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Emma Engdahl
Orebro University

Marie Gelang
Orebro University

Kurt Zemlicka

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The rhetoric of store-window mannequins

EMMA ENGDAHL

School of Humanities
Education and Social Sciences
Orebro University
701 82 Orebro, Sweden
emma.engdahl@oru.se

MARIE GELANG

School of Humanities
Education and Social Sciences
Orebro University
701 82 Orebro, Sweden
marie.gelang@oru.se

ALYSSA O’BRIEN

Program in Writing and Rhetoric
Stanford University
Sweet Hall 3rd Floor
CA 94305-3069, USA
aobrien@stanford.edu

ABSTRACT: This collaborative paper examines the visual rhetoric of mannequins: the embodied media representation of the future consumer. Citing material evidence from Sweden, the USA, Egypt, Singapore, and China, the paper explores the visual arguments of mannequins as they embody female and male constructions of identity, position, and power, both reflecting and shaping social doxa with regard to gender norms, sexuality, religious behavior, and even nationality.

KEYWORDS: Actio, Capitalism, Gender, Identity, Nonverbal images, Mannequins, Modernity, Rhetoric

1. INTRODUCTION

In our research, we have found that the mannequin is as common a feature of the urban milieu as the images on advertising pillars. With their poses, appearance, and clothing, mannequins seek to entice urban passers-by to enter stores. In that way mannequins represent one of rhetoric’s means of persuasion, namely actio. The poses, appearance, and clothing of mannequins amount to a frozen actio.

With this paper, we analyze mannequins as visual rhetoric texts that portray messages about gender identity, nationalism, social and societal belonging. We hope to show that these visual rhetoric texts offer powerful messages that both reflect and create ideals, values or doxa as well as the embodied media representation of the future consumer.
2. MODERNITY AS AUTONOMY

Schneider (1995) describes how mannequins in 1950s American display windows, shown below, demonstrated how to stand and sit at a cocktail party as well as presenting suitable attire. According to Schneider, the mannequins’ non-verbal communication influenced the observer’s performances at real-life cocktail parties insofar as customers tried to emulate the mannequins’ poses. They were a location where society’s ideals of masculine and feminine were forged. In this way the mannequin takes part in creating and solidifying what we experience, for instance, as masculine and feminine non-verbal communication. In addition to analyzing the rhetoric of gender, we also propose that one way to build a theoretical understanding of visual rhetoric with regard to mannequins is to re-examine the urban landscape as constitutive of the social spaces of capitalism and the structural transformation of modernity.

![Image of 1950s cocktail party with mannequins]


In general we understand modernity as autonomy, which always implies an inescapable tension between freedom and discipline. With the structural transformation of modernity we include a distinction between modernity in general and three historical epochs of modernity where autonomy is realized in different ways.

Our interest in the structural transformation of modernity is mainly related to the significance of ideals in society. With ideals we refer to collective convictions that have the power to influence action, but which are more or less possible to fully realize (freedom is a good example). Such ideals are regulative, but just precisely as regulative ideals they can also be constitutive of an epoch of modernity. Hence, we do not suggest a focus on the transformation of capitalism, but rather on the transformation of “the spirit of capitalism” (compare Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Engdahl 2009).
This implies that we do not think that force and material gain is enough to motivate people to take part in the accumulation of capital. Also reasons or ideologies that justify capitalism are needed. Following Luc Boltanski and Evé Chiapello (2005), such ideologies can be called spirits and include three elements: excitement, security and a common good.

The focus on ideals enables us to investigate the transformation of modernity as revealed in display widows, rather than in actual working conditions, or the transformation of self-ethics, rather than actual behaviour. In this perspective one can perceive the mannequins as images of modern identity.

2.1 Two Examples: Shanghai and Syria

Consider the Mannequins from Shanghai, China (below), embodying both a Western consumer fantasy for locals and an Orientalist shopping fantasy for tourists. Shopping-windows could be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieus’s (1990) notion of the modern field, the social site for power relations across the class structure, in which the mannequin occupies a specific space, or habitus. The mannequin embodies an aspiration class status that lures the consumer with the desire of upwardly mobile identity formation.

Consider, as well, the mannequins from high-class boutique dress shops in Syria (below), where the dresses are not traditional Muslim robes, but rather signifiers of Western identity and even sexuality. In this way, the rhetorical stance of the mannequin signifies a frozen actio that in fact signifies movement: travel up the social hierarchy, into new and even forbidden realms of cultural belonging, class privilege, and cultural identity.
As we see it, the movement represented in the shopping-windows parallels the transformation of modernity or what in sociology goes under the heading “successive modernity” (see Wagner 1994; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Carleheden (2006).

3. SUCCESSIVE MODERNITY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Successive modernity focuses on western societies and divides modernity into three epochs with two intermediate crisis of modernity.

The first epoch of modernity is the epoch of the bourgeoisie and the entrepreneur. The ideals of this epoch are related to the liberation from feudalism, monarchy, aristocracy and the political ambitions of the church. Everyone’s equal right to freedom is constitutive for this society. However, this formal right to freedom was in the first epoch realized as the formal right to property. Only property owners could fully realize themselves as modern. This story is well-known to every reader of Karl Marx. But from the perspective of Max Weber we can also understand this epoch as the age of asceticism. The individual is released from tradition, which is replaced by self-discipline in the form of hard work and thrifty. As Richard Sennett (2006) has put it; the “delay of fulfilment becomes a way of life”. Using Horkheimer and Adorno’s logic of the dialectic of Enlightenment and their concept “instrumental reason”, we can see how the ideal of freedom fails and turns into its opposite.

The second epoch of modernity can in many ways be understood as a reaction to the failures of realizing the ideals of first modernity. Freedom for all could not be realized by way of formal civil rights. Instead a materialisation of rights occurs and a national welfare state society takes form. Thus, political citizenship can be generalized to national
belonging, instead of being built on private property. Politics becomes organized within hierarchical mass parties aimed at satisfying conflicting class interests. In this sense the second epoch could be seen as the organisation age. The ascetic or the entrepreneur is replaced by the organization man, loyalty and solidarity replaces self-discipline, and, thus, the inner-directed character is replaced by the outer-directed character (Riesman 2001).

Going back to the picture of the shopping-window from the 50s (below) we can see how the ideal of group-belonging or an other-directed character, rather than inner-directed character, is demonstrated.

This organization age certainly meant inclusion, but also a strict focus on distributive justice. This kind of justice focus on “the allocation of material goods such as things, resources, income, and wealth, or on the distribution of social positions, especially jobs”. Typically also non-material phenomena—“power, opportunity, or self-respect”—is understood according to the logic of distributive justice (Young 1990a). Today—decades after the fall of this epoch—it is clear that this inclusive, but materialistic, bureaucratic and hierarchical epoch had its own special dark sides. The lasting influence of 1968 (which was the beginning of the end of the second epoch) is—according to Boltanski and Chiapello—not its radical social critic, but its artistic critique. This is a critique of standardization, disenchantment, commodification and inauthenticity. The thesis of Boltanski and Chiapello is that capitalism managed to pacify the radical social critique of capitalism partly by using the artistic critique of capitalism.

By incorporating the artistic critique the organization of capitalism takes on a new form. When Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) try to capture the third spirit of capitalism they focus on new ideals for working life. Hierarchical organisation should be replaced by network organisation. Mobility, flexibility and creativity become crucial for
employability. Most importantly, authenticity and personality become crucial on the labour-market. In this transformation the outer-directed character is replaced by a subject-directed character (Carleheden 2006; Engdahl 2009).

Persons with subject-directed characters are not interested in controlling their subjectivity. They are interested in the novelty and expression of it. It is not productivity or loyalty, but creativity that motivates them. Hence, they do not discipline their desires and seldom seek or find themselves in group-belongings. Economic wealth is in first hand seen as means for inventing and exploring themselves, mainly by making their selves into unique pieces of art. Indeed, they put a lot of effort into staging the inner truths about themselves.

To speak with Michel Foucault (1990), they have invented a new form of pleasure, namely, the desire to confess who they are. Also, they desire to desire, they desire to inspire to desire, and they desire to be desired (Bauman 2007; Engdahl 2009). Since the principle operation is to establish new connections and enable new projects this becomes the ideal form of self-presentation.

The mannequins frozen action mirrors what Bourdieu and classical rhetorical theory both articulate as the doxa that interpellates the subject into being. In this case, the mannequin in the window represents doxa that is shaped by capitalist, urban engines of progress, with serious consequences for subject-identity-formation. As visual culture theorists Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009) have argued, the meaning of images (or in this case mannequins) “lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are ‘consumed,’ viewed, and interpreted.” This, too, is the case with the mannequin in the store-window, whose meaning as visual rhetoric shaping doxa is acquired
by the consumer who pauses, views, absorbs, and literally consumes—both through purchases and through ideological persuasion (Gelang 2005).

Yet according to rhetoric scholar Charles A. Hill (2004), people prefer to take shortcuts when making decisions. People in general would rather not have to analyse and take into account a large number of facts before deciding. Because we are capable of responding reflexively to emotions such as fear and pain, it is also easy for us, according to Hill, to react unreflexively when more complex and culturally determined emotions are triggered in us. Visual images, photos, mannequins and the like often have a life-like quality, which affects us emotionally and leads us to make decisions without regard for what can seem like complex facts. When the association between a certain object and a certain value becomes culturally accepted, the object can be used to remind us of this value and evoke the emotions connected with the object. In this way mannequins can symbolize the prevailing fashion trends but also more serious social norms, and ideas about gender, class, and identity.

In this way, the store window function as another of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) through which the modern subject becomes the target in a process of identification with the image or construct of the institution—in this case, the shop, which is a microcosm for contemporary capitalist society with tremendous implications for the rhetoric of gender identity.

Photo by Alyssa J. O’Brien
4. GENDER IDENTITY

Our conceptions about masculine and feminine are deeply rooted. The results of several recent research projects indicate that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine ways of standing, sitting, gesticulating, and speaking (Young 1990b; Engdahl 2005; 2009). Female mannequins in Swedish shopping windows a couple of years ago emphasised strongly our understanding of typically female expression showing splayed poses, with open arms stretching away from their bodies in various directions.

The above picture shows Swedish mannequins that were thin, size zero, and had blemish-free skin and a matching hairstyle. They rested their weight on one leg, with a hand on a thrust-forward hip, all in order to convey a mild, coolly sensual, and feminine message.

Male mannequins in Sweden (below), by contrast, display a more rectangular form, with muscular arms often crossed before their chests. Some stand at attention in a military fashion to convey a resolute and powerful nonverbal message.

As early as Quintilian, speakers were advised to stand with their backs straight and legs slightly spread, and to use gestures moderately to succeed with their delivery. Throughout history these recommendations have been repeated and have generally been considered a form of masculine behaviour that project power and authority.
In the shopping windows of Sweden today (below) one can see how female mannequins are getting closer to the expression of the male mannequins with a more rectangular look, sitting down with legs spread apart, and standing with hands in their sides. Whereas little has changed with male mannequins, still standing straight with their weight on both feet.
Irrespective of gender one can see how their “frozen actio” signals less emotions, even the very persistent sex appeal amongst female mannequins is less dominant. The mannequins also represent a mix of skin and hair colour where it seems possible to create multiple personas sending a message to the viewers that consumers are able to create their own image in imitation of this “pick your pieces and be yourself” message.

Hence, our conceptions about masculine and feminine do change, even though
they are deeply rooted. Indeed the change signifies the transformation of modernity, surprisingly not taken into account within the theories of successive modernity.

According to Brigitte Mral’s (1999) definition of persona “Choosing a persona involves (over-) emphasizing a particular side of one’s complex personality” – the mannequins we have seen, through their different poses, their styles of clothing, and their images, show how we can give form to different personas. In this way the persona becomes a sort of appearance that we can modify and adapt to the situation in which we find ourselves in order to be persuasive and achieve success. This is significant for the subject-related character which is ideal in the third epoch of modernity. What our research is beginning to teach us, from a visual rhetoric and intercultural rhetoric point of view, however, is how very situated that persona is within the culture of the window-display. The persona of the mannequin adapts to a rhetorical situation circumscribed by the spirit of capitalist in a specific country or urban landscape, with significant influence on the possible action – and the consequence of ideals, values or doxa represented. Thus, we need to ask, what happens to this paradigm when mannequins are examined across cultures? Do mannequins in store windows across the Europe, the Middle East, and Asia perpetuate a gendered dichotomy across diverse international landscapes and cultures? If so, how are Mannequins as visual texts a vital medium for creating and establishing what we recognize as male and female expressions and rhetorical choices for identity formation?

5. THE INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

From an intercultural perspective, when identity construction occurs across cultures with an eye to objectification and exotification of the image presented by the Mannequin, we can theorize it in terms of Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism (1979), or the imposition of the exotic, the primitive, and the barbaric of non-western cultures. The mannequin as embodiment of Orientalism becomes a signifier of fantasy for the western consumer.
When we move from Scandinavia to economically wealthy and cosmopolitan countries in the middle East—such as this window-display from Beruit, Lebanon, a center of capitalism and multi-cultural influx, the model of western gender and class ideologies appear in the mannequins of store windows.

Heading into the streets of Egypt before the revolution, however, we begin to see alternative constructions of possible personae for the prospective consumer. This is even the case in high end shops such as shown here, where the Mannequins reflect and shape the religious, cultural, and aesthetic doxa of the Egyptian urban elite. The faces and hair are not represented in these mannequins, as they were for the European models, a practice which reflects a frozen action of the bodies of women in the cityspace.

Across the Middle East, we find that the very bodies of the mannequins change from the ones we presented earlier. Here, a window-display in Syria, shows several full-sized models luring customers into the shop. Gender here takes on an intercultural aspect, as the bodies of the models convey solid, almost masculine stances, yet the gestures and the colors of the clothes worn under the robes signify a certain feminine construction. With these mannequins, Charles Hill’s idea of a rhetorical short-cut to decision making works to close the sale and continue the social order of this culture.
Traveling down the class structure, into the shopping bazaars of Syria, we find that the rhetoric of mannequins continues to provide the function of fantasy for the consumer—what we have argued is akin to Althusser’s notion of interpellation. Here, the young women and girls peruse the double, half mannequins of erotically dressed figures—half bodies that reveal a subculture, half hidden in the alternative spaces of the city and beneath the respectable dresses of the consumer.

A very different picture emerges in Asia, where mannequins wear and convey arguments about national pride and cultural belonging, as well as visual rhetoric signifiers of class and gender. This shop-window from Seoul South Korea, repeats its message in miniature.

A similar focus on national pride over gender differentiation is happening quite strongly in China shown in this window display from Shanghai the summer before the summer Olympics. Here, the red colors on the clothing and the art of the window reverses the Orientalism prevalent in the West but does not succumb to western idealization. Instead, a new visual rhetoric of Asian nationalism emerges.
Moreover, to return to our point that gendered stances for males and females may be changing, notice that the bodily stance and gestures for female and male mannequins share a common actio. The mannequins are united in support of a rising China. This is a nationalist rhetoric rather than one distinguished by dichotomies of gender, as we saw with the Swedish mannequins. Thus, for China’s shop windows, the argument of the mannequin is not a lure for the individual consumer, but rather interpellation into a powerful doxa of social belonging as a nationalist project. The mannequins are united in a collaborative team effort to realize a new persona—not for themselves but for the nation of China.

6. UPSHOT

Our point here in analyzing these rhetorical texts is that changes in mannequins seen interculturally suggest shifts in doxa, as a consequence of the travel of commodities and mobile visual signifiers of class, race, culture, and identity formation through the spread of the third spirit of capitalism and the competing forces of globalization and development. This is particularly the case with the rise of China, the Asia-Pacific region in general, and the Middle East as strong cultural and economic forces on the world theater. Thus, the mannequins we have shown today, emerging from the site of the shopping-window as a force of interpellation of the modern subject, should make us think about such store dolls a powerful form of persuasion, one that we can watch to see the shifting winds of cultural imperialism and social values or ideals.

In rhetorical terms, the construction of persona, the attributes of identity shaped by doxa, are not as homogeneous and as hegemonic as we might expect, when analyzed through an intercultural lens. Instead, we find ourselves, when looking around the world’s shopping-windows, to be at a time of great change and cultural transformation. Hence, we have to ask ourselves: Is this a powerful demonstration of the second and the third spirit of capitalism or do some of the shopping-windows point at yet another modernity (“multiple modernities”), not incorporated in the theories of successive modernity?
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Commentary on “THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF STORE-WINDOW MANNEQUINS”
by Emma Engdahl, Marie Gelang and Alyssa Obrien

KURT ZEMLICKA
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Communication Studies, CB# 3285, 115 Bingham Hall
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3285
United States
zemlicka@email.unc.edu

I’d like to begin with a quote from Michael Calvin McGee, who, in thinking through the concept of ideology, poses us with the following impasse:

If we are to describe the trick-of-the-mind which deludes us into believing that we “think” with/through/for a “society” to which we “belong,” we need a theoretical model which accounts for both “ideology” and “myth,” a model which neither denies human capacity to control “power” through the manipulation of symbols nor begs Marx’s essential questions regarding the influence of “power” on creating and maintaining political consciousness. (McGee 1980: 4)

McGee’s answer to the question “why is it that people accept the conditions of their own imprisonment at the hands of capital?” is of course to forge a new emphasis on examining and criticizing sites of ideological manifestations. In this sense, I think he would really appreciate the work being done in this presentation. One way in which I think McGee can actually help us think through the practices of interpellation brought forth by storefront mannequins is through his conception of the ideograph, or a specific ideological concept succinctly put into an abstract term. As he points out, the ideograph always accretes meaning in the context of the society in which it operates—in other words, we can think abstractly, if only for a moment, what freedom means in the best of all possible worlds, but this type of “pure thought” is hampered by the contextual shackles placed upon it by the society in which it is used.

This hindering of pure thought that McGee speaks of is perhaps most succinctly demonstrated by the conceptual and analytical work done in the presenter’s work on mannequins. These mannequins’ frozen actio of the “spirit of capitalism” seems to do the work of at worst preventing, or at best hampering critical thought about their positioning in terms of gender, class, or nationalism, much as their use of Hill’s work points out. This short-circuiting of pure thought, then, seems to be where the ideological workings of the mannequins is laid most bare, and where we would do well to examine closely the work being done in this piece. It is both its strongest and perhaps most troubling finding: Interpellation may not be simply false consciousness, but instead functions as a sort of ideological enthymeme that expressly tells the consumer: “don’t think about what I represent, just act like me.”

Central of course to this process, is, as the authors point out, the role of fantasy and desire. In the shifting landscape of the second and third modernities, one thing remains constant: while we may have shifted from primitive accumulation to the notion of authenticity and self-making and remaking, we are still caught up in the logic of “too much is never enough.” In this sense, I think the authors can move beyond the notion of “desiring to
desire” as it is presented here and explore more fully the ontological conditions of desire itself. Be it from a psychoanalytic standpoint that demonstrates that it is not the object-cause of desire itself that we desire (in this case the clothing on the mannequin’s body), but instead the act of desiring is pleasurable in and of itself, and thus it contains within itself its own inability to be fulfilled. This is the spirit of capitalism, and in turn, seems to be the true thrust of the ideological apparatus of the mannequin: we do not seek the clothes on the body, but rather to be the mannequin itself—or rather the set of beliefs, customs, and upward mobility that the newest fashion draped over the ideal body represents. In this way, the mannequin itself is really just a metonym—a placeholder for accreted ideals that we as a society map on to it—a representation of that impossible to describe and unattainable state of total fulfillment—in other words, an ideograph of the spirit of capitalism itself.

Another interesting aspect of this presentation is the potential it opens up for further considerations in the relationship between materiality and argument. We have heard several panels at this conference on the question of whether or not visual arguments exist. However, this paper seems to provide a fairly convincing example of the efficacy of visual argumentation through the example of the mannequin. Simply put, the notion of frozen actio, and perhaps actio in general, requires a visual element to convey its propositional content. But I think this paper pushes the envelope further: It is not just the visual elements of the mannequins that convey an argument—rather it is their very materiality itself. This is a concept not foreign to rhetoricians: Greene, Cloud, Lundberg and Blair et al have all written about not only the rhetoric of materiality, but the materiality of rhetoric itself. The distinction may be semantically fine, but is significant: What this paper shows us is not just the fact that material objects can contain argumentative or rhetorical aspects, but that the very ways in which they argue or persuade is itself material, and in turn, inculcate material transformations in the audience. In other words, the actio of the mannequins, or their ideological effectivity is predicated upon their ability to persuade a consumer to purchase the goods they display while inhabiting the mindset the consumer assumes they possess. In this sense, the argument contained within the mannequins themselves are material.

Finally, I’d like to explore the notion of “successive modernities” in the piece. The author’s describe the transition from the second to third modernity as a transformation from the “outer-directed character” to the “subject-directed character.” In this modernity, the subject becomes enamored with authenticity and self-making, and questions of mobility and flexibility become paramount. However, I wonder if this notion of modernity is present uniformly throughout the countries that the authors have explored. For example, the role of nationalism in the Chinese storefront seems unique to that country in the examples we have heard talked about today. In this sense, I am curious of perhaps one of the theoretical contributions of this piece is precisely the fact that there are multiple third modernisms in various countries throughout the world. Lawrence Grossberg, in his book Cultural Studies in the Present Tense, writes at length about the notion of multiple modernities in different economic and sociological contexts. Grossberg professes the critique that “the dominant ways in which modernity has been theorized assume that all possible modernities are simply variations on the universal model of euro-modernity,” and that that line of thought inherently limits the our ability to imagine alternative worlds to euro- and liberal modernity (Grossberg 2010: 259). His call therefore its to examine the discursive productions of the modern by exploring its own conditions of possibility. It seems to be that much of the work being done in this piece is along that line
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of thought. In order to push it further however, it seems like we would need to conceptualize the role of the mannequin as one of an entire network or conjuncture of discursive productions of the consumer, some modeling western modernity and others resisting it. Apart from instituting gender and class norms, I am wondering how the mannequins themselves, along with other forms of advertisements, forge conditions of possibilities for various modernities themselves. The key here is thinking of multiple modernities not as successive, or operating along mutually exclusive temporal planes, but rather existing concurrent with each other. While a large function of the interpellative processes of the storefront mannequins in this piece no doubt inscribe certain aspects of euro-modernity, they also challenge it in culturally specific ways. Each storefront mannequin exists in a context whose specificity demands an examination of the type of possibilities they allow in terms of what is “modern.” All of this is to say that the cultural doxa explored in each of the countries seem to be speaking toward different possible worlds and different possible modernities. The challenge I would levy at the authors is to think through the possibility that these mannequins represent not only a third modernity, but specific third modernities to each country examined. The result of course would be to explore the possible worlds these mannequins open up—worlds that may have generalized structures that are based upon euro-modernity, but at the same time speak to the problems of ideological interpellation in radically different ways. If we follow the words of Talad Asad (2003: 14) and realize that “Modernity is not a way of cognizing the real but of living in the world,” what do these storefront mannequins tell us about the ways in which we inhabit the modern in radially different contexts. This, I think, may be one of the most valuable contributions this work has to offer.

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