but from the category of old people. *Advanced Style* outfits disrupt stereotypes of age-related dress because they do not conform to the drab and dowdy clothing old people are expected to wear. Whether the vehicle is the bright colors—yellow, turquoise, and orange—that Lynn wears (Cohen, 2012, pp. 153, 156, 157); the whimsical hats worn by the duo Cohen calls the *idiosyncratic fashionistas* (Cohen, 2012, pp. 222–227); or the flamboyant jackets and capes worn by Morton and Virginia (Cohen, 2016, pp. 76–79), the message communicated is one of vibrancy rather than conformity to stereotypes about the old.

At the same time that the outfits reject categorization as stereotypically old, the substantial variation in style among *Advanced Style* participants also asserts that old people are not the same and should not be grouped together in any kind of category (Mumel & Prodnik, 2005). The fashions thus suggest that neither *Advanced Style* outfits nor the individuals who wear them can be placed into the category of old age

because the category itself does not exist. Sue's style, for example, captured in her list of style tips, is quite at odds with Joyce's elegant style described earlier:

- Less is less, more is not quite enough.
- As far as exuberant color is concerned, throw away the color wheel; everything goes with everything!
- It is quite okay to wear an entire ethnology department around your neck.
- Good taste is overrated.
- And finally ... *Don't wear beige, it might kill you!* (Cohen, 2016, p. 250)

Sue is photographed following her own advice. She is dressed in a long colorful ethnic jacket, with each half a different fabric. She carries two totes—one features an image of Frida Kahlo and the other an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She does indeed seem to have an ethnology department for a necklace: Layers of fabric rope are adorned with what appears to be an angelic mermaid with wings and a trumpet. The entire outfit is finished off with a pair of bright red eyeglasses (Cohen, 2016, p. 248). The contrast between Joyce's and Sue's outfits is typical of the distinctiveness that characterizes *Advanced Style*.

Advanced Style participants thus refuse to be placed in any system of classification, preferring to challenge and reconstruct the ideology of the old on their own terms. They refuse to be categorized in terms of the fashion industry and in terms of how the old are supposed to be; they also assert that the differences among them make any kind of categorization moot. Removing items and individuals from their presumed and expected categories is crucial to constructing an alternative ideology.

Syncreticity

A third dimension of visual enactment that emerged from our analysis of *Advanced Style* outfits is syncreticity, a merging, blending, or fusion of different ideas, beliefs, and practices to create a coherent whole (Bell, 1996; Postrel, 2003). At the heart of syncreticity is *bricolage*, “the composition or arrangement on the body of a collection of apparently incongruous objects, which taken as a whole create for the subject who wears them an organized and meaningful system” (Calefato, 2004, p. 6; see also Derrida, 2017; Hebdige, 1979; Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Debra describes the bringing together of various elements as “the ABCs”—assembling, building, constructing (Cohen & Plioplyte, 2014). To create their eclectic creations, those in *Advanced Style* combine, blend, and integrate disparate styles, colors, textures, and layers in outfits accessorized by hats, gloves, rings, bracelets, earrings, eyeglasses, tights, footwear, and purses or briefcases. For example, one woman wears a sleeveless white knit top over a garment with net sleeves; the combination leaves her shoulders bare. Her broad-brimmed black hat is adorned with a chunky gold pin, and several large bracelets decorate both arms. She carries an open fuchsia fan that matches her geometric fuchsia handbag. Her ankle-length skirt is gathered at the hem, and a row of oversized white puffballs march in a row down its front. She completes

the outfit with bright red lipstick and eyeglasses with tortoise-shell frames (Cohen, 2016, p. 103). The result is an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of intermingled, heterogenous elements that make a lively statement about the right of old people to be in the world. The construction of complex outfits from a variety of items is common across *Advanced Style* fashions, but two processes in particular characterize their syncreticity—incorporating items from the past and making use of items not usually considered elements of clothing.

Advanced Style participants incorporate and appropriate items from the past as a way to enrich the present. One source of items from the past is thrift stores. Judith explains the discoveries and rewards of second-hand shopping:

For many years I enjoyed composing outfits that I discovered at estate sales, consignment shops, thrift stores, and yard sales. I loved the thrill of the hunt, as I ran my fingers over the fabrics in a pile or on a rack until I found an item of beauty and pulled it out, admiring the treasure and reward that my tactile and visual senses provided. (Cohen, 2016, p. 111)

Mary also creates outfits using items from the past. She describes her wardrobe as consisting of clothing from “the 1920s—skirts, sweaters, and trousers—and the 1930s—shirt dresses, fitted sheath dresses, fitted jackets, and swing or straight skirts” (Cohen, 2016, p. 241). In one photograph, she wears a fitted blue sweater and matching pants topped with a vest of purple and blue flowers and stripes. Wearing second-hand clothing “never means mechanically repeating the past or aping history; it means, rather, experiencing new feelings and new stories” in the clothing (Calefato, 2004, p. 127). In deliberately repurposing clothing to create a new look, *Advanced Style* participants suggest that just as a piece of clothing is not worn out, old, and out of date, neither are they.

In some *Advanced Style* outfits, elements from the past are drawn from familial or cultural elements that are important to their wearers’ heritage. For inspiration for her outfits, Lana draws on childhood memories of her father in immaculate suits, waitresses in starched white uniforms, and “church ladies for whom no single color from hat to shoes would ever seem so gauche as not to be pleasing in the weekly sight of each other and, of course, the Almighty” (Cohen, 2016, p. 191). Lana is photographed in outfits that highlight the elegance, color, and ever-present hats historically associated with the African-American community. In one photograph, she wears a black suit over which she has layered a black-and-white-striped shawl. Her hat, made of the same black and white stripes, is at least half a foot high, to which she has added a nosegay of white flowers with black centers (Cohen, 2016, p. 190). Bringing together elements of the past to create innovative looks serves as metaphor for the capacity of *Advanced Style* participants to bring their wisdom, knowledge, and experience from the past into the present and future. They resist the notion that old people have nothing to offer and instead insist that their sagacity, acumen, and resourcefulness, honed over a lifetime, be acknowledged.

A second dimension of the syncreticity evident in *Advanced Style* is the incorporation and repurposing of items not usually considered elements of dress. In one

photograph, for example, Debra uses several rolled linen table napkins that stick out at odd angles as the basis for a hat (Cohen, 2012, p. 57); in another, she wears a giant paperclip as an earring (Cohen, 2016, p. 88). Needless to say, napkins and paperclips are not typically considered appropriate accessories for clothing. For another photograph, Debra combines various items of clothing and found objects, and her signature bracelets are made from toilet-paper rolls (Cohen, 2016, p. 88, [Image 3](#)). Cohen (2012) describes her appropriation of such objects in this way: “She wraps fabric in unexpected ways, turns her skirts backwards or upside down and stacks on kitchen utensils, resulting in the most wonderful creations” (p. 52). Ilona similarly repurposes items to construct one of her outfits. Her black and white polka-dot skirt is made from an old bathrobe, and she has turned a sun visor upside down for a necklace (Cohen, 2017, [October 19](#), October 19, [Image 4](#)).

Syncraticity challenges the ideology of old age because the outfits signal that their wearers continue to place importance on appearance and the ability to self-present effectively (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009). This presentation contrasts with ageist assumptions that old people can no longer focus, are no longer productive or creative, and are unable to keep up with life’s demands (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). In repurposing items from the past and drawing on elements not usually considered part of dress, *Advanced Style* participants engage in the task of constructing a different kind of vision for themselves,

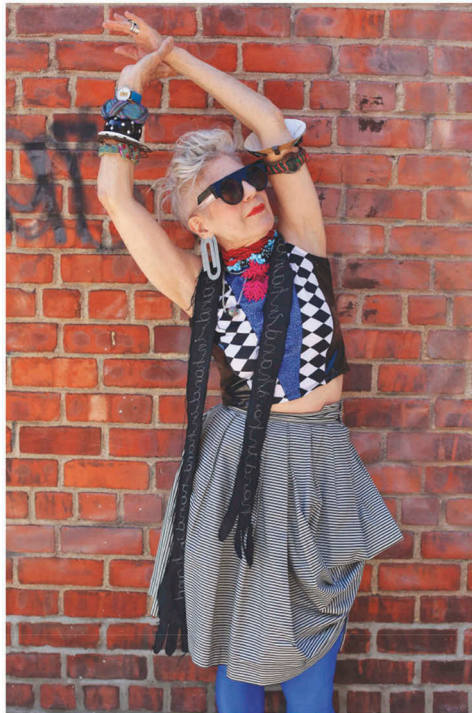


Image 3 Debra.



Image 4 Ilona.

not only in their clothing but also in the larger world. The outfits of *Advanced Style* literally offer new ways of constructing, experiencing, and expressing old age.

Futurity

A fourth element of enactment—futurity—is focused on and realizes the vision of the future created through the assemblage of syncreticity. Futurity references future events or prospects; it signals a moment “redolent with possibility, productivity, and agency” (Pollock, 1998, p. 24). The assemblage of syncreticity juxtaposes, combines, and melds things together in new ways; the dimension of futurity gives life to those constructions. In the case of *Advanced Style*, futurity directly contradicts the expectation that, for old people, the best of life is behind them. Instead, the concept of futurity suggests that a future for old people is not just possible but is vibrant and filled with potential. What is important for the future, according to Sue, is “to be open to epiphanies, thunderbolts, and unexpected visits from the muse” (Cohen, 2016, p. 249). The outfits of *Advanced Style* communicate futurity both in terms of the types of activities they anticipate and the occasions for which their wearers dress.

The ways in which the *Advanced Style* outfits connote anticipated involvement in meaningful activities and events is evidence of futurity. They suggest that their wearers

are engaged in important activities in part because the fashions are carefully constructed, composed, and complex and point to particular activities in which the wearer will be involved. Ruth, for example, is dressed in an elegant 1940s' vintage gray suit and net gloves set off by bright red lipstick. She holds a barbell in each hand, part of "her weekly regimen of Pilates, weight lifting, and stretching" (Cohen, 2012, pp. 136–137). Her photograph references activities that contribute to and signal a healthy future. Tao's outfits fully embody futurity as well in how they anticipate a future that will be filled with dance. She started ballroom dancing at the age of 87 and has won more than 700 first place awards (Cohen, 2016, p. 11). Cohen (2016) photographed her in a turquoise print skirt; a fabric belt of gold, red, and purple geometrics; and bright pink high heels with peek-a-boo toes. Her stance suggests she is ready to take the dance floor, poised to twirl into an action-filled future (p. 10, [Image 5](#)). In a second photograph, she is dressed in a bright purple jacket and purple and turquoise leggings, and her feet give the impression that she is ready to leap into a dance move; the position of her arms and hands suggests it will be flamenco (Cohen, 2016, p. 12). Many of those photographed for *Advanced Style* indeed have created futures full of important things to do. Valerie runs a charitable foundation—the Andre Sobel River of Life Foundation—to provide financial assistance to the single parents of terminally ill children (Cohen, 2016, p. 99). The complexity of her outfits—a green shimmery coat with sleeves trimmed in fur, a gold belt and coordinating stone necklace, an off-white turban, and red lipstick—suggests she



Image 5 Tao.

has the capacity to manage myriad details (Cohen, 2016, p. 101). Similarly, Lyn started a fashion blog in her 60s (Cohen, 2016, p. 31), and her asymmetrical skirts and contrasting jackets, platform shoes, and oversized hoop earrings attest to a sense of style appropriate for a fashion writer (Cohen, 2016, pp. 30, 32).

The future anticipated by *Advanced Style* outfits is one that is special and worthwhile, suggested by the fact that the individuals photographed wear their fashions for even the most mundane activities and at what typically would be considered inappropriate times. In fact, many dress up whenever they leave the house—even if just to go grocery shopping or run errands. Cohen's (2012) description of Mary is typical of this dimension of futurity: "Under no condition will she leave the house without the perfect shoes and, more often than not, properly coordinated socks" (p. 166). Mary is photographed in a leopard-print dress, accessorized with dark stockings and brown pumps (Cohen, 2012, p. 167). Ruth also "never leaves the house without being perfectly dressed" because she might meet someone "on the way to the mailbox" (Cohen, 2012, p. 136). She is shown in a bright red dress that contrasts with her black accessories—shawl, hat, gloves, stockings, and shoes. A gold pin adds a dramatic touch to the dress (Cohen, 2012, p. 139). Although dressing up for special occasions is customary, participants in *Advanced Style* turn that custom around: For them, dressing up makes an occasion special. The outfits of *Advanced Style* thus communicate that not only is there a future ahead for old individuals, but it is worth getting dressed up for. Old people have something exciting ahead of them—they are all dressed up with everywhere to go.

The future constructed by those involved with *Advanced Style* will be a space that gives lie to the ideology that currently governs old age. This new future will be meaningful, energizing, fun, and exciting; it is definitely one in which the old want to participate. This alternative vision, however, does not dictate the precise details of that future. It is only hinted at—it is not fixed or settled—because of the variety of meanings available from the outfits themselves. As with any instance of visual rhetoric, what is communicated by means of dress is ambiguous; meanings are highly context dependent, in process, and open to interpretation (Brouwer, 2008; Davis, 1992). Whatever alternative vision is constructed is fully realized only as spectators contribute their own meanings to the outfits and thus to a new vision of old age, helping project and realize its possibilities and its consequences. Enactment is to some degree enthymematic, then, in that it motivates and encourages witnesses to participate in the anticipated future. The *Advanced Style* coloring book (Cohen & Schraer, 2013) is an example of a potential affordance by which individuals can contribute to the new vision; those who take crayon in hand and begin to color an image from *Advanced Style*, applying their own sense of aesthetics to the picture, help imagine, negotiate, and contribute to a future that runs counter to that offered by the conventional ideology of old age.

Of course, the range of future possibilities open to old individuals of limited means may not be as extensive or elaborate as the projects and activities available to those with higher incomes. In the world of *Advanced Style*, however, futurity is as much an attitude as it is the development of specific plans. Old people can look forward with anticipation and excitement to what is yet to come—no matter what activities are involved—by bringing an

eagerness to how they approach each day. Joy's approach is typical: "Each morning upon awakening, I ask God: *What exciting surprise awaits me today*" (Cohen, 2016, p. 208)? Ruth is similarly optimistic: "Celebrate every day and don't look at the calendar" (Cohen, 2012, p. 141). Doonan (2016), writing in the foreword to Cohen's second book, summarizes the potential that is the essence of futurity in the fashions of *Advanced Style*: "Optimism fills the air. Life is suddenly exciting again. Advanced Stylistas are life-enhancing avatars who fill the world not just with glamour, but also with a sense of *possibility*" (p. 5).

Conclusion

We have suggested in this essay that the outfits of *Advanced Style* exemplify the visual form of the strategy of enactment. Through the elements of visibility, individuality, syncreticity, and futurity, these outfits "animate a shared critical consciousness, employing new ways of seeing" (Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009, p. 185) that have consequences for the ideology of old age. By disrupting stereotypical views of old age, *Advanced Style* fashions enable new meaning-making practices to emerge around the construct of old age.

The four central dimensions to visual enactment in *Advanced Style* both challenge the ideology of old age and further explicate the strategy of enactment in general. Inextricably linked in a rhetorical constellation, each dimension performs a particular function that contributes to the force of the strategy. Visibility is crucial as a starting point for visual enactment because unless an ideology is recognized as problematic, it cannot be challenged. Individuality, the process of distinguishing and removing items from a class, is also a requisite dimension of visual enactment that makes possible a different ideology. Syncreticity is the process of putting together elements to construct a new ideology to replace the rejected one. Futurity then offers a vision of the future based on the new ideology—one open to the participation of both rhetors and audience members.

The four features of visibility, individuality, syncreticity, and futurity, elaborate on and refine the characteristics identified in the earlier literature on enactment. The material embodiment that marks enactment provides a grounding for the images presented to viewers. The very presence of an image, projected to viewers, is material, and this presence/materiality creates much of the force of enactment. The performative nature of enactment can be seen in the way in which a challenge to an existing belief system and the presentation of an alternative are performed in some detail for viewers, primarily via the dimension of visibility. Performance is a major aspect of how visibility is made evident. A greater reliance on emotional appeals—another feature identified in the earlier literature—typically happens as a result of visibility as well. When images attract viewers' attention, they do so not only because of the material nature of the images but also because of the emotions they spark in viewers. Viewers often cannot help but respond emotionally to the images presented to them—with shock, amusement, joy, or appreciation, for example. Thus, rejection of a conventional ideology is made easier when an image disrupts the staid or the normal. We suggest, then, that the four features of

enactment we identify and explicate align well with the features identified in the earlier literature; what we have done is to explicate those features in more detail.

Although we theorized visual enactment in the fashions of *Advanced Style*, we suggest that the four features may characterize visual enactment in general. A brief look at another study of visual enactment—DeLuca’s (1999) analysis of ACT UP and Queer Nation—suggests these strategies are present in how visual enactment is performed by these two groups that sought simultaneously to improve care for AIDS patients and challenge heterosexism. Visibility is evident in the groups’ conspicuous and extravagant displays that enabled the groups to “buy’ air time,” using their bodies as “flags to attract attention for the argument” (DeLuca, 1999, p. 10). Their performance of same-sex kiss-ins in public spaces and die-ins in Catholic cathedrals, for example, made “their bodies visible, present, exposed” (DeLuca, 1999, p. 18). The feature of individuality can be seen in a poster of two male sailors kissing; it cautions against putting gays into the category of the heterosexual military. Instead, gay bodies are distinguished from the conventional category of the military man. The elaborate events created by ACT UP and Queer Nation speak to the syncreticity that is involved in visual enactment. Whether a die-in at a cathedral, a kiss-in at a bar, or a queer fashion show in a shopping mall, the events require considerable organization and attention to detail to construct a new vision of queer public spaces—spaces in which gay and lesbian sexuality is out in the open. Futurity is evident as well in the protesters’ visual announcement that not only would the future be “safe for visible manifestations of multiple sexualities,” but it already had arrived (DeLuca, 1999, p. 19).

We recognize that one brief test of our theory beyond our artifact is insufficient to discern whether the four features truly compose a constellation of intertwined qualities necessary to the strategy of visual enactment in general. We invite others to test and refine our theory further by applying it to other instances of enactment—both nondiscursive and discursive—to continue to refine the dimensions of this rhetorical strategy. Additional investigation into the nature and function of enactment will provide greater clarity about its operation and its potential to disrupt and replace conventional patterns of thinking.

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Notes

1. We are following the lead of Calasanti and Slevin (2001) in using the word *old* in this essay to refer to those of advanced years; they suggest “there is nothing wrong with being old” (p. 47). Although some scholars suggest that the use of the term *old* reinforces the negative view of those beyond middle age, Calasanti and Slevin (2001) counter that the disavowal of the word *old* is a symptom of ageism itself: “We should rather learn to use the word ‘old’ in

a positive or neutral way—much in the same way that we use terms for other age groups” (p. 47). They offer as an example the term *young*, to whom negative characteristics are often attributed; yet no one proposes that a different term be used to refer to this age group.

2. Those photographed sometimes are referred to by both names, sometimes by one name, and sometimes are not named at all. For the sake of consistency, we will use just an individual’s first name when it is available.

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