

# Affectivity in Fashion Magazines: Designer Stories and the Production of Gender through Emotional Intensity

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*Muotimedian käytännöt tuottavat sukupuolta tavoilla, joissa emootioilla ja affekteilla on keskeinen rooli. Artikkelissamme keskustelemme mediatekstien ja affektien monimutkaisesta suhteesta analysoimalla 11 suunnittelijajuttua, jotka julkaistiin Gloriassa, suomalaisessa muotilehdessä, vuoden 2013 aikana. Ymmärrämme suunnittelijajutut affektiiviseksi tekstuaalisuudeksi, jonka kautta muotisuunnittelijat tarjoiltaan emotionaalisen kiintymyksen objekteina. Tutkimuskysymyksemme on kaksiosainen: 1) Millaisia emotionaalisia intensiteettejä suunnittelijajutut tuottavat arvottaessaan suunnittelijoita, ja 2) kuinka näiden emotionaalisten intensiteettien organisoituminen rakentaa sukupuolta naisfeminiinisyyteen painottuvassa kontekstissa? Osoitamme, että affektiivinen tekstuaalisuus muodostuu kuvien ja kirjoitetun tekstin yhteispelinä, jossa suunnittelijaa esittävä kuva on hyvin keskeisessä roolissa. Koska arvottamisen loogikka ja sisällöt ovat sukupuolittuneita, tavat sisällyttää mies- ja naissuunnittelijoiden hahmot affektin tuottamiseen eroavat toisistaan.*

**Keywords:** affective textuality, designer story, emotion, fashion designer, fashion magazine, gender, multimodality

## 1 Introduction

How does it feel to browse through a glossy fashion magazine filled with pictures of luxury products and beautiful people? Are you irritated by the consumerist values and wasteful production promoted by the magazine, or do you allow yourself to be immersed into the flow of imaginary worlds beyond everyday reality and subscribe to the lure of fashion? Either way, you are affected by the magazine and the representations of fashion which it offers to you.

Fashion is often related to as a hybrid form of production because of its obvious associations with art on the one hand and with mass-produced design on the other hand (Barnard 2014: 27–33). Fashion is essentially an affective practice engaged in the production and insemination of emotion (Wissinger 2007; Arvidsson, Malossi and Naro 2010), and fashion magazines play a central role in the processes whereby the reader is invited to enter this ambiguously tempting world which draws on admiration, imagination and desire (see Moeran 2013): the promise offered by fashion magazine makes no claims to realism and factuality, but invests in an imaginary inclusion in a phantasmatic sphere of luxury. On the pages of the glossy magazine fashion is ever fleeing enticement, attainable for the common consumer through objects of emotional intensity.

The fashion designer is the most prominent embodiment of this allure (McCracken 2011: 136). Fashion scholar Yunia Kawamura (2005: 59) emphasizes the role of the designer for the understanding of the structure and organization of fashion as a system. The designer is constructed as a creative individual and artist genius through the social structure, star system and hierarchy of fashion. According to Kawamura (2005: 66), the star system injects personality into mass consumption and allows for the consumers to form personal emotional attachments to the star. Thus, the designer becomes, together with supermodels and famous designs, perhaps the most central locus of emotion within the fashion system. The role of fashion magazines is to make designer personas available to the consumer through representation.

The fashion designer, fashion magazine and affective viewing-reading are the starting point of this study. All these entities meet in the designer story. The aim of this paper is to study the production of emotional intensities through the designer story, one of the most central standard features in fashion magazines. Fashion magazines offer an abundance of objects of emotional stickiness such as fashion images. However, we decided to focus on the designer story because of the very centrality of the designer in the fashion system (see Kawamura 2005; McCracken 2011). Our objective is to find out what kinds of emotional attachments are highlighted through the evaluation of the designers and how closeness and distance are constructed by way of multimodal representation. Moreover, since fashion is essentially obsessed with gender (Wilson 2011: 117), we, as gender scholars, are interested in finding out how the designer, as an object of emotional attachment motivated by the star system of fashion, expresses gendered divisions as highlighted through emotion.

Indeed, the fashion system is one of the central areas of popular culture in which gender is produced, redefined and disseminated. This is visible for example in the gendered structures of the immaterial labour of the fashion precariat, gender divisions by way of dress and the gendered organisation of consumer groups and fashion media characterize (see Paoletti and Kidwell 1989; Wissinger 2007; Arvidsson, Malossi and Naro 2010). In fashion magazines, the production of gender is based on the reiteration of gender performatives (see Butler 1991) that construct notions of men, women, styles and bodies. These performatives often maintain the conventional notions of feminine women and masculine men, but they can also rupture the bipolar understanding of gender (cf. Vänskä 2014), as in the case of Stacey Bendet Eisner, who in our material features as the only female designer associated with male-typical creativity. In our study, we explore how affect functions as a fluid mechanism that engenders tension and ambiguity that is differently attached to female and male designers.

## 2 Material

The material analysed for this article comprises altogether 11 printed designer stories published in *Gloria* in 2013. The stories are one-page-long feature stories with a repetitive, formulaic structure. According to Siivonen (2007: 115–118), feature stories have four criteria: they have one protagonist, include at least one citation from the protagonist, display an image of the protagonist and contain biographical details from her or his private or professional life. Due to their limited length, *Gloria*'s designer stories can be characterized as career and personality sketches rather than extensive stories of the protagonist's life. The stories are written in expert style which, according to Machin and van Leeuwen (2005: 594; 2007: 144–145), involves a fairly formal vocabulary, a preference for abstract and general nouns, a limited vocabulary of verbs and an objective, third-person form of address. *Gloria*'s stories describe the designers' careers in a formal way, occasionally employing playfulness and emotional nuances in order to make them more approachable to the reader.

The top half of the page in the stories is always dominated by a large image of the designer and a standard constellation of three catwalk images of models in design clothes, walking towards the viewer. Second, the main heading under the image field consists of the designer's name and a line which summarises the primary tone of the main text body. Thirdly, the bottom half of the page features images of design items attributed to the designer. The text body is approximately 180 words long and focuses mostly on appraising the characteristics and capabilities of the designers as persons as well as their design items.



**Image 1.** The designer stories from *Gloria*'s issues May and June of 2013

### **3 Affect and Multimodal Analysis**

Methodologically, we draw on multimodal analysis and affect theory. We use Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) well-known ideas of visual grammar of the printed page in our analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 14) see visual communication as a means for the articulation of ideological positions and essentially dependent on culture-specific traditions and semiotic practices. As all semiotic modalities, visual communication features emotionality and affect as expressed through its constitutive elements.

The designer stories studied in this paper incorporate both images and written text and must therefore be approached through means which allow for an analysis of their multimodal elements. 'Multimodal analysis' can be defined, following Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 177), as analysis of any text 'whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code'. Magazine pages are typical examples of 'integrated texts' (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 117) governed by the integration code of spatial composition, patterns of interaction or other ways of producing meaning by way of visual grammar as well as written text. In an integrated text, the spatial co-presence of all these elements indicates that they should all be taken into account in the analysis not only as separate entities, but as mutually connected elements which participate in the construction of meaning (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 177).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 175–214) pay attention to the information value of left and right, top and bottom and centre and margin; moreover, they discuss different techniques of framing and linear and non-linear compositions. Mainly due to limitations of space, we focus our analysis on the information value expressed by the vertical and horizontal lines as well as three aspects of representation and interaction, namely the gaze, social distance and camera angle. We regard these aspects of visual analysis as central from the perspective of production of emotional intensities by way of the designer story. How the written text interacts with the visual is the second focal point in the analysis, and again, because of the space limit, we focus on the descriptions of the designers' careers and design items in order to detect the gendered affect as produced through the stories.

For these purposes, we enrich the multimodal analysis by applying affect theory, and approach the stories as what could be called 'affective textuality'. Following Sara Ahmed (2014), we treat emotion as something emotive that fastens on objects such as the images and verbal descriptions of the designers and the items designed by them. Although many affect theorists, including Ahmed, do not distinguish explicitly between emotion and affect, we use the term 'emotion' for the specific relation between an object and the emotional attachment produced by it and 'affect' when we refer to the totality of emotions and visceral responses produced by the designer stories. According to Shinkle (2013: 79), affect can be described as dynamics by which new sensibilities and

thought patterns make their way into representation. Affect is always embodied; bodily and visceral responses are integral to the ways in which representation comes to mean (Shinkle 2013: 76), but their mattering is an elusive and complicated affair.

#### **4 Emotion and Production of Gender in Fashion Stories**

Despite its associations with art (art for art's sake), the primary objectives of fashion and fashion magazines are clearly commercial. Illouz (2009: 382) treats emotion as a central category of consumption, in that emotion can offer a route to the understanding of its most central characteristics. Drawing on Nigel Thrift's (2008: 171, 187) idea that affective responses can be pre-designed into spaces, we understand the fashion magazine as one of those sites of cultural construction which serve as platforms for the production of affect. Fashion magazines are designed with affect and emotional reactions in mind; in this sense, they can be equated with other institutions, mentioned by Thrift (2008: 189), that promote certain, unified emotional styles among their interest groups. When it comes to the designer stories studied in this paper, paralleling of emotional styles is clearly at work: the stories follow the same layout design, in the written text certain recurring themes are highlighted, and the style of representation both regarding the images and written texts is identical. However, modulation or manipulation of affect is not simple, and content producers cannot predict all the sensations that originate from the text with affective charge (see Shinkle 2013: 83).

Moreover, not only are the designer stories repetitive and generative of an emotional style of 'designer story', but they also subscribe to a more general tradition of visual representation. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 3–4) argue for the existence of a fundamental, universal presence of an organizing principle of visual grammar (nevertheless, with culture-specific characteristics). Consequently, just like verbal language, visual presentation subscribes to an underlying system which viewers automatically relate to. This grammar is as such productive of certain affectivity through the above mentioned devices of spatial composition and interaction.

According to Sara Ahmed (2014: 13), texts have the capability of naming or performing emotions. However, emotions do not reside in the text, but are, as Ahmed (2014: 13) points out, 'effects of the naming of the emotion'. The words 'anticipation' and 'excitement', explicitly connected to Jason Wu's upcoming first collection for Hugo Boss, are examples of how emotions named immediately set the tone of the text. However, texts can perform emotions without explicitly pointing them out. For example, in the story on Johan Lindeberg, both the written text and the images signify life crisis through other means: 'turbulence in private life', 'divorce' and 'difficult life situation' mentioned in the text associated with an image of the designer from the side holding his forehead with one hand in a pose which together with the written text perform seclusion and 'sadness' (Dec 2013). 'Objects of feeling circulate and generate effects', says

Ahmed (2014: 14). Emotion is not an inherent property of an object, but, as in the examples above, produced through social and cultural processes which involve ideologies, values and personal experiences. Ahmed (2014: 45) points out that affect does not reside in the object – instead, the object increases in affective value through circulation, which means that the more the object circulates, the more affective it becomes. For example, as representations of designers and design items circulate in fashion media, they accumulate emotional value.

Fashion is typically characterized by experiential factors and thus also emotion (see Illouz 2009: 386–387). The consumption of actual design items is replaced by the consumption of, for example, a fashion magazine’s representation of the commodity, whereby it is converted from a material commodity to an experience. Illouz (2009: 387) pays attention to the emotional aspects of ‘experience commodities’ and emphasises their importance in the production of emotion. For example, in the designer stories the descriptions of costly materials and dresses that flatter women’s bodies evoke sensual perception of the fabric’s touch against the skin and the dresses’ ability to make one feel elegant and femininely voluptuous. In the affective context of fashion, the designer story offers pleasure in aesthetic experiences, imaginary identification with the ‘chic’ inside circles of fashion and the ambiguity in construction of gender along the lines promoted by the designer stories.

## **5 Emotion, Gender and the Fashion Story**

In designer stories, emotion is most clearly produced through the placement of images and text elements on the page. The elements on the page produce the ‘designer story’ in concert. Therefore, the emotional intensities attached to single images or linguistic expressions must always be related to the other participants linguistically or visually available for the viewer-reader. Certain elements are more immediately accessible (salient); for example, main headings and large images of human faces require immediate attention and engage the reader through conspicuousness, gaze and social distance. However, other elements such as written text tend to remain in the background because it requires a word-for-word reading (see Borrelli 1997: 248). Since the production of gender is a process of signification induced by the interplay of elements on the printed page, how images and text convey the designer in this context is based on the interplay of both.

### **5.1 Emotional Intensity, Gender and Spatial Design**

In her study of fashion writing, Laird O’Shea Borelli (1997: 248) emphasizes the cultural predominance of the image over written text and the immediacy of its effect. Borelli (1997: 248, 255) refers to the fashion image, but the same mechanism is at play with all images, including the image of the fashion designer, which accounts for the

‘main narrative’ of the story. In the designer stories a large image of the protagonist is without exceptions placed in the top half of the page, a position defined as the Ideal by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 186). The Ideal is opposed to the Real, the lower part of the page. In visual communication, what is placed within the realm of the Ideal, is presented as idealized or as the generalized essence of the information. The upper part of the page plays the lead ideologically. As in the designer stories, the image of the designer and selected examples of designer clothes photographed on the catwalk occupy the position of the Ideal, these visual elements represent the ideologically foregrounded message promoted by the stories. The written text is always situated in the bottom half of the page. It serves as an elaboration on the meaning constructed through the images (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 186–188).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 186) also point out that the Ideal makes an emotive claim by showing the reader-viewer ‘what might be’. The emotive claim incorporated in the image of the designer has, first, to do with the position of the designer in the fashion system, second, with the ways in which the image expresses interaction and, third, with the integration of the image in the story as a whole. As Kawamura (2005: 60–67) has stated, designers are produced as creative individuals and endowed with charismatic authority and the mythical status of the great designer through a legitimation and labeling process within the fashion system. Fashion magazines are part of this system of legitimization; a designer story highlights the designer’s status through association with the Ideal which refers to the luxurious, imaginary and emotional sphere of fashion characterized by ambiguity and negotiation. The designer story that features the designer’s image in the realm of the Ideal simultaneously displays the designer as an object of emotional intensity. This emotional intensity draws on the salience of the image and the designer’s status as something special, admirable and desirable. Through the image the designer is constructed as a symbol of the desire that fashion as a whole represents: she or he embodies the aesthetic pleasure and ‘coolness’ of fashion. Since all designer images are placed at the top of the page in the realm of the Ideal, their placement does not convey gender distinction.

Although the top-bottom distinction is not gendered in this material, the distinction of right-left does produce gendered and emotionally charged meanings. The culturally compelling relation between the right side of the multimodal printed page as opposed to the left side is, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 179–185), based on the information order in (Indo-European) languages and the Western tradition of reading from left to right. Thus, the left side is in most cases reserved for ‘the already given’, which the reader-viewer is expected to know already ‘as part of the culture, or at least as part of the culture of the magazine’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 180). The right side is the place of the new information, the actual message, not yet known. It is something which should be paid special attention to. While the Given is presented as

commonsensical and self-evident, the New represents the ‘problematic’, ‘contestable’ and the information at issue (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 180–181).

This distinction is clearly gendered in our material. Of the altogether five stories on women designers three feature the main image in the place of the Given, and of the two which occupy the place of the New, one presents the female designer in the company of a male colleague. The remaining six stories on male designers place the image of the designer at top right. This placement of the male designer without exceptions in the realm of the Ideal and New highlights the difference between the conceptualization of the male designer as genuinely creative geniuses and star designers (see Kawamura 2005: 60–70) and female designers as something less, as admired professionals who, despite their fame and success, fail to reach the status of the creative genius and instead remain in the sphere of skillful couturiers.

Kawamura (2005: 66) points out how the star system allows for the formation of ‘deep emotional attachments’. When the male designers are presented as the elite, the genuine stars shining in the bright sky of fashion, the production of the male designer as an object of emotional intensity can be assumed to be based on topics and arguments different from women designers. In what follows, we study how the distinction is highlighted through the interaction by way of images and the choices of what is told about the designer’s career, what he or she is associated with and how his or her design is described in the text body.

## 5.2 Emotional intensity and interaction by way of image and written text

It is quite obvious that interaction by way of image or written text has a great deal to do with emotions. The very fundamental modes of ‘offering’ and ‘demanding’, when it comes to both speech acts and the gaze in visual communication, can incorporate different kinds of emotional responses from compliance to resistance, threat or aggression. Both the vertical and horizontal angles add to the aspects of power in visual representation through distinctions of inclusion/exclusion. As an oblique camera angle denotes exclusion, high angle communicates viewer power and low angle the opposite. All of these aspects of visual grammar contain potential for the expression of emotional intensities, and the individual cases allow for an unlimited array of emotional expression by way of multimodal communication.

Nigel Thrift (2008: 177, 193) emphasizes the role of the face as of the greatest importance in the production of affect: face and faciality work as an index of emotion. The main image of the designer in the stories always displays the face, although the social distance and indicators of power may vary. When it comes to framing and social distance, no significant gender division can be reported in our material. Most of the designer images suggest close social distance and thus certain confidentiality, but no



social bond between the designer and the viewer. However, when it comes to the gaze, differences begin to appear. Only one of the designers who look away from the camera in an ‘offering’ pose which does not suggest direct communication with the viewer is a woman (Jil Sander; Feb 2013). However, despite the gaze suggesting distance, through her warm and inviting smile, relaxed posture and every-day appearance, the viewer is invited to embrace the intimacy of her designship. Several scholars have pointed out the techniques of women’s magazines in creating ‘synthetic sisterhood’ or imaginary communities of readers who subscribe to the values, ideologies and aesthetics promoted by the magazines (see Talbot 1995; Borrelli 1997). How emotions stick to representations are an inescapable part of these processes. While women designers are produced as part of the ‘female’ through closeness and intimacy, male designers are treated in terms of distancing.

Of the male designers, only two look in the camera demanding interaction. Of those two Hedi Slimane exemplifies clearly the contradiction and distancing constructive of the male designer: characterized explicitly as “Brave and Contradictory” in the main title and wearing jeans, T-shirt and leather jacket, Slimane looks at the viewer from under his brows in a typical ‘young rebel’ gaze, thus giving supporting evidence to the characterization by the title (Apr 2013). Slimane is demanding interaction, but simultaneously stating its terms. In this Slimane differs from the women designers who never challenge the viewer, but welcome the interaction both in the ‘demanding’ and ‘offering’ images.

Judging from the examples above, how emotion sticks to the image also has to do with facial expressions, gestures and, for example, dress and when taken into account, the distinction between genders becomes obvious. In the stories in *Gloria*, female designers are represented as more accessible to the readers than men who subscribe to the ‘star designer’ image also on the level of images. For example, the extreme close-up of Anna Sui becomes a locus of specific emotional intensity suggesting intimacy highlighted by the demand for interaction through the gaze directed right at the camera, the big and open eyes and friendly smile (Jan 2013); Sarah Burton, dressed casually in jeans and low-heeled pumps, looks smilingly in the camera and waves to the viewer (Mar 2013).

The written text, placed either bottom left or right in the realm of the Real, depending on the placement of most salient object on the page, the designer image, remains less central than the images, except for the main heading (see Borrelli 1997). In the text body two things are important: first, the narrating voice as expressive of the tone of the story and second, the relationship of what is explicitly told in the text and what is communicated by the visual images. In *Gloria*, the stories are attributed to four individual editors who subscribe faithfully to the formulaic style and language of fashion media (see Borrelli 1997). This ‘editorial persona’ of the magazine represents the narrating voice with which the publication speaks to the readers (see Abrahamson 1996), and the

tone and style of the editorial persona sets the affective tone of the text. In *Gloria's* designer stories, the editorial persona 'write-speaks' (Ferguson 1983: 265) to the reader in a friendly tone: she is 'hip', brand-conscious and inspired by a gracious lifestyle, a sophisticated couture and details relating both to designers' careers and their designs. Highlighting these details is one means to intensify intimacy of the stories. Judging from the 'feminine' style, the editorial persona is a 'quality conscious' woman who speaks to other women also interested in fashion and its celebrity designers (cf. Borrelli 1997: 257). She seems to have limited access to the inner circles of high fashion but, she is capable of offering a selection of views on the catwalk world. Moreover, the editorial persona 'is privy to "insider information"' (Borrelli: 1997: 257) and hosts authority to inform the reader of designer names, fashion houses, brands and newest trends in a cursory way, relying on readers' previous knowledge of the 'Big Names' of the fashion world.

There is an evident pattern in the written texts that supports the 'skillful couturier' image attached to women designers through visual representation. Although all the stories focus on the career of the designer, the career paths of female designers are described in identical ways as smooth with no obvious bumps along the way. The female designer does not take risks, does not live dangerously, her work is not questioned and as with Sarah Burton and Sandra Choi, she emerges from under the protective wing of a male mentor. The overall emotional atmosphere, when it comes to female designers, is built on safety and immanence. Moreover, the main titles of the stories also point towards the presence of a specified textual performance of femininity constructed on modesty and small scale: Jil Sander is titled as 'The Queen of Minimalism' (Feb 2013) and Sarah Burton as 'The Maker of that Dress' (Mar 2013). In Burton's case, the typical way of presenting female designers through one design item applies (other examples Eisner: 'In the beginning were striped trousers' (Jun 2013) and Sandra Choi: 'The lure of high heels' (Jul 2013)). In addition, the verb 'maker' refers precisely to the down-to-earth manufacturing practice women designers are associated with in the stories. Simultaneously, the titles introducing male designers refer to something beyond this everyday materiality: Hedi Slimane (Couragous and contradictory, Apr 2013) and Johan Lindeberg (Dec 2013) who thinks 'Outside seasons' are clear examples.

However, Stacey Bendet Eisner represents an ambiguous example in the material. She is the only female designer who signifies newness and male-like talent through the placement of her image top right, in the company of male designers. She is also presented in the 'male style' through the distancing angle, absent gaze and introvert smile which do not correspond to the contents of the written text. The text attaches to her typically feminine attributes such as 'feeling', design as feminine play instead of serious work and one successful item (Jun 2013). Thus, the written text realigns Eisner with typical ways of producing female designership. The story is rich with emotion-filled expressions: it refers to the designer's changing feelings which direct her choice of

clothes and the ‘jazzy feeling’ which made her wear a tiara one day. Alternating atmospheres, playfulness, the mere coincidence that made a fashion designer of her and focusing her designership on one successful item, a pair of striped trousers all communicate ‘happy’, ‘light’ and ‘unserious’.

In the story on Johan Lindeberg, mentioned above, emotion also plays an important role. As a whole, however, the story on Lindeberg is not constructed on lightness and play, but on the idea of a serious, ‘productive life crisis’ and a narrative of a man who turned crisis into success and fame (Dec 2013). A related idea is also strongly present with the other male designers whose careers are described as incorporating great expectations, determination and faithfulness to a ‘vision’ despite setbacks and questioning. The story on Alexander Wang, titled ‘Boy wonder in Paris’ is a good example: his ability to renew Balenciaga is questioned in the beginning of the story (‘anticipation’ and ‘excitement’), and his success is stated in the second paragraph. In a direct quotation, Wang compares himself to Cristóbal Balenciaga, ‘an avant-gardist of his time’, and states his determination to rewrite the story of the fashion house (May 2013). Both Lindeberg’s and Wang’s narratives express strength and determination which the stories on female designers do not have.

## **6 Conclusions**

Designer stories, as discussed above, represent affective textuality in which written text and images work in concert in the construction of gendered affect. It seems that the affective in the stories is not based on disturbing differences, but on very conventional fashion magazine aesthetics that draws on the ‘glamour’ of the magazine while producing representations of the female and male designers’ different kinds of appeal. The fashion magazine is a product directed at female audiences and, as our discussion above has shown, maintains the traditional gender binary through the ways in which female and male designers are constructed in terms of affect. While female designers’ representations produce closeness and familiarity, men are associated with emotions such as bravery and fearlessness.

What does this affective division mean in the context of the fashion magazine very much based on female femininity? *Gloria* promotes itself as a magazine for people, in practice women, who are well educated, ‘quality conscious’ and have a good income which allows them to make choices which suit their preferences. Judging from the description, this consumer group is assumed as capable of deciding what they want from life in addition to their consumerist preferences. However, somewhat paradoxically, the product offered to them is designed according to the very traditional binary logic of gender which, through affect, presents women as different from men and as loci of soft, ‘feminine’ emotions, whereas the evaluation of male designers involves a stronger and more demanding affective charge.

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